



Learning and Teaching Committee

Paper for : Information

Subject : Potential uses of teaching assistants in supporting and enhancing teaching and learning

1. At the 47th LTC meeting held on 26 June 2012, the issue about using Teaching Assistants (TAs) to support teaching and learning was raised. The Committee requested EDC to identify common practices of utilizing TAs to improve teaching and learning and prepare a paper for LTC's discussion.
2. The attached paper was submitted by EDC for the above-mentioned purpose.

September 2012

Using Teaching Assistants to Support and Enhance Teaching and Learning

The Teaching Postgraduate Studentship (TPS) Scheme was launched in March 2012. One important purpose of the TPS Scheme is to enable departments to create more part-time Teaching Assistant (TA) positions to provide additional teaching and administrative support needed for implementing the 4-year undergraduate curriculum. Departments are strongly encouraged to make good use of the TPS Scheme. There are great potentials for using TAs to support and enhance teaching and learning. The following table provides some suggestions on how TAs could be utilized effectively to support teachers in meeting the challenges of teaching, in particular, those presented by large classes. Faculty members who are working with TA (or planning to do so) are encouraged to consider these suggestions when determining the responsibilities of their TAs.

Challenges for teachers	How TAs can help
<i>Preparation for teaching</i>	
Need to enrich teaching with more real-life examples, but searching and organising the materials are time-consuming	TAs can provide useful support to the teacher, e.g., they can help to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - search for resource materials (real-life examples from newspaper clippings, case examples from literature/data banks, etc.) - organise the resources for presentation by the teacher and/or discussion by students
<i>Lectures and tutorials</i>	
Research has shown that in-class learning activities (e.g. short problems to recall knowledge taught in previous lectures or to apply knowledge presented in the current lecture) will significantly enhance students' conceptual understanding. But it is difficult to attend to students' questions during in-class activities, particularly in a large class.	TAs can assist with in-class activities and small group work (walk around and answer students' questions)
Having to cover large amount of materials, teachers may only have time to give an overview of theoretical concepts in the lectures.	TAs can attend lectures and take notes of important concepts presented by the teachers, then help to elaborate on the concepts and illustrate with examples in tutorials
Because of the limited time, teachers may only have time to explain the procedures and skills for operations / problem solving in the lectures.	TAs can help students to apply the knowledge and practise the skills through hands-on activities, simulations and other problem solving activities in the tutorials.
<i>Using the LMS</i>	
Teachers are encouraged to make the best use of the Learning Management System (including Blackboard Mobile Learn) to support their teaching and students' learning. The abundant features available in the LMS require technical knowhow to use and may present challenges to teachers.	TAs, particularly those who are technically capable, can support the teacher to make the best use of the various functions of the LMS, e.g., they can <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - coordinate and monitor online communications including discussions, announcements and emails - upload / archive course materials

Challenges for teachers	How TAs can help
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - assist in creating tests and surveys - manage and mark eAssessments (using Grade Center) - support online group work - assist with plagiarism detection - assist with mobile learning
<i>Project work, student seminars and presentations</i>	
<p>Providing students with consultative support on projects and on the preparation for seminars and presentations will significantly improve their performance. But it is a very time consuming task, particularly when there are many student groups.</p>	<p>While teachers can focus on giving students the overall direction and conceptual guidance, TAs can provide further support such as discussing with student groups on the difficulties they encounter and helping them to rehearse and improve their presentations.</p>
<i>Practical / laboratory classes</i>	
<p>Practical / laboratory classes are essential for professional programmes and a range of tedious work is associated with them.</p>	<p>TAs can help with a wide range of tasks, including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - setting up equipment for the practical classes and maintaining equipment after the classes - preparing and distributing pre-lab materials to students - giving demonstrations in the practical/laboratory classes - supervising practical/laboratory classes to ensure safety - helping students with the difficulties they encounter in practical projects - grading lab reports - designing laboratory experiments (if appropriate)
<i>Experiential and other out-of-classroom learning (WIE, service learning, fieldtrips, visits, study tours, etc.)</i>	
<p>Experiential and out-of-classroom learning are extremely valuable learning experience. They are particularly useful for developing all-round students with professional competence in programmes of an applied nature. But the organization of such activities incurs workload additional to regular teaching.</p>	<p>TAs can help in a wide range of tasks thus enabling teachers to organise such activities more frequently. They can</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - search and source for opportunities of out-of-classroom learning, e.g., suitable sites for visits, organisations for collaboration in service learning - organize the activities, e.g., liaise with the partnering organisation, prepare schedule, book transportation, ... - collect and compile information about the activities and the site of the visit and distribute them to students for preparation - brief students before the activities - lead or help on the day of the activity

Challenges for teachers	How TAs can help
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - help to facilitate the debriefing/sharing session - support students in doing the reflective learning report - grade the reflective learning reports
<i>Assessment</i>	
<p>Continuous assessment is widely recognized as a good practice with multiple advantages. It engages students in continuous work over the span of the learning period and discourages them to leave the studying to the end of the semester. It is fairer and more reliable as it looks at the performance of the students over time instead of relying one time performance at the end point. It allows teachers to track and monitor the progress of students and allows students to receive feedback on their performance, thus enabling both the teacher and the students to improve their teaching/learning for better results. But it also creates more workload for teachers.</p>	<p>TAs can enable more frequent use of interim assessment by helping teachers to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - prepare problem sets/quizzes and solution sets - mark assignments and grade exam papers - provide verbal feedback to students
<p>Research has shown that providing students with clear assessment criteria and expectations help students perform better in assessment. Many teachers have prepared rubrics for this purpose but find that students have difficulties in understanding them.</p>	<p>TAs can help students to understand the rubrics, e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - conduct a discussion session on the rubrics - share their own experience in using the rubrics with the students
<i>Communication with students</i>	
<p>It will help teachers to teach more effectively if they know more about how well students are learning, what areas are causing difficulties for students, etc.</p>	<p>TAs can act as a bridge, providing teachers with feedback from students for preparing and modifying their teaching to meet students' concerns and needs.</p>
<p>It is a good practice to maintain effective communication with students. Teachers also receive course enquiries from students frequently such that they find it difficult to respond promptly.</p>	<p>TAs can act as communicators over course enquiries. They can</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - man office hours to communicate face-to-face with students - respond to email enquiries in timely manner - maintain a website for the class