Reflective Teaching and Learning:
A DIY Tool for TAs
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At the beginning of my foray into grad school I began a private blog meant to document my experiences as a first-time TA. I called this my (ta da!) Teaching Journal. I intended this blog to serve as a warehouse for all of the teaching experiences that I wanted to remember, and the act of writing about these experiences was intended to make me think more reflectively about my teaching. Shortly after beginning this ongoing project, I renamed this blog My Teaching and Learning Journal, taking into account that many of the episodes I had been documenting were not teaching strategies taken directly from my TA role. Rather, I was documenting instances of my own learning which I saw as importantly bridging the ambiguous distinction between teacher and learner that new TAs must learn to negotiate.

Material for my journal has been drawn from far more than my experiences in discussion groups or office hours with the students I TA. I drew also from my own experiences as a student in my program, observing the pedagogy of my own instructors and their interactions with students. Even more interesting to me now is the amount of space in my blog I dedicated to reflect upon some of the workshops offered to TAs in my program. My observations focused on interactions among and between workshop “students” and “teachers.” I found the ambiguous identities and relationships during these workshops to be an exciting focus of observation. Many of the workshop attendees were graduate students, often in their first or second year of grad school, all of us still learning where and when to take on the different personae of teacher, mentor, student, peer. In a few cases, professors and senior instructors also attended these workshops—sometimes as participants, sometimes as guest presenters, and often as both.

It was in these workshop settings that I observed the fluidity of identity between instructor, student, and teaching assistant. My assumptions about learning and teaching were challenged in this setting. I began to notice that my fellow TAs learned different, yet equally rewarding, lessons from our shared experiences of teaching for the first time. I began to realize that my favourite instructors in the grad school setting seemed to be transformed when put in the role of student. And I began to understand that people I thought were brilliant as students sometimes struggled to make sense of their teaching experiences. As I reflect both upon those experiences and upon the ways in which I documented those episodes, I see evidence of myself navigating this dual role of teacher and learner and consciously thinking about the kind of teacher-learner I want to become.

I still keep my private blog, and it serves many purposes. It is simultaneously a place for me to vent, a place where I can celebrate, and a simple record of reflections or observations. My Teaching & Learning Journal is personal, it is specific, it is self-focused—and that is why it has probably been my greatest teaching tool this year. My periodic visits to re-read past entries have reminded me of successes, failures, impressions, and feelings which otherwise might have been forgotten, but which nonetheless serve to remind me of my constantly developing teacher-learner role.

Top Ten Things You Want to “Be” in the Classroom
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1. Be RELAXED - whenever you are in front of the class, don’t panic! Take a deep breath and relax.
2. Be SUPPORTIVE - compliment your students when they are doing the right things and try to motivate them when they are having trouble.
3. Be CONFIDENT - if you are not familiar with the material you will make the students even more confused with your explanations. Study the material ahead of time so you can deliver it with confidence!
4. Be HONEST - if you don’t know the answer, just be honest. Keep in mind that you want to pass along correct information so don’t make up answers just to save face. There is nothing to be ashamed of, because you are also in a learning process.
5. Be FRIENDLY - you will be working with these students for at least one semester, so try to remember their names and be friendly with them so they are comfortable with you.
6. Be AWARE - learn to pick up on the signs your students are giving you. If they are too quiet or too noisy your students might be bored or confused.
7. Be INTERACTIVE - involve your students in the learning process to keep them interested. Changing up your routine will keep things interesting and make the material more memorable.
8. Be INNOVATIVE - don’t be afraid to experiment with new ways of explaining the subject matter. A difficult concept can become clearer if you can find a new way to explain it.
9. Be YOURSELF - these tips are just a few ideas to think about, but in the end you have to come up with your own teaching style. Remember to be yourself and enjoy the experience!