

Session 2: Challenges in Teaching Recitations/Labs

Led by former TA facilitators who can select from the list below or generate their own examples

Course logistics and policies (if these have not been previously discussed)

1. *The student who tells you her major is Course ## and needs help on a P-set (led by _____).* Some new TAs are unfamiliar with MIT-speak (Course numbers, P-sets, recitation, etc.), who 7.XX students are, and what the roles of 7.XX TAs have. Please give a brief overview of those topics.
2. *The student who falls ill before an exam or other deadline (led by _____).*
3. *Troubleshooting in the lab (led by _____).* The importance of explaining to the students that lab-based courses are based on cutting edge, current research, which means that (like “real” research), procedures or equipment don’t always work perfectly.

Office Hours, Review Sessions and Recitations

4. *Strategies for getting off to a strong start in recitation (led by _____).* A discussion of setting expectations, building student confidence, and creating a supportive and productive learning environment. This can include tips on what to do on the first day of recitation to establish your role as the TA and create a productive learning environment. (Examples of popular tips include using Stellar pictures to help learn your students’ names, and establishing email guidelines, such as letting students know you will respond within 12 or 24 hours, to avoid 3 am emails the morning assignments are due.)
5. *How to maximize student learning in office hours (led by _____).* Tips for how to help students solve problems without just giving away the answers. Also, for crowded office hours, how to facilitate students teaching each other.
6. *Handling questions that you don’t immediately know how to answer (led by _____).* Strategies for handling difficult questions from students, such as telling your class you will get back to them with a complete answer in the next recitation or by email. Also, the importance of using your TA team as a resource and realizing that it’s okay that you don’t know everything in every situation.
7. **Unattended office hours/recitations (led by _____).* You are scheduled to hold office hour on Tuesday from 3-4 PM. The first two weeks no one shows up. On the third week, you wait 45 minutes. Again no one shows up. You have a lot of work to do in lab.
8. **The student looking for a tutor (led by _____).* You want to help the student. So you accept his/her request and agree to meet at a time and place other than your usual office hours. However 10 minutes through the session you realize that the student has not done his homework and did not come prepared with a set of questions. How would you react?

9. *The student who lacks study skills (led by _____)*. A discussion of how to help your class succeed with good study skills, including stressing the importance of understanding each homework problem, setting aside sufficient time to study, and coming to office hours prepared with specific questions. Many MIT students get through high school without needing to study much, so reviewing study skills and time management is a valuable part of helping the students succeed as MIT students. Possibly suggest that students always start p-sets on their own first and have them start each question on a new piece of paper, to record their thought process. That way, you can immediately diagnose where the problems are. Also, how to support students with a weaker science background that need both help with the material and extra encouragement. A successful strategy here is to suggest that students make a study guide as they go through class that contains basic examples and more complicated problems. Students then should annotate the study guide so it is in their own words.
10. *The demanding student (led by _____)*. A student who tries to take advantage of the TA's time, refusing to put in sufficient work on their own, demanding more and more time from the TA, or making increasingly ridiculous excuses for incomplete and poor work. Also how to deal with students that take advantage of your time in other ways, such as requesting unnecessary homework re-grades or constant email explanations. Some students will *fish* for a TA who helps them the most by emailing more than one. Some might say they're unable to attend one day of section each week and would like you to fill in what he missed during office hours. What would you do?
11. *The procrastinating student (led by _____)*. A student who waits until the very end of the semester or module to begin working on a lab report or other assignment, either due to procrastination or an overloaded schedule. How to deal with this type of student, as well as how to encourage all of the students to begin planning for and organizing their lab reports with sufficient time to produce quality work.
12. *How to get feedback during the semester on your teaching (led by _____)*. *After every 5-6 recitations you seek evaluations from the students. One of the students while evaluating you comments that although you have a fairly good teaching style a) you have thick accent which is hard to follow b) you are hesitant to say that you don't know the answer to a question. How do you react? What changes will you make to your recitation moving forward?

Discussing grades with the students, instructors and Professors

13. *The student who **thinks** she's/he's failing (led by _____)*. A student who is doing fine in the course, but is convinced that he/she is failing or a student who struggles on the first exam, but has plenty of time to improve his/her grade. A discussion of students' insecurities at MIT after being at the top of their class in high school and the perception that they don't belong here or were accepted into MIT by accident.

14. *The student who is failing (led by _____)*. A struggling student who is in danger of failing this and perhaps other courses. A discussion of what steps to take, including contacting the advisor to get more information, and when it might be appropriate to advise a student to drop the course. Some students in this situation are overcommitted both with the number of classes they are taking and with extracurricular activities. Also, what to do when you think the academic issue might be related to personal or mental health issues.
15. *The student who is hyperfocused on grades (led by _____)*. *A few students, anxious about the grades, approach you 2 and 1/2 months into the semester and ask about what their final grades would be if they ace final. What do you tell them? What if the student is concerned that the “B” they received may jeopardize their admission into medical school? You would like the student to have a successful career. So you look over the student’s work and cannot find justification for raising the grade. How should you address the situation?
16. **The student who is at the cusp of getting a better grade (led by _____)*. After the finals, the Course Instructor emails the finalized grade sheet to all the TAs. You see that a student from your recitation is very close to the A/B cut-off. You know the student very well and know that the student is sincere. How would you react?
17. **The good student who is underperforming (led by _____)*. A student comes and talks to you after your recitation. The student explains that he is doing very well in other classes but not so in this class, he is overwhelmed by the class size and he has never obtained a “B” grade in any class before. How would you react? What would you do if a student who was indeed failing the class comes and seeks help from you halfway through the semester?

Problem Sets and Lab Reports

18. **The two problem sets with very similar answers. (led by _____)*. Use this to emphasize i) the course strategy and ii) clear the misconception that the problem set grades are more important than the experience of trying each problem themselves and assessing which areas they need to spend more time on to succeed on the exams.
19. *Plagiarism on lab reports (led by _____)*. A discussion of plagiarism (not properly citing sources or more commonly, by copying or sharing answers or sections of a report between lab partners). How and when to review plagiarism rules with the students and how to discuss this in terms of academic consequences and personal and scientific integrity. This has been a problem in even the advanced lab courses, so stressing that plagiarism will not be tolerated is important in all of the laboratory classes both at the beginning of the semester and as lab report deadlines approach.
20. *The student who is testing your lateness policy (led by _____)*. *The problem sets are due on Fridays at 10 AM and the solutions to the problem sets are posted at 10 AM. At 10.15AM, one of your students shows up with his problem set and says, “I forgot it at home and just ran there and back, I didn’t have time to see the solutions. Can you accept it late? Please.” What do you do?

Setting up and maintaining boundaries with the students

21. *The student you are familiar with from outside of class (led by _____).*
22. **The student-friend (led by _____).* A student visits during your office hours and after reviewing some problems for 1/2 hour you get thirsty. You both agree to move the advising section to the cafeteria where you can get coffee/soda. At the end of the meeting the student thanks you profusely for your help and offers to repay you for your generosity by inviting you to a concert on campus that weekend. You are sure you would enjoy the student's company. How would you best respond to the invitation?
23. **How to deal with Facebook friend requests (led by _____).* The students send you invitations to be friends at Facebook. They also say that your fellow TA has set up a Facebook page for the students of his/ her recitation. How do you react to the student's request? TAs have different strategies for establishing boundaries. A discussion of the different options for maintaining a professional relationship in the age of social media. Also, a discussion of the considerations of giving out cell numbers or other personal information. Consider deleting your contact information from the online MIT directory if you don't want students knowing your home address and phone number.
24. *The student who emails you at 1AM just prior to exam with a list of questions. (led by _____).*

Issues with the fellow TAs

25. **The incorrect TA (led by _____).* At a review session that you attend, you hear the reviewer presenting some information incorrectly i.e. the reviewer writes on the board and says the name of a virus particle is a "VIRON"(instead of a virion) or writes and says lysozyme instead of lysosome or draws a signaling pathway incorrectly. There are 300 students in the class. What do you do if the reviewer is a TA? Would it matter if the reviewer was a Professor?
26. **The too-helpful TA (led by _____).* After the exam you hear a group of students saying, "My TA discussed a very similar question in the recitation thankfully".
27. **The slacker TA (led by _____).* As a TA you are required to edit and solve problem set or exam questions. As the semester progresses you realize that a fellow TA is not taking his/ her job assignment seriously. Therefore you are forced to complete his/her job. How would you react?
28. **The disruptive TA (led by _____).* You observe that a fellow TA raises (unnecessary) issues during staff meeting, which creates disturbance and slows down the pace of the meeting.

29. **The loose-lipped TA (led by _____). You are at a meeting with other graduate students including a fellow TA in a café not far from campus. You begin to talk about some ridiculously funny wrong answers students have written on exams or lab reports. The other TA starts to mention students by their full names. You look around and do not recognize any one sitting close by as being in the class.*
30. *Specific challenges to TAing fellow graduate students (led by _____). How to handle situations that might arise when TAing a course that includes friends and lab mates.*

Managing the emotional aspect

31. *Balancing lab research, TAing and other obligations (led by _____). A discussion of how to balance your own time during the semester and how to deal with the stress of trying to teach while simultaneously working in a lab.*
32. *The student who starts crying during recitation or office hours. (led by _____).*
33. *The “advanced” student that is constantly challenging you or questioning your authority or expertise (led by _____). The case of a student who tries to show off with questions meant to undermine your authority as the teacher. Also how to handle questions that you don’t immediately know how to answer.*
34. **The Professor who made a possibly offensive or inappropriate remark (led by _____). In lecture, the Professor makes a joke about women scientists. At recitation, a number of very upset students approach you, saying that they were offended by the joke. You agree that the professor’s remark could have been construed offensive. What would you do? What if you didn’t feel the remark was offensive.*
35. **If **you** made a possibly offensive or inappropriate remark (led by _____). While presenting information during a section lecture, you use the metaphor of two ethnic groups whose members are thought not to get along to describe two chemical compounds that are not compatible with each other. As soon as the words have left your mouth, you realize you should probably not have used this analogy. What should you do?*