Chapter 10
The Balance of School and Teaching

One of the hardest parts of graduate school is balancing your duties to your students and your duties to yourself and your own education. Most graduate students feel that they could work full-time on any one of their multiple obligations and still not get as much accomplished as they would like. This chapter suggests ways to integrate teaching into your demanding graduate program.

Front-Loading Effort

The better prepared you are for the course at the beginning of the semester, the less work you will have during the semester. If you have control over the syllabus, write a detailed one that guides you from week to week. In addition, take advantage of the lull in your own course work at the beginning of the semester to run lab experiments, to make copies of long handouts, or to complete other foreseeable time-consuming tasks.

Assigning Responsibility

Your job as a teaching assistant is to guide the learning of your students, not to do their work for them. While you should recognize that college course work can be demanding for many students, you should not feel obligated to tailor an individual course of study for each of your students. Ironically, the students who demand the most of your time are often the students who put the least effort into the course. Resolve that you will not do more work for a student than the student is doing for your course.

Here are a few ways to make sure that you do not take too much responsibility and that your students take enough.

• Write a clear and complete syllabus.
Use it as a way to tell students what you will do for them and what they are expected to do for the course. Establish clear guidelines for what will happen when students fail to do their work and stick to them.

DON’T “Late work will be penalized.”

Do “Paper grades will be lowered by five points for every day late.”

DON’T Assume that every student will feel they have to come to every exam.

Do “Contact me in advance if you will not be able to attend an exam and need to arrange a makeup. If you do not attend an exam and do not contact me in advance, you will need to provide proof of an emergency in order to take a makeup.”

See chapter 2, “Establishing Contact” and “Syllabus: Setting the Agenda,” for more information on developing your syllabus.

• If a student is struggling in your course, be clear with the student about what they must do to get back on track.

DON’T If a student has missed three weeks of class, offer to meet with them individually to summarize the material.

Do If a student has missed three weeks of class, explain where the information can be found (the course pack, a friend’s notes, etc.) and offer to answer specific questions once they have read over the material.

DON’T Devise a complex plan for how a student can make up missed work.

Do Ask the student how they feel they should make up the missed work. They will invariably devise a more demanding and cruel plan than anything you would ever have come up with!

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**Student:** I was in Florida over spring break, and I got so badly sunburned that I haven’t been able to come to class for three weeks. What did I miss, and how can I make it up?

**TA:** Sorry about the burn. In the last three weeks, we have covered chapters five through ten in the text, the middle third of the course pack, and we have taken two in-class quizzes.
Student: Wow, I missed a lot. What can I do to make it up?

TA: You’re right: that is a lot. What do you think would be a good way for you to get completely caught up with the material?

Student: I guess that I could copy a friend’s notes, write brief summaries of all the chapters and articles, and write a short paper that covered the material on the quizzes. Does that sound okay?

TA: That sounds fine. Show me the chapter and article summaries and give me the paper to grade. I’ll give you two weeks from today to hand them in.

• Schedule your office hours so that they have a distinct ending.

You are not obligated to meet with students past the time of your scheduled office hours if you do not want to. Do not hesitate to point out to the student kindly that office hours are ending; do not feel that you need to justify doing so. Invite the student to come to your next scheduled office hours should they wish to.

Scheduling Teaching-Related Activities

Teaching Classes

You may not have a choice about when you teach your classes. But you may have the option of meeting with all of your classes on one day or of spreading the classes throughout the week. Whatever you choose to do, try to schedule your sections so that they all occur after the same lecture. This way, you need to create only one lesson plan per week. Many teaching assistants prefer to teach all of their classes on the same day, and there are both pros and cons for doing so.

Pros

You will save time by only needing to assemble your teaching materials once each week.

You can get into a “teaching mode” and stay there as you move from one class to the next.

You can make small changes and correct mistakes you see in the class plan.

You can minimize “downtime,” as many teaching assistants find that they are not able to do much of their own work right before or right after they teach.
Cons  Teaching can be exhausting, so you may run out of energy before you get to your last class.

If you find that you are missing necessary materials, or that you need to develop a different class plan altogether, you will not have time to make major adjustments before you get to your next class.

A bad first class may affect how you feel about teaching later ones.

Preparing for Class

Be sure to set aside time each week just for teaching preparation. You probably will want to do this at least a couple of days before the class so that you will have time to get any needed materials or to photocopy any handouts. Schedule this time in your planner; it is more efficient and less stressful than trying to cram your preparation in around the edges of your other work. If you want your students to prepare before they come to your class, be sure to get one or two weeks ahead in your class planning so that you can tell them what will be expected week to week.

Making Your Schedule

When you choose to block out preparation and grading time in your schedule will depend on how you function both as a teacher and as a student. A few suggestions:

- Figure out when you do your most productive academic work (be it early in the morning or after midnight) and leave those times available.

- Determine whether you can use postteaching downtime as a time for grading or for class preparation. Devoting certain days to teaching and others to your work can be an effective division of time.

- Schedule your blocks of time with natural breaks to end them (e.g., meals, sleep, scheduled activities like exercise). This will make it easier for you to stick to your schedule and to keep your activities distinct.
Coordinating Teaching and Personal Schedules

In graduate school, you must learn to be a student and a teacher and still feel like you have time to be human.

Sharing the Burden

You owe it to your students to be prepared for every class, to be familiar with all of the material, and to take them and their work seriously. You also owe it to yourself to take advantage of opportunities to do less, not more, work. Here are a few suggestions.

- Ask your students to prepare review questions before an exam and help them work through the answers as opposed to developing a review sheet for them.
- Ask your students to take responsibility for giving presentations to their classmates at the end of the semester.
- Ask several students to come to class prepared with a discussion question about a text so that you do not have to devise all of the questions.
- Invite a guest speaker.
Employing such strategies will significantly lighten your teaching load because you will be asking students to take partial responsibility for leading the class. And it may even improve your teaching as students become more active learners.

**Scheduling Due Dates**

If you have control over when your students will hand in papers, exams, or problem sets, try to schedule these at times when you will not be working on significant papers, exams, or problem sets of your own. Then schedule uninterrupted grading times and uninterrupted work times for yourself throughout the week; protect those times jealously! Do not schedule meetings with students or professors during your work times; do not let yourself grade during your work times. And if you finish grading early in a scheduled block of grading time, give yourself the rest of the scheduled block as “free time.”

“When I first started as a teaching assistant, I was all too willing to accommodate the schedules of my students, even if it was inconvenient for me. I had one student who could never make my regularly scheduled office hours but who often wanted to meet. I would usually agree to meet at a time he suggested, even if I knew that it meant walking from one side of campus to the other and then back again after our meeting. I am now more careful about when I agree to meet with students. If you take a few extra minutes, you can often find a time that is convenient for both of you.”

**Self-Preservation**

You would not be a graduate student if you did not hold yourself to high standards in your academic life. Many graduate students feel that they should be as good at teaching as they are at learning. It is easy to forget that you have spent at least sixteen years of full-time work honing your skills as a student. It is also easy to forget that if you stay in academia, you will spend your career perfecting your skills as a teacher; even the most talented and experienced teachers learn and develop new skills all the time.

**Enjoy Your Successes**

Be sure to recognize things that are going well in your classes and take credit for them. Do not assume that you are responsible only for the things that go poorly.
Expect and Accept Your Failures

Things will not always go well. You will have difficulty dealing with some students. Some of your discussions will go better than others. Students will ask you questions for which you are not prepared. You will have days when not one of your students will have something helpful to contribute to the class. You will have class plans blow up in your face.

Some of the things that go wrong in your class will be because of the students; some will be because of you; and some will result from a misalignment of the stars. All good teachers have bad days, and there is such a thing as an awkward group of students who will not come together to learn no matter what you do. Expect that you will make mistakes and take time to figure out what went wrong. Make notes on your class plan about what happened so that if you ever use it again, you will be able to make changes. The sooner you accept that things will not always go well, the sooner you can use your mishaps to guide you to better teaching in the future.

See chapter 9, “Responses to a Discussion Section,” for more information on how to walk back into the classroom after a bad day.

Think of Teaching as a Process

Teaching is like driving. Even though you likely got your driver’s license when you were sixteen, you are a better driver now (we hope!) than you were when you first were let out on the road. Graduate students teach because they are more familiar with the material than the undergraduates. Other than that, there is no reason why a graduate student who has never taught before should be a perfectly skilled teacher. You will continue to develop and learn as a teacher with every semester, but to begin, you will just have to take the wheel and start driving.