

## **The University Of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign Psychology Department New TA**

### **Orientation: De-Stress, Model, and Inform**

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The University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) is a Doctoral/Research University, Intensive. As the premier public university in Illinois, it attracts high quality undergraduate and graduate students. The Teaching Assistant (TA) Orientation that I will describe is offered by the UIUC Psychology Department, which has 55 faculty members and 170 graduate students. Any graduate student in the Psychology Department who will be teaching for the first time is required to attend the TA Orientation.

#### The Basic Structure

Douglas Bernstein and I began our Psychology Department TA Orientation in 1992 as a reaction to the orientation to TA training offered at the campus level. Although this campus-wide orientation was excellent in many ways, our students did not find some segments helpful (e.g., learning styles) and found the emphasis to be on pedagogical theory rather than on basic teaching issues. Because this orientation precedes their new teaching assignment by only a week, there was a “crisis” mentality among graduate students who wanted survival skills first and theory later. Thus, the emphasis of the Psychology Department orientation, from the very beginning, has been on the practical aspects of teaching and the departmental resources available to support teaching. We encourage TAs to enroll later in a psychology or campus-wide graduate course on college teaching.

The Psychology Department’s orientation is a two and one-half day affair presented the week before fall semester begins. I plan it with two or three advanced graduate students. The first two days focus on teaching information, and the last half day focuses on practice teaching, with each TA being videotaped presenting a mini-lesson.

## The First Day of Orientation

We begin our TA Orientation with a brief welcome from the department head. In a research institution such as ours, where teaching is often perceived as secondary to research, this welcome and clear statement about the importance of good teaching by the Head provides credibility for the orientation.

Because we have found TAs to be incredibly anxious at the outset of orientation, we begin by asking TAs regarding their concerns about their upcoming teaching experience. TAs write their concerns on one side of a 3x5 card and rate that concern from 5 (*very concerned*) to 1 (*minimally concerned*). On the other side of the card they note what they are looking forward to in their teaching. We then model an active learning technique by collecting the cards, shuffling them, and redistributing them randomly; thus each TA has another TA's card. Next, we ask for those who have a card with a '5' to read it aloud, and we talk about the issue raised. We open the floor in this discussion. We do not pretend to know all the answers, and we rely on other TAs in the orientation to provide a different perspective, a relevant experience, or a helpful insight. This tactic models using students as resources. Typical concerns include fear of speaking in front of groups, classroom control, and grading issues. After addressing most of the 5s we recollect the cards and assure new TAs that we will address all of their concerns during the orientation. I read each card that evening and make sure that we do address all issues mentioned.

We then begin our presentation by handing out an outline of the entire orientation, modeling the importance of an outline. The first topic is basic teaching skills. We show and discuss short video-clips of former TAs lecturing (used with their permission). Although all of the TAs shown were good teachers, they all had areas in which they could improve. We present examples of different styles of lecturing, from a structured lecture in front of 200 students to a more Socratic approach with 20 students. We discuss the importance of "being yourself" as a teacher. We talk about the basics of lecturing: being seen and heard; being organized; using the blackboard, overhead, or PowerPoint; providing examples; and using

handouts. We talk about how to prepare a lecture and how to adjust teaching methods to the size of the class.

Our next set of video-clips involves TAs leading discussions. We talk about different types of discussions, the teacher's role in these different types of discussions, and tips and techniques for getting discussions started. We then move on to video-clips of instructors asking and answering questions. We stress the importance of checking for student understanding of class material and going beyond asking "Are there any questions?" We encourage the use of follow-up questions, and stress the importance of "wait time"—all issues that arise from watching the video-clips. We talk about nonverbal behaviors that encourage students to ask questions and show them that you are listening, which include eye contact, nodding, not interrupting, and movement closer to the student talking. We discuss what happens when you don't know the answer to a question—checking to see if others in the class know, then saying, "I don't know—but I'll find out and get back to you." We discourage invention of answers.

The morning ends with a discussion of active learning techniques, including using small groups. We provide a handout that lists techniques ranging from low to high "risk." One of the presenters gives a good lecture over a topic, and then another presenter covers the same material with a classroom activity. This demonstration allows the TAs to experience the different techniques as students would.

After lunch we talk about grading and testing. We have an expert from our campus Center for Teaching Excellence make a presentation on guidelines for writing and grading quizzes and exams. He has a handout containing examples of "poor" test questions and divides the TAs into small groups to analyze them. They report back to the class the problems they found with the questions. At the end of the speaker's presentation, we hand out a 6-page excerpt from an introductory textbook and "Tips for writing good test items." The TAs are instructed to write, and bring back the next morning, four different types of questions based

on the common reading. Specifically, they are told to have each question on a separate page, in as large a font as possible, and containing no names.

Following a break, the associate head of the department makes a presentation on academic integrity and capricious grading. While discussing campus and departmental guidelines, she provides sample “I believe that you engaged in academic dishonesty” letters. She also talks about the teaching applications of FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act), which prohibits putting out graded assignments for students to look through, passing around piles of graded material and allowing students to find theirs, and posting grades by Social Security number. We then talk about assigning and grading papers, including different types of papers, campus writing resources, and, of course, plagiarism.

We finish the first day talking about student evaluation of instructors. We encourage TAs to gather early informal feedback, provide instruments they could use, and give them ideas for how to use that feedback. We talk about UIUC’s summative evaluation system and how it works. We inform the TAs about the workshops on this topic to be held later in the semester.

Our last handout of the day is considered by many TAs to be the most important. It is an individual job description of their TA position written by the graduate student who held that position the previous term. This job description tells them what their actual duties will be, how to access any materials that they will need, and has the most recent course syllabus attached.

### The Second Day of Orientation

The second morning starts out a bit more relaxed. TAs hand in the questions they have written and I leave the orientation to sort through them, picking examples of good questions and those with problems, and copying the questions onto transparencies. While I am gone, the graduate student presenters talk with the new TAs about issues that might not be discussed as frankly with a faculty member present. They discuss student-instructor relationships from the TA’s dual perspective. They talk about working with supervising faculty members and they

talk about TA relationships with students. This discussion goes beyond the “Don’t date your students or your advisor.” When I return, we deal with issues of gender bias in the classroom, racism, and diversity. We concentrate on subtle examples of bias and racism, focusing on syllabus construction and exam items, for example, not having all names in multiple-choice exams be Brittany or Derrick, but using ethnic names as well.

We end the morning with a discussion of classroom management issues. I provide demographics of the entering students on our campus (e.g., mean ACT score, gender, and ethnicity). We discuss the importance of having and keeping office hours, creating classroom rules, being consistent, and learning students’ names. We provide handouts on institutional resources, including useful Psychology Department contacts with office numbers, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses. These handouts answer questions such as “Where do I get a desk copy of my textbook? A TV/VCR? A grade book? Whom do I see to have an exam Brailled? Where can I get a room reserved?”

We give the campus policies on adding and dropping classes (supplying the appropriate dates for the term), make-up policies, and guidelines for accommodating religious holidays. We end the morning discussing available UIUC resources for teaching students with disabilities.

After lunch we have a presentation in a “smart classroom” from our campus technology center outlining some of the software programs that are available for instructional use. The presenter also discusses and demonstrates using “smart classrooms” (media equipped), using an on-line grade-book, and incorporating the Web into class assignments.

After this presentation, we discuss the quiz items they have submitted. We discuss the better aspects of the questions as well as how they could be improved. Our orientation evaluations show that both the practice TAs receive writing the questions and critiquing them is appreciated.

We end the formal portion of the orientation by discussing the first day of class. This discussion includes the importance of a good syllabus, knowing the physical layout of the

classroom and incorporating important teaching techniques from the very first class session. We talk about the perception that students gain on the first day of class when the instructor quickly goes over the syllabus and then dismisses the class—that class time is not valuable and the teacher has more important things to do. We encourage TAs to incorporate active learning, small groups, discussion—any type of teaching technique that is important to them, beginning with the first class sessions.

We then break into small groups and talk about the teaching outlines for the microteaching session scheduled for the next day. We end with an anonymous, written evaluation of the program. The same evaluation is redistributed in the middle of the semester, to see if the information from the Orientation is more or less valuable now that they are actually teaching.

#### Microteaching

The next day, groups of 10 TAs are videotaped (each on an individual videotape) presenting an 8 min lecture to each other. They receive written feedback on their presentation from both the facilitator (one of the graduate student presenters or me), and their peers. After the microteaching ends, the TAs bring their videotape to watch individually with a different graduate student presenter or me. For 20 minutes we have a one-on-one interaction with each new TA, talking about the video and any concerns he or she may have. TAs almost always tell us that, although they hated doing the microteaching, it was the single most important preparation they had for their teaching responsibilities.

#### Final Thoughts

I think it is important for an orientation immediately preceding the actual teaching to focus on hands-on, practical teaching information and to provide TAs with the resources they will need for their individual assignment. A departmental orientation allows new TAs to meet faculty and graduate students within the Department who are concerned with teaching issues. This personal contact provides new TAs with several approachable individuals should they

encounter problems in their teaching responsibilities—whether that occurs in their first semester of teaching or their last.

It is also important that the orientation be sensitive to the needs of the new TAs. Thus, although the basic structure of our orientation has stayed the same, we have changed various aspects of it in response to the evaluations. For example, it was new TAs' lament that they didn't know what they were supposed to do that prompted us to develop the job description handout.

Finally, food, that great graduate student motivator, is an important component in our orientation. We provide continental breakfast and lunch the two full days. This format allows new TAs to meet each other over coffee and muffins and encourages everyone to stay and socialize at lunch.