

Building Community, Enhancing Learning, Fostering Innovation

As a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA), you likely have more control over the classroom climate than you might think. GTAs often have more frequent interaction with students than faculty, and also grade students' papers and evaluate students' performance. As a result, GTAs have an important role in creating a comfortable and inclusive environment for students from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, and can implement many effective strategies to create a climate conducive to student learning, such as creating a safe and open environment, setting up clear expectations of the class, soliciting student feedback, and so on. Consider the following teaching strategies:

1. **Set up grading criteria/guidelines and communicate these criteria to students.** An uncomfortable classroom environment sometimes is a result of misunderstanding. For example, if the grading criteria are not clear and a student earns a Con a paper, this student may think the instructor is biased, negatively affecting his or her ability to learn in the course. Clarifying your expectations can prevent this type of ambiguity in the classroom and increase students' perception of fairness. Defining these criteria can also reduce the influence of biases when you are stressed, overtired, or under "cognitive load," and keep your grading consistent. If you are unsure of these criteria or of how to communicate them to your students, consult with faculty members or other TAs.
2. **Communicate to students that you value fairness and equality** (unless you don't) and set up ground rules about being respectful to other students, even when they differ in their opinions about course material.
3. **Discuss relevant issues with faculty.** You're not alone on this; most faculty members would also like to help their students learn more effectively and may be able to provide you with support, resources, and the benefit of their experiences.
4. **Make to represent a range of genders, cultures and social groups multicultural topics in examples or course materials.**
 - a. GTAs in discussion sections, problem solving sessions and many labs have ample opportunity to use examples to clarify concepts or materials students learn in lectures. You can also create examples that include people from different social groups or cultures. Even course material that doesn't focus on multicultural topics can usually include examples that refer to a diverse group of people.
 - b. Caveat: It is also important to think about whether these examples portray stereotypic or prejudicial assumption about some social groups. If you realize it too late (while you are already teaching it), point it out in class and acknowledge how the example is stereotypical.
 - c. When using pop cultural examples or humor, you may want to explain the background when using these examples because there is a chance that a few students do not have the background to understand the example or joke and are afraid to ask.
5. **Some strategies to create an Inclusive discussion:**
 - a. Don't be afraid of silence. Some students may need to gather their courage to say something in class. Give them some time.

- b. Play devil's advocate: introduce various perspectives to balance out the view expressed in class.
 - c. Encourage discussion of various viewpoints and control the common urge to impose our beliefs onto students. Try to address and acknowledge students who present interesting/opposing ideas rather than shooting them down with contrary evidence. Responses such as, "I'm glad you brought that up. It's actually a common misperception." or "Interesting idea. What do you think the author of this study would say to that?" can develop critical thinking skills without silencing students. Remember that it takes a lot of courage for some students to bring different ideas up.
 - d. If issues about ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or other differences come up and seem relevant address them; do not avoid talking about these issues. It may seem irrelevant to you but may be important for some students.
6. **Create opportunities for students to interact with each other** (e.g., small group discussion, collaborative learning, group projects)
- a. Students may like to sit with their friends or people who are similar to them. Although this can be beneficial at times when it helps students feel comfortable in the classroom, heterogeneous groupings can teach skills important to a variety of situations and can help students expand their "Comfort zone."
7. **Address inappropriate or offensive comments/jokes**
- a. If these occur, address them immediately; don't wait or let it slide. At the same time, don't simply insult or dismiss the speaker. Try instead to get the class to examine the assumptions underlying the comment.
 - b. Occasionally, even the best intentioned of us can inadvertently say something that can be offensive to some students. If this happens, be sure to address your remarks in class and apologize.
 - c. See Chapter IV of the TRC Teaching a Diverse Student Body Handbook for other ways to deal with these difficult moments.
8. **Be aware of unconscious biases that we all may have.** Understand that these biases may affect the way we behave towards, and evaluate, students. Although we are not consciously aware of having these attitudes, it doesn't mean that we cannot control our behavior or think of ways to reduce the influence of these unconscious tendencies. Awareness is the first step.
9. **Know students beyond their names and most apparent social group memberships.** Learn something about each student through an ice-breaker exercise. Encourage them to come to your office hour. When they do, talk to them about something outside of class materials. In these conversations, you may ask them about their backgrounds and learn something about them. This will show that you care about them as individuals but also respect their cultural backgrounds.

*Created by Janetta Lun, former graduate student, *Psychology*