

## The Mindset of an Effective and Happy Teaching Assistant

*Aretta is thrilled to begin a new chapter in her Ph.D. program in behavioral neuroscience: this semester she will be a TA. Today she meets with Dr. Cajal, the professor teaching Topics in Behavioral Neuroscience, who is also her advisor. He smiles and says, “Congratulations! It’s time to get your feet wet and gain some experience teaching. You’ll be one of three discussion leaders for my class. Essentially, you’ll manage a weekly 1-hour discussion section with about 50 students in it. Think you can handle that? The other TAs have done this a couple times, so you can ask them for any help you might need.” Aretta is pretty sure she can handle this assignment and is eager to show Dr. Cajal and the other TAs that she can do so. Within a week, Aretta has studied the syllabus and textbook and come up with discussion questions for all 15 discussion section meetings, using the textbook chapter questions and some online research. She also creates some powerpoint slides that correspond to the chapters that Dr. Cajal will cover in his lecture. She feels great knowing that she is managing the responsibilities already and the semester hasn’t even begun! Maybe, she thinks, I’m a born teacher!*

What do you think about Aretta’s approach? Take a moment to jot down some ideas about how Aretta is preparing for her role as a TA. Then, read on . . .

### **Aretta’s initiation**

Aretta’s situation looks similar to that of many new TA’s: she has received only a little guidance from the professor she is teaching for, and she has access to support from more experienced TA’s but only if she needs help. And, like most new TA’s, Aretta wants to demonstrate her independence and confidence, wants to be a trusted colleague, and wants to prepare efficiently for her teaching so that she can focus on her own studies. But what are the beliefs about teaching that underlie her approach to preparing for her TA assignment? If we dig a bit deeper, we can see that Aretta holds three common misconceptions about teaching that are likely to lead to problems. Let’s examine these misconceptions and then consider new mindsets that might help Aretta be more successful.

### **Common misconceptions about teaching**

Misconception #1: *Teaching Assistants should work independently to demonstrate competency.* Aretta thinks she needs to prove that she can do all the work of her assistantship alone.

A more effective mindset: *Becoming an effective teacher is a developmental process that requires support.*

When new teachers try to go it alone, they isolate themselves and fail to create a network of teaching mentors and resources. Teaching, like many aspects of an academic life, is most successful when we approach it as a collaborative effort. Just as faculty need colleagues to critique a new project idea, to provide feedback on drafts of grant proposals, or to consider a good way to navigate a conversation with a Dean, highly effective faculty also look to their colleagues and to support staff to develop their courses and their plans for teaching. Because you have never really been behind the scenes at a teaching institution, you may not know that it is not

only typical but also encouraged for instructors to get support from departmental colleagues, from the institution's Teaching and Learning Center, and by consulting the research on teaching and learning. It might surprise you to know that there are books and research journals on teaching in higher education; some books and journals are even dedicated to teaching in your specific discipline! As you consider the kinds of challenges you might face as a new teaching assistant—everything from planning a course to handling a difficult discussion in the classroom—it's important to know that there are experts who are happy to help you think through these issues and develop your teaching abilities.

Misconception #2: *Teaching ability is innate.*

Aretta thinks that she might be a born teacher.

A more effective mindset: *Teaching is a skill that develops over time with practice and feedback.*

There is a great risk in believing that teaching ability is innate: when things get difficult (which they inevitably will!), teachers who hold this belief might decide teaching isn't actually for them and simply give up. Teachers aren't born—rather they develop. The research on teaching suggests strongly that teachers improve by trying approaches, reflecting on the outcomes, and then gathering new ideas from the research on teaching and adjusting their approaches accordingly. This is much like the way we approach research! Just as our research develops through cycles of investigation, teaching is an ability that improves with work and reflection. Evidence from research on teaching suggests that a productive way to think about teaching is to see it as a skill that grows over time *and* to see it as a field of study in and of itself, with a scholarly tradition that can support that growth with the application of evidence-based teaching practices.

Misconception #3: *Teaching starts with a syllabus and a textbook.*

Aretta's preparation to teach began with her considering all the things that students should know or understand.

A more effective mindset: *Teaching is about staging learning experiences for students that require them to do meaningful work.*

When new teachers think of teaching, they tend to focus on what should be covered in a course. This focus on content usually leads new teaching assistants to start looking at topics on syllabi or chapters in a textbook. While each discipline at a university *could* be reduced to a list of facts, topics, or themes, students who are simply required to memorize or know a lot about a discipline are deeply disadvantaged. To begin with, a focus on foundational knowledge is boring; beyond that, when students are asked to memorize or retain a lot of information, they are robbed of the opportunity to do meaningful and motivating work in the discipline. While undergraduate students aren't necessarily ready to do the doctoral-level work you are doing, it's important to challenge them to do aspects of the kinds of analysis, application, or evaluation that make each field of inquiry really exciting. Requiring students to do real work is what will allow them to learn in your class *and* will make you a more inspired teacher (who does less work while they do more!).

## **Why do Teaching Assistants hold mistaken beliefs about teaching?**

As noted above, new teaching assistants often embark on teaching without having been invited behind the scenes to see how instructors get support, prepare themselves, develop, or start their course planning. Because of this, most new teachers draw on their own experiences as learners.

Some of these experiences may actually contribute to the misunderstandings new teaching assistants have about teaching! First, Ph.D.- or Masters-level students are often required to demonstrate independence, working quickly and without help. While this may make you stand out as a graduate student, it works against the principle of finding support as you develop as a teacher. Second, probably because you've been around a lot of professors who seem brilliant and because you yourself are likely a quick learner, you might consider talent in your area to be the result of innate ability. This can lead us to think that researchers and teachers are simply very bright people whose work is inspired by natural ability. So it is not a stretch to think that teaching is also an innate ability—a belief that you now know is mistaken. Finally, many graduate students have been exposed primarily to lecture-based teaching, so they think that this approach will work with their students. But graduate students are more likely to learn from lectures because your level of expertise helps you listen actively and make connections between the lecture and other concepts and processes. The lecture for you is a challenge that helps you develop your thinking. Our undergraduate students don't do that kind of spontaneous, expert thinking when they listen to lectures. Providing students with information and lectures just won't result in the kind of deep thinking that you would do with those resources. But if most of the teaching you've experienced has been based on lectures and reading, it's easy to see why you might mistakenly think that is a good way to approach teaching.

## **Moving forward with a more effective and more fulfilling teaching mindset**

You now know about three key principles to an effective and more fulfilling mindset. It's time to start acting on these three key principles. Let's explore how you can shift toward this more effective mindset.

### ***1. Find support as you develop your teaching.***

Like many institutions of higher education, the University has resources to help you develop your teaching skills and to tackle the work of your teaching assistantship. ITLAL offers one-on-one consultations to take you from your first steps as a TA through your first semester as a grader, discussion leader, or instructor of record. We offer workshops and academies to help you with your teaching in a collegial atmosphere where you can learn with and from other instructors. We also offer courses on college teaching, preparing for a career as a professor, and the process of creating a teaching portfolio. Our website offers many written resources that will guide your thinking about teaching. You'll also find information about the services we offer that help you get feedback on your teaching, such as an early semester survey for your students and non-evaluative, confidential classroom observations. Your department may also offer classes, guidance, and mentoring to support your work as a teaching assistant. ITLAL can help you consider what your supports are and how to make the most of them. Never feel hesitant to reach out to us. We are always here for you.

**2. See teaching as a skill that develops over time and with practice and feedback.**

As you explore the supports that are described above, or meet with instructional consultants and other instructors, you will hear how you can develop your teaching and learn how others have done so. Browsing scholarly journals about teaching and learning or exploring the titles in the [ITLAL library](#) that focus on learning to teach can be inspiring: you will start to see that learning to teach takes time and is a process. Relax a little, reach out for support, and see that this is the beginning of a learning journey. You can move as quickly or as slowly as is necessary as you balance learning to teach with finishing your graduate studies.

**3. Think about teaching as staging learning experiences for your students that require them to do meaningful work.**

As you shift into the mindset that teaching means giving students realistic, disciplinary work, consider the kinds of work you do that is exciting. What do you do when you read a text, analyze a study, streamline coding, create research questions, interpret a text or data, code field notes, run an experiment, annotate a primary document, clean up data, or compare two critical texts . . . ? Consider that you are an expert who does a lot of complex thinking and that as a teacher, your task is to invite novices into your discipline and apprentice them into these new and complex ways of thinking. Make an appointment with one of ITLAL's instructional consultants and work with them to generate ideas about how you can ensure that your students do meaningful, disciplinary work, even as novices. Thinking in this way can help you plan productive and exciting discussions, activities, reflective work, feedback, or assignments for your students. This is true whether your first teaching assistantship is as a grader, a discussion leader, a lab instructor, a guest lecturer, or an instructor of record.

**Resources to help you develop as a teaching assistant**

Bain, K. (2004). *What the best college teachers do*. Harvard University Press.

Brookfield, S. D. (2017). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. Jossey-Bass.

Lang, J. M. (2016). *Small teaching: Everyday lessons from the science of learning*. Jossey-Bass.

Nilson, L. B. (2016). *Teaching at its best: A research-based resource for college instructors*. Jossey-Bass.

If you would like to learn more about developing a productive mindset as a Teaching Assistant, please feel free to [schedule a consultation](#) with ITLAL.