

Building a Teaching Together Toolkit: Scenarios

The following scenarios present challenging teaching situations that instructors and TAs face in large classes. In your group, discuss your assigned scenario and potential responses. How would you address this situation? What, if anything, could you do to prevent this situation or make it easier to deal with?

1. You are one of three TAs for a large class taught by a new professor. One of your students has missed the first exam and asks to make it up, saying they stayed home sick with a cold. You say no, citing the policy in the syllabus, which states that make-up exams are only permitted in “extreme and well-documented situations.” You later hear that another TA allowed a student in a similar situation to retake the exam in office hours. You go to the professor, who defers and asks TAs to use their own judgement on a case-by-case basis. You appreciate the professor supporting your decision, but you are concerned this isn’t fair to students. How do you handle this situation?

2. You’re a TA for a large class in your discipline, and you’ve just received your students’ midterm evaluation forms. You’ve been putting a lot of work into planning interesting and active lessons, and their feedback on your teaching is mostly positive. However, while many students say the discussions are “fun” and “interesting,” they also describe them as “pointless” or a “waste of time” given the course’s heavy workload. You don’t want to simply “teach to the test,” but you also don’t want to make the section an unnecessary burden on your busy students. How do you handle this situation?

3. You are an adjunct lecturer teaching a large class with a single TA. You and the TA split the grading of weekly writing assignments, for which you use a rubric. Midway through the quarter, a panicked student comes to your office hours with questions about her last assignment. Upon reading the TA’s comments on the student’s paper, you think their feedback is very harsh, but not totally unfounded. The grade is only slightly lower than what you would have assigned. You don’t want to undermine your TA, but you want to reassure the student. How do you handle this situation?

4. You are faculty and have been supervising a strong graduate student who is now preparing for the academic job market. The student has been successful at earning research grants and is submitting articles based on their dissertation chapters, but they are struggling to write the teaching statement and sample syllabi needed for their job applications. The student was a TA in your class and has asked you for a letter of recommendation for teaching-focused positions, but you never actually observed their interactions with students. How do you handle this situation?