

MODELS OF INNOVATION & BEST PRACTICES IN TEACHING & LEARNING AT UND GTA/UTA Contracts, Using BlackBoard, Simultaneous Assessment of ES goal and Student Work

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GTA/UTA Contracts: One useful strategy to be able to do more than “lecture and test” in mass classes is to divide the work. While Graduate Teaching Assistants can be very helpful, Undergraduate Teaching Assistants can be just as helpful and they are often seemingly more approachable and better able to relate to their peers. While GTA’s work for their stipend and other intrinsic motivations, the undergraduates typically are not paid but they are instead allowed to earn credit for their efforts. Without the implied contractual obligation of a paycheck I think it is important to be able to control the actions of the UTA’s with oversight of a pending grade. I also write up contracts for all of my TA’s whether graduate or undergraduate so expectations are clear and there is an important layer of acknowledged and signed accountability. A sample of my contract which the student and I sign is below:

To: Name of Student TA

From: Name of Instructor

Re: UTA Responsibilities –name and semester of class (ex: CJS 201 Summer 2008)

Date:

Welcome! I look forward to working with you this semester. I assume that you may have questions regarding your role and responsibilities as an undergraduate TA, so I will attempt to outline your role in this memo. If you have any further questions at any time, do not hesitate to ask. Making any class run smoothly and well takes a team effort. Welcome to the team!

UTA Responsibilities:

We will meet at least twice a week in my office or after class to discuss the class and any related issues.(time to be arranged)
We will also meet briefly before each class to address immediate class concerns.

You should attend the class itself as often as possible. This is a good time to make announcements or clarifications to the class as a whole, help with the distribution and collection of assignments, keep abreast of class progress, and formulate relevant test questions.

You are encouraged to set personal office hours and keep those office hours as well as any other appointments set with students.

You need to dress and act in a professional manner when interacting with students.

Your primary duty in relation to this class relates to (insert their duties – ex: the social awareness activities). After clearance from me you should post relevant activities on the BlackBoard site and announce/explain the activities in class. After guidance from me, you should grade and record the grade of all social awareness activities. You should routinely provide me with a record of student grades. You should be **uniform** in the grading method and you should store the documentation in an orderly and timely fashion.

You will help me prepare and monitor all exams. You should also assist with the sorting of tests and the recording of grades if needed.

You may also be asked to proctor make-up exams.

You should be prepared to collect assignments and cancel class in an orderly fashion if my absence due to illness or professional travel requires it.

My Responsibilities:

I will be available to provide direction and answer questions that arise regarding grading and other class issues.
I will help you with your professional development.

I will provide you with feedback regarding your UTA performance at least twice during the semester.
I will accept full responsibility for class lectures.
I will accept full responsibility for test grading.
I will accept primary responsibility for syllabus, assignment, and test preparation.
I will provide you with the required text for class if needed.
I will assist with other class related matters that may arise.

Using BlackBoard: Another useful technique in dealing with the organization of communications and feedback to the students desired in any class but often particularly difficult and time consuming in a mass class is the use of the BlackBoard (BB) program available at UND for no charge to the students or the faculty. There are excellent trainings available on campus about how to use the program so I would like to share which elements of the program I have found to be most useful.

Announcements – The BB program is able to show any announcement you wish on its home page so as soon as students log in they can be informed about a change in due date, a class cancellation, a guest speaker or whatever else you wish to inform them about. This announcement is not only posted for all to read but it can be e-mail to all students (or only the ones you select) enrolled in the course at the same time without you having to enter any e-mail addresses. Using this function helps the students feel involved and they know what to expect. It also eliminates the need for sending individual e-mails and being bombarded by phone calls from confused students.

Gradebook – This component of the BB program is the one most valued by the students themselves. Whether you give student work back to them or not they are able to track the progress of their points at any time. Students are often understandably concerned about their grades and this function allows them to see when things are done being graded, what their grade was and how they compared to the class average. For the instructor it is a nice spreadsheet which allows you to enter class grades quickly and to perform some limited statistical analysis on any component as well as see running totals by component or by student. Again this eliminates a lot of phone calls or confusion by students about where they stand in class in regard to their grade as they can check it 24/7.

The BB program also allows me to post assignments, share links to websites, create wiki definitions of key terms and even allow students to blog on thought questions, among other things. However, communicating with the students through the posting of useful class content and important announcements as well as having clear grade expectations which the students can track and monitor themselves are probably the most important and most student accessed (which can be monitored by the instructor if you are curious) functions of the program. It is not unusual for students to access the program in the middle of the night or on weekends when it is most convenient for them.

Simultaneous Assessment of ES goal and Student Work – In conjunction with the Gradebook function of BB mentioned above it is possible to record direct assessment outcomes in relation

to an Essential Studies goal for your course while grading student work. Progress toward this goal can then be monitored by the faculty and the students both in terms of their scores and the class averages. The key is to have an assignment or activity (or a repeated set of these) directly designed to measure progress toward the stated goal. The grading rubric used both assesses progress toward the goal as well as assigns any associated point values toward the class grade. For instance, I have the students read an article then write a short paper summarizing the main points of the article and creatively tying it back into something covered in lecture and something they read in their text. Each time this exercise is done it is worth a maximum of 2 points. One point for summarizing the article, .5 for creatively tying it to lecture and .5 for creatively tying it to the text. Anything over the first point is an assessment of creative thinking as well as a grade for the class.