

Bringing American and International Teaching Assistants together to Enhance the TA Training Experience

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Agenda

- Context
- Project
- Implementation
- Sample Panel Questions
- Benefits
- Testimonials
- Future Plans
- Discussion Questions

The context: Florida State University

- A public research university in Tallahassee, FL. Member of the State University System of Florida.
- Classified as a Research I University by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching
- Ranked as the 33rd best public university in the US by US News and World Report
- 41,000+ students; 9,000+ graduate students; 1,800+ teaching assistants, 440+ international teaching assistants

FSU Graduate School Programs

The presenters coordinate two programs for graduate teaching assistants and were seeking for opportunities to cooperate in order to enhance the experience of both groups.

Program for Instructional Excellence (PIE): PIE Associate Program

PIE Associate Program provides assistantships for experienced graduate TAs to support TA training in their departments and campus-wide workshops.

International Teaching Assistant Program (ITA Program)

The ITA Program offers courses for international TAs whose first language is not English so they can improve communication skills in order to perform TA duties at FSU.

The Project: Organizing Two Panels

Panel 1: Understanding the “American Classroom”

Panelists: PIE Associates (3-4)

- International TAs will prepare questions on teaching, classroom management, conflict solution, etc.
- Questions are sent to panelists in advance so they can discuss with other PIE Associates.

Panel 2: Understanding Education in other Countries

Panelists: International TAs (3-4)

- PIE Associates will prepare questions about high school and higher education as well as teaching and learning expectations in other countries.
- International TAs discuss the questions in their class in preparation for the panel.

Implementation

- Each panel was 45 minutes.
- Panel 2 was done about 5 weeks after Panel 1.

Keys to successful implementation:

- Identifying volunteers for the panels in advance
- Generating interest while preparing the questions
- Sharing the questions before the panel
- Discussing the questions and answers with their peers before the panel

Panel 1 Questions

1. On average, how much time do you spend preparing for each class? After several semesters, does it get easier/faster?
2. How do you handle students who...
 - a. are distracted in class?
 - b. are not motivated to learn the subject?
 - c. copy the homework from classmates?
3. How do you address different learning styles in the classroom?
4. How do you evaluate projects, presentations, and groups assignments? We feel that they are harder to evaluate than tests.
5. What was the most difficult and/or embarrassing situation you faced as a TA? How did you overcome it?

Panel 2 Questions

1. What is the average high school and college graduation rate in your country? What types of jobs are available for students who don't graduate high school and college?
2. What do you think about the U.S. school system? What are its strengths and what are its weaknesses?
3. What are some differences you see in university life here versus in your country?
4. How do American universities compare to those in your country?
5. What is the relationship professors have with their students? How does it compare?
6. What unique challenges do you face as an international TA?

The Benefits

- Both groups are empowered and have an opportunity to grow as graduate students and teachers.
- Enhanced communication skills and experience in panel presentations.
- Building networks with fellow TAs in their fields and other fields.

For American TAs:

- An opportunity to reflect on their own teaching practices.
- An increased understanding of other cultures, which is important given the growing number of international undergraduate students.

For International TAs:

- An increased understanding of the “American Classroom”
- An opportunity to receive advice from more experienced TAs.
- An opportunity to communicate in English in a meaningful way.

Panel 1 Testimonials

“It’s good to hear and learn from these experienced TAs. Their working experience/method is interesting and helpful” -- *Electrical Eng. TA from China*

“Every TA has difficulties. However, they are learning and developing from that experience.” – *Education TA from South Korea*

“I learned how to address embarrassing situations and how to keep students interested in class.” -- *Biology TA from Brazil*

“I learned how they fix their problems when they are teaching. I like their attitude to treat students. They are kind and helpful.” -- *Electrical Eng. TA from China*

Panel 2 Testimonials

“I introduced a lot of stuff about education in China. I liked writing on the board. It made me feel like a teacher” -- Statistics *ITA from China*.

“It opened my mind because I could learn about the educational systems in other countries” – *Biology ITA from Brazil*.

“I was surprised to learn about the different distributions of the private and public school systems depending on the country! I had no idea public schools in South America were more prestigious and only made up a small fraction of the colleges. I was also surprised to learn about the affordable education in China (but also very tiny dorm rooms!). Finally, it was interesting to think about the relationships between the advisors and the students – it seemed like in other countries the relationships between grad students and their advisors was much closer than in the U.S.” --*Biology TA from the U.S.*

Panel 2 Testimonials

“I think cultural exchanges like this could be leveraged in different contexts (diversity initiatives, cultural sensitivity training, best teaching practices, etc.) and should be a part of TA or departmental training. I think many people presume that international students need to “just acclimate to U.S. culture,” but I think it is also valuable for Americans to learn about different cultures so we can be more supportive and understanding of culture shock that people coming to the U.S. from other countries might experience.”

-- *Biology TA from the U.S.*

“In the future, I'd love to hear more about the pedagogical differences between the countries and cultures. How do pedagogical differences between countries impact the learning experiences for the grad students as students and then as TAs or teacher?”

--*Theatre TA from the U.S.*

Future Plans

- Continue organizing the panels in the Fall and Spring semesters.
- Limit the number of questions.
- Allow more time for Panel 2 or divide it into a mini-series of panels (could be organized by region).
- Add a campus-wide workshop in which participants submit their questions for experienced TAs.

Questions?



Discussion Questions

1. How might this activity work at your institutions?
2. What other groups at a university would benefit from participating in an activity with a similar format?
3. How might this activity work in other contexts/settings?