

Signature Course Training: Fall 2007 Report
Graduate Student Instructor Program
University of Texas at Austin
Rachel Barrera, Mark Decker, Josh Iorio

I. Background

The Graduate Student Program has provided training to teaching assistants for specific initiatives at UT-Austin. The first training took place in August 2006 for the Signature Course Pilot and Difficult Dialogue Seminars. GSI staff was able to meet with most of the trainees and designed a two-day training that responded to their concerns, needs and overall expectations of their roles as teaching assistants. The second training took place in January 2007 for new Difficult Dialogue TAs and the training included a panel session with previous Difficult Dialogues attendees of the first training session which allowed incoming TAs to get a sense of course and instructor expectations. The two day training included sessions on managing conflict, assessing and designing discussions. One attendee remarked, "...it was perfectly tailored for the type of course that we will be TAing." Once again, GSI staff was able to meet with attendees prior to training and were able to obtain a comprehensive list of concerns, needs and prior teaching experiences of the attendees.

The most recent training occurred in August of 2007. This most recent group came from a variety of areas: Sustainable Planet Course, Philosophy, LBJ, Kinesiology, and included undergraduate teaching assistants under the supervision of Dr. Powers. Each brought their own unique qualities to the training and energy of the entire group. From the beginning GSI staff identified a number of challenges. The training included teaching assistants with a wide range of experiences and prior knowledge, from undergraduate teaching assistants with no training or teaching experience to award winning teaching assistants with many years experience and advanced training. In addition, due to a departmental obligation, the LBJ TAs only participated in the 1st day of training. Another challenge was not being able to meet with trainees prior to training in order to receive their input in the design of the training experience. Not only did we need to meet a wide range of needs but we also had little knowledge of what those needs were because of our inability to meet with participants. This knowledge deficit was primarily due to the following two factors: 1) many participants were assigned their positions late in the process; 2) others did not know and/or had not met with their supervising faculty to orient themselves on expectations and duties. Based on previous experience, GSI staff was aware that meeting with attendees prior to trainee was critical in designing a successful training experience. This recent training was the most challenging but also provided the most insights into what should be done to improve future offerings.

These training experiences have provided GSI staff and DIIA a learning opportunity. By analyzing and reflecting on the information collected from attendees' evaluations, and staff participants during debriefings, we can continue to further develop and refine our training offerings to the UT-Austin campus community.

Key Points

- **The first time we led the training with two groups of TAs—Signature Courses (Sustaining the Planet) and Difficult Dialogues—we were able to meet with the TAs in advance to establish rapport, determine strengths and needs, and design training so as to address common concerns.**
 - We were not afforded this opportunity to the same extent with this most recent cadre.
- **TA’s represented five distinct groups: Philosophy, Kinesiology, LBJ, President Power’s Undergraduates, and Sustaining the Planet.**
- **There was a wide-range of TA experience:**
 - One trainee had four years of experience
 - One had participated in the training previously (with Sustaining the Planet, and was now a Lead TA for that contingent)
 - Another Sustaining the Planet TA had been awarded a TA Teaching Award for her support of that course the previous semester
 - All undergrads had little or no teaching experience
- **Most TAs, besides those associated with Sustaining the Planet, had not yet met with their supervising faculty. Therefore, they had no sense of roles and expectations**
 - The majority of the TAs were hired close to the training date, and were therefore unable to meet with training staff

II. Data Summary for August 2007 Training:

- Overall, participants rated the fall 2007 workshop as *Very useful* and were generally positive in their summary comments.
- Individual workshop sessions were all rated as useful with mean ratings falling between *Somewhat* and *Very useful*.
- In particular, respondents identified hands-on activities, specific tips, “practical solutions,” and concrete examples as being most helpful to them.
- Suggestions for improving the training were varied. Several respondents desired a greater emphasis on activities (e.g., role play) and concrete tips/example while others desired more advanced content.

III. Quantitative Evaluation Results: (N=14)

Participants were asked to rate each session during the two day workshop. The ratings were based on the following 5-Point Likert Scale: (1: Not at all useful, 2: A little useful, 3: Somewhat useful, 4: Very useful, 5: Extremely useful). The mean and standard deviation (σ) values for the ratings of individual sessions are presented in Table 1. The

standard deviation is a value that represents how tightly clustered the data points are around the mean. For instance, a standard deviation of 1.0 on a mean of 2.5 means that all of the data points were located between 1.5 and 3.5. For a standard deviation of 0.1, all of the data points are located between 3.4 and 3.6. A higher standard deviation indicates less consensus in the responses by the participants.

Table 1: Individual Session Evaluations

Session Title	Mean	Standard Deviation
Ground Rules, Faculty/TA Checklist	3.62	0.87
How People Learn	3.50	1.02
Designing Effective Discussions	3.50	1.16
Managing Conflict DVD	2.93	1.00
Integrating Writing into Discussion	3.57	0.85
Muddiest Point	3.21	1.05
Minimal Marking Method	3.64	1.08
Assessing Discussion	2.93	1.07
Kidney Machine Exercise	2.43	1.09
Fostering Deep Learning	3.57	0.94
Recap/Drinking from the Cup	3.27	1.01
Overall	3.79	0.58

Qualitative Responses:

The evaluation for the Fall 2007 Signature Course training contained two questions designed to elicit qualitative evaluations of the training. The questions asked participants to 1) provide a rationale for their overall rating of the training, and 2) offer suggestions for ways in which the training could be improved in the future. The responses are presented below.

Question 1: *Please explain your rating of the overall usefulness of the two day training.*

- As I have never run a discussion before, this training feels like it will certainly prove to be useful when going into my sections. I have **become aware of many issues** that I hadn't considered before
- I especially enjoyed the **sessions that addressed specific classroom situations**. I'm also glad that we have been **made aware of resources available to GSIs**. The most valuable things I got from the trainings were **specific prompts for discussion and activities**.
- A little too much on assessment, but overall the **training was balanced** and provided **many good tips and tricks**.
- The **minimal marking method** may prove to be useful, but honestly, beyond that, these may not be much of use that I didn't already know.
- **Useful tips and techniques**. Presentations themselves **modeled useful tips and practices**. Good just 9:00-2:00 (instead of 9:00-5:00) for those of us with minimal attention spans. **Great bullet point handouts**.

- The training introduced **a lot of concepts and activities that are useful** to think about when approaching a discussion section. **Muddiest point and deep learning** are good things to consider in designing a lesson plan.
- I learned a great deal about **different teaching methods** and **how to manage a classroom**. The days were split up perfectly, so I didn't feel overwhelmed with material. The best material was the "**ground rules**", "**kidney machine**", and "**deep learning**".
- The overall structure (**lots of interaction and discussion**) of the sessions was good.
- I have **more confidence** leading a class after attending the training. The **workshops on writing** were particularly helpful.
- I liked the **practical solutions** to TA issues, but felt a lot of the theoretical info was unnecessary
- **Lots of good ideas**. At times, perhaps too basic. Aimed at folks with less/different experience
- A lot of what was discussed was intuitive, but some was **useful**. There was too much time spent on concepts.
- I really **learned a lot** and will implement many aspects into my teaching

Question 2: *What suggestions do you have for improving the training?*

- The **DVD portion** could be better
- Not sure. Maybe **observing more discussions** and methods of managing them. Sweet's presentation was great.
- Pitch the training to a **higher level**. Those of us that have been doing this for a while probably didn't benefit so much.
- **Role-playing** in Kidney exercise (disruptive student, etc.). **More interactive** "How to Lead Discussion" PowerPoint presentation. Thanks for the food, pay, and books.
- **More activities** and less lecturing. Demonstrations of effective/ineffective methods go a long way.
- Maybe incorporate a little more on **different learning styles** (visual vs. aural vs. tactile learners) to understand the different types of students TAs encounter
- Overall, I thought the program was effective and well designed
- Tell us why we're learning these specific skills as signature course TAs. How is this different from other TA trainings? I also think everything could easily be accomplished in **one day**.
- The doing was always more helpful than the hearing. Incorporate **more activities**. Perhaps less lecture
- I think it could be **condensed**
- More **focus on specific conflict scenarios** and less focus on vague situations. More **role acting of classroom situations** would reinforce specific lessons and strategies.
- Have it in a **bigger room** so that it will not feel so congested.

IV. Specific Conclusions & Recommendations:

Both the qualitative and quantitative data presented above reflect some of the challenges discussed by the presenters during informal debrief sessions held after the training. There were two challenges that we will address here:

Conclusion 1: Participants were uncertain about their role as TAs. Before the training, we contacted all of the participants and asked for them to outline their previous experiences as TAs and to describe what kind of role they would be expected to play for their classes in the semester subsequent to training (e.g. grade papers, lead discussions, design evaluations). Many of the participants did not know what their roles were going to be. (In fact, many TAs had not yet met their faculty supervisors. In part this may have been due to last minute decisions related to TA hiring and assignments.) We tried to solicit this information beforehand so that we could tailor the training to the specific needs of the participants. Our goal was to make the training as interactive as possible, but interactivity can only be accomplished through meaningful, relevant, activities and discussions that are designed with the specific needs and goals of the participants in mind. The qualitative data presented above indicates that the participants would have liked the sessions to be more interactive. However, given the participants' uncertainty as to their role in the classroom, achieving this level of interactivity proved to be extremely challenging for the session leaders.

Recommendation 1: TAs and training staff need to work more closely with lead faculty in identifying clear roles for the TAs prior to training. This will allow training staff to craft meaningful and relevant interactive activities that afford the participants hands-on experience developing the relevant skills that will be essential to fulfilling their expected role as TAs. We suggest that the presentation team meet face to face with supervising faculty members prior to the training. In addition, TA hiring decisions should be made as early as possible. This should enable TAs to begin asking appropriate questions related to role expectations, and, as part of that process, it could also help identify competency areas that may be worthy of training focus.

Conclusion 2: Participants had widely different levels of teaching experience. Another challenge we identified was in crafting a training program that was relevant and useful for all of the participants. This was challenging because of the difference in teaching experience between participants. Some of the participants were undergraduate TAs with no experience as TAs while other participants were senior TAs with many semesters of experience in the classroom. We see the results of this situation born out in both the qualitative and quantitative data presented above. In the qualitative data, we see conflicting suggestions for ways to improve the training. Some participants indicated that the training should be focused on more complex ideas and that the training was too basic. Other participants indicated that they learned a great deal and that many of the concepts were useful and practical. We also see the diversity in teaching experience of the participants reflected in the quantitative data. Given the relatively large cumulative standard deviation (1.01), this indicates that the evaluations were not tightly clustered around the mean (3.38). We can interpret the standard deviation value as demonstrating

that there was a split between the participants as to the usefulness of the training. Although the mean score for the sessions was average to above average, the large standard deviation indicates that some found the training very useful to extremely useful while others found the training to be a little useful to somewhat useful.

Recommendation 2: Develop two separate training tracks based on level of teaching experience. For each group, i.e. those with prior experience as TAs and those without experience in the classroom. By creating two different tracks, we will be able to continue to develop the pedagogical effectiveness of the experienced TAs while ensuring that the inexperienced TAs receive basic training focused on their concerns as first-time teachers.

If a split training model is not feasible, we recommend developing a training program that utilizes the experiences of the more senior TAs and incorporates their experiences in the classroom into the overall program design. However, to reiterate an earlier point, training staff must be empowered to begin communications with designated TAs as soon as possible. This can only happen when TAs are assigned in a timely manner and when both faculty and TAs have a sense of course-related expectations.

V. Conclusion

In order to continue to provide quality training, certain actions are recommended. **First, once teaching assistants are appointed, preferably timely appointments, trainers should meet with all possible attendees in order to establish their needs and concerns regarding their teaching assistant positions and duties. Ideally, attendees will have already met with their faculty supervisors to obtain their responsibilities, and know expectations in their assigned roles.** Meeting teaching assistants prior to training is critical in establishing a positive learning dynamic. If possible, GSI staff should meet with supervising faculty as well. This can only further enhance the design of the training. **Secondly, two separate training tracks are recommended if the targeted training group includes both novice and experienced TAs.** The two tracks can ensure that the needs of each group are met without alienating one or the other if training is done concurrently as previously done. Furthermore, GSI and DIIA should continue to critically analyze attendee evaluations to continue improving the training design.