The American Classroom/Culture

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OVERVIEW OF THE SESSION

• Different types of classroom formats
• GTA’s roles in American classrooms
• The American classroom culture
WHAT IS AN AMERICAN CLASSROOM LIKE?

The Different Formats
• Lectures usually serve diverse student majors.

e.g. Entry level Physics, Math, and English courses
Recitations/Discussions

- A supplement to lectures
- Smaller in size (< 30)
- Safer space to discuss & answer questions about assigned materials
- Prepare for exams/papers
- e.g. Mathematics, the Sciences (Chemistry, Physics, ...), Engineering, Psychology...
• An add-on to lectures
• Hands-on experience
• So-lo experiments
• Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Engineering, social science…
• Smaller group (<30)
One-on-one tutorial

• Providing help on a one-on-one basis
• Fine Arts...

Online classes

- Most course materials are made available online on the learning management system, which is blackboard for WSU.
- Students interact with instructor and with each other using the online tools.
- In most cases, course assessment is also done online.

https://www.teachaway.com/sites/default/files/shutterstock_517415605.jpg
Flip Classrooms

- Do worksheets & Activities in class
- Watch / read lectures at home

GTA’s roles, responsibilities and expectations

What GTAs do
What do I do as a GTA?

• You will lead discussion sections and labs

• Mostly expected to do grading, and attend lectures and TA meetings

• Prepare for your section creating a lesson plan

• Be ready to take questions about all the materials

• Set rules and expectations for your classroom creating your section syllabus (ask Prof.)
Best Approaches

• Make yourself available by assigning office Hours.

• Be very approachable.

• Use verbal signals when you speak and speak slowly so that students understand you.

• When you are preparing students for exams, give them study guides.
ASKING QUESTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

Ask

• To start with a yes/no question
• Follow with questions that are direct, clear, and specific.
• Do not ask more than one question at once

Respond

• Wait for students to think and formulate responses;
• Do not interrupt students’ answers;
• Show that you are interested in students’ answers, whether right or wrong;
• Develop responses that keep students thinking.

Source: https://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/resources/teaching-methods/participation/asking-questions-to-improve-learning/
Responding to Students’ Questions in Classroom

- Positive Feedback for a Correct Response, Comment, or Appropriate Question:

Scenario 1:
- GTA is lecturing on balancing chemical reactions, and a student asks, "Can we change the subscript to get the equation to balance?"
- Although you know that it is a major misconception in balancing, you should address the question carefully.
“Thanks for bringing that up. The question was, can we change the subscript to get the equation to balance?' Does anyone think they know the answer?”

- 'Thanks' validates student participation.
- Restating the question for the class ensures that everyone can hear what was asked.
- Passing the question on to the whole class encourages participation.
“Interesting question. The question was ‘can we change the subscript to get the equation to balance?’ In fact, changing the subscript instead of the coefficient changes the molecule as a whole. For example, ...

- Starting with a positive response validates student participation.
- Restates the question for the class so everyone can hear.
- Allows the GTA to move into a lecture-style format and present additional information.
Scenario 1: Option 3

• “Good question. The question was ‘can we change the subscript to get the equation to balance?’ I believe this question requires that all sections we've talked about be considered, but I am not sure. I will look into it and let you know by email. In the meantime, is there anyone else who knows?"
  • Positive response.
  • Restates the question for the class so everyone can hear.
  • Admits the GTA does not know the answer (honest response) and demonstrates accountability.
  • Passes the question on to the class for group participation.
Positive Feedback for an Incorrect Response, Comment, or Appropriate Question:

Scenario 2:

- In a Biology class the TA asks: "Who can tell me what distinguishes an animal cell from a plant cell?" A student responds, "Well, I don't think a plant cell has a cell wall" (an incorrect response).

Sources: http://www.uwo.ca/tsc/resources/resources_graduate_students/ta_handbook/giving_effective_feedback/suggestions_verbal_feedback.html
Scenario 2: Option 1

• OK, let's take a step back first. Who remembers the characteristics of a plant cell from last week?"
  • Does not emphasize the student's mistake.
  • Serves as a way to review and consider recent material.
Scenario 2: Option 2

- No, that is not quite right. One of these cells has a wall while the other does not. Can you remember what distinguishes the two?"
  - Encouraging feedback that does not alienate the student.
  - Restates the student's response and clarifies what is incorrect.
  - Uses the incorrect response as a chance to compare two concepts and to review other material.
The American Classroom/culture

How is it different?
• U.S. education is more like a business serving customers. Students pay a lot of money for tuition, housing, meals, and other fees.

• Students, as customers paying for a service, will be evaluating the service they are receiving for their money.

• The American classroom is less formal than many other classroom cultures.

• That means: Do evaluations! (≠ “assessments”). Your students’ voice is key.
The “W” Curve

1. “Tourist phase”. Initial euphoria
2. “Rejection phase”, elements of the new culture begin to intrude into your life. You might experience frustration, anger, or loneliness.
3. “Adaptation phase”, you learn to adapt to and appreciate the local ways.
4. “Local expert phase”, you feel at home and truly enjoy the country and culture. Biculturalism.
5. Counter-culture shock when you go home.
6. Re-adjustment.
To make the roller coaster ride as smooth as possible:

- Be flexible, keep an open-mind.
- Keep a sense of humor, and learn to laugh at yourself.
Relationships 101: Friendship

- American friendship type: “We'll do lunch.” Avoiding awkward situation at any cost.
- Once school starts, people tend to prioritize their work; they’ll only have time for a handful of friends.
- Other secondary “friendships” are usually kept in case for networking.
- It would be better for you to meet people outside of your campus bubble!
Relationships 101: Professional Life

- Usually informal with hierarchy, **first-name basis**. You can use this or not in your classroom. Establish early on what you want to go by.

- Key word for student/GTA relationship: **amicable**. Remember you have the power to give grades.

- Avoid conflicts of interests and always stay professional. You represent the department you work for. You represent the school in general.
Relationships 101: Personal Life

• Public displays of affection, and personal space.

• Most American millennials you may encounter tend to see dating as casual and open-ended. Exclusivity is not required nor is it the norm.

• Yes means yes.

• No means no.
If you plan on staying in the U.S. long-term and eventually buying a car or a house here, you’ll need to start building credit.

The Office for Student Money Management at Wichita State University will assist you with your needs on building good credit.
Key concept: **Safe place** in the classroom and on campus.

**Diversity** is about:

- Recognition of identity and of historical traumas
- Representation of self and multitude
- Redistribution of resources and opportunities
• You made it here for a reason!

• Although your jobs as GTAs is all about the students, YOU are here primarily to get your degree.

• Put your work first, but don’t let your students down.

• Make the most of the resources available in campus well as the opportunities coming your way.

• Good luck!
For questions and comments, use the “Ask the Instructor” forum on blackboard.

We’re here for you! ida@Wichita.edu
Reference Books
