

# Graduate Teaching Assistants



## Session 5

Andrew Davies

University of Manchester

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## What Is A Learning Disability/Difficulty?

A learning difficulty is a permanent condition. People with learning difficulties grow and develop as individuals, but at a slower pace. Some people with learning difficulties may also have physical disabilities or other medical conditions, but many do not.

‘Valuing People’ white paper (2009) states that:

Learning disability includes the presence of:

- A significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information, to learn new skills (impaired intelligence).
- A reduced ability to cope independently (impaired social functioning).
- Which started before adulthood, with a lasting effect on their development.

[http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH\\_093377](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_093377)

Read the hand out if you are not sure. Contact details are in the text.

### Task 1 - Complete the table in your groups.

Name	Occupation	Disability
Agatha Christie		
Beethoven		
Christopher Reeves		
Douglas Bader		
Handel		
Harry Truman		
Helen Keller		
Jacqueline Du Pre		
Julius Caesar		
Louis Braille		
Napoleon		
Ray Charles		
Roy Orbison		
Stevie Wonder		
Tom Cruise		
Tony Grieg		
Andrew Davies		
Stephen Hawking		
Albert Einstein		
Cher		
Richard Branson		
Sylvia Law		
Agatha Christie		



**(C)**

**Scenario:** You have noticed that well over half your students are performing badly. They are not responding in lessons, not taking part in discussions or handing in work on time. What are the possible reasons for this? And what could you do to change the situation?

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**(D)**

One of your students has an issue, you don't know what it is, but recently, she has changed. In class, she is not her usual bubbly self. She makes comments like, "oh well I'm not bothered" "I'm not going to need this qualification anyway" and "I won't be around to take that exam". What could her problem be? What should or could you do about it?

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## Equality and Diversity in a classroom – What the University says.

*"The University is committed to providing an environment free from discrimination, bullying, harassment or victimisation, where all members of its community are treated with respect and dignity. It aims to create a culture of diversity within its community, providing a dynamic working and learning environment, where all members are valued for their contribution and individuality."*

<http://www.manchester.ac.uk/aboutus/equalityanddiversity/>

Staff and students have a responsibility to:

- Understand this policy and the related Dignity at Work and Study procedure and to contact their manager, tutor or the equality and diversity team if there are any questions.
- Challenge inappropriate behaviour or any discrimination.
- Report unacceptable behaviour in accordance with the Dignity at Work and Study procedure.

Managers and tutors have a responsibility to:

- Set a good example by treating all members of the University with dignity and respect.
- Correct unacceptable behaviour.
- Ensure staff and students know how to report discrimination, bullying and harassment. Ensure that reporting incidents does not result in victimisation.
- Deal with complaints fairly, thoroughly, quickly and confidentially.
- Ensure that due consideration is given to equality and diversity within their sphere of influence.

Any cases of harassment, discrimination or bullying will be taken very seriously by the University. Any member of staff or students found guilty of unlawful discrimination or harassment will be subject to disciplinary action, including where appropriate, dismissal for gross misconduct. Any member of the public, visitor or service provider involved in discrimination or harassment, appropriate or serious action will be taken.

Staff, students or other parties who make a complaint of discrimination have the right to do so without fear of victimisation and the University will make every effort to ensure victimisation does not occur and that any complaints are dealt with promptly and fairly.

## EXPECTATIONS

Have you ever walked into a classroom expecting students to be prepared and begin learning and instead found them looking at you like you are an alien from another planet for even expecting their attention? Unfortunately, low expectations have become the norm for both teachers and students. Many teachers do not want to fight against the expectations that students have because realigning their thinking is both time consuming and difficult. However, it can be done!

Students might come into your classroom with expectations of how you are going to act and what they will be expected to do. However, just because they have these beliefs does not mean that you have to conform to the great expectations that have become much of what drives teaching.

Discipline in your classroom should never be about raised voices and confrontations. It should be about consistent application of established rules. Learning will occur in a safe environment if you, the teacher, establish from the beginning that you will be fair but firm.

## Managing behaviour

For the most part, students are hard-working, courteous and well-behaved in class. Right? But as we have seen, occasionally, you may find yourself faced with a student whose behaviour threatens to sidetrack or disrupt the course. It may be behaviour which is distracting, like doing something not class-related, or it may be behaviour that is interruptive and intentionally disruptive. Either way, you need to maintain control in the classroom. Use these tips to stay on top of classroom distractions and disruptions:

### 1. Establish standards.

Prevention is better than cure. Establish certain standards at the beginning of the semester by defining expectations in the course syllabus and reviewing those expectations on the first day of class.

### 2. Make it clear that class disturbance of any kind is unacceptable.

This includes: coming in late, sleeping, reading newspapers, listening to music, text-messaging, doing other homework, etc. These activities disturb others and undermine the etiquette of the classroom. Deal with these disruptions first through non-verbal cues, catching their eye, to let them know you recognize that they are not engaged in the class. If this doesn't work, you may want to direct a question their way or speak to them after class. Do

not ignore these students for to do so will only encourage others to join in this kind of behaviour.

### **3. Take action early on.**

Take swift and firm action early on, before your position is compromised. Being able to identify problems before they escalate will help you to maintain control of the class. The basic rule is not to embarrass the student in class. Embarrassment does little to help change a student's behaviour and may affect the other students as well. Speak to them individually after the session and ask them, nicely, to adjust their behaviour.

### **4. Communicate that disturbance shows a disregard for classmates.**

It is important for students to realize that they are disrespecting their peers, who may want to learn, when they cause classroom disruption. Stress the value of cooperation and consideration.

### **5. Recognize that one student dominating a discussion may be a distraction.**

Class discussion is a great engagement tool, but the other students will tune-out if they feel the discussion is just between you and one or two other students. The rest of the class will become disengaged. Speak to this student after class, explaining the value of involving the whole class.

If the student continues to monopolize the class, take the student aside after class and discuss the situation as you see it. Explain that although you recognize the value of the student's contributions to the class and the depth of the student's knowledge in the subject, you also see the value of involving the whole class in the learning process. You may wish to involve this student in your attempts to make the rest of the class more responsive. Most bright students readily acknowledge their own over eagerness and are willing to give the other students in class an opportunity to respond before they do, especially if their teachers make it clear that they appreciate the student's ability and intelligence.

### **6. Keep an eye on students who commonly side-track a discussion.**

Keep an eye on students who commonly side-track a discussion, not really responding to the topic or question at hand, moving the class away from the intended content. This student may relate long personal stories which do not really have relevance to the topic at hand. These students can also disrupt a class. It is best to have carefully formed questions that require the

answer to relate back directly to the readings or topic at hand. Learn to bring these students back on-topic so the rest of the class doesn't tune-out.

### **7. Speak to students who make intentional offensive remarks immediately.**

Students who make offensive remarks (racist, sexist, etc.), intending to offend, should be spoken to immediately. This behaviour is unacceptable and if it repeats, should be dealt with through proper channels. Make it very clear from the beginning of the semester that this can never be tolerated in a university classroom. Sexist, racist, homophobic, and xenophobic remarks should be confronted on the spot. If the student seems genuinely not to understand the problem, explain why the remark is unacceptable. But if the student clearly means to offend, you should respond sternly and quickly. This is one classroom situation where a show of anger may be justified. If, after being spoken to, the student persists in such behaviour, you may have to report that student's particular behaviour to your line manager/tutor for further action.

Another problem is the genuinely disruptive student. You will sometimes encounter students who sit together (usually in one of the back corners of the classroom) and talk and laugh throughout class. Directing a pointed comment at this group may remind them of the expected behaviour. "Did you wish to add something to the discussion, Mr. X?" will let them know that their behaviour has been observed and that they are not behaving in an acceptable manner. You should also speak to them after class, individually whenever possible. If you wish, you can ask that they no longer sit together during your class. Most students will not persist in this kind of behaviour once you have very clearly let them know that you will not allow it.

<http://www.sc.edu/cte/guide/classdistractions/sleepingstudents/index.htm>

## **Troubled Students**

You can expect students to come to you with personal problems as the semester progresses. For a variety of reasons, students often confide in GTA's during personal crises. Listen to your students. Keep the lines of communications open. Even if the problems of the students seem trivial to you, do not treat them lightly. Remember that many of your students are living alone for the first time and trying to cope with increased academic and social demands. Your compassion and understanding could make a big difference in their lives.



Some students won't come directly and ask for assistance but may send you signals about their difficulties in other ways. There are a number of signs which can alert you to the fact that a student may be in trouble.

- Marked decline in quality of course work, class participation, quality of papers or test results; increased absence from class or failure to turn in work.
- Prolonged depression, suggested by a sad expression, apathy, weight loss or gain, sleeping difficulty and tearfulness.
- Nervousness, agitation, excessive worry, irritability, aggressiveness or nonstop talking.
- Bizarre, strange behaviour or speech.
- Extreme dependency on faculty or staff, including spending much of his or her spare time visiting during office hours or at other times.
- Marked change in personal hygiene.
- Talk of suicide, either directly or indirectly such as, "I won't be around to take that exam anyway" or "I'm not worried about getting a job, I won't need one."
- Comments in a student's paper that arouse concern.

If you are unsure about the severity of the student's problem, or the steps which should be taken, a consultation with a member of the Counselling Centre will help you to evaluate the problem and offer some suggestions for assistance. Always remember that you are a GTA, not a counsellor, so the extent to which you can directly help students may be limited.

Never try to force a student to go to counselling. Inevitably, this is counterproductive. Encourage the students in whatever way you can, and let them know that you are concerned and willing to help, but do not try to strong-arm them. Too much pressure will make them retreat, perhaps cutting them off from their only avenue of assistance.

Undergraduates are not, of course, the only ones subject to depression and anxiety; graduate students are just as likely to suffer from these problems. GTA's should acknowledge the fact that they are human and may sometimes need help; they should also recognize the fact that their unique position in the university, both teacher and student, produces special problems. There is no need to wait until the pressure is unbearable. The sooner you seek help, for yourself or your student, the better.

<http://www.studentnet.manchester.ac.uk/counselling/>

Tel: 0161 275 2864 (52864 from an internal phone)

Email: [counsel.service@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:counsel.service@manchester.ac.uk)

5th Floor, Crawford House  
Precinct Centre  
Booth Street East  
Manchester  
M13 9QS

## **International GTA's**

Most of the problems faced by international GTAs are the same problems faced by UK GTA's, but because international GTA's may not only be new to Manchester and to teaching but also to this country, it is possible that some unique concerns may trouble them.

Perhaps the greatest concern of international GTA's is language. They worry that they will not be able to understand their students or that their students will not be able to understand them. This is, of course, a very real concern and one that can lessen only as the GTA gains experience as a speaker of the English language. To hasten the process, GTA's should try to immerse themselves in the language: listen to television and radio; read English newspapers and magazines; speak English as often as possible, seeking out native speakers with whom to practice speaking and listening skills.

Knowing what to expect in the classroom may make the first months easier. Be aware of the fact that your accent may be unfamiliar to many of your undergraduates (90% of students from Scotland, for example, have their own distinct brands of regional English), so you should speak slowly to give them a chance to get used to your accented English. When you introduce yourself on the first day (being sure to write your name on the blackboard), you may wish to tell the students what country you are from and why you are here at Manchester. Students who understand a little about a person's culture and background are more willing to give that person a chance and make the small effort necessary to understand an unfamiliar accent.

Let your students know that you care about them and are interested in them. You may wish to explain that you hope the classroom will be a kind of partnership where both parties have something to offer. You look to them for help with correcting any initial difficulties you may

have with the language. They can look to you for expertise in the subject you are teaching. Working together, you can both benefit.

Make it clear to the students that you expect them to let you know when they don't understand something you say, and promise to do the same for them. If a student asks you a question you do not understand, ask the student to rephrase it. Don't worry that saying you don't understand will compromise your authority; pretending to understand when you clearly do not will do much more to undermine your authority and lose your students' respect. During the first few weeks at least, pause often to ask students if they are following you, if they have any questions, and wait for an answer. Let them know that you really do want them to tell you when they are having difficulties. Make sure that during your lectures you write all key words on the board so that you are sure the students understand them correctly.

To avoid having students use your accent against you, i.e., telling you that they misunderstood you so they did not complete their work or study for a test (do not worry, very few students will do things like this), give the students handouts detailing all assignments or write them on the blackboard so there can be no misunderstanding. A clear and detailed outline will prevent many of these problems.

English students may seem very different from students in other countries. International GTA's are sometimes shocked at first by what they perceive as a lack of respect towards them as teachers. Understanding some of the differences in English students may help to alleviate this shock. One way of doing so would be by sitting in on some undergraduate courses in the university during your first weeks as a GTA. This will allow you to see the varieties of accepted classroom behaviour and the kinds of student/teacher relationships common in this country.

In the UK, students come from a wide range of backgrounds. Some of your students may be older than you expect; many will probably be holding part-time jobs. The dress and manner of your students may be quite casual; do not interpret this as a sign of disrespect. Classrooms are sometimes quite informal. English students will often question or even disagree with something the teacher says. This is accepted classroom behaviour and is not meant viciously or as a challenge to the teacher's authority. You will probably make some mistakes. Try to laugh at them and make them work to your benefit. By demonstrating to the students that you

care and by displaying enthusiasm for your subject, you can limit the number of problems you encounter in your first few months as a GTA.

## **Non-traditional Students**

The non-traditional student, often an older student with a career or a family, or both, has become a strong presence on university campuses over the past thirty years. Non-traditional students must meet the same standards as all students, but, often, because they are only attending part-time, they will take more time to complete their degree requirements.

Unlike the lives of many “traditional” students, those of non-traditional students will probably not be centred around the university. Their schoolwork is important to them, but they are equally committed to their jobs and families. This is not to suggest that they are less interested in their education; for the most part, they are dedicated and demanding students, often more actively involved in their education than other students. In many ways, they are closer to graduate students and GTA's in their dedication and commitment than to most undergraduates.

Many of these students have responsible jobs that have accustomed them to carrying out assignments independently.

This experience may make them more demanding as students, less tolerant of wasted class time, poorly-prepared lectures, and careless grading. Changing requirements, policies, or due dates mid-term, while never a good idea, could cause severe hardships for these students whose time is necessarily carefully budgeted. Always be clear about requirements, whether work is voluntary or required, extra or no credit.

Your policies on deadlines and attendance may have to be more flexible than is usual. A student may have to travel occasionally for his or her job. A sick child may prevent another from completing his or her paper. All the work, of course, must be completed, but deadlines should not be totally inflexible. Because non-traditional students often have a much wider range of experience than traditional students, classes with these students are often livelier and more challenging to you as a teacher than those with only traditional undergraduates. It is always a good idea to listen to and make the most of their life experiences. They will, sometimes take matters into their own hands when it comes to disruptive teenagers.

## To finish

A story told by a fellow teacher called Bob, who was riding in a New York City cab with a friend. When they got out of the cab, the friend said to the driver,

"Thank you for the ride. You did a super job of driving this cab!"

The taxi driver seemed stunned for a second and said, "Are you a wise guy or something?"

"No," said the friend, "I'm serious. I admire the way you keep cool in heavy traffic. Not many cab drivers are able to do that. I'm glad I rode in your cab today!"

"Yeah, sure," the cab driver said and he drove off.

Bob asked his friend, "What was that all about?"

"I am trying to bring love back to New York City," said the friend. "I believe it's the only thing that can save the city."

"You think one man can save New York City?" asked Bob

"It's not one man," said the friend. "I believe I have made that taxi driver's day. Suppose he has twenty customers. He's going to be nice to those twenty customers because someone was nice to him. Those customers will in turn be kinder to their employees, shopkeepers or waiters, or even their own families. Eventually, the goodwill could spread to at least a thousand people. Now that isn't bad, is it?"

"But you are depending on that taxi driver to pass your goodwill on to others." said Bob

"Maybe he won't," said the friend. "But I might say something nice to ten different people today. If, out of ten, I can make three happy, then I can indirectly influence the attitudes of three thousand or more."

"You're a nut," said Bob to his friend.

"That shows how cynical you've become," said the friend. "Take postal workers, for instance. The reason so many of them hate their work is because no one is telling them that they are doing a good job."

"But they aren't doing a good job." responded Bob

"They're not doing a good job because they don't believe anyone cares if they do or not," replied the friend.

Bob and his friend continued walking down the street and noticed five workmen eating their lunch. The friend stopped and said, "That's a magnificent job you men have done. It must be difficult and dangerous work."

The workmen looked at Bob's friend suspiciously.

"When will this job be finished?" the friend asked.

"June," growled one of the workmen.

"Ah, that is really impressive. You must all be very proud of what you are doing here!"

As they walked away, Bob said, "I still don't think you are doing any good."

"On the contrary," said the man, "when those workmen digest my words, they'll feel better about what they are doing and somehow the city will benefit."

"But you can't do this alone," said Bob. "You're just one man."

"But I'm not discouraged," said the friend. "I'm hoping to enlist others in my campaign."

They continued walking down the street.

"You just smiled at a very plain-looking woman," Bob said to his friend.

"Yes, I know," the friend replied. "And if she's a teacher, her class is going to be in for a fantastic day."

I hope you all have a fantastic day...

