**Large Course Organization and Communication: Head TA Toolkit**

*Cassandra Horii, Director, Center for Teaching, Learning, & Outreach*

Caltech's largest courses enroll around 200 students, but even a course of 40-60 needs some extra tricks to run smoothly. This packet for Head TAs contains a brief toolkit of practices that make large courses into well-oiled machines of learning, so that instructors, TAs, and students alike are able to focus on the content, rather than on logistics.

1. **What’s the “big deal” with large courses?**What makes large courses challenging for:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| TAs and Instructors: | Students: |

In large courses you have taken or taught, what were some effective strategies that made them run smoothly?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| As a TA or Instructor: | As a student: |

1. **Expectations**

**Before or within the first week of the quarter, know the expectations of your role and the responsibilities of the other TAs**. Contact the professor or option admin (whoever creates TA appointments) and clarify what TA responsibilities are, including special roles like Head or Lead TA. If the responsibilities are unclear, take the opportunity to establish set expectations that are clear to everyone. The following questions are important to clarify at your first TA meeting to ensure everyone is clear on what is expected:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| * **Are TAs expected to attend lectures?** Ideally, TAs will attend lectures to be well-prepared to assist students in recitations and office hours.
* **What is the protocol if a TA must miss a recitation, lab, or office hours session?** If a TA must be absent, most courses have them notify the professor and/or head TA in time for a substitute to take over. A TA should never just leave a note on the door of the classroom unless there is a sudden emergency and the head TA or professor can't be reached. If a long-term absence is foreseen, arrangements for a permanent replacement may be necessary.
* **What are the expectations regarding office hours?** Is there a certain amount of hours per week TAs are expected to be available? Should the hours be held during specific times to be easily accessible for students? Where do all TAs post their office hours (i.e., course website)?
* **How do TAs share preparation and grading responsibilities?** For a course to run smoothly, TAs should be sharing the work equally. Does each TA prep section notes/examples for a different week of the course? How is grading shared? What are the timelines for getting course prep and grading to each other?
* **What are the collaboration policies?** **Grading policies?** These are often in the syllabus, but what might be confusing for students? Clarify before the term begins and share with all TAs in the course.
* **What is the detailed course schedule?** If there isn’t one, TAs can draft in before the term starts and get the professor’s approval or edits. This includes when assignments are handed out to students, when they’re due, when grading is to be finished, and when students get assignments/exams returned to them.
 | Check if you already know |

***It may seem like extra work now, but clear expectations and shared information and plans will SAVE MUCH MORE TIME in avoided problems later when you are busier and more stressed!***

**Example Course Schedule[[1]](#footnote-1)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Assignment** | **Content** | **Important Deadlines** | **Team/author** |
| PS 1Workshop 1HW 1 | Week 1 material (list topics) | Tu- Sep 30 PS draft/recitation example problems/outline due at Team Meeting W- October 1 Run recitationsW- October 8 Collect and grade PS1/HW1  | **Team 1/****TA-1** |
| PS 2Workshop 2HW 2 | Week 2 material | Tu- October 7 PS draft/recitation example problems/outline due at Team Meeting W- October 8 Run recitations W- October 15 Collect and grade PS2/HW2  | **Team 2/****TA-3** |
| PS 3Workshop 3HW 3 | Week 3 material | Tu- Oct 14 PS draft/recitation example problems/outline due at Team Meeting W- October 15 Run recitationsW- October 22 Collect and grade PS3/HW3 | **Team 3/****TA-5** |
| PS 4Workshop 4HW 4 | Week 4 material  | Tu- Oct 21 PS draft/recitation example problems/outline due at Team Meeting W- October 22 Run recitations W- October 29 Collect and grade PS4/HW4 | **Team 1/****TA-2** |
| MIDTERM | **ALL ABOVE** | Tu-Oct 28 Exam draft due at Team MeetingW- October 29 All TAs run Review sessionsTh- Oct 30 Confirm exam is onlineTu- November 4 Collect exam and schedule grading session Tu- November 11 Exam grades due **W- Nov 12 Send exam grades to class (last day to drop approaching)** | **All TAs/****Team 2** |
| PS 5Workshop 5HW 5 | Week 5/6 material | Tu- Nov 4 PS draft/recitation example problems/outline due at Team Meeting W- November 5 Run recitations W- November 12 Collect and grade PS5/HW5 | **Team 2/****TA-4** |
| PS 6Workshop 6HW 6 | Week 7 material | Tu- Nov 11 PS draft/recitation example problems/outline due at Team Meeting W- November 12 Run recitations W- November 19 Collect and grade PS6/HW6**W- Nov 19 Last day to drop class (remind students)** | **Team 3/****TA-6** |
| PS 7HW7 | Week 8 material | Tu- Nov 18 PS draft/recitation example problems/outline due at Team Meeting W- November 19 Run recitations W- December 3 Collect and grade PS7/HW7 | **Team 1/****TA-1** |
| FINAL | **ALL ABOVE** (but mostly new material) | Tu- Dec 2 Exam draft due at Team MeetingW- Dec 3 All TAs run Review Th- Dec 4 Confirm exam is onlineTu- Dec 11 Collect exam and schedule grading sessionTu- Dec 18 Exam grades due | **All TAs/****Team 3** |

1. **Course/TA Meetings**

**Tips for Running Effective Course Meetings[[2]](#footnote-2)**

Head TAs are often responsible for the organization and efficient operation of both the course and its TA meetings. The tips below are designed to help you in those efforts.

* **You can never be too organized**. Before the quarter starts, sit down and figure out the frequency, time, and duration of your regular meetings, and what you hope to accomplish during each one. Timing may change toward the end of the quarter (fewer regular meetings), but be sure to schedule final grading well in advance!
* **Pick a good time to have a meeting**. Give TAs enough time between the meeting and recitation to implement suggestions. If it’s possible to provide food sometimes (check with the option administrator or professor), it will be appreciated!
* **At the beginning of the meeting, go through a list of what you hope to accomplish**. (e.g., on whiteboard or chalkboard). This keeps everyone on track and models effective teaching. E-mailing TAs in advance about the agenda of the meeting also works well.

**Possible agenda items**:

* **Have TAs run through their section of the course**. Divide the TAs into groups of 2 or 3, who are responsible for a specific week or a segment of the course. This includes handouts, preparation of slides, etc. Have the group lead the other TAs (particularly new TAs) through a sample section for that week. This means a) TAs will be prepared to teach section that week b) all TAs will be teaching approximately the same material (a great worry in a large course!) and c) TAs do not duplicate handouts and work unnecessarily, saving time for all.
* **Present all exams and assignments, along with solutions,** to the TAs at a staff meeting before giving them to students, in case they have suggestions or questions. This helps everyone answer student questions consistently, too.
* **Grade sample assignments as a team**. Hand out copies of an assignment or problem to all TAs. Have them read it and then mark it with a grade. Discuss what grades were given and why. From that discussion, come up with guidelines for grading that will be used consistently. You may only need to do this once or a few times, and revisit as needed.
* **Talk about student questions.** What are the main points of confusion? Maybe some TAs have found especially helpful examples or ways to answer. Share this information so all students can benefit.
* **Stay on track with returning work to the students**. Check on progress during meetings. TAs returning work late or inconsistently will be a major student complaint and it is not fair to have some TAs return work later than others. Undergrads have strict add/drop dates, and that students need to have some idea of their grade at all points in the course.
1. **Troubleshooting: Scenarios**

|  |
| --- |
| 1. Students in your large course are not required to attend a specific recitation. After the first two weeks, it has become clear that almost all of the students are going to two popular recitations, and very few are attending the others. Is this a problem? How could this be solved? How could this be prevented?  |
| 2. One of the TAs wrote homework questions without providing the other TAs with a solution set before recitations and office hours. Is this a problem? How could this be solved? How could this be prevented? |
| 3. You have just turned a student down who has asked for their fourth homework extension. That student then asked a different TA and was granted the extension. Is this a problem? How could this be solved? How could this be prevented? |
| 4. The midterm is coming up. In one recitation, a TA answered questions about what would be on the test. In another, the TA said that they were not allowed to answer specifics, but reviewed all the topics and answered specific questions. Is this a problem? How could this be solved? How could this be prevented? |

1. **Getting Feedback**
	* Course Ombudspeople: many large courses ask students for volunteers to serve as course ombuds—students who are designated to gather feedback from other students and discuss/troubleshoot with the professor and/or Head TA. In a few options (Math, Chemistry), the ombuds may meet with the Executive Officer as well, but they can always be a source of information within the course.
	* Mid-quarter surveys: Ch1, Ma1, Ph1, CS1 will have shared survey in week 4 during fall 2017. If you are a Head TA for any of these courses, contact Cassandra Horii (cvh@caltech.edu) to discuss the survey contents. For other courses, CTLO can help set up and administer a survey to provide early feedback on how the course overall, recitations, office hours, and other aspects are going.
	* Observations and focus groups: CTLO can help Head TAs learn how to observe sections and give informal feedback, or CTLO staff can come observe lectures or recitations to help instructors improve—with or without video recording. We can also run focus groups with students in the class to get more nuanced feedback and engage them in the process of thinking about their learning strategies.
2. **Tools and resources for organization and communication (Caltech tools/resources available through IMSS/Access.caltech.edu)**
	* **Caltech Moodle:** Caltech’s learning management system. Use for overall course organization and communication. Students may submit assignments; grades may be communicated securely to students. Includes discussion forum function.
	* **Caltech Sharepoint:** Caltech collaboration platform. Use for course material archives and TA/instructor communication.
	* **Caltech Box:** Caltech shared document platform with secure login. Use for course material archives.
	* **Custom email lists:** For course-wide announcements and/or TA/instructor communication.
	* **Registrar Information Systems (REGIS):** log in through <http://access.caltech.edu>. Access enrollment lists, email all students (though some students report filtering out notices sent through REGIS), submit midterm/final grades.
	* **External tools:** While not sanctioned by Caltech, some instructors and TAs have found these types of tools useful for organizing and communicating in large courses. *Never to communicate protected or confidential information, such as grades through, these channels.*

**Piazza:** an alternative discussion forum platform that supports graphics, LaTeX, code, and has advanced flagging and search capabilities.

**Slack** or similar group messaging platforms: for keeping track of course team tasks and progress.

**GitHub** repository for collaborative code with version control; sometimes also used for documents and other materials.

1. Thanks to Heather Curtis and Robert Johnson for developing materials and cases on managing large courses. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Adapted from: *Harvard Bok Center for Teaching and Learning,* [*http://bokcenter.harvard.edu/head-tf-resources*](http://bokcenter.harvard.edu/head-tf-resources)**.**  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)