Teaching Tips for TAs: Acknowledging Responses and Dignifying Errors

One thing certain to occur in every classroom is that students will produce answers that are either not what the instructor is seeking or are factually inaccurate. How you as an instructor handle these responses is key to your ability to generate discussion and stimulate student participation.

Fear of giving a "wrong" answer can inhibit class participation because students do not want to risk the humiliation of being wrong in front of their peers. Obviously, this can make it difficult for instructors to involve students in discussions or to gauge student understanding. It’s crucially important for instructors to establish from the outset that errors by students are not a reflection of their self-worth and that making “mistakes” is a valuable element of the learning process.

Here are a few guidelines on how to deal with student responses and wrong answers so that you encourage participation, check understanding and ensure the entire class has accurate information.

A. Use more positive than negative language in verbal and written responses.

- Remember to give praise whenever possible.
- Focus on what is needed rather than what is missing, e.g., "You need an analysis section" vs. "You failed to analyze . . ."
- Do more than point out incorrectness -- guide the student toward the correct response. Remember, you are there to help students be right, not catch them being wrong.

B. Acknowledge all responses as a contribution, regardless of their accuracy.

- Make sure that each student’s comment is greeted with some gesture of acknowledgment: a head nod, a smile, a verbal "Good" or "Interesting" or "I see what you mean."
- Look for chances to give positive feedback, e.g., "Now that’s an intriguing way to look at it" or "Bingo, you’ve hit the nail on the head."
- Look for chances to refer back to a student’s earlier contribution to weave into the current discussion, e.g., "That ties in nicely to what Janie said earlier about X."

C. Handle "wrong" answers by dignifying students’ responses and involving the rest of the class.

- Remember, a "wrong" answer means the student doesn’t know two things: (1) The correct answer to the question you posed and (2) what question to which their response really belongs.
- Resist the impulse to respond to errors by saying "No" or "Wrong." This may squelch students’ enthusiasm for speaking up and will discourage participation.
• Instead, dignify an erroneous response by indicating what question the answer is correct for, and then clarifying why it’s not correct for the question you asked, e.g., "That would be correct if X were true, but remember that this situation is different because of Y," or "I see why you might think that, because the terms are easy to confuse. However, keep in mind that we’re talking about Z."

• Resist the temptation to give the right answer or to declare a response correct (or incorrect) too quickly -- that instantly ends contemplation of the question for the rest of the class. Instead, ask for others’ responses, or redirect the same question to another student, or ask other students to build on the previous comment.

D. Hold students accountable for the correct answer.

• Make sure that the correct answer is eventually provided (by a student or by you). This can be done when you summarize major points of a discussion to reinforce accurate information.

• Hold students accountable by insisting that they learn the correct answer. This can be gentle: "Let’s go over that one more time so you’ll remember it"; or medium: "I’ll check with you tomorrow to be sure you remember," or unmistakable: "You will be accountable for this on the test."