

# EMPOWERING PSYCHOLOGY TEACHING ASSISTANTS THROUGH A SYMPOSIUM

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## Introduction

Demand for tertiary education has been increasing worldwide with predictions that it will continue to do so, from 97 million students in 2000 to a projected total of 262 million students by 2025 (Bjarnason *et al.*, 2009). There has been a similar trajectory of increasing demand for tertiary education in Singapore, indicated by a marked increase in proportion of the population with tertiary education; the percentage of the Singapore population of university graduates increased from 14.7% to 25.7% between 2002 and 2012 (Teo, 2013). This rising demand for higher education, coupled with a worldwide economic slowdown, poses a unique and challenging question for higher education institutions: How can higher institutions of learning maintain a high quality of teaching when faced with rapidly growing student numbers and reduced student-staff ratios (Muzaka, 2009)?

Employing graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) to assist in undergraduate teaching has been considered a viable solution to the conundrum. It costs relatively less to employ GTAs and it might be easier for faculty to engage their help due to the flexibility of their schedules. With an increase in the numbers of GTAs taking up significant undergraduate teaching assignments in Australia (Bell & Mladenovic, 2008), North America (Park, 2004), UK (Muzaka, 2009), and Singapore, it is pertinent for educators to understand how to better prepare and empower GTAs for their teaching responsibilities.

There has been some research that focused on the training of GTAs (DeChenne, 2010). The National Postgraduate Committee (NPC) of the National Union of Students in the UK promulgated guidelines for the employment of postgraduate students as teachers (NPC, 1993), which included adequate training as a requirement. Yet, according to Goddard (1998), although it has been recognised that GTAs contributed significantly to teaching in higher education institutions, the training has not been entirely adequate.

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With the exception of North America, which has well-established tutor training programmes (TTPs), this issue has been taken less seriously in Australia and the UK until fairly recently (Herbert *et al.*, 2002a, b). Therefore, it is imperative to have in place a framework for the training of GTAs designed to accommodate the wide variation of roles and responsibilities (Sharpe, 2000).

The Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning (CDTL) which promotes best practices in teaching and learning at the National University of Singapore (NUS), recognised the need for GTA training, and has developed a comprehensive 2-day training program known as the Teaching Assistants Programme (TAP) to prepare new GTAs for their roles in undergraduate teaching. The TAP effectively empowers GTAs with a range of broad skills that are relevant for teaching and learning in general. At the same time, we recognised that across various disciplines, teachers may apply specific pedagogies when engaging undergraduate students, and require specialised skill sets and paradigms. Generally, higher education in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has become characterised by learner-centred instruction (see, for example, Huba & Freed, 2000), with the aim of promoting active learning, although there are exceptional situations. For example, Lindbloom-Ylän and colleagues (2006) found that instructors from science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) related disciplines tend to teach in a more teacher-centric, information-transmission way as compared to liberal arts instructors.

On top of differing pedagogical skills and paradigms, each academic department provides a unique teaching and learning environment that GTAs must learn to navigate in order to become effective teachers. More pertinent to psychology, Prieto and Meyers (1999) asserted that many psychology departments around the world appear to offer GTAs formal training and supervision in an inconsistent manner. We thought that discipline-specific training for psychology GTAs will complement the broad university-wide training that they already receive from CDTL, and further promote effective teaching within the Department of Psychology. To this end, we launched, for the first time, a teaching workshop for our psychology GTAs, which we called the Psychology Teaching Assistants Symposium (PTAS). This Symposium—a pilot study—aimed to facilitate a meeting for discussing and sharing best practices and ideas in order to empower our GTAs on how best to teach psychology students. Our research question examines the extent to which our PTAS initiative would have impacted our attendees in that regard.

## **Psychology Teaching Assistant Symposium (PTAS)**

The inaugural PTAS was held on 25 February 2014 and a total of 22 participants from the Department of Psychology attended the event, including GTAs, full-time TAs, and faculty members. At the end of the programme, participants would be able to:

- Apply appropriate strategies to address pedagogical issues during tutorials;
- Apply appropriate skills on how to relate to module lecturers and students;
- Apply strategies on how to balance coursework and research with teaching.

These learning outcomes have been mapped by the PTAS Subcommittee<sup>1</sup> in a half-day programme consisting four interactive sessions, during which attendees would learn teaching skill sets and, at the same time, have opportunities to ask questions as well as interact and share experiences with the PTAS Chair and Co-Chair:

- (A) Session 1: Developing pedagogical and presentation skills,
- (B) Session 2: Engaging and connecting with students: A panel discussion,
- (C) Session 3: Relating to module lecturers and students, and

(D) Session 4: Balancing coursework and research with teaching

**(A) Session 1: Developing pedagogical and presentation skills**

This segment of the symposium focused on discussing pedagogical and presentation techniques that can be applied to specific tutorial formats that GTAs may frequently encounter across the various modules offered by the Department. The chief impetus behind such an approach was the conviction that the teaching challenges GTAs face depend largely on the type and format of modules they teach. It is hoped that framing teaching strategies within specific teaching contexts would allow GTAs the opportunity to develop and apply problem-specific solutions more effectively.

Participants were randomly divided into five discussion groups at the beginning of the session, consisting of three to four members in each group. Within each group, participants were asked to share their experiences, teaching roles, challenges and difficulties faced vis-à-vis the modules they taught. Each group then summarised their key discussion points on a whiteboard. We further categorised participants' responses into two broad types of tutorials: open tutorials (in which the tutorial format unfolds unpredictably in real-time), and closed tutorials (in which the tutorial format is pre-determined and highly structured). See Table 1 below for a summary.

*Table 1. Challenges (as identified by participants) that Psychology teaching assistants face across various tutorial formats*

Tutorial Type	Tutorial Format	Challenges in Conducting Classes
Open	Student-led presentations	Reduced in-class interaction with students may have negative consequences for both creating a cohesive learning community and <u>TAs'</u> teaching feedback.
	Tutor-led activities (E.g., live demonstrations)	Building connections between tutorial and lecture content can be demanding for TAs, particularly when TAs <u>are</u> given full creative control over tutorials without guidance from lecturers.
	Flipped classroom (E.g. in-class exposition of pre-class readings and online activities; see Kim <i>et al.</i> 2014 for a detailed discussion)	Facilitating discussions can be daunting when students in a tutorial group come from diverse backgrounds and years of study, such that there are large individual differences in the levels of understanding of the subject matter.
		Encouraging students to actively participate in discussions can be challenging due to the diffusion of responsibility to openly voice one's opinions, particularly in large classes.
Closed	Tutor-led lecture reviews and mini lectures	It can be difficult to engage students when the material that is being discussed has highly technical content.
		Building an overarching take-home message across several tutorials can be challenging.
Closed	Tutor-led lecture reviews and mini lectures	Adhering to a lesson template and repeatedly delivering the same structured lesson can become a dull routine that is unchallenging for <u>TAs</u> .

### *Strategies to address challenges in closed tutorials*

As several challenges participants raised could potentially be resolved with good presentation skills, we conducted a live demonstration of teaching a psychological statistical concept (Levene's Test for equality of variances) within a closed tutorial format. Through this demonstration, we highlighted how GTAs can convey complex theoretical concepts in a simple and memorable manner via strategies such as pacing their speech, repeating key points for emphasis, and injecting personally relevant examples to aid understanding. Of particular interest was the concern that adhering to a lesson template and repeatedly delivering the same structured lesson can become dull and unchallenging for GTAs after some time. Methods to deliver the standard class materials in new, diverse ways were discussed. First, GTAs were encouraged to keep themselves abreast of the latest literature and draw on relevant portions to show how the foundational knowledge being taught is being advanced in the research field today. Second, they were encouraged to constantly illuminate how the psychological concepts actually played out in one's own daily experiences, in order to promote active and durable learning among students (see Lim & Gan, 2013). Third, GTAs were challenged to explore the use of technology in teaching standard class materials which may potentially create positive student learning experiences, although they were also cautioned against potential pitfalls (see Lim & Yong, 2013, for a detailed discussion).

### *Strategies to address challenges in open tutorials*

Next, we provided a live demonstration of an open tutorial. A recurring concern among participants was the challenge of encouraging active student participation in tutorials. We raised two plausible reasons to account for students' tendency to be passive in class: a perceived "power gap" between GTAs and students, where the latter sees GTAs as unapproachable authority figures, as well as a deep fear of failure. To overcome these problems, we proposed that GTAs aim to build connections between students and themselves, as well as among students themselves.

#### *Building connections with students*

Since students' perceptions of GTAs as unapproachable authority figures may discourage them from actively sharing their viewpoints, GTAs can seek to break down such barriers in the classroom both psychologically and physically. For instance, GTAs can utilise appropriate examples from their personal lives to illustrate concepts in class. This strategy will not only enable GTAs to explain difficult theories in a more relatable way, but also allow students to see GTAs as more personable, down-to-earth and approachable, thus bridging the perceived power gap for more effective open dialogue. At the same time, GTAs can set up appropriate classroom arrangements that reduce the physical distance between themselves and their students (e.g., physically moving nearer to the students when speaking; removing unnecessary equipment), thereby creating a conducive learning environment that effectively supports classroom engagement.

#### *Creating a conducive learning environment to build students' confidence*

To help students to overcome their fear of failure, GTAs can create a safe learning culture by providing opportunities for students to first gather their thoughts and engage in small-group discussions before sharing their viewpoints, rather than expecting an immediate response to a question. This can put students on the spot, and imposing such time pressures can be stressful for them. At the same time, responding effectively to students' answers can promote sustained classroom engagement in the long run. For instance, GTAs can and should use appropriate positive reinforcement such as praise and affirmation in response to students' contributions, thus creating a positive classroom climate that boosts students' self-confidence and encourages increased classroom participation. Also, by elaborating and building on students' good

answers, GTAs can create a valuable learning opportunity for the entire class to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter and what makes for an insightful response. When students supply incorrect answers to a question, it is vital that GTAs continue to respond in a positive and encouraging manner by patiently guiding students towards finding a right or better answer. When GTAs demonstrate that they are receptive to their students' ideas, they can build connectivity and provide much-needed assurance to students to actively voice their opinions in the classroom.

### ***(B) Session 2: Engaging and connecting with students: A panel discussion***

Leading seamlessly from the first session, we chaired a panel discussion of some pertinent concerns participants had highlighted pertaining to their own pedagogical experiences and the challenges they faced during and outside of classroom teaching. These discussion themes had been gathered from an online pre-symposium survey, in which we invited participants to submit their inputs in order to define the scope of the discussion. This was so that participants could also summarily recognise the challenges that educators commonly face in the classroom. To encourage participants to provide accurate and honest opinions, they were assured complete anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. Based on the data collected from 11 survey respondents, we identified "engaging and connecting with students" as a recurring theme which warranted open discussion. The panellists also fielded questions from participants. Table 2 provides a summary of the session's proceedings (*see page 24*).

To boost participants' sense of self-efficacy in applying the pedagogical strategies discussed, we concluded the panel discussion with an open sharing session, during which participants engaged in self-assessment to identify one of their strengths and how they can capitalise on this strength to connect with their students for more effective teaching.

### ***(C) Session 3: Relating to module lecturers and students***

During this segment of the symposium, we facilitated a forum with the primary objective of providing a platform for participants to voice potentially sensitive concerns related to their experiences working alongside lecturers and students. To this end, faculty members attending the symposium were invited to leave the venue for a tea break, while the GTAs and full-time TAs took part in the forum. Participants were reminded to avoid revealing any identifying information when sharing their feedback, which we subsequently noted on a whiteboard. Faculty members were then invited back to the venue, and served as panellists who addressed the issues that had been raised.

Some pertinent issues were addressed, including clarifying the role of psychology GTAs, the distribution of teaching and grading responsibilities between lecturers and GTAs, and appropriate handling of pedagogical conflicts between lecturers and GTAs. Importantly, faculty members also proposed the development of department-level support networks with the following goals: to provide GTAs with the guidance and mentorship necessary for managing teaching demands, as well as enhancing tutor welfare by making available a formal outlet for GTAs to air grievances and seek help to address problematic situations.

### ***(D) Session 4: Balancing coursework and research with teaching***

In view of the high number of GTAs in the Department, this session was intended as an avenue for GTAs to discuss optimal ways in which they can manage their coursework and exams while fulfilling their teaching and grading responsibilities to the best of their abilities. Based on their personal experiences, participants exchanged good practices in effective grading. We also offered recommendations on how GTAs can



integrate their various duties. These included making long-term plans that work around tightly clustered grading deadlines and implementing a firm schedule for their coursework and research.

*Table 2. Participants' questions and panellists' responses on engaging and connecting with students.*

Participants' Questions	Panellists' Responses
How can TAs engage a class of students with diverse backgrounds and interests?	TAs can select a key learning objective for each tutorial and make consistent connections to it during the class, such that all students will be able to understand this main take-home message.
	To cater to students who have a deeper interest in pursuing the subject matter beyond the class, TAs can provide interesting and relatable follow-up questions intended to elicit deeper reasoning and guide independent review of the relevant literature.
How should TAs deal with "boring" or difficult journal articles and theoretical concepts?	TAs can identify thinking, learning, and evaluative skills that they would like their students to develop, and leverage on discussions of complex articles and theories to have students practise these skills in class. For instance, to engage students intellectually, TAs can prepare a good summary of the assigned reading, and then explain to students how this summary was constructed in order to impart useful learning techniques.
	To increase students' interest in the subject matter, TAs can act as positive role models by demonstrating their passion towards Psychology in their teaching.
How can TAs better connect with students within the short span of five tutorials (10 hours)?	While it is undoubtedly a challenge to build strong connections with students within just five tutorials, TAs can seek to establish rapport in the classroom by investing the effort to learn and remember their students' names.
	TAs can also use their facial and body language to project warmth and sincerity while injecting verbal humour in their lessons.
How should TAs handle hostile or uncooperative students?	Although prevention is certainly better than cure, TAs can potentially remedy the unfortunate situation by showing that they are genuinely interested in their students' learning and welfare. For instance, TAs can take the initiative to email students supplementary notes that aid their understanding of difficult concepts. More often than not, students are appreciative of such thoughtful gestures and are likely to reciprocate.
	To foster trusting relationships with their students, TAs should be fully prepared for their lessons in order to earn their students' respect. A sense of preparedness will not only empower TAs with teaching efficacy, but students will also be more motivated to learn from a competent teacher.
	To increase trust in the classroom, TAs can also engage in greater self-disclosure (e.g., sharing relevant personal anecdotes in relation to the subject matter at hand).

As an ending note to the PTAS, we facilitated a reflection session during which participants were invited to share their personal encounters with students whom they had positively impacted through their teaching. Drawing on these recollections, we highlighted that despite its challenges, teaching is truly a rewarding profession and a great privilege for educators, and we encouraged participants to continue building on their strengths towards becoming yet more effective teachers of psychology.

## Attendee Feedback on the PTAS

At the end of the PTAS, participants were invited to fill out a voluntary and anonymous questionnaire to evaluate the symposium. Participants were offered the option of either completing a printed or online version of the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of ten quantitative items ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and four qualitative items. A sample of the questionnaire is shown below:

*Table 3. Sample of the questionnaire to evaluate PTAS 2014*

<b>Quantitative items</b>	
1)	Please evaluate, using the 5-point scale, PTAS 2014 based on your overall impression of the event: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The symposium was relevant.</li> <li>• The symposium was useful.</li> <li>• The symposium was informative.</li> <li>• The symposium has motivated me to pursue better teaching practices.</li> <li>• I will be able to apply the knowledge gained from the symposium in my teaching.</li> <li>• Overall, the symposium was effective.</li> </ul>
2)	Please rate, using the 5-point scale, the effectiveness of the individual programme items during PTAS 2014: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Session 1: Developing Pedagogical and Presentation Skills</li> <li>• Session 2: Engaging and Connecting with Students: A Panel Discussion</li> <li>• Session 3: Relating to Module Lecturers and Students</li> <li>• Session 4: Balancing Coursework and Research with Teaching</li> </ul>
<b>Qualitative items</b>	
3)	What were some <u>strengths</u> of PTAS 2014?
4)	How will you be applying what you have learnt from PTAS 2014 in your teaching?
5)	What recommendations do you have for ways by which PTAS can be improved?
6)	Could you please share with us any other comments and suggestions (e.g., activities or initiatives) that you think may be useful for future runs of PTAS?

### Quantitative evaluation of the PTAS

The quantitative items involved rating the effectiveness of the symposium's four individual sessions, whether the overall symposium was relevant, useful, informative, and effective, the extent to which the symposium had motivated participants to pursue better teaching practices, as well as the extent to which participants would be able to apply the knowledge gained from the symposium in their teaching. All ratings were performed on a 5-point Likert-type scale with higher scores indicating higher levels of the variable measured (mean scores and standard deviations are presented in Table 3). Participants' ratings across the six items related to their evaluation of the overall symposium were collapsed to yield a mean overall PTAS effectiveness score of 4.50 (S.D. = 0.47).

*Table 4. Mean scores and standard deviations of participants' quantitative evaluations of PTAS*

	<b>M</b>	<b>S.D.</b>
<b><u>Effectiveness of overall symposium</u></b>		
The symposium was relevant.	4.63	0.52
The symposium was useful.	4.38	0.74
The symposium was informative.	4.25	0.46
The symposium has motivated me to pursue better teaching practices.	4.75	0.46
I will be able to apply the knowledge gained from the symposium in my teaching.	4.38	0.74
Overall, the symposium was effective.	4.63	0.52
<b><u>Effectiveness of individual sessions</u></b>		
Developing pedagogical and presentation skills	4.25	0.71
Panel discussion	4.25	0.89
Relating to module lecturers and students	4.25	0.71
Balancing coursework and research with teaching	3.38	1.19

*Note. N = 8. All ratings were performed on a 5-point Likert-type scale.*

### Qualitative evaluation of the PTAS

The questionnaire's qualitative items asked participants to identify some strengths of the PTAS, how they would be applying what they had learnt from the symposium in their teaching, their recommendations for ways in which the PTAS could be improved, as well as their comments and suggestions for activities and initiatives for future runs of the PTAS. We consolidated participants' feedback and coded them according to common underlying threads in Table 4.



*Table 5. Participants' qualitative evaluations of PTAS.*

Themes	Codes	Participants' Consolidated Feedback
Strengths of PTAS	Relevant	"Personally relevant."
		"Highly engaging; relied on challenges and issues raised by attendees, thereby maximizing its relevance."
	Informative	"Overall, the symposium was very informative with regard to the plethora of dynamic skills relevant to enhancing student teaching and learning."
		"Care was taken to address most important questions."
	Incisive	"Very incisive insights into particular challenges of teaching."
		"Clear concrete examples given on issues like how to engage with students."
	Connecting with Department Members	"Chance to connect with other TAs and foster community."
		"A good, long overdue opportunity for TAs and grad students to know that others share their problems and concerns."
		"Confidence-building measure between TAs and the department."
	Knowledge Exchange	"Promoted exchange of problems and ideas between panel members and attendees."
Application of Learning Points from PTAS to Teaching	Connecting with Students	"It was also great that we talked about the issue of relating to module lecturers—it brought to my attention the unfair workload that was given to me by a lecturer (I was struggling with the load but was unaware that lecturers were supposed to be doing certain things instead of TAs) and reminded me to ask or clarify with the lecturer or surface this upwards should this occur again."
		"Inspiring testimonials from the facilitators."
	Imparting Thinking Skills	"It didn't merely impart teaching skills but also reminded us to reflect on and leverage our strengths. It was also a refreshing reminder of the impact that we can potentially create on students, to inspire them and to form a personal relationship with them."
		"To not only view teaching as clarifying concepts and imparting knowledge, but also a process of leadership and influence, and a good opportunity to mentor and inspire students through modelling or sharing of values, experiences, or thought processes."
	Pedagogical and Presentation Techniques	"I will definitely adopt and apply the rapport-building techniques introduced in my future classes."
		"Making tutorials on theoretical concepts a venue for teaching on methods of thinking about research claims."
		"Better discussion and presentation techniques."
	Teacher Motivation	"A more relaxed tone in teaching."
		"The parts about overcoming power distance and linking different threads to one or two take-home points was very good."
	Teacher Motivation	"Mostly feeling recharged to continue to teach passionately."
Recommendations for Improvement of PTAS	Time Management	"Better time management—not all issues proposed for discussion were addressed, but most were."
Suggestions for Future PTAS Activities and Initiatives	Extended Symposium Programme	"A whole day symposium please."
		"It would be helpful to have more time for discussions (perhaps starting in the morning)."
	Live Demonstrations, Role-Playing	"Make it a full day event. This allows more time for hands-on activities."
		"Have a session on role-playing or 5-minute presentations per group that then allows people to engage further with problems and solutions of TA interaction."
		"Demonstrations of how to teach a dry paper."
		"Role playing of how we would teach certain concepts."
	Experience-Specific Discussions	"Cluster those of similar years of experience together as a group (to further examine in detail the tips and challenges faced by TAs of various experience levels or stages of teaching maturity)."
	Lifelong Learning	"How to encourage and promote lifelong learning among psychology undergraduate students."
	Incorporating Students' Perspectives	"Take students' feedback (from perhaps the Psychology Society) on specific issues, problems, or features they want us to reflect on with respect to tutorials."

## Reflections

Based on the data gathered above, the PTAS positively impacted the GTAs who attended it. In general, attendees evaluated the PTAS 2014 positively, and thought that it was “personally relevant” and “highly engaging”. They liked the fact that the symposium promoted “exchanges of problems [*sic*] and ideas between panel members and attendees, created “[a] chance to connect with other TAs”, “didn’t merely impart teaching skills but also reminded [them] to reflect and leverage [on their] strengths”, contained “inspiring testimonials from the facilitators”, and provided “a refreshing reminder [that they too] can potentially impact and inspire students”. A participant “[felt] recharged to continue to teach passionately”.

The single drawback that was observed in this inaugural PTAS was that there were potentially many more topics and areas that could have been covered (although we must point out that the present scope of the session was commensurate with our goal for this session to be a pilot run). Indeed, this drawback was corroborated by sentiments from many participants who suggested having a full-day programme for future runs of the symposium. We believe that a variety of disciplines—beyond psychology—can organise similar symposiums to empower their teaching assistants. Moving ahead (two semesters after the GTAs have attended the PTAS), we intend to conduct focus group interviews with selected GTAs to keep track of how they have applied the skills and insights which they have gained from this PTAS, and how these have enhanced their teaching. The data will further assess the impact of the PTAS on GTAs’ teaching journeys. We are excited about having these conversations with our GTAs in the immediate future.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> The PTAS subcommittee comprises Assoc Prof Melvin Yap (Psychology Graduate Programme Coordinator and PTAS Advisor), Dr. Stephen Lim (PTAS Chair), Mr. Lee Li Neng (PTAS Co-Chair), and Ms. Sarah Wong (PTAS Secretariat).

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## About the Authors



*Mr. Lee Li Neng is currently a Teaching Assistant and also pursuing his Ph.D. in the Department of Psychology. He has won the FASS Graduate Students' Teaching Award several times and is currently on the Honour Roll. He is intrigued by education, how technology can interact and contribute to it, and especially the art of teaching. Specifically, he is interested in the question of how teaching can be mastered and passed on to other people.*



*Ms. Sarah Wong is a Teaching Assistant in the Department of Psychology. For her, teaching involves challenging and being challenged by students in a deeply enjoyable process of mutual learning. She continually seeks to inspire growth in her students, not just in the classroom but also in the bigger picture of life. Her postgraduate research focuses on developing pedagogical approaches and cognitive strategies towards enhancing young children's musical creativity.*



*Dr. Stephen Lim hails from the Dept of Psychology and strives to continue bringing life-transforming educational experiences to his students. As Assistant Dean (External Relations and Student Life) in the FASS and Executive Council Member of the NUS Teaching Academy, he contributes meaningfully towards student mentorship and development in and beyond the classroom. He is also the Founding Director of the Cognition Lab in his Dept, and continues to spearhead educational research projects.*