

Reflections on Teaching at Stanford (speech given at Stanford's annual Teaching Assistant Orientation, September 23rd, 2016)

First, I want to say welcome to teaching at Stanford. If you're anything like how I was as a first time TA (Teaching Assistant), then you might be nervous about teaching.

When I started teaching at Stanford, I was intimidated about serving as an instructor for this highly accomplished student body. Stanford students have started companies and charities and worked as intelligence analysts with the U.S. military. Some students in your lectures or sections may even be coming home with gold medals from the recent Olympics. As a TA, you might wonder – what can I offer as an instructor to this extremely high-achieving and selective group of students?

When I first started TA-ing, my answer was to learn the course material as thoroughly as was humanly possible. I wanted to come across as having the highest level of expertise in the subject matter, and be able to answer any question that students threw at me – no matter how obscure or specific the question might be. My worst nightmare was a student asking a question to which I simply didn't know the answer.

Of course, this approach to teaching made me really nervous – especially when teaching classes where I didn't have as much background in the material. And this nervousness came through in my early course evaluations. Students wrote things like, "I wish Lauren weren't as frightened of students" and "Lauren could be more confident."

But there were some other things I noticed in my evaluations that I hadn't expected. The moments when I hadn't known the answers to questions were actually moments that came up in my most positive evaluations from students. Students wrote: "Lauren didn't know the

answer to every question, but when she didn't, she took the time to find out and always followed up, either by sending an email out after section or talking about it the next class." Being a good instructor didn't mean being a walking encyclopedia, but showing students that I cared about their learning and would tackle challenging questions with them.

In future quarters, I decided to openly admit my struggles with difficult material rather than attempting to minimize them. While teaching a demanding statistics course to incoming psychology PhD students, I found that I was able to use my own past challenges to connect with struggling students. In my evaluations, students wrote: "I appreciated Lauren's ability to connect with students. Specifically, she was comfortable saying that the material was difficult to master, even for her, and this helped me keep working towards building an understanding."

Through these experiences, I've learned that the social dynamics of the classroom are as important as the content for learning. TAs help students learn effectively by supporting them and encouraging them, and that counts more than knowing all of the right answers.

This idea has dramatically changed my mindset about TA-ing. At first, I neglected the social aspects of classroom in favor of delivering as much content as possible. One experience really showed me this. During my first quarter TA-ing Introductory Psychology, I was excited to have students complete a new activity where they would debate about whether things like caffeine withdrawal should be considered a mental disorder (fun fact: it is according to the DSM-5!). But, the first thing many students were doing in this activity was introducing themselves to each other – even though it was a small section of 12 students and it was already week 5 of the quarter. I'd been so focused on the idea of learning as absorbing knowledge that I hadn't helped students learn each others' names! Now I

spend time helping students build rapport with each other at the beginning of the quarter, realizing that the social connections made in the classroom are as important as learning a new fact or discussing one more interesting study. Students learn and achieve more when they feel that they belong in the classroom and TAs are an important facilitator of this sense of belonging.

So: don't be nervous. You already have all of the knowledge you need to be a successful TA. You're ready to help students master challenging material, regardless of whether you're writing your dissertation on the topic, or have never even heard a lecture on it before.