What I Wish I Had Known

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1. Introduction

Over five semesters and nine classes worth of TAing there have been many times where I wished that someone had explained something to me beforehand. This paper will discuss some of the things I wish that I had known, divided into two general categories: proving yourself as a new TA and things that I wish I had thought about after a few semesters as a TA.

2. Proving Yourself as a New TA

Imagine this scenario: You show up to your first TA meeting and everyone seems to know each other already. All of the office hours heroes from the previous semester together, in one room, discussing something. However you can't quite figure out what it is that they're talking about even though it sounds like English; it must be pretty complex. Perhaps even worse, you do have something to say but all they seem to care about is your favorite Disney character. These are the kind of people that you want to mold yourself after, capable of effortlessly simplifying the complex one minute and ~~debugging complex code~~ reading a stack trace the next. But it seems as if everyone else in the room is already a member of this exclusive club, how can you get in? Logically, since all of the people in this club are your favorite TAs, your only way to get there must be by showing them that you too can be a great TA.

Whether the above scenario seems feasible or not, the point is that at some time you may feel as if you have to prove yourself in order to fit in, get rehired, make friends, get job interviews, become the life of the party, etc. Whatever the motivation though, putting too much effort into proving yourself to your colleagues, professors, and even students is a recipe for burning out, stressing out, or even becoming physically ill, none of which are good for any of the parties you wanted to prove yourself to.

Having gone through this, I wish that I had been told not to feel like I needed to prove myself. (This comes from the first person to set their piazza email notification time to instant) Unfortunately, when looking into the future as a new TA it can be hard to see why you wouldn't want to try outperforming everyone; how are you going to get better by just being average? In reality though you have to strike a balance as a TA between being a TA and the rest of your life. It's true that TAing can make you "smarter" (or just better at debugging), but so will taking more classes and exploring new topics in your spare time. In that spirit, new TAs should be told not to worry about proving themselves and just worry about improving. If the difference between these two can be hammered home then hopefully people won't put extra pressure on themselves and burn out.

In addition to the above advice, the following subsections can serve as more examples of positive behavior/advice.

2.1 Don't be Afraid to Ask for Help (and then Actually do it!)

This has actually been said or implied every time that I have TA'd but I didn't take it to heart and try to do it until later. Like many things it is actually easier said than done in most cases. I realized that this was advice was worth heeding when I observed other TAs spending a large amount of time with single students/groups during office hours. Occasionally I would approach them to make sure they were OK, and often times within five minutes I could identify the problem that they were having. This wasn't due to a difference in our abilities as TAs or the problem being too complicated to solve, but rather that they had been staring at the problem for too long or had glossed over the problematic piece of code. By getting a fresh set of eyes on the problem or starting from scratch without any assumptions about

where the problem actually was, not only did the problem get solved faster but everyone was able to learn about different strategies for locating problems.

This advice is worth heeding because it helps the students get their question answered in a timely manner and also helps you answer questions or find bugs faster in the future.

Part of the problem with this advice is that new TAs might hear "Don't be afraid to ask for help" as "If you can't figure out what the problem is then ask a smarter TA", which for a new TA out to prove that they're smart enough to actually be a TA, might be seen as admitting defeat. Instead perhaps new TAs could shadow a returning TA for the first week of assignments or be assigned a returning TA as a mentor to meet for 10-15 minutes a week in order to talk about assignments and common problems with them, this way they would feel comfortable with asking questions and have a friend to talk with.

2.2 Don't Make Yourself Available All the Time

This was a mistake that I made my first couple semesters TAing 1110. A new TA might feel that any unanswered student question needs to be answered by them. Answering all questions at all hours of the day can lead to a problem where not only are you spending all of your time answering questions, but the quality of the question, or the time a student spends thinking about a question before asking, decreases. In this model where students are able to get help at all hours of the day they may find it acceptable to ask questions without thinking about them first because they can get you to answer them, freeing their brain of a small/moderate cognitive load.

This only really became apparent to me after comparing the Piazza forums of classes like 1110 with classes like 4610 or 4457. CS 1110 feels like a plethora of "Why don't I pass a hidden test case" while an upper level class is mostly conceptual questions. This could partly be due to a difference in the abilities of students, but I am inclined to believe that there is also a difference in the amount of help that students are trained to expect. Being available all the time can also take a toll on one's health, so in reality it isn't helping anyone learn.

As far as communicating this to new TAs I think there should be an emphasis across the department made on individual problem solving with TAs being told (en-

forcing the behavior might still be an issue) only to facilitate critical thinking and answer higher level or conceptual questions such as "How can I figure out what is causing my issue?". This may be be too big of a culture shift for some groups of TAs to make right away but hopefully over time this can be achieved.

2.3 Don't Worry About the Students Liking You

I discovered this to be an extension of not trying to prove yourself as a TA, but it might be worth mentioning that your goal should be to help the students learn, not be their friend. Sometimes this means walking away and letting them finish on their own, or pointing them to their notes and coming back later.

It is easy to care about people liking you because we are social as people but for many of the same reasons as above, putting a large amount of effort into being the TA that students want you to be (if we're honest they'd like a 24/7 on call private tutor) should be avoided to encourage student learning and for your own personal wellbeing.

A good way to teach this to new TAs is just to repeat it, and hopefully over time they will stop trying to prove themselves and realize that people respect them for being knowledgeable and helpful, not because they put effort into being liked.

3. Advice for Later in a TA Career

TAing for long periods of time can lead to burning out or feeling dissatisfied. There is an implicit pressure to continue but sometimes TAs lose the motivation to continue doing the same thing every semester. This becomes apparent mostly when asking other older TAs about it, but hopefully some mitigations can be communicated before it happens to prevent anything too bad from coming of it.

The best way to combat this fatigue is probably by presenting different opportunities to TAs who have been working for a year or more.

Some more specific examples follow but the gist is that more experienced TAs might want to consider changing what they do every semester or year so that things don't feel repetitive.

3.1 Consider TAing different classes every year

Something that a new TA might not be prepared to experience is the student knowledge "reset" that happens every semester. As a TA your skills are improving all the time, and for one semester it seems like the aver-

age student skill rises as well. When the next semester starts however, your skills are roughly where they were at the end of the last semester while the average student has regressed from where last semester's students were. This can be unexpectedly demoralizing as you find yourself with many new things to say and students who get farther and farther away from understanding them. Such a removal from when you were taking the class can make it feel impossible to impart knowledge on a level that the students can actually understand. It is worth knowing that there are options for you to continue TAing in positions where you also start fresh so that you don't feel an urge to give up on students, which isn't fair to them.

More experienced TAs might be given the opportunity to try TAing for a higher level class to combat this. This has the benefit of not only giving you a slight knowledge "reset" but hopefully also pairing you with a set of students that knows more. The combination of these two factors will hopefully give the TA a more positive outlook and help them connect with students.

3.2 Look to Move Into a Different Role as a TA

Something that newer TAs might not be aware of is all the behind-the-scenes effort that goes into running a class or creating a homework assignment. This becomes apparent or you catch onto it later on after hearing professors discuss it repeatedly, but not normally until you have been TAing for some amount of time.

This work presents a good opportunity for a more experienced TA to branch out from the normal office hours, grading, lab routine and try their hand at a different level of teacher assistance. Replacing one of the above responsibilities can help prevent burning out but also gives you the opportunity to spend more time with your professor which will allow them to write better letters of recommendation and form a more personal connection with you.

The best way to communicate this to more senior TAs would be to mention it explicitly in meetings or an email, just so that they are made aware in a low pressure fashion that the opportunity exists for those who want it or are unhappy with their current duties. Hopefully this will not only keep older TAs satisfied but also free up some space for newer TAs to interact with students.

4. Conclusion

When I think of things that I wish I had known as a TA they fall into two categories: the pitfalls of overworking yourself as a new TA, and the possibility of burning out as an older TA. I think that both of these can be avoided with some added explicit communication between more experienced staff and relatively less experienced staff, and hope that my experience can be put to good use.