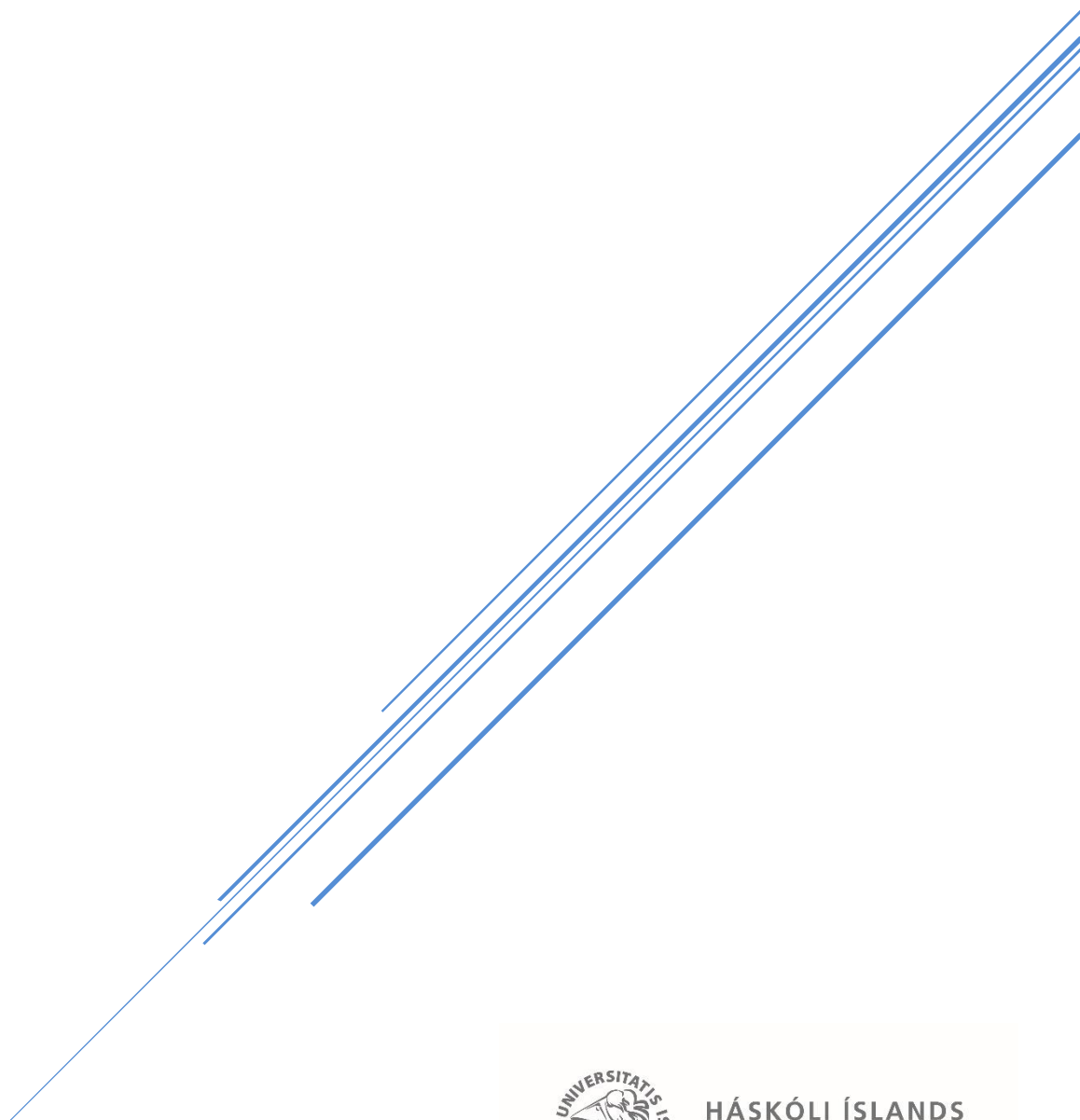


HANDBOOK FOR ASSISTANT TEACHERS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS
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On assistant teaching

The purpose of this handbook is to provide helpful advice to student assistant teachers regarding teaching and communication with teaching staff and students. Teaching is undeniably rewarding in and of itself, but experience as an assistant teacher may also carry weight when applying for postgraduate studies or academic positions.

Although an assistant teacher may not plan to pursue university teaching in the future, teaching can nevertheless provide valuable experience. It enhances knowledge and understanding in the academic field in question, as well as the ability to explain material to others. These skills will prove beneficial in any area of employment. You should try to factor in the following in order to promote successful assistant teaching:

- ✓ A meeting with the supervisory teacher and other assistant teachers at the beginning of the course in order to discuss the role of assistant teachers (e.g. with regards to working hours, responsibilities and required skills) and what they can expect from this opportunity.
- ✓ Regular meetings with the supervisory teacher and other assistant teachers in order to promote good communication, coordination and an overview of all aspects of the course.
- ✓ Balance between the assistant teacher's teaching work and other responsibilities.
- ✓ Feedback from the supervisory teacher.
- ✓ Assistance from the Centre for Teaching and Learning with evaluation and development of teaching.

Characteristics of a good assistant teacher

Preparation and organisation

Good organisation is important, whether with regards to discussion periods, reviewing course material or supervising practical classes. Material that has been used in previous courses can be an asset when preparing for another.

Knowledge

Assistant teachers must be knowledgeable in their fields and possess a solid understanding of the material for the course in question.

Skills

Assistant teachers must be able to verbally present information in an organised manner, explain complicated topics, create interesting examples and listen carefully when students ask questions.

Approachability

Students must find assistant teachers approachable. Assistant teachers should encourage students to email them with any queries, as well as staying around for a while after class to give students the chance to have an informal chat.

Concern for students

Students appreciate assistant teachers who they feel have their best interests at heart.

Good communication with the supervisory teacher

Regular, positive communication with the supervisory teacher and discussions on how the course is going from the perspectives of the students and the assistant teacher.

The first class

Before the first class, assistant teachers should meet with the supervisory teacher and review the following points, as well as any other issues that may arise.

- ✓ What are the assistant teacher's responsibilities?
- ✓ Does the assistant teacher have to attend lectures?
- ✓ When are the deadlines for assignments?
- ✓ Does the assistant teacher have access to a computer, photocopier and teaching material?
- ✓ Information on the syllabus and reading material.
- ✓ Available work facilities.
- ✓ When are classes and office hours?
- ✓ How is the classroom equipped? Is there any technical equipment which the assistant teacher needs to learn to operate? Who should the assistant teacher contact with any questions?

Nervousness

- ✓ If you are very nervous, it may be a good idea to practice before the class.
- ✓ Nervousness can cause you to speak faster and less precisely – take particular care to speak slowly and clearly and not to lose sight of the main points.
- ✓ Bear in mind that you know a lot more about the course material than the students do.

To start off

- ✓ Introduce yourself and tell the students a bit about yourself.

- ✓ Explain why you are teaching on the course and what it is about the subject that interests you.
- ✓ Have the students introduce themselves and tell the class a bit about themselves, e.g. where they are from or why they chose this course/subject. Such introductions help the teacher to learn the students' names and encourage a positive atmosphere.
- ✓ In the first class it is important to explain the role of an assistant teacher and give the students practical information.
- ✓ It is also important to make students aware of the structure and content of the course.
- ✓ Explain which parts of the course and assessment you are responsible for.

A good atmosphere

- ✓ Show the students that you see them as individuals and that you care about them.
- ✓ A good way to achieve this is to learn the students' names as soon as possible.
- ✓ Icebreakers are a good way to bring the group together and give the students an opportunity to get to know one another.

Other

- ✓ Describe the course requirements and how the course will be assessed.
- ✓ Explain your expectations and goals and what you expect of the students.
- ✓ You may perhaps also mention various boundaries that you wish to set, e.g. regarding the response to students arriving late to class or missing deadlines for assignments.

- ✓ Discuss academic integrity and inform the students of the University's disciplinary sanctions for cheating and plagiarism.
- ✓ Emphasise that your role is to help and advise students.

At the end of class

- ✓ Finish the class on time.
- ✓ Stay around whilst students pack their things away and give them the chance to ask questions.

Review what happened in the first class

- ✓ How well did you explain the key points?
- ✓ Is there anything in particular that you need to find out or learn before the next class?
- ✓ It can be useful to discuss the first class and your thoughts on it with other assistant teachers or the supervisory teacher.

Icebreakers

Icebreakers are important for fostering camaraderie and improving the atmosphere in the classroom. They don't have to take long and may even fit into the course. Below are a few icebreakers that can have a positive effect on the atmosphere in the classroom.

1. Students talk together in pairs and then introduce each other to the class. You might suggest that they find out each others' favourite food, music or sport, etc.
2. To find out more information about the class, you might for example ask the students where they are from, whether they have studied the subject before and what they most want to get out of the course.
3. Two truths and one lie. Each student tells the class three things about themselves, one of which is untrue. The other students try to guess which statement is a lie. This is a very good icebreaker that can tell you a lot about the students, even though it's not all true.
4. The name game. The students are given a moment to think about their names – whether they are named after anybody, what their name means and so on. They then tell the class the story of their name, making it easier for the group to remember what everyone is called.

Information on more icebreakers can be found, for example, on <http://www.icebreakers.ws/>.

Active student participation in class

It is important that students actively participate in class in order to enhance their understanding and improve their performance. There are many simple methods which can be used to break up lessons and encourage the students to actively participate.

- Ask questions about material that you know the students have something to say about.
- Begin each class with a question related to its subject matter. Allow the students to influence the choice of discussion topic.
- Have the students present parts of the material.
- Group discussions – students discuss a certain topic in small groups and then share their conclusions or ideas with the whole class.
- One, two, everyone – students each consider a certain topic, then share their views with the person sitting next to them, and finally with the whole class.
- Arrive punctually and provide the opportunity for an informal chat as the students come in.
- Fun! Jokes! Role playing! Anything that might engage the group!
- Pave the way for debates, have students present arguments from opposing view points.
- Short written exercises to help the students better remember what they have learnt.

Discussion periods

During discussion periods teachers generally have a relatively small group of students that they come to influence and know well.

Many assistant teachers find the quantity of material to be covered in each discussion period overwhelming. They sometimes even end up reading the material only a few days before the students or working as assistant teachers on undergraduate courses that they have recently completed themselves. Assistant teachers must prepare well, talk to their colleagues, attend lectures on the course even if the supervisory teacher does not ask them to do so, discuss the supervisory teacher's expectations for discussion periods and be absolutely certain of the key points of the course and how these should be handled in discussion periods.

Generally, student attendance, participation and even their expressions or body language will give you an indication of how the discussions are going. It is a good idea to get the students' opinions on the matter, both informally and formally (e.g. with a mid-semester review or group review). Discussions which appear to be getting off track can be steered back again by simply asking the students how they think that their time would be best used in class. It is not a sign of weakness to admit that things aren't going as well as they should. On the contrary, it is a good reason to ask the students what they are genuinely interested in and what would make class more exciting. Students respond positively to signs that the assistant teacher cares about their opinions and wants them to succeed.

Leading discussion groups

Attitude

- ✓ One of the most important factors in successful group work is the personal approach of the teacher; the teacher's attitude can affect the group's teamwork and participation as well as the quality of the discussion. The attitude of a good teacher indicates expectation, passionate interest, self-confidence and last but not least respect for the students and the subject.
- ✓ The key to a good, productive group discussion is the mutual communication within the group.
- ✓ Make sure that everyone understands the purpose of the work, what is expected of the students and what the students can expect of the teacher.

Trust

- ✓ In order for group work to be as successful as possible, you must create an atmosphere characterised by trust between the teacher and students and amongst the student group. A good teacher is open to the students' ideas, listens to them carefully, encourages them and guides them with regards to their contributions to the discussion.
- ✓ The teacher should lead discussions in such a way that everyone has an equal opportunity to speak, as well as ensuring that the students do not get off topic and that errors are corrected immediately.

Preparation

- ✓ Begin the class with a review by asking questions about the material.

- ✓ Familiarise yourself with the material and expect to answer factual questions. As you prepare, keep in mind: a) which points are particularly useful for the group, b) what is the critical information, c) the purpose and/or learning outcomes for each discussion period.
- ✓ Arrange the furniture in the classroom such that students can participate equally in the discussion and that small groups can easily move around the room if so required.

Problems with participation

- ✓ Silent students – one way to get them to come out of their shells is to divide the group into smaller groups. It may be easier for them to express themselves in a smaller group.
- ✓ Students who talk too much – you can ask students who talk more than their fair share to send you questions by email so that more students get a chance to speak up.
- ✓ A lull in the discussion – wait a few minutes and give the students a chance to digest the information. If you have fully covered the discussion topic before the end of class, you might ask the students if there is anything else they want to talk about or give them time to ask questions.

Finally

- ✓ Respect the students' points of view even if you disagree.
- ✓ Don't interrupt a student who has starting speaking.
- ✓ Make sure that everyone gets a chance to speak.

- ✓ Ask for clarification if answers are unclear.
- ✓ Endeavour to provide constructive feedback and encouragement.
- ✓ Emphasise establishing confidence and trust within the group.
- ✓ Be open and ready to share your own experience with the students.
- ✓ It is important to sum up the conclusions of the discussion at the end of class.

The role of questions in a general discussion

Questions are the simplest interactive teaching tool, especially in large groups, and can be used in any subject. They can encourage active learning and measure students' interest and understanding. Ask questions right from the start of the course and thereby let the students know that you expect them to actively participate.

You can use questions to shape discussions, liven them up or give them more depth by directing the students' attention to certain topics or points. You can also use questions to encourage reserved students to participate in the discussion, thereby promoting general participation.

Prepare questions before class (this makes it easier to organise your lesson).

Decide when you are going to ask the questions. Ask questions early on in the lesson in order to pique students' interest and gauge their knowledge, in the middle of the lesson to break up a lecture and at the end to review the main ideas that have been discussed and provoke new ideas.

Ask varied questions: questions that gauge knowledge, demand explanations or definitions, or challenge accepted conclusions or perspectives.

Leave a pause between the question and answer (a short pause gives the students a chance to consider the possibilities, and if the first person to raise their hand is not chosen this encourages less forward students to answer).

Repeat the answer so the whole group can hear, or write it on the board.

You can also take a short break in your lecture and give the students one or two minutes to answer a certain question in writing. Then you can ask them to discuss the question and their answers amongst themselves, in pairs or larger groups. By producing a written answer first, everyone has a chance to think about the question and answer it. This leads to more students actively participating.

Walk around the classroom and pay attention to the students' expressions. Avoid focusing solely on those who answer questions.

Keep in mind

- ✓ Only ask one question at once.
- ✓ It is a good idea to ask varied questions, since the student group is probably also varied and individuals learn in many different ways.
- ✓ Wait for answers. Students need time to think and formulate their answers.
- ✓ Use many different sorts of questions: factual questions, questions that don't necessarily have a right or wrong answer, questions that build on previous answers from students and

questions that require the students to analyse something in more detail.

Difficult questions from students

- ✓ Questions that are hard to understand. Ask the student to repeat or rephrase the question. Be careful not to imply that you find the question stupid.
- ✓ Irrelevant questions. If such questions relate to material that will be covered later in the course, you can tell the student when to expect an answer. Otherwise you must evaluate whether you have time and a reason to answer.
- ✓ Questions that you cannot answer. There is no need to be ashamed if you don't know the answer to a question. Check whether the other students know the answer or offer to find out before the next class.

Questions that belittle the assistant teacher's knowledge or are antagonistic in some way

- ✓ Stay calm! Give the student as honest and reasonable answer as possible.
- ✓ Politely decline to get into an argument with the student.
- ✓ Offer to answer the question outside of class time, for example during office hours.
- ✓ Explain your position and what it involves in a composed manner. Remind the student that complaints should be directed to the supervisory teacher, head of faculty or another person in a senior position.

The laboratory

Special responsibilities come with teaching in a laboratory. As well as organising activities, you must ensure the safety of everyone in the room. In an emergency situation, the students will rely on the directions of the assistant teacher.

Assistant teachers must be very familiar with the response protocol for fires, accidents and other incidents that could threaten the lives or health of those present. Indeed, this applies in any classroom.

Preparation for teaching in a laboratory

- ✓ Meetings with the supervisory teacher and other assistant teachers in order to coordinate the preparation and review of teaching.
- ✓ The laboratory's layout and equipment.
- ✓ Health and safety. Where is the first aid kit, basic first aid, how can you get help in an emergency?

Preparation for class

- ✓ Familiarise yourself with the purpose and aims of the experiment so there is no doubt about what the students are supposed to be learning.
- ✓ Review the procedure in the laboratory before the class.
- ✓ Be prepared for the possibility that the experiment won't go to plan. It isn't a bad idea to start with brainstorming things that could cause the experiment to go wrong.

Good organisation is vital if things are to go according to plan

- ✓ Teachers must themselves, well in advance, conduct the experiments that students will have to do. Students will encounter various difficulties, even with well-organised experiments – both the

students and the teacher will benefit from the teacher getting to know the tricky points in the experiment.

- ✓ Before class begins, you must ensure that the laboratory is fully set up for the experiment and that the equipment and materials required are available.

The first class in a laboratory

- ✓ Explain what reports should involve and what format they should be in. Inform students about course assessment, deadlines and disciplinary sanctions for late submissions. Students should also receive this information in writing, or it should be available on the course website.
- ✓ Explain how work in the laboratory will be assessed and how it relates to other parts of the course.
- ✓ Discuss academic integrity, collaboration, plagiarism and so forth.
- ✓ The use and treatment of equipment that will be used in the laboratory.
- ✓ Health and safety regulations and preventative measures.

In the laboratory

- ✓ Explain the value of the experiment, as well as the method, time management, health and safety issues and so forth.
- ✓ Create a checklist including the most important elements that the students are expected to grasp in the experiment.
- ✓ Check whether the students want to ask any questions before starting the experiment.
- ✓ Walk around the room and monitor the students carefully. If their results are not as expected, you should reassure

them and ask them to think about what went wrong.

- ✓ Conclude each class by summing up the most important results of the experiments.
- ✓ Make sure that students leave the room clean and that they tidy up tools and equipment, leaving everything in optimal condition.
- ✓ Go over everything at the end: turn things off, close cupboards, check the ventilation, taps and so forth. Close up the laboratory. Go over the checklist or instructions for cleaning up the room if such a document is available.

Revision with students

Revision involves quickly covering material that has already been discussed, presenting it in an easily understandable manner for students who are struggling with the course material whilst not boring those who are doing better.

To organise successful revision, you need to know which points the supervisory teacher believes that students need to understand well in order to be successful in the course. To ensure that you do, you should attend lectures and get notes if you miss one. Regular meetings with the supervisory teacher and other assistant teachers, as well as old exam papers and assignments can all help with organisation and planning.

You must identify the most important points since it is not possible to revise all material in detail. You must choose between rushing through all the material in a somewhat superficial manner, or going over certain parts in more depth.

It is important to watch to see whether the students understand what is going on. Use plenty of examples to add emphasis and ask the students to come up with their own examples. Give the students a short task to be completed whilst the revision is in progress. Give the students time to think after asking questions or ask them to get into pairs and discuss the problem or question for a few minutes.

It is a good idea to ask students to send any questions by email before the revision period so that it can be best organised to meet their needs.

Services for assistant teachers at the Centre for Teaching and Learning

Courses

Assistant teachers may take courses at the Centre for Teaching and Learning. Some schools run special courses for assistant teachers and tutorial leaders in collaboration with the Centre for Teaching and Learning.

Advice

Centre for Teaching and Learning personnel can provide advice, e.g. with regards to teaching methods or if the teacher is having difficulties with teaching for whatever reason. An adviser from the Centre for Teaching and Learning can sit in on a class or have it recorded and then suggest certain improvements that you can make.

Recordings

One of the most effective ways to evaluate and improve your teaching is to listen to or watch yourself teaching. Teachers can also record

sound and screen shots from the teaching computer using Panopto and save it onto their computer. Instructions for using Panopto can be found on the Centre for Teaching and Learning website, www.kemst.hi.is.

Evaluation of teaching

The Centre for Teaching and Learning can implement a teaching evaluation in the middle of the semester, either using the K2 survey system in Ugla or by conducting a survey during class.

Books on teaching

You can find various books on teaching at the university level, diverse teaching methods, course assessment and so forth in the Centre for Teaching and Learning. The School of Education library at Stakkahlíð also contains many works on teaching at all school levels.