

LEARNING TO TEACH | TEACHING TO LEARN

Supporting And Expanding A Community Of Design Educators

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The Response_ability conference has plenty of content about what our students need and how we can support and enrich their experience, but what about us? This paper focuses on the educators: on building professional relationships and helping each other find success, satisfaction and balance.

In an ever-changing world of design education, one thing remains constant: students who want to learn need smart, caring, and competent people to teach them. There is always a shortage of qualified faculty. We need to build a stronger pool of design educators by identifying promising future teachers. Then we need to support them in navigating the realities of teaching and academic structure.

This paper has two parts. First: an idea on encouraging people to consider design education through an innovative undergraduate teaching assistantship. Second: thoughts about creating a continuing, supportive educators community.

PART 1: TEACHING TO LEARN

I have been working with undergraduate teaching assistants in my design and typography courses for many years. The basic course guidelines for the Undergraduate Teaching Assistantship and tips for participating students are included at the end of this paper.

One way to encourage promising designers to consider teaching is to give them a taste of what it means to be a teacher as their interest in design is maturing. This is common at the graduate level, but several schools are developing undergraduate experiences that are focused on teaching. Such undergraduate courses plant the idea of teaching early, even before a young designer enters the field.

I have structured the **Undergraduate Teaching Assistantship** as an elective course that provides promising undergraduates with a beginning experience and understanding of the roles and responsibilities of a teacher. The value of this experience is deep, broad and lasting. It is a win-win situation for the assistant, the professor, and the students in the class. It enhances the entire design program by building relationships and expectations that cross boundaries of courses, experience levels, generations.

Undergraduate Teaching Assistants are invited, or a student may approach a faculty member and request consideration. It is an honor. They take their responsibilities seriously. The assistant is assigned to a specific course and works with students during the design process. They do not get involved in grading and formal evaluations. They are not paid, but they gain credentials that can be listed on their resumes. More importantly, they gain real understanding of what it means to become a teacher in a positively controlled environment under the guidance of a seasoned professor.

The UNDERGRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT leads some of the formal group critiques and demonstrates techniques and presentation methods. They often assist with technical and software issues, freeing the professor to concentrate on conceptual and visual developments. They reinforce standards and help to establish the atmosphere of the studio. They provide another pair of eyes and ears in the classroom, and that helps to advance everyone's experience.

I hear, and I forget. I see, and I remember. I do, and I understand. —Chinese Proverb

I usually meet the Teaching Assistant for a brief overview before class, and often we have a summary discussion after class is dismissed which helps to keep us working smoothly as a team. As the semester progresses and their understanding of their potential as teachers evolves, their conversations with me evolve too. New questions and observations become apparent and intriguing to them.

After a few years of professional experience, many undergraduate teaching assistants have planned a path to graduate education and a teaching career. I have seen them become more confident and assured in their decision—before they invest in the advanced academic credentials. They gain teaching mentors from both undergraduate and graduate institutions and that support gives them a head start when they are finally in charge of their first class of students. The experience helps some of them decide that teaching is not their appropriate path, and that is enlightening as well.

BENEFITS IN THE CLASSROOM

The Undergraduate Teaching Assistantship promotes an enhanced learning environment for all enrolled students. It also fosters increased connections across grade levels and throughout the entire design program—even lasting after graduation in some cases.

- students have another person working with them (particularly valuable for a large class)
- students are sometimes more comfortable asking questions of the assistant rather than the professor
- students get feedback more quickly with two people moving around the studio
- the assistant provides another pair of eyes for managing the classroom and monitoring behaviors; reinforcing lessons, concepts, vocabulary, procedures
- students' work becomes more advanced and refined because there is extra leadership and support in the classroom; it pushes the workflow more effectively
- relationships are built between advanced and beginning students; knowing the assistant often fosters connections with other advanced design students too
- beginning students look up to the assistants and see the assistantship as an honor; they push themselves because they aspire to the position some day

BENEFITS FOR THE TEACHING ASSISTANT

Their ability to do the work in design and typography is already proven and their maturity and intellectual ability are already noted by the faculty, but prospective Teaching Assistants often do not recognize the extent of their abilities. The experience is enlightening intellectually, practically, and professionally for the assistant. It enriches their self-awareness.

- assistants deepen and expand their understanding of concepts they already know
- their ability to communicate about design ideas and issues is strengthened
- they gain experience in managing people and gain confidence in their leadership ability
- credentials as an assistant adds to their resume, and their new-found confidence allows them to interview more effectively for any design position
- they gain empathy for the nuances, excitement (and sometimes difficulties) of teaching, and gain insight into managing stages of a problem and the people involved with it
- often they've completed the same problems so they can anticipate where students will feel unsure, providing insights and encouragement to the new group of learners
- they develop a new relationship with their professor/mentor that may last a lifetime
- they solidify career goals, pinpointing their own strengths and weaknesses with greater accuracy

BENEFITS FOR THE PROFESSOR

An assistant is a constant reminder of the energy of fresh experiences, and how stimulating it can be when your tasks are new, exciting, uncertain. Being part of a team rather than working as a soloist offers dynamic exchanges and new possibilities that challenge and refresh a seasoned educator.

- working as part of a team and sharing ideas is invigorating
- prior to entering the classroom, the professor needs to focus, explain, anticipate, and share the day's goals with the assistant, which discourages "being on auto-pilot"
- a team approach catches problems or confusion more quickly, and early discussion and clarification strengthens the learning process
- assistants can be in charge of technical and production issues, freeing the professor to focus valuable time on concepts and development
- the role of mentoring, with open and frank discussions of teaching methods and concerns fosters new insights and re-evaluation of known experiences

PART 2: LEARNING TO TEACH

If learning is an endless process so is learning to teach. Earning academic and/or applied credentials as a design practitioner does not necessarily provide a foundation for effectively teaching design. New design educators need support. Experienced educators also benefit from access to a community that validates, challenges, and enlightens them.

How to teach, what to teach, how to simply manage a classroom would seem to be the core of what we do, but this often gets short shrift amid the list of other demands and expectations. The academic structure is a three-headed beast of teaching/research/service, creating a confusing reality that can easily be overwhelming. Once we've invited our best and brightest into this profession, how can we support them in finding success and satisfaction?

AIGA provides opportunities for educators to meet and mingle, but actively facilitating connections between diverse faculty from a range of academic institutions continues to be an important goal. Most institutions have internal mentoring structures of some sort but often in smaller settings there may not be another design educator, and sometimes internal situations make having an outsider view particularly valuable. Can we facilitate discipline-wide mentoring? How can we enhance growth and understanding for fellow educators?

Teaching is a difficult job. Faculty can easily be overwhelmed by the demands and expectations of most teaching positions: teaching, advising, recruitment, community outreach, active involvement at multiple institutional levels, a personal research/creative agenda, management of equipment and resources, and grant-writing. There are review cycles for recontracting or tenure, demands for documentation and assessment, the necessity of keeping up with ever-changing technology, grant-writing, and budget and resource limitations. Along with the predictable unpredictability of students, there are sometimes challenging personalities among colleagues. How can a person do it all and do it well? How do we keep smiling, keep moving, keep proving ourselves over and over, and find satisfaction in doing so?

Teachers open the door. You enter by yourself. —Chinese proverb

TOPICS OF CONSIDERATION

Counteracting “job creep”

When something new is proposed that adds expectations to faculty workload, it is usually well-intentioned. Positive or not, it is another responsibility. When such proposals were discussed, a former colleague was helpful in focusing the group as he would ask, “If you want us to do this, what do you want us to not do?” Just asking that question made us pause and think carefully rather than simply reacting.

There are no more hours in a day, so can we be more sensitive to how we fill them? Can we become better at removing and streamlining rather than simply piling on? Demands on faculty have grown exponentially, so can every idea be examined for need and efficiency? Can we remind each other that it is okay to say NO?

Building relationships

It is easy to feel too busy, but being attentive and supportive to colleagues can be as simple as taking a moment to offer a word of encouragement or a thank-you. Remember how good this feels when it happens to you. Sharing a helpful hint, or relaying excited comments from a student can help brighten someone’s day. Are we really so busy that we don’t have time to be kind and polite?

We need to build relationships inside and outside the department and with faculty at other institutions too. Assist junior faculty in developing a support network. Sometimes it is uncomfortable to discuss sensitive issues within your own department. When something is worrisome, the people in your network can be sounding-boards who provide perspective: Is the issue local or pervasive? Short-term or long-lasting?

Relationships with people at a similar career stage and with seasoned mentors are both important. Are you making a mountain out of a molehill or fruitlessly raging against something that has little possibility of changing? Our mentors, our networks can help us control our stress levels and focus our energies productively.

Plan informal small-group educator gatherings

There are many design educators in every region. Interactions through social media can be good, but relying on technology can also feel like an extension of our work. Face-to-face is great. Once or twice a year, why not gather a small group of faculty from the region for a few hours of discussion? About six to eight people is an effective size that encourages everyone to actively participate, and it doesn’t feel formal or become difficult to coordinate.

Gatherings can be hosted at someone’s institution, but consider meeting at someone’s home for a more personal setting. Some groups are more comfortable setting a topic and others simply set a time and place and let the agenda evolve. We shouldn’t be surprised to find that many of us are grappling with the same issues and concerns. The point is simply to share ideas, help each other, and build community.

This paper was one of four presentations for the AIGA conference panel on the topic of Learning to Teach/Teaching to Learn. The presenters on the panel were Jan Conradi, Jillian Lindner, David Raymond, and Roger Baer. The panel participants offered an example of the power of mentoring: Baer was Conradi’s Major Professor in graduate school, and Lindner and Raymond are two of her former students. Both held positions as Undergraduate Teaching Assistants.

There are many sources of information on various aspects of teaching and managing academic expectations. Doug Lemov is an educational consultant working to identify and teach concrete strategies for classroom management. His book, *Teach Like a Champion*, is great.

Many institutions have faculty centers that provide resources and activities to support faculty in various aspects of their careers. Too many people view such centers as something for new faculty only, or as a place to help them when they are in trouble. The faculty center can offer another avenue for building relationships.

An Overview of the Undergraduate Teaching Assistantship:
Design Communication, Demonstration, Analysis, Leadership

Teaching is the highest form of understanding.
—Aristotle

Course Description

This assistantship allows students to become familiar with the instructing process and to expand their fluidity in thinking and communicating about design and typography. The student will assist the instructor in the classroom throughout the semester. Assistantship expectations include attending all scheduled classes for the course, assisting students during lab or study sessions as well as taking an active role in classroom critiques, discussions and studio maintenance. Permission of the instructor is required.

Introduction

The Teaching Assistantship in Graphic Design and Typography is a specialized learning experience aimed predominantly toward students who are considering graduate education and teaching as their professional goal. This is an opportunity to begin to understand the educational process from the view of the teacher. It provides openings for in-depth conversation and exploration of individual skills and learning strategies.

Specific objectives will vary depending upon the class the Assistant is working with but there are commonalities for all courses in the graphic design program. Being a Teaching Assistant is a privilege and an honor; you should conduct yourself accordingly. You are a model for the students in the class.

Required Skills

- Demonstrated ability to organize and manipulate compositional relationships
- Clear understanding of typographic fundamentals
- Demonstrated handskills and materials knowledge for crafting and presenting work
- Proficiency with design software
- Ability to analyze and critique work throughout all stages of the design process, accurately pinpointing strengths and weaknesses
- Strong verbal and written communication skills

Expected Duties

- Be an active presence in the classroom, attending all classes
- Assist individual students as their concepts and forms are developed and refined
- Assist individuals in mastering computer/software issues and working methods
- Reinforce principles on matters of composition, organization and presentation
- Demonstrate specific tools, processes, and techniques as needed for the entire class, including creating any supplemental handouts (at least twice during the semester)
- Lead class critiques or discussions (at least twice during the semester)
- Observe/work closely with instructor in the evaluation of class projects (at discretion of instructor; grading remains the responsibility of the instructor)
- Meet with instructor for weekly discussions on pedagogy, and meet at end of semester for a summary conversation
- Write a summary description/analysis of the Teaching Assistantship experience.

*Designing is not a profession but an attitude. . .
It is thinking in relationships.*
—Laszlo Moholy-Nagy

As a teaching assistant, you are expected to provide leadership and guidance in introducing the class to the process and problems of graphic design and typography. This includes concept development; visual form, structure and organization; time management; technology & production issues; and craft and presentation.

To be a classroom leader requires skills in visual creation and fluency in communication in a broader sense: a good teaching assistant is a good listener, planner, thinker, questioner. You must be self-disciplined and motivated; able to work patiently and positively with a wide variety of people. You must be supportive of the learning process, encouraging students to find answers for themselves without jumping too quickly to provide them with a solution may be obvious to you.

In this process you will strengthen your own skills. You may discover traits and refine abilities you were not aware you had. It is one thing to understand what you are doing in your own work; it is quite different to be able to accurately convey that same understanding to others. Many Teaching Assistants find their communication skills and their ability to work effectively with others grows tremendously through this process. Be self-aware even as you are focused on helping the students in the class.

Recommended Texts

There is no required text for the Teaching Assistant, but it is recommended that you have the textbook the students are required to purchase for the course you are assisting. Encouraging students to make use of library holdings is expected.

Attendance

You are expected to attend every class period unless the professor has okayed your absence for a particular session. You are required to be on time and to remain for the entire scheduled time. In case of illness or emergency, please notify the professor prior to the scheduled meeting time if at all possible.

Grading

You will earn a grade for your Teaching Assistantship based upon the following criteria.

General classroom presence and assisting	50 points
Demonstration	20 points
Critique leadership	20 points
Final self-evaluation and analysis	10 points
Total	100 points

Advice for Teaching Assistants—Ten Tips for a Positive Experience

1. Treat the students as if you are the actual teacher. Learn their names. Even if you are friends with some of them remember that your task is to provide leadership, not be a buddy. Move through the room and regularly interact with all students in the class.
2. Jump in right away. Get up and join in. You will gain respect from the teacher and the students. Offer to do small tasks such as organizing the classroom or presentation materials, distributing supplies, erasing boards after class.
3. Support program and school policies. Be prompt in arrival and stay for the entire session. Remind students of lab procedures and policies. Try to minimize other distractions by closing doors if hallway is noisy.
4. Maintain close contact with the professor. Plan a few minutes to talk before or after class, or schedule another time to assure that you understand and are prepared for the next session. Read and think about assignments before class begins. If you were doing the assignment, what clarifications would you want at the start of the problem?
5. Over plan your demonstrations, lessons and critiques. Prepare for demonstrations by gathering and testing materials, techniques and software ahead of time to make sure everything goes smoothly. Prior to leading critiques and perhaps during critiques, make notes about points you want to reinforce, question or discuss.
6. Model good behavior. Be focused and attentive right from the beginning of class to help students settle and focus. Assist in discouraging use of personal media distractions and off-topic conversations. Think about learning enrichment; be proactive in seeking and sharing new references or support materials and examples.
7. Respect individuality. Students will respond differently to motivation, questioning, and suggestions. Don't be too quick in solving a student's problem. Suggest choices rather than providing a correct solution so the student gains ownership of the learning process. You might know the "right" answer to a problem someone is struggling with, but be patient and encouraging so the student finds the answer and develops his or her problem solving abilities.
8. Don't be afraid to integrate some of your own teaching techniques or classroom management skills. If you are unsure about this, talk with the professor before class. If students are under prepared, don't be afraid to tell them so. Point out the need to do additional research or exploration if that lack is limiting the effectiveness of their solution.
9. Repeat, Repeat, Repeat. Students can never hear instructions/directions and key concepts enough.
10. Keep a sense of humor and enthusiasm. A positive classroom will accomplish much more than a classroom that is filled with negativism.