Imagine you are a teaching fellow (TF), one of several TFs supporting a large undergraduate course in global health. You have carefully crafted your teaching plan and handouts, and told students what to expect in today’s section. But then, crossing the Yard a few moments before section starts, you see an urgent email from the professor, telling you to focus the hour instead on a completely different topic. What do you do?

This scenario (it happens) was one of several challenges that Dr. David Jones, the A. Bernard Ackerman Professor of the Culture of Medicine, posed at an August 26 workshop for TFs of global health-related undergraduate courses. Co-sponsored by the Harvard Global Health Institute (HGHI) and the Derek Bok Center for Teaching & Learning, and facilitated by Cherie Ramirez, PhD, Curriculum Fellow at HGHI, and Joseph Lee, the Global Health Departmental Teaching Fellow, the workshop gave new and veteran TFs the chance to hear from students, faculty, and each other about strategies for introducing students to global health concepts in section.

“Students interested in global health have no idea how to make it into a career,” said Akanksha Sharma, one of several undergraduate panelists who provided their perspectives on what helps (and hinders) learning. Sharma, who worked in Tanzania this summer and is pursuing a joint degree in Sociology and History & Science with a Secondary Field in Global Health and Health Policy, said she spent her first three years at Harvard assuming she had to go to medical school, a common misconception since so many global health “stars” are physicians. TFs can help undergraduates envision more broadly across both health and non–health disciplines, panelists agreed, by sharing their own stories and connecting opportunities with a student’s interests.

The best TFs, said students, are those who really care about what undergraduates want to get out of the class. As the first section sets the tone, start early on building social capital, lowering communication access barriers, enduring awkward silences, and making handouts appealing. The Harvard Global Health Institute and the Bok Center also offer a range of learning tools and resources for students as well as teaching fellows who seek to encourage these connections, said Ramirez.

Above all, be clear. “Set expectations,” said Sheila Ojeaburu, a third–year Neurobiology concentrator. “And if you say it, do it.”
Consistent grading is a big challenge for all TFs, said Dr. James Herron, Director of the Harvard Writing Project, part of the Harvard College Writing Program, who led the workshop discussion on fair and consistent evaluation standards. While the "artfully constructed vacuous essay" may glitter in contrast to a clear-thinking freshman's first attempt at critical thinking and correct grammar, TFs should be wary of confusing content with style when grading, he emphasized. Herron refers to grading as "an exercise in restraint," recommending that TFs provide feedback in a manner and quantity that directs students' attention to the most critical areas of strength or weakness in the paper.

And how to work with faculty to get sections "right"? Regular teaching team meetings are essential, said Jones. "Good teaching requires advance preparation; just as a TF wouldn't ask the professor to change the lecture topic at the last minute, a professor shouldn't ask TFs to reinvent a section plan at the last minute," he emphasizes. "TFs and professors are both part of a team in the service of students, and both need to do what they can to help the other be most effective."

"In global health courses, both the professors and the TFs really care," concluded Sharma; "They not only love their subject; they also love to teach." Florin-Stefan Morar, a PhD candidate in the History of Science, agreed as he packed up his bags at the end of the workshop: "I will try very hard to make my first section a success!"

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A sampling of global health courses

The Global Health and Health Policy Secondary Field

Photos, from top: (1) Joseph Lee (far right), global health teaching fellow, leads into discussion with the undergraduate panelists (l-r): Brandon Liu, Khin-Kyemon Aung, Sheila Ojaeburu, and Akanksha Sharma; (2) Undergraduate panelists Khin-Kyemon Aung and Sheila Ojaeburu share undergraduate perspectives on effective learning; (3) History of Science Professor, David Jones, offers tools and tips for building an effective section plan; (4) TFs enjoy the discussion (l-r): Shanshan Li (HSPH Departments of Epidemiology and Nutrition affiliate), April Opoliner (Lead Developer for SW25's HarvardX course), Andrew Ong (Anthropology graduate student and SW25 TF), and Dr. Maryam Farvid (HSPH Visiting Scientist in Nutrition); (5) Dr. Cherie Ramirez, HGHI Curriculum Fellow, listens to discussion. All photos by S.R. Holman