

GSI Mentoring For Remote Instruction

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Prompt: What steps can faculty take in working with GSIs so that the experience of teaching remotely is a positive one for themselves, their GSIs, and their students?

When I started on my first MOOC in 2012, the world was abuzz with excitement about the transformative power of this new thing called online education. By contrast, our present move online is out of painful necessity in a world stalked by a disease that can kill. We are anxious, stressed out, and isolated, and there seems to be no end in sight. Online education, in which every pair of participants is separated by physical distance and a screen, doesn't seem at all like a wondrous opportunity. Instead it is a symbol of how we are now forced to live, a poor alternative to how we really want to teach.

But I won't have a positive experience with my GSIs and students if I approach online education primarily as a problem. So my guiding principle will be to focus on the reason why my GSIs and I are teaching, which is that we love our subject and we love guiding our students towards feeling the same way. Now, more than ever, it's my responsibility to help GSIs build on the foundation of their expertise and use their creativity to draw out the essence of the course. That was always the job – it's only the mode that has changed. If we succeed in this together then the GSIs will lift up the whole class. Their enthusiasm is infectious, as is their joy.

To make this happen, I have to remember some basics. I regret to say that my mind labels them with dreadful clichés.

- **Content is king.** The weekly pedagogy meeting will be all-important as before. If GSIs are confident of the content and pedagogical goals, they will be better able to adapt to the instructional mode. Also, students forgive many snafus if GSIs are knowledgeable and helpful.
- **High tech needs high touch.** Frequent and prompt communication is as necessary for GSIs as it is for students. The staff Slack (for quick notes and emergencies) and staff Piazza (for more substantive discussion) are excellent additions to Zoom. I have to be present on all these platforms to converse, praise, thank, and support, publicly and privately.
- **Don't walk alone.** Staff teams are a good idea regardless of instructional mode. In the online world they are an antidote to isolation. There are also new opportunities. For example, a single section can feature recordings made by several GSIs whereas traditional sections have just one.
- **Bigger isn't better.** Zoom deprives teachers of feedback from students' faces, and Spring GSIs report that they therefore "felt less useful". We have changed our course structure so that staff regularly get to work with very small groups of students, not just sections of 30, for engagement and more helpful feedback in both directions.
- **Keep it simple.** High production values are great but I don't think they have to be a primary concern. My GSIs are free to stick with low-tech or home-video quality to prioritize preparation and communicating with students.
- **Don't overdo it.** The dedication of our GSIs is humbling. I must make sure they don't shoulder more than they should.
- **Yes we can.** Even if I'm only saying, "Yes we can let this particular issue go," I have to be positive and confident that we can teach well this term. I do have doubts about details, but they mustn't cast a big shadow. Remembering my own motivation is my first step towards working with GSIs.

Last Spring I proposed using a Covid example in an assignment. To my surprise, the GSIs objected. They were surrounded by talk of Covid, they said, and, “This class is one place we can get away from all that.” What they wanted was to “just enjoy the class like always.” Enjoyment has been in short supply lately. For my GSIs and students, I will try to find it again.