

Looking Back on Another Semester

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For our final assignment of the GTA Practicum course, we were asked to piece together a 2-page reflection on this semester of teaching. In this reflection, I will share how I grew as an educator, what activities I employed, and how I plan to improve in the future.

Growth

Coming into this semester, I had about 7 semesters of teaching under my belt. Specifically, I had worked as a lab instructor and grader for 4 semesters at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) before moving into a full instructor role at The Ohio State University (OSU). As a result, I was comfortable teaching. However, I had a few new worries:

1. Teaching more advanced material
2. Dealing with student pushback
3. Managing graders
4. Nurturing students who want to get into the major

Together, these concerns made for a challenging semester. For example, I had to spend a lot of time learning the material, so I could anticipate questions. In addition, students often pushed back on the material because they felt it didn't match their expectations of industry. Likewise, I had an absolute terrible time trying to manage my graders. Finally, many students begged for grade changes throughout the semester out of fear for their final grade.

In the end, all my worries came to fruition, but I feel like I handled them to the best of my ability. After all, one of my strengths is strategy which allowed me to anticipate these issues in the first place. Otherwise, I probably would have had a much more difficult time dealing with them on the fly.

That said, anticipating potential issues and dealing with them are two different problems. Luckily, one of my strengths is resilience, so I'm able to roll with the punches. For example, when students complained that grading didn't line up with their expectations, I offered to provide an appropriate curve while also reexamining my expectations for my graders. Likewise, I always made sure to hear out both parties, so I could strike a proper balance.

At this point in the semester, I have learned a lot about software components, how to manage graders, and even how to mentor students. In no way am I the same person I was at the start of this semester, and I am thankful for that.

Activities

One of the biggest changes I made this semester was the addition of peer instruction. In the past, I used to check student understanding using an anonymous multiple-choice question format on TopHat to address misconceptions. Now, I ask the same questions, but I add a step of peer instruction after students see the responses. If I don't get consensus, this is a perfect opportunity for students to debate their understanding. As a result, students are able to learn from their peers

while building connections. By far, this was my most effective teaching tool, and students often agreed in my daily feedback requests.

On the other hand, grading was not so great. In particular, I have students complete 11 projects and 22 homework assignments. Each assignment serves a special role. For example, the homework assignments prime the students for content in the following lecture. Meanwhile, projects are long form assignments meant to deepen understanding of core concepts.

While the assignments were great for learning, grading often undermined that effort. In other words, my graders weren't always fair in their assessment. On many occasions, they graded much harder than I would have, and it had a negative impact on my students' relationship with the course. Instead of motivating our students through enjoyment and pride, we used fear and anxiety, and it didn't work out well. Ideally, I would have preferred assessing fair grades with valid feedback, so students felt motivated to improve. Sadly, that wasn't the case.

Change

As an instructor, I feel confident. That said, there are a few areas in which I can improve:

- Managing responsibilities in my teaching team
- Including real-world examples in my curriculum
- Setting more rigid expectations across the board

As I mentioned previously, I really struggled to manage my graders this semester. After several emails reiterating my expectations, I just couldn't get my graders to assess my students fairly. In the future, I intend to provide clearer expectations by providing examples of graded assignments. In addition, I want to regularly circle back with my graders to ensure they are maintaining my expectations.

Another improvement I'd like to make is including real-world examples in my curriculum. While most of my curriculum is geared toward industry, I don't do a great job of incorporating real-world examples. In other words, when I teach about trees, I should provide examples and applications of trees. Having taught the course once already, I think the examples will come naturally. That said, I do want to bake at least one example into every new concept for next semester.

Finally, I tend to be relaxed in terms of expectations, and that can hurt me in various circumstances. For example, I already mentioned my issues with graders, but I'd also like to extend more rigid expectations onto my students. Right now, I always make sure I get all accommodations down in writing. Next semester, I'd like to extend that to include public rubrics for assignments. That way, students and graders know exactly what to expect before assignments are submitted.

Overall, my goal for next semester is to take what I've learned over the past few years and continue to build on it for the future. After all, that's how we grow as educators.