

From Tutoring to Teaching: How to Survive as a TA After the Writing Center

By Alex Pickens

Writing centers across the country enjoy many bistro-like qualities: couches, paintings, coffee pots, and a warm, supportive atmosphere. After tutoring in the writing center for four semesters, and assuming the ever-so-daunting position of assistant director, I took the leap to teaching my own freshman composition course. As a graduate student, we are allowed to either tutor in the writing center or teach our own freshman composition classes. If we choose the latter, we are called TAs (teaching assistants).

Full of ambition, I said a tearful goodbye to my writing center colleagues and brought my box of books to my new office. My new office. My own class. After trying to decipher confusing assignment sheets, I was going to change the way things were done. I was going to write clear, concise directions and detailed, legible comments on my students' papers.

Well, teaching did not turn out quite as I had expected. Soon I realized that it is very difficult to write assignment sheets, and that no matter how much time I put into each paragraph, I would leave something out. Soon I was getting angry emails from my past coworkers: "Why are you assigning the rhetorical analysis in only the fourth week?"; "Have you thought about how confusing this assignment will be for ELL students?"; "Just FYI, did you know you missed a word on your annotated bibliography assignment sheet?"

My head was spinning, and no matter how hard I tried I still felt like I was running in sand. My class was doing wonderfully. I had real-world assignments; I provided extra resources; I conducted peer review and conferences. The problem was the sudden absence of the constant support I had come to rely on in the writing center. Of course there were the other TAs, the composition director, and other professors to discuss issues with, but the intellectual debates, discussion of relationships, and vent sessions about homework were markedly absent.

After examining the new responsibility and individuality of my teaching position and having several conversations with the WC Director, I came to a few conclusions that I believe can help Tutor/TAs who find themselves in this transition.

First, set up a safety net immediately. Other fellow tutors may also be making the transition to teaching. Take advantage of it. I find myself emailing assignment sheets, consulting on grading, and brainstorming lesson plans with my fellow tutor-turned-TAs.

To further improve pedagogy, incorporate the wealth of information offered in completed tutor training classes. Often, tutoring theory can be applied to teaching theory—at least it should be. For example, I learned a lot about social constructionist theory (the idea that knowledge comes from social discourse) in my tutor training. As a tutor I relied on social constructionism to collaborate and be nondirective in my tutorials. Applying this principle to group discussion and peer review can make an immense impact; using the idea that knowledge is socially constructed, and not just acquired through lecture, will also justify doing fun, collaborative activities in class. Writing center theory also is helpful when writing comments on student

papers. This can save any TA from writing too critical of comments on papers: *so what, what does this have to do with your thesis*, or, my personal favorite, *AWK*.

Grading papers can be one of the most challenging tasks for the former tutor. My tutor training taught me to be objective, noncritical, and nurturing in a tutorial. It is very difficult to turn those off while grading papers. I find it difficult to give a student a C or D when I know how difficult it is for some students to write. As far as I have found, there is no clear road around this problem. To counteract this, after grading papers I find a seasoned TA or adjunct and have him or her read three papers: one I have given a good grade, one I have given a fair grade, and one I have given a poor grade. This way I can get a second opinion as to whether or not my grading criteria are fair.

Finally, as a tutor I was blessed with the chance to go home with a clear head. Most of the time, save the occasional frustrating tutorial, I simply left work at the writing center and was able to complete my coursework. As a TA, there are always papers to grade, emails to write, grades to input, assignment sheets to write, journals to read, and so on and so on. I have not had a clear head since last summer.

On this last point, the only advice I have is to get used to it. Tenured professors, adjuncts, Writing Center Directors, TAs and most instructors in between have no choice but to live with participating in many activities at once. However, for those going on to teach in community colleges or attend a doctoral program, being able to function in the midst of pandemonium will be a vital skill.

At the end of the day, being able to attend conferences, write articles, and complete homework while grading papers and reading 75 journal pages a week is one of the most valuable experiences a tutor TA can have. So while you new tutor-turned-TAs out there may be struggling, lean on your allies and utilize the relationships you built in the writing center, for they are truly invaluable.