

My UTA Experience

When I first signed up to be a UTA for the fall of 2019 I was pretty nervous about the whole ordeal. The idea of improving my communication skills in math was appealing (and why I signed up), but the thought of being relied upon by a professor to help teach on top of a busy schedule seemed like a large responsibility. I ended up getting matched with Dr. Neville teaching Calculus 2 with a flipped classroom style. This meant that students each day were given a worksheet to go look over outside of class and learn concepts, while in class was reserved for answering questions and working with each other in groups. This flipped style of teaching ended up being exactly the right medium to pursue my goal with. Dr. Neville, who was very open to ideas and suggested that I could come to classes with these students and help answer questions directly. She and I would walk around the classroom and check students' answers to problems as well as answer questions. This was wonderful because I got to talk on the one to one level with students and gave me an opportunity to improve how I answered math questions. I found this part surprisingly difficult as it can be very hard to answer someone's question without directly giving away the answer, thus giving the student more time to think about the math they are engaging with. However, I also found it very rewarding to help someone learn and to share my knowledge of a subject I enjoy.

My nervousness about the large responsibility being there was largely unfounded. While yes, there is definitely a sense in which I was being relied upon to grade homework, teach individuals, and hold review sessions, I never felt like I was being placed into a situation that I didn't want to be in. My mentor was very forgiving in that she knew I was already busy and when something needed done, she added the kind caveat of "get as far as you can and if you don't finish, that's ok". In addition, the UTA seminar gave me a lot of tools to make situations easier on myself. For example, while tutoring in the tutoring lab (one of the outside the classroom responsibilities we tutors had), we were told techniques to learn contextual information about a problem we didn't know how to solve by asking students questions, looking at their notes, ect. This was an enormous help as it put a lot of stress off of me as a teacher because I didn't have to know how to do every problem that came up, I just needed to be able to find out how to do it as I went. The UTA seminar also had a bunch of helpful information on graduate school and how to prepare for it. Finally, during some of our last sessions, we gave presentations on some math topic which gave me a chance to talk about some research I was doing this semester. In hindsight this was very helpful because it highlighted that certain aspects of my presenting skills need to be improved in the future.

Overall, I found this experience to be fantastic and I would heartily recommend it to anyone going into a field that requires communicating math. It will improve your ability to interact with your peers, strengthen your knowledge of a subject, and give you some confidence in your math ability. Dr. Neville was a great mentor, and it was a blast to interact with the other UTAs in the tutoring lab and the seminar. It was so nice that I have planned to do it next semester as well!