

Teaching Reflections Fall 2016

Feel pretty good about the Fall semester – we continue to make a lot of changes (all, ultimately, for the better I hope).

Some of the things that went particularly well this term included:

- Our orientation for TAs seemed much better organized than in previous years.
- Ashley provided much more support to TAs in exam prep, ideas and resources for Free Topics and student grading appeals.
- Giving TAs 2 weeks to grade assignments appeared to have decreased their stress and without a negative impact on the students.
- While students continue to voice their frustrations on our (my) high standards, the grade distributions for the term were excellent (i.e., less than a 3% average grade variation across course/section, normal distributions by grade, etc.) as were students' achievement (over 20% of students received A level grades).
- The changes in our TA contracts (i.e., more clearly defined hourly distributions) have more clearly represented what our TAs actually do (i.e., hours for grading, etc.).

Some of the things that I need to continue working on, include:

- Our implementation of the changes to the 2 tutorial assignments could have been better. We have revised the assignment sheet/rubrics for next semester as well as compiled a number of completed assignments to be used as guides for students. These two changes should help students understand what we are looking for in the assignments.
- The move from 10 to 7 tutorials per term to help address TA workload needs to be revised. In January, we will try 8 tutorials to increase student/TA contact but also give them more time for free topics.
- Using lecture time to describe the tutorial assignments did not work. Trying to show students what the assignments were about in a lecture format was a good idea but did not work. We will move the discussion of tutorial assignments back to tutorials where they belong.
- Students continue to have trouble with APA referencing. To help alleviate confusion, will be distributing a single referencing resource for students.
- I struggle each term with trying to manage TAs who are unresponsive to e-mail from me/students and/or getting their scores in on time. To be clear, 90% of the TAs are an absolute pleasure to work with but there are always 1 or 2 that require a great deal of energy to stay on top of.
- I need to try harder to get the TAs more comfortable with understanding why we (I) do the things we do. For example, TAs (and students) are frustrated by my position that we can't "teach the A". There is the perception that if a student is able to regurgitate lecture/text material that they deserve the A – I simply do not agree. For me (and for good or bad, as the teacher I get to decide such things) A's go beyond the material. An A only exists when a student demonstrates the ability to transcend the material and apply sociological insights that we cannot predict nor define. TAs are nervous trying to defend their scoring and students are frustrated that they cannot "get it" right away even though they study. However, over the term, with practice and with time, many students do start to push themselves and their understanding of the material, and get the As. The fact that many, many students do, confirms that the standard is achievable. However, what I need to do better is communicate to students and TAs the context and justification for why I take this position and my evidence supporting that it works.

All in all, a very successful semester.

/Bruce