COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY WITH TEACHING ASSISTANTS DURING PERIODS OF REMOTE INSTRUCTION
Ideas for Instructors

What is it?

Teaching Assistants (TAs) are graduate students who assist instructors of record with instructional responsibilities. In some courses, students may spend the majority of their time interacting with and learning from TAs, and thus, TAs serve an integral role in undergraduate education here at UC Davis. Communicating effectively with a TA involves setting clear expectations and goals, providing and receiving feedback, and meeting early and often.

Why is it important?

Communicating effectively with your TA(s) is an essential part of developing a strong instructional team. Because TAs often serve as the primary conduit between instructors and students, setting clear expectations about learning goals, grading, etc. with TAs ensures that they can then facilitate their course tasks well and communicate clearly with students. For TAs, clear and consistent communication from instructors provides a supportive framework, enables them to manage their multiple responsibilities as teaching assistants and graduate students, and gives them an opportunity to observe and influence decisions about course design and content. When there is a failure to communicate effectively, misunderstandings, frustration, and conflicts often ensue. Establishing a plan for effective communication early on in the course builds trust between all parties, prevents many potential issues, and helps ensure the course runs smoothly. This is more important than ever during periods of remote instruction.

How to do it?

Communicating with a TA in a remote or online setting is not fundamentally different than communicating with a TA face-to-face. In both cases, it is important to set clear expectations and goals both for the course and for the TAs role, provide opportunities for the TAs to give and receive feedback, schedule weekly meetings with TA(s) to maintain open communication and discuss important course details, and check-in with TAs regularly about student engagement and workload.

Communication between instructional team members can be accomplished through several platforms, including phone, email, video conferencing services (e.g, Zoom), shared cloud documents (e.g., via Google Drive/Dropbox/Box), and online instant messaging services (e.g., Slack channels). With any communication platform, it is important to establish expectations for both instructors and TAs in terms of their availability, expected response time and methods, etc. Communicating with TAs through platforms they are expected to also use for teaching has the added bonus of providing them extra comfort and familiarity with these tools.

Tips for communicating effectively with TAs:

- **Make sure TAs understand the course's major learning outcomes.** In many courses, students spend the majority of their time interacting and learning with TAs. It is vital that TAs understand how each activity and assignment contributes to the course's major learning objectives so that they can communicate these expectations to students and execute activities successfully.

- **Develop clear expectations early.** Before the course begins**,** have a discussion with your TA about what you expect them to contribute to the course (in terms of time, responsibilities, and skills) and what they hope to get out of their role (in training, experience, and mentorship). What are your expectations for how the TAs will contribute to grading, lesson planning, and interacting with students? Delegate tasks for the course (e.g., who will be responsible for writing email reminders to students or for responding to comments in an informal Q&A space, like a Canvas discussion board or Piazza). Make sure to get these expectations and goals in writing, so that they are clear to everyone and available for reference later on.

- **Make sure TA(s) are comfortable using the learning management system and other tools for the course.** TAs for remote and online classes spend significantly more time working with the learning management system than they would in a face-to-face setting. Before the course begins, make sure the TAs practice using these tools and feel comfortable with all of the tasks they will be expected to do. Provide any tips you have learned or resources you have collected about working with Canvas, Zoom, etc. Establish back-up plans for when technology fails.

- **Schedule standing weekly meetings with your TA team** via Zoom to maintain open communication and discuss important course details. These meetings should include time to reflect on the past week, preview what is coming up, and address both instructor-side and TA-side concerns. If you have multiple TAs, these meetings are even more important so that TAs can brainstorm activities and assignments, work through tricky concepts or questions together, offer and receive feedback, and seek advice about difficult classroom situations.

- **Check-in on a regular basis with each individual TA.** Schedule individual meetings with each individual TA via Zoom (or phone) on a regular basis to review and confirm teaching responsibilities, share insights from interacting with students, and resolve any issues (e.g., scheduling, grading, student concerns). It is important to ask how much time they are spending on their TA duties and how they are managing their workload. Make sure the TA is not exceeding the hours in their contract and is able to balance their TA work with other academic, professional, and personal obligations.

- **Offer multiple channels of communication**: Outside of weekly Zoom meetings, it may be helpful to correspond with TAs via phone calls, email, shared Google Drive/Box/Dropbox documents, and/or a course Slack channel. Be sure to establish guidelines for how often you and the TAs will check and respond to various lines of communication and when you will be available or unavailable to them.

- **Invite TA(s) to watch you teach**. Encourage the TA(s) to virtually attend your classes to learn from watching you teach and give you feedback on your teaching performance. Initiate conversations about which aspects of teaching interest them the most. You may require TA(s) to regularly attend your class so they can better engage with students about all aspects of the course and help you track student engagement.

- **Attend a class/lab/section taught by your TA(s)**. Attend a live discussion/studio/lab section taught by your TA(s) or watch a recording of their class to give them feedback on their teaching performance. Make sure to provide constructive feedback that highlights both their strengths and areas they could improve as a teacher.

Tools to facilitate communication in remote and online environments:

- **Phone/text/email:**
    - Phone and email are great low-tech solutions for communicating with TAs.
    - Make sure to discuss when to use these lines of communication and appropriate response timeframes.

- **Zoom:**
    - Zoom is a cloud platform for video and audio conferencing, chat, and webinars
    - You can set regular scheduled meetings via Zoom to meet with individual TAs or groups of TAs.
    - Share your screen to help illustrate difficult concepts or guide TAs through how to use the course management system.
    - TAs can also share their screen to show activities they have developed.

- **Shared Google Drive/Box/Dropbox folder:**
    - It's generally a good practice to keep all of the course documents in a centralized, organized location.
    - Maintaining course documents in a shared cloud folder allows both the TAs and instructors to access and edit documents as necessary.
    - Create a folder for your course, with subfolders for lesson plans, handouts, assignments, answer keys, assessments, etc.
    - Files can be uploaded as "read-only" or you can share specific subfolders with TAs to control access/editing.

Further Reading:

UC Davis EdTech Commons
http://edtech.ucdavis.edu/getting-started/advice-for-teaching-assistants/

Stanford Teaching Commons
https://teachingcommons.stanford.edu/grad-support/grad-teaching-development/teaching-assistants-role

Association of College and University Educators (ACUE) Online Teaching Toolkit
https://acue.org/online-teaching-toolkit/

The Chronicle of Higher Education's "How to Be A Better Online Teacher"
https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/advice-online-teaching