



UNIS
The University Centre in Svalbard



Teaching Manual for Field Assistants

Based on The UNIS Field TA Academy

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This is the first edition of this manual. It is intended as a living document, to be updated and expanded over time as new case studies are developed and feedback from teaching assistants and course responsables is gathered.

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Teaching Manual for Field Assistants at UNIS

Overview

Conducting educational fieldwork in the natural sciences is often a demanding task, particularly in the Arctic; for many students it is also a new experience. However, fieldwork has a high potential to add great value to conventional classroom lectures and lab work. Alongside the course responsible and students in the field, typically one or several teaching assistants (TAs) are involved in a given course. An important task for these assistants is to contribute towards the best possible learning environment for the students through a range of practical and theoretical tasks. However, they seldom receive formal training in their tasks, and much is learned simply by doing and or by informal knowledge transfer from, for example, more senior students and the course responsible. This shortcoming was addressed by a 3-day course held for the first time at UNIS (University Centre in Svalbard) during spring 2021 and subsequently in 2022. In 2024 and 2025 the course was extended to 5 days.

“The course was very much needed to prepare me for my teaching duties as part of my PhD. It was tailored to teaching in general, but also with respect to teaching in the field on Svalbard. The tips and tricks given from the lecturer about their experiences teaching here at UNIS were super helpful and something you wouldn’t get from a ‘normal’ teaching assistant course. I feel the course was a good base but could also be even longer over a week or two.”

– Christine Lockwood-Ireland, PhD student at UNIS

The course, titled ‘The UNIS Field TA Academy’, covers the following topics: introduction to pedagogical theory and teaching; feedback and feedback culture; group work; conflict resolution; diversity, equity, and inclusion; and field learning. This manual is a summary of the course topics and is expanded based on feedback from former field TAs, students, and course responsables.

Survey

We are continuously working to improve this manual and TA support at UNIS. If you have experience as a TA, we would appreciate your feedback — whether during or after your contract. We also welcome feedback from TAs from other institutions in and outside of Norway. A short anonymous feedback form is available here:

[TA Feedback Survey](#)

Your input may directly shape future editions of this manual.

Resources

All TA resources, including the latest version of this manual, the field checklist and a list of additional case studies, are available in the shared UNIS TA folder:

[Resources folder](#)

The folder is publicly accessible and will be updated as new material is added.

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Pedagogy

The UNIS Field TA Academy starts with an introduction to higher education pedagogy where teaching assistants (TAs) learn about the theoretical background to teaching and learning. This part of the course also includes strategies for engaging teaching practices, active learning, and lesson planning.

Group Work

Group work is an important and effective learning method¹ and a widely used collaborative approach to learning in higher education^{2,3}. All courses at UNIS include group work in some capacity, encouraging students to collaborate on shared assignments or projects. This collaboration might involve two individuals tackling a brief exercise or a larger team working on a more complex, graded project where teachers and TAs (teaching assistants) often function as facilitators. Working together in group work helps students sharpen their communication and problem-solving skills³, abilities they'll need for scientific fieldwork and furthermore in professional life.

However, collaboration can also be a challenging exercise for students. In multicultural settings, such as the one at UNIS with over 50 nationalities of students, it is important to take into account the variety of communication skills, behavioural patterns and intercultural competence students are bringing in⁴. When working in groups, students often experience difficulties with some students not contributing to the group work (free-riders)⁵, challenges connected to interpersonal conflicts, disagreement about project goals or unclear or missing instructions from teachers when conducting group work. Previous negative experiences with group work can also result in students being reluctant to participate in it, reinforcing negative dynamics within groups.

To keep in mind and be aware that students often have some struggles with group work is therefore important for group facilitators. Group work frustrations typically become very clear under high work pressure, for example during the final stage when the students have to submit a product. At this point, it is often too late to adjust the ongoing processes and project work. Being attentive to the non-verbal and verbal behaviour from the start of the group and responding to it appropriately through facilitation and support, is crucial⁶. Sometimes student groups solely need some extra follow up to better understand the topic they are working on. This can encompass clarifying the goals and hypothesis thus easing their feeling of stress. Challenges can also be more interpersonal.

¹ AAC&U. (2023), "High-Impact Practices," American Association of Colleges and Universities. [https://www.aacu.org/trending-topics/high-impact\(open in a new window\)](https://www.aacu.org/trending-topics/high-impact(open in a new window)).

² Wilson, K. J., Brickman, P., & Brame, C. J. (2018). *Group work*. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 17(1), fe1. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.17-12-0258>

³ Colbeck, C. L., Campbell, S. E., & Bjorklund, S. A. (2000). *Grouping in the dark*. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 71(1), 60–83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2000.11780816>

⁴ Popov, V., Brinkman, D., Biemans, H. J. A., Mulder, M., Kuznetsov, A., & Noroozi, O. (2012). Multicultural student group work in higher education: An explorative case study on challenges as perceived by students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 36(2), 302–317. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.09.005>

⁵ Hall, D., & Buzwell, S. (2013). *The problem of free-riding in group projects: Looking beyond social loafing as a reason for non-contribution*. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 14(1), 37–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787412467123>

⁶ Brown, M., & Jarldorn, M. (2024). *Overcoming fear of conflict in group work: Reflections from practice and teaching*. *Social Work with Groups*, 47(1), 79–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2023.2220115>

Students may need help setting the overall goals for the group work. This can for instance involve agreements on which grade the group aims to achieve. If the level of conflict rises in group work, the ultimate consequence may be to split the group and the project, so that those involved in the conflict no longer work on the same project.

In the process of introducing group work as a learning method for students, it is vital not to assume that students automatically know how to work effectively in groups. They will need some supervision, guidelines and tools to help them to foster and develop productive group work⁷. Underneath is a list of suggestions on how to proceed with group work.

- 1) Start by explaining the concept of group work for students to create a shared understanding for the learning method. You can also ask students to share their experiences with group work, including both positive and negative aspects. This can help create more openness and a better understanding of both the benefits and the more challenging sides of working in groups but also help students define guidelines for how to proceed with group work. In this initial phase it is also good to bring forward the message that even when group work is challenging and feels less efficient than working alone, the collaborative approach is similar to what they will find in everyday working life where they have to manage to work with others. Training for collaboration and developing skills is therefore an important preparation for professional life.
- 2) Assign different roles to student members within the group⁸. This can help the students to understand their responsibilities and keep the team organized. The structure prevents confusion, holds each person accountable and provides opportunities for every student to engage and develop skills. Some examples of group roles include:
 - Project leader: responsible for coordinating the group's work
 - Data manager: ensures that all data are organized and accessible. To be a data manager is not the same as being responsible for the statistical analysis of data
 - Secretary: takes notes during meetings and keeps written records
 - Logistics person: organizes equipment, materials and clean up

It is important to remember that even if students are assigned different roles, it does not mean that those in different roles should not learn how e.g., the data should be organised or know how to find, use, or take care of, the equipment. Having a person in charge of a specific task also involves delegating part of this work to others in the group and assuring that the work is done. Further, all students should be able to understand and present the project at the end, regardless of their role.

For TAs, these different student roles can also simplify organisation on an overall level as you as a TA can call out e.g., all logistics persons come to collect field equipment when packing for a cruise. Or you can meet up with all project leaders to get a view of the status and practical challenges within the groups.

⁷ Sousa, M., & Rodrigues, J. (2025). *Group contract: A boost for commitment and effectiveness in collaborative learning* [Conference paper]. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14982986>

⁸ [Team Roles and Group Contracts – Essential Communication Skills: Mohawk College \(pressbooks.pub\)](#)

3) Make the student group create and sign a group contract^{7,9}. A group contract is a document created by all group members to formalise and clarify each person's expectations, roles, and responsibilities. Group contracts at UNIS have been utilized in Arctic Biology (AB) courses since 2015. They help students identify mutual goals, communicate effectively, and divide work tasks⁶. A group contract could include following points:

- Names of the group members and a place for each member to sign the contract
- Agreement on a common goal for the group (if possible) – what are the expectation for the final work and how much work are the members willing to contribute with
- Assignment of specific tasks – who should do what
- Practical meeting rules– when to meet, duration of meetings, who should be at the meetings, how to communicate between meetings
- How the group addresses challenges when conflicts arise - what to do then. This paragraph could include how to raise concerns early, what steps to take if agreements are not followed and when to reach out for external help

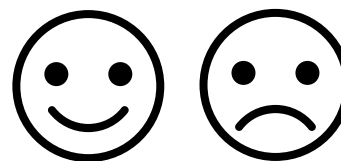
A closer description of team roles and groups contracts with concrete templates can be found within these resources:

- [Making Group Contracts | Centre for Teaching Excellence | University of Waterloo \(uwaterloo.ca\)](https://teachingexcellence.ca/making-group-contracts/)
- [Team Roles and Group Contracts – Essential Communication Skills: Mohawk College \(pressbooks.pub\)](https://pressbooks.pub/teamrolesandgroupcontracts/)

⁹ [Making Group Contracts | Centre for Teaching Excellence | University of Waterloo \(uwaterloo.ca\)](https://teachingexcellence.ca/making-group-contracts/)

Feedback & Feedback Culture ^{10,11,12}

Feedback at UNIS isn't about one-sided evaluation; it's about guiding growth and reinforcing strengths. Students will receive formative feedback throughout a project, either orally or in writing, except for selected projects where summative feedback is reserved until grading. Throughout, striking a balance is important, between content (what the students say) and presentation (how they say it).



Good feedback is specific and objective. Take the time to plan your feedback

Qualities of Effective Feedback

Think of feedback as a compass guiding students towards the next step, rather than telling them where they went wrong. We use seven elements of effective feedback:

- **Be specific:** Give specific examples how to improve rather than generalisations
- **Accurate:** Use facts and aim for clarity
- **Objective:** Aim for neutrality, be unbiased and unprejudiced
- **Timely:** As soon as possible
- **Usable:** Connected to learning goals and giving a clear path for improvement
- **Welcomed by receiver:** See yourself as an advisor, you can give feedback but be aware that not everyone may seek feedback at a given point in time
- **Checked for Understanding:** Clarify understanding with the student, e.g., ask short follow-up questions to make sure the student has understood what is desired; encourage questions; ask students for feedback on teacher's comments

Choosing the right Approach

Establishing a positive feedback culture begins on day one. The student-faculty relationship plays an important role in student learning^{13,14} and creating an atmosphere of psychological safety is thus extremely important¹⁵. At the beginning of the course, make it clear how you wish students and teachers to communicate with each other, and that questions can be asked without judgement.

¹⁰ [Giving effective feedback | Centre for Teaching and Learning](#)

¹¹ [Seven Keys to Effective Feedback](#)

¹² [ERIC - EJ1002434 - Seven Keys to Effective Feedback, Educational Leadership, 2012-Sep.](#)

¹³ Hattie, J. (2008) Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement, 1 edn. Routledge, London.

¹⁴ Rusticus, S.A., Pashootan, T. & Mah, A. (2023) What are the key elements of a positive learning environment? Perspectives from students and faculty. Learning Environments Research, 26, 161-175. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10984-022-09410-4>

¹⁵ Sætren, G., Stenhammer, H., Doornich, J.B., Soernes, J. & Saghafian, M. (2022) Psychological safety in crisis preparedness and management training context. Proceedings of the 32nd European Safety and Reliability Conference (ESREL 2022). Research Publishing Services.

Neither students nor teachers should be afraid of critical feedback, and the atmosphere should be open and mutually trustful¹⁸. In addition to mutual trust, good communication and feedback is of high importance¹⁶. Therefore, at the beginning of each course, include sessions on how to give (oral) feedback.

Note that especially in oral feedback situations, the use of an open, encouraging language is important. Using “I” statements (e.g., “I noticed...” or “I wonder if we could try...”) keeps the focus on ideas while accusatory “you” messages can cause conflict. A practical setting for encouraging a feedback culture could be aboard a cruise. For example, a daily debrief round asking reflective questions can support a feedback culture: “What was the most important thing you learned today?” or “What impressed you most?”.

Written feedback is also a common feedback form and used for written assignments. It allows for more detail and gives students a record they can revisit. Both forms can also co-exist, e.g., written feedback can also form the preparational base for an oral feedback situation (discussion) between students and teachers. Whether it’s one-on-one or in a group, remain mindful of the differences in cultural backgrounds and past experiences. By fostering a supportive environment, you can ensure that feedback - no matter how it is delivered - remains a constructive tool for growth rather than a source of tension.

Common Pitfall	Better Alternative
“You never do this right.”	“Here’s what I’ve noticed and how it might be improved.”
Vague “good job” with no specifics.	“Your opening paragraph presents a structured and persuasive argument on ...(e.g., how plant growth relates to summer climate) - well done!”
Waiting too long to address big issues.	Offering feedback early in the process so students can adjust before final stages.

The Role of TAs

You’re not just a grader - you are a community builder and mentor. Regular check-ins, even a quick “How’s everyone doing on this assignment?” can reassure students they’re supported. By making feedback timely, it allows students to refine their approach before investing too much time in less productive directions. Showing care, presence and cultural inclusivity encourages students to seek help early and be more receptive to guidance.

¹⁶ Carless, D. (2013). Sustainable feedback and the development of student self-evaluative capacities. In S. Merry, M. Price, D. Carless, & M. Taras (Eds.), *Reconceptualising feedback in higher education: Developing dialogue with students* (pp. 113–122). Routledge.

Planning your Feedback Steps

Feedback should be planned, taking into account how many feedback steps are appropriate for the project. Focusing feedback on structure and content is more important than commenting on grammar and language ('presentation', see points below). Often, the course responsible will have a guideline which may look somewhat like the following (example from a biology course):

- Introduction:
 - What is the objective and relevance of the study?
 - Do paragraphs follow a logical order?
 - What are the hypotheses? Are they specific and testable?
 - What is missing?
- Methods:
 - Is the method, *What* and *How*, properly described (is the study reproducible)?
 - Does the chosen approach answer the hypothesis?
- Results:
 - Is the data analysis appropriate?
 - Is there any logical flaw in the appearance of the results?
 - Are appropriate results shown? Are data missing that should be there?
- Discussion:
 - Is the work set into context?
 - Are sources of errors addressed?
- Presentation:
 - Are the grammar and language correct?
 - Is the paper easy to read?
 - Are the figures large enough and correctly labelled?

Ultimately, feedback is a conversation - one that evolves with the students and the project. Strive to guide students toward a deeper understanding with clear communication, empathy and a commitment to ongoing dialogue, rather than as a series of checkpoints. Remember that a strong feedback culture benefits everyone, students feel supported, instructors see more engaged learners and the course community as a whole flourish.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict in the Learning Environment

Conflict often emerges due to differences in aspects such as values, perceptions, or motivations¹⁷. These differences can be substantial, but may also be minor. In any classroom or field setting, such differences can become amplified by the pressures and demands of academic work^{18,19}. Conflict can arise between course instructors, TAs, and students, as well as within these groups (e.g., between students in a class). It operates on a continuum, from relatively acceptable (often smaller) disagreements to clearly unacceptable behaviours such as racism, discrimination, or other forms of harm; the latter behaviours must never be tolerated²⁰. Unfortunately, negative behaviours can spread, potentially exacerbating existing tensions if left unaddressed. In this regard, disagreements and clashes are also detrimental to learning²¹.

It is important to distinguish between conflicts that a TA can manage independently versus those that require input from the course responsible²². Minor issues, such as misunderstandings, low-level disruptions, or group dynamics, can often be addressed directly, whereas more serious situations (e.g., harassment, discrimination, frequent disruptive behaviour) need to be reported to the course responsible or appropriate support services. **If in doubt, speak to the course responsible.**

Precursors to Conflict

Several factors can spark conflict in the learning environment²³. Some conflicts spring from procedural factors, where rules or guidelines are questioned. Others emerge from practicality, e.g., a student challenging instructions. Power struggles may occur when someone attempts to dominate the learning environment. Evaluation in particular can cause tensions, for instance when students feel upset about, or disagree with, grades on assessments. Conflicts can occur among peers or affect teachers, involving TAs and course responsables. Regardless of the type, when challenges collide with the strain of coursework (or life, in general), emotions may arise, which in turn may trigger conflict²⁴.

¹⁷ Kantek, F., & Gezer, N. (2009). Conflict in schools: Student nurses' conflict management styles. *Nurse education today*, 29(1), 100-107. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2008.07.007>.

¹⁸ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/conflict>

¹⁹ Murphy, K. (2010). Is my teaching disturbing you? Strategies for addressing disruptive behaviors in the college classroom. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 81(6), 33-44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2010.10598489>

²⁰ Gruber, S. (2015). Ideologies in online learning environments: The need for multiple stories. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 13(4), 39-53.

²¹ Järvenoja, H., Näykki, P., & Törmänen, T. (2019). Emotional regulation in collaborative learning: When do higher education students active group level regulation in the face of challenges. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(10), 1747-1757.

²² <https://teach-learn.ca/2022/02/28/dealing-with-conflict-as-a-gata/>

²³ Rounds (2017) [Classroom-Security-3.pdf](#)

²⁴ Wass, R., Timmermans, J., Harland, T., & McLean, A. (2020). Annoyance and frustration: Emotional responses to being assessed in higher education. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 21(3), 189–201. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787418762462>

Pressures, Emotions, and the Opportunity for Growth

Outside pressures follow students and teachers into the classroom and academic environment. These pressures may be personal, socio-emotional, cognitive, motivational, or systemic in nature. Such factors can shape how individuals interpret and respond to conflict. When these pressures build, emotions can intensify. Yet conflict itself does not have to be negative. When students are supported in navigating disagreement constructively, it can become a pathway to deeper, higher-order learning. For example, having a respectful, inclusive in-class debate encourages them to express concerns, find common ground, and work collaboratively. This promotes stronger engagement and the development of essential skills²⁵.

The way you handle both your own emotions and those of your students can either calm tensions and support growth, or intensify conflict and disrupt learning.

Managing Conflict: Roles, Responsibilities and Styles

In most cases, conflicts are best addressed directly by the people involved. At times, a mediator can play a helpful role by facilitating dialogue and guiding participants toward a constructive resolution²⁶. Whether you are part of the conflict or supporting others through it, there are distinct roles and responsibilities to consider. Many conflict-management frameworks describe five core styles, often mapped along a spectrum of assertiveness and cooperation²⁷.

Understanding your own default approach, as well as recognising other styles, allows you to respond more intentionally and flexibly. No single style is inherently “good” or “bad”; each has advantages and limitations depending on the context, urgency, and power dynamics at play. **Regardless of the approach, effective conflict management is grounded in trust, respect, accountability, and care.**

Friedrich Glasl’s model of conflict resolution²⁸ describes conflict as a process that escalates through nine stages (Fig. 1), grouped into three phases: win–win (differences and tension), win–lose (increasing polarization and competition), and lose–lose (destructive conflict where all parties suffer). As conflict escalates, communication breaks down and interventions must shift from facilitation and mediation to more formal measures.

²⁵ Aimeur, E., Frasson, C., & Lalonde, M. (2001). The role of conflicts in the learning process. *ACM SIGCUE Outlook*, 27(2), 12-27.

²⁶ [Managing Conflict - Graduate Assistant Handbook](#)

²⁷ <https://www.usip.org/public-education-new/conflict-styles-assessment>

²⁸ Glasl, F. (1999). *Confronting conflict: A first-aid kit for handling conflict*. Hawthorn Press.

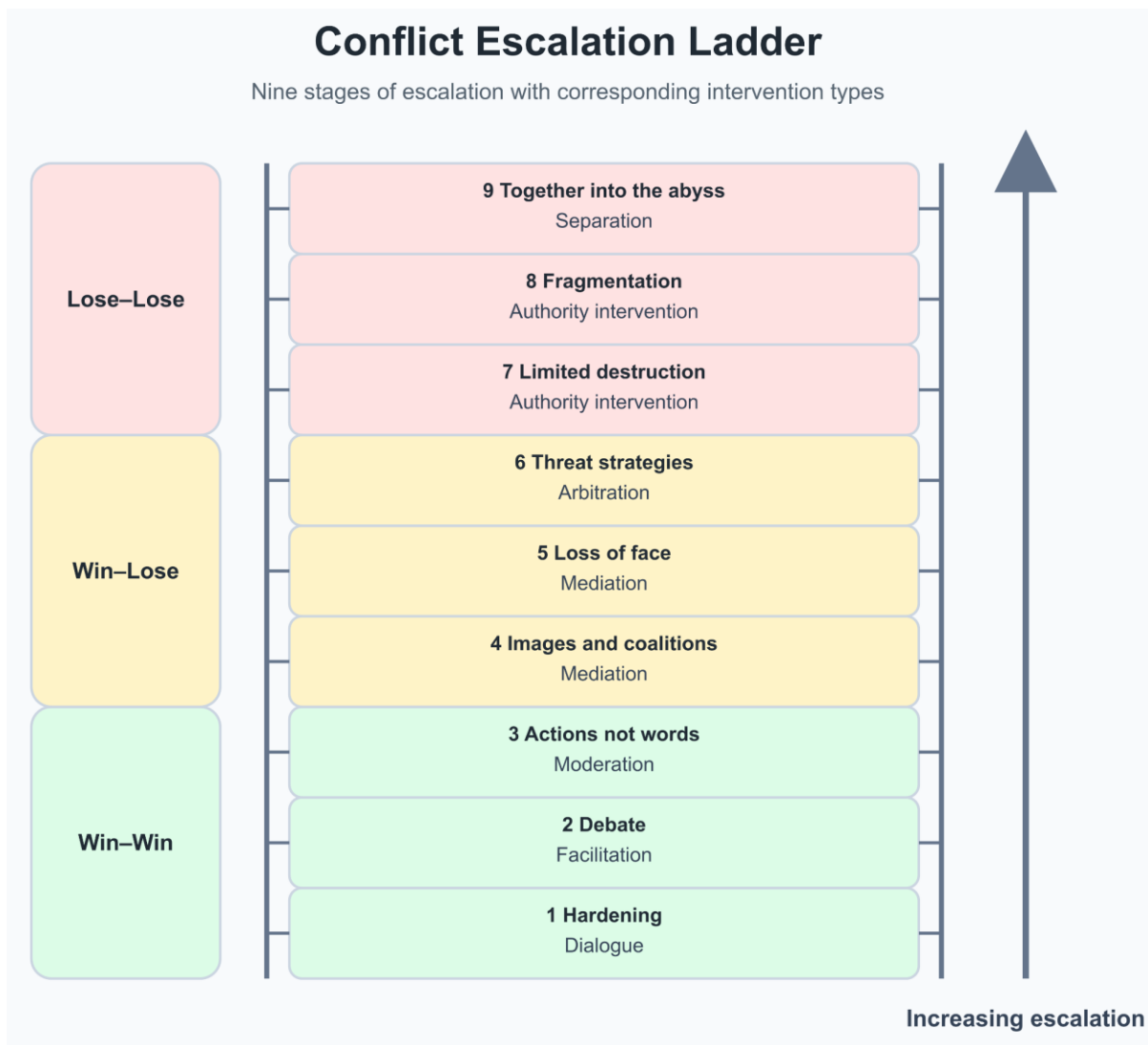


Figure 1: Glasl's conflict escalation ladder. Conflicts develop through nine stages, progressing from manageable disagreement (win-win) to increasingly adversarial dynamics (win-lose) and ultimately destructive conflict (lose-lose). Each stage is associated with different intervention strategies, ranging from dialogue and facilitation to mediation arbitration, and authoritative measures as escalation increases. Adapted from Glasl (1999).

TAs and instructors are often expected to take the lead when conflict arises, often when it happens. This responsibility can feel uncomfortable, and even seasoned educators may find it challenging. Addressing conflict in the classroom is more effective when the environment is built on respect, trust, and a collective commitment to care for and support everyone involved; this is where a course code of conduct (itself the responsibility of the course responsible) is particularly useful.

When tension is building or already present, being thoughtful about when, where, and how you respond can make a meaningful difference. One helpful approach is the **SOAR** process, which stands for Stop, Observe, Assess, and React²⁹.

²⁹ <https://teaching.cornell.edu/resource/managing-classroom-conflict>

Address any harmful behaviour or derogatory language right away. In other situations, take a brief pause to acknowledge the tension or discomfort in the room. It's better to respond imperfectly than to ignore the issue altogether. Consider your next steps carefully, and if needed, use a short break or timeout to allow emotions to settle and give everyone a chance to regain composure.

Effective ways to handle conflict ^{30,31}	Ineffective ways to handle conflict ³²
Listen and restate - Restate each perspective to reduce misunderstandings, especially when emotions run high.	Conquest - Treating conflict as a power struggle escalates tension and derails learning.
Clarify your position - Choose an approach aligned with your teaching goals and explain your reasoning.	Avoiding - Ignoring the issue allows it to persist.
Outline next steps – Provide a clear plan, relevant resources, and any appeal options; document your decisions.	Bargaining - Compromising standards to “keep the peace” undermines fairness and credibility.
Be consistent - Apply standards fairly and keep your responses aligned with your teaching objectives.	Quick fix - Superficial solutions leave root problems unresolved and can lead to lingering resentment.

Recognising your Limitations

TAs are not expected to resolve every conflict or have all the answers. While you can't control how students react, you can hold them accountable. If conflicts persist or escalate, involve the course responsible³³. **Recognising when to seek support is key to maintaining a safe, respectful learning environment.**

Less serious disruptions can often be managed through direct conversation, feedback, or mediation. **However, harmful or dangerous behaviour and serious misconduct require immediate action.**

Maybe most importantly, remember that you are not alone as a TA. Your support network includes the course responsible, your supervisor, student services, and your head of department, so don't hesitate to reach out to one or more of them if needed.

³⁰ <https://www.niu.edu/citl/resources/toolkits/classroom-conflict/managing-classroom-conflict.shtml>

³¹ <https://teaching.cornell.edu/resource/managing-classroom-conflict>

³² <https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/catalogs/tip-sheets/conflict-management-instructors>

³³ <https://teach-learn.ca/2022/02/28/dealing-with-conflict-as-a-gata/>

Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity in Teaching for TAs

Teaching Assistants (TAs) play a key role in shaping students' learning environments. Understanding diversity, inclusion, and equity is essential for fostering effective, supportive, and fair educational experiences.

Understanding Diversity

Diversity refers to the wide range of differences among students, including both **visible characteristics** (e.g., gender, ethnicity, physical ability) and **invisible or hidden dimensions** (e.g., mental health, socioeconomic background, learning styles, prior knowledge). Recognising this complexity helps TAs move beyond assumptions and treat students as individuals with unique needs and perspectives.

Importantly, diversity should not be seen as a problem to manage but as a **resource that enhances learning**. Diverse groups are known to improve decision making, foster innovation and mitigate risks by avoiding group think. The benefits from diverse groups comes when everyone in the group feels sufficiently safe and supported to speak up and use their experience, not just from representation of different people (tokenism). Inclusion is about ensuring all students feel valued and able to participate, and equity involves providing fair support tailored to different needs. For TAs, this means going beyond “checking boxes” and actively creating environments where all students can engage meaningfully.

A key component of managing diversity is the concept of “psychological safety” and “belonging”³⁴. Psychological safety in a learning environment is where students feel safe to ask questions, raise concerns, make mistakes and contribute ideas without fear of embarrassment or backlash. This goes for the larger group as a whole, but also in individual small teams for example during fieldwork. When students don't feel they belong, contributing to the teaching and learning is harder. TAs can support this progression by encouraging participation, validating contributions, and normalising uncertainty. This is particularly true in the field, where previous experiences with the outdoors, use of equipment, physical skills, fit of safety gear or clothing or needs for more privacy or concerns around bathroom breaks, medical or dietary needs may enhance feelings of not belonging.

Bias and Stereotypes in Learning Environments

All individuals carry cognitive biases, which help us process information and make decisions but can also lead to unfair assumptions and behaviours. In educational settings, these biases can influence who is encouraged to participate, how competence is perceived and who are assumed to take leadership roles.

Examples are for example gendered assumptions about fieldwork roles or statements like “I’m not a racist, but...”, that highlight how subtle biases and microaggressions can

³⁴ Edmondson, A. C. (2018). *The fearless organization: Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth*. Wiley.

undermine inclusion. TAs should reflect on their own biases and actively work to mitigate their effects - for example, by distributing attention evenly, using inclusive language and challenging problematic behaviour constructively. Remember that it is normal not to be fully aware of biases that don't affect oneself. The implicit bias test³⁵ may shed light on some of your own internalized biases.

Some tips to handle implicit bias in the field is to:

- Rotate and randomize leadership or responsibility roles (for example group leaders or who is handling specific equipment)
- Take the time to learn what kind of skills the students have from before, instead of assuming a skill level based on appearances.
- Focus on training skills, rather than distribute roles based on skills some students already have or are perceived to have.

Structural Barriers and Inequality

Students do not all face the same conditions. Structural barriers, such as financial constraints, caring responsibilities, physical accessibility, or exposure to harassment, can limit participation, particularly in field-based or group activities³⁶.

In STEM fields, research shows persistent inequalities, where certain groups (e.g., white, able-bodied men) experience systemic advantages, while others face cumulative disadvantages in recognition, access, and career progression³⁷. These broader patterns influence students' confidence, sense of belonging, and engagement³⁸.

For a TA, openness to making accommodations where needed and creating teams and learning environments where everyone gets to learn and recognition for what is achieved, may counteract some of the structural biases.

³⁵ <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

³⁶ Giles, S., Jackson, C., & Stephen, N. (2020). Barriers to fieldwork in undergraduate geoscience degrees. *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment*, 1(2), 77–78. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-020-0022-5>

³⁷ e.g., Cech, E. A. (2022). The intersectional privilege of white able-bodied heterosexual men in STEM. *Science Advances*, 8(24), eabo1558. <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abo1558>

³⁸ Jebson, J. M., Nicoll Baines, K., Oliver, R. A., & Jayasinghe, I. (2022). Dismantling barriers faced by women in STEM. *Nature Chemistry*, 14(11), 1203–1206. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41557-022-01072-2>

The Role of TAs in Inclusive Teaching

TAs are often closest to students and can significantly influence classroom culture. Key practices include:

- **Fostering belonging:** Learn students' names, encourage participation, and create respectful group norms.
- **Supporting diverse needs:** Be flexible and attentive to different learning styles and circumstances.
- **Facilitating inclusive group work:** Ensure equitable participation and avoid dominance by certain individuals.
- **Addressing bias and behaviour:** Intervene when necessary and model respectful communication.
- **Promoting psychological safety:** Encourage questions, normalise mistakes, and provide constructive feedback

Additionally, TAs can help students navigate challenges by recognising different coping responses to discrimination or exclusion and guiding them toward supportive resources.

Conclusion

Diversity, inclusion, and equity are not add-ons to teaching—they are central to effective learning. By recognising diversity in all its forms, addressing biases, and actively fostering inclusive environments, TAs can help create fieldwork and classrooms where all students feel they belong and can succeed. This not only improves individual learning outcomes but also enriches the collective educational experience.

Inclusivity and Equity in Assessments

Almost all courses have some method of assessing students and providing grades based on those assessments. Different kinds of assessments can, however, promote biases, therefore it is important to understand the limits and benefits of different kinds of assessments and how assessments can be structured to promote fairness and inclusion. Additionally, assessments can impact how students view a course and thereby influence their behaviour and learning strategies. For example, assessments that are based on recall will promote rote memorisation without deeper understanding. Though overall many higher education institutions have moved away from assessment solely or primarily based on memory and recall, other assessments nonetheless have other inherent biases and it is beneficial for TAs and teachers to be aware of them.

Multiple-Choice Assessments

Multiple-choice (MC) tests were first widely used by the US military and are still one of the most common means of assessment at US based higher education institutions. They are selected response format tests, i.e., students select instead of construct an answer.

There are some clear advantages to MC tests: they are easy to grade and standardise because answer(s) are unambiguous which makes them objective and highly efficient. This makes them an optimal choice for courses with a large number of students where one-on-one interactions between students and teachers are limited.

However, MC tests also have important limitations:

- They often promote superficial learning and rote memorisation.
- They can oversimplify complex topics or end up testing details rather than concepts and understanding.
- They can lead to pre-knowledge, where people who have taken the test can tell others about the content and test-takers might already have an idea of what will be on the test.
- Students may develop 'testwiseness' (strategies for guessing correctly rather than understanding content). Students who come from backgrounds where MC tests are common (e.g. USA) are more likely to score well on MC tests because of knowledge of test taking strategies than students from backgrounds with little to no exposure to MC tests.
- Questions are often meant to be ambiguous or misleading: the idea behind this is often to dig deeper into a student's understanding. But non-native speakers might be at a disadvantage because they might fail to comprehend subtle nuances.
- Assessors might include easy answers or options, but these are often culture based, so people from different backgrounds might not pick up on 'obvious' clues.

Additionally, students tend to score higher on MC tests compared to other formats and it provides no space for critical thinking, creativity or self-expression.

An alternative to MC tests is multiple correct tests, or, direct option multiple choice (DOMC). In this format, a question is presented with two options (e.g. yes/no) and the question is repeated.

By not presenting options simultaneously, most test-taking skills (including testwiseness) cannot be used. DOMC can support more than the four or five options commonly used in MC tests. As a result, DOMC questions can be written with hundreds of options in a pool of options. Of those, only two to three options might be exposed to each test taker. This reduction in exposure makes it difficult for individuals to harvest the question content, share it online, or allow others to cheat using pre-knowledge. This serves to increase the overall fairness and validity of exams.

Essay Based Assessments

Assessments with essay questions are called constructed responses because it requires students to generate their own answers. This means that they have to synthesise ideas, draw connections and combine different components to make their own arguments. It is a means of communicating one's understanding of a topic where a single correct answer doesn't exist, but instead, many good answers exist and it is up to the test taker to 'prove' their answer. It allows for space for creativity and originality and overall promotes higher order thinking and deeper understanding.

However, they also present challenges:

- They are difficult to grade (as mentioned before, no single correct answer).
- Grading can be subjective since what constitutes a good essay or argument is a question of perception and opinion.
- Grading is very time consuming.
- Language based biases will come through very clearly (additionally other backgrounds such as dyslexia).
- Essay writing practices also differ by country and assessors might be biased towards their own preference (e.g., in the US, essays start with the main point that are then broken down whereas in France, essays build up to the main point).

Additionally, it is difficult to write good questions! Being very clear about the question without steering test takers too much in one direction is a tough line to toe.

Written Exam Overview

Other than MC and essay-based tests, there are three other major test types:

- True/false
- Fill in the blank/short answers
- Home essays/open book

True/false tests are similar to MC tests. Short answer tests are the constructed version of MC tests, but also quite similar and different from short essays which require more breadth of knowledge.

This lecture and session focuses on written exams mainly because of my own limited experience with oral exams. But it is worth keeping in mind that oral exams present their own set of challenges and benefits that are worth considering when assessing students.

Students come from different educational backgrounds and test cultures and tend to be more familiar and comfortable with the types of tests they are used to. Some may have changed countries in their education and have experienced a larger variety of test cultures. However, overall, it should be kept in mind that within every cohort, some students are more likely to excel at some types of tests compared to others. One way in which we can increase inclusivity in testing is by incorporating different types of tests through a course. Furthermore, when preparing tests and questions, and during assessment, it is important to keep in mind the points brought up regarding biases in order to be as fair as possible

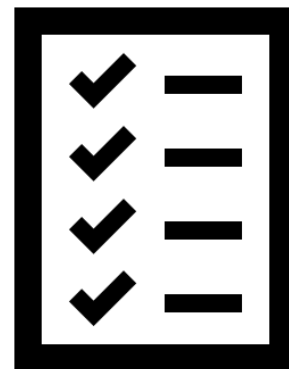
Fieldwork in three steps

This is based on the fieldwork conducted at UNIS and can be adapted for other locations.

Preparation

Proper preparation is essential for ensuring a safe, productive, and enjoyable field excursion; it also enhances the learning outcomes. Before heading into the field, take the time to brief all participants. Use this opportunity to clarify the expectations for the trip, including the goals of the activities, any specific tasks that need to be completed, and safety considerations. A well-structured briefing sets the tone and ensures everyone is on the same page.

Using checklists is invaluable for staying organized and reducing the chance of forgetting critical items. Start by reviewing the equipment and instruments needed for the day, ensuring they are functioning correctly and packed securely. Double-check the weather forecast for the day, as Arctic conditions can change rapidly. This will help you prepare appropriately and advise the team on what to wear and bring. Also include the non-scientific aspects of the fieldwork such as food, breaks, toilet situation, duration, sleeping arrangements - this is especially important to remember as not everyone in the group has necessarily an idea how this is handled in the field.



It's also important to have contact details for all participants readily available. This should include a copy of the Health, Safety, and Environmental (HSE) Form, which outlines emergency protocols, emergency contact numbers, and participating personnel. Familiarise yourself with the study area beforehand, paying special attention to hazards, points of interest, and the day's planned activities.

- **Brief all Participants**
- **Checklists**
- **HSE Form**
- **Wellbeing and Snacks**

Take time to consider the group's wellbeing. Does anyone have allergies, injuries or other medical concerns that may require attention? Proactively addressing these needs can prevent issues in the field. Finally, pack extra snacks and warm clothing for unexpected delays or weather changes. Being over-prepared can make a significant difference in challenging conditions.

Having a back-up plan (B and C) is the course leader's responsibility, but TAs should be made aware of these. A good strategy is also to prepare students for changes, which are aplenty during Arctic fieldwork. Thus, when a student asks what the plan is - underscore that the PLAN is this or that, but it most likely will not go exactly as planned. Not all students respond constructively to sudden changes in the field plan, so managing the expectation before going out into the field that change is likely is important.

In-field

Effective Communication

Effective communication is essential for a successful field day. To ensure clarity, stick to English and use simple sentences, especially in challenging Arctic conditions where distractions and language barriers can arise. Providing summaries along the way reinforces key points and ensures everyone stays aligned and safe



Clear communication and body language can help.

When engaging with students, focus on asking reflective questions that promote deeper thinking, such as *what* instead of *why*. This approach encourages students to think critically about their actions and decisions. Additionally, make it a priority to learn students' names early on, as this builds rapport and encourages active participation. If you are unsure about a question, it is perfectly acceptable to say so (especially if you are starting out as a TA). Acknowledge the question, suggest how it could be approached, and offer to follow up later (e.g., "That's a great question - I'm not entirely sure, but I'll look into it and get back to you next session or via email").

Body language is as important as spoken language. Ensure your posture and gestures align with your verbal instructions to avoid confusion. As the primary contact point for students, stay approachable and responsive, answering questions and addressing concerns as they arise. Carry a non-electronic writing tablet (or laminated sheets of paper and whiteboard pens) to visually convey ideas, plans, or instructions, which can be especially helpful when verbal communication is challenging.

Note that some students may have hearing impairments or other challenges when receiving spoken only information. You can mitigate these challenges by speaking clearly and making sure students see your face when talking. Winter clothing covering one's face can make understanding spoken instructions impossible. Consider always removing any face mask as well as scooter helmet before teaching, and ask students to do the same. Never use questions like "did you hear what I said?" but rather ask students to rephrase what you've just told them.



Take time to discuss the day's happenings

Safety and Risk Awareness

Using a buddy pair system enhances safety and fosters collaboration, allowing students to support each other throughout the fieldwork. Regularly discuss field risks, such as polar bears, cold/wind, avalanches, glaciers, scooter accidents, river crossings, and difficult ground to keep students aware of potential hazards.

It's critical to ensure that long-distance communication devices are operational, especially when leaving areas with mobile phone service. If using VHF radios, agree on a channel to use for communication. Have the contact information of all participants, teaching assistants, and course responsables readily available via email or phone. If anything seems unclear or forgotten, don't hesitate to consult the course responsible—open communication is vital for safety and success.

Planning and Coordination

For extended fieldwork, hold regular/daily meetings. These meetings should:

- Summarise what has happened.
- Highlight key learnings.
- Review ongoing activities.
- Discuss future plans, including who will do what and why.

Preparing field note forms or establishing protocols for taking notes and labelling samples beforehand helps streamline data collection and ensures nothing is overlooked.

Active Learning³⁹

Encourage active learning by prioritising thorough and detailed note-taking. Notes are essential for tracking progress and recording observations. Whenever possible, allow students to work independently. This promotes ownership of their tasks, builds confidence, and enhances problem-solving skills.

To manage tasks effectively, divide students into smaller groups with subtasks. This approach ensures each group focuses on specific objectives, making the workload more manageable and efficient. Distributing specific roles among students may also help communication (see also Group Work), and a buddy-system is an effective way to ensure students look out for each other.

Adapting to the Unexpected

Fieldwork requires an understanding of and readiness for the unexpected. Embrace Arctic flexibility—conditions can change rapidly, and you must adapt when things don't go as planned. Always have a Plan B/C/... prepared (ask the course/fieldwork leader) and make sure all participants are aware of these contingency plans before setting out. Being prepared ensures you can handle unforeseen challenges with confidence.

After the Fieldwork

The period after fieldwork is just as important as the time spent in the field. This phase allows participants to consolidate their experiences, reflect on their learning, and identify areas for improvement. A well-structured debriefing session should be the first step, providing an opportunity for everyone to share their observations, thoughts, and takeaways. Begin by summarizing the objectives of the fieldwork and reviewing whether these were achieved. Encourage participants to discuss both successes and challenges, fostering a collaborative atmosphere where feedback is constructive and open.

³⁹ [Active Learning | Center for Teaching & Learning](#)

Effective feedback is essential during this phase. Supervisors should provide specific and actionable insights into participants' performances, highlighting their strengths while addressing areas for growth. Focus on the key learning outcomes of the fieldwork, linking feedback to individual tasks or group dynamics. Equally important is gathering feedback from participants about the field experience itself. This can help refine future fieldwork planning, ensuring that logistical, educational, or safety concerns are addressed.

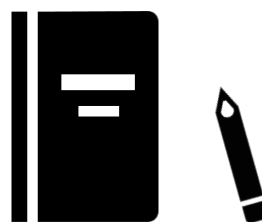
Additionally, this is the ideal time to organise and consolidate field notes and data. Encourage participants to review their notes, fill in any gaps and cross-check findings with their peers, as well as digitalize, photograph, or copy the notes to store it by at least two different methods. If students work in groups, have them prepare summaries of their findings or even a short presentation to share their insights with the broader field team. These activities not only reinforce learning but also ensure that valuable field data are documented and preserved for analysis or reporting.

Finally, wrap up the post-fieldwork phase by celebrating the achievements of the group. Acknowledge the effort, adaptability, and collaboration that went into making the fieldwork successful. This positive closure reinforces a sense of accomplishment and motivates participants for future challenges.

The described points for after the fieldwork also apply after each field day on a longer field excursion.

Additional Points

Although fieldwork focuses on academic and practical learning, there are broader responsibilities that come with supervising and supporting students. Setting clear expectations for professional boundaries and behaviour is essential. Supervisors should refrain from joining student parties or engaging in activities that may compromise their authority or professional relationship with students. It's helpful to address this in advance by outlining these expectations before the fieldwork begins, ensuring transparency and mutual understanding.



Make sure field notes are organized.

Creating a safe and supportive environment requires acknowledging that disabilities are not always visible and some participants may face unique challenges. Supervisors should foster open communication and encourage students to share any specific needs or accommodations they may require. This proactive approach helps create an inclusive experience for everyone. Similarly, being mindful of gender equality is crucial. Supervisors should actively foster equitable participation by recognizing patterns where certain voices may be underrepresented or overlooked.

It is also essential to provide students with information about how to address uncomfortable situations. Make sure they know whom to contact at UNIS, such as the TA, course responsible, or university staff, if they experience harassment, bullying, safety or any other issues. Identifying the appropriate channels in advance can make a significant difference in ensuring students feel supported.

Encourage participants to utilize the UNIS Speak-Up System, which allows students to report concerns to staff bound by confidentiality agreements or anonymously⁴⁰. Introducing this system during pre-fieldwork briefings helps normalise speaking up and reinforces that these concerns are taken seriously. Additionally, remind students that maintaining a respectful and inclusive atmosphere is a shared responsibility, contributing to a positive group dynamic.

By addressing these broader considerations alongside the practicalities of fieldwork, supervisors can cultivate an environment that prioritises learning, safety and well-being. These efforts not only enhance the fieldwork experience but also leave a lasting impact on students' academic and professional journeys.

⁴⁰ <https://www.unis.no/student-life/speak-up-system/>

Certification as a Tool for Field Skills

Purpose of Certification

Constructive alignment of learning outcomes (LO), teaching methods and assessment improves learning^{41,42}. However, LOs related to practical skills are often misaligned⁴³. For example, the LOs may state that students will learn “how to use a compass”. Yet what is assessed is the result of the ‘use’, such as a field report including slope angles, while the practical skill on how to use a compass remains unassessed. Also, since students divide work between them, they often only learn the skill they measured within their group. A certification procedure was therefore designed to practice and assess practical skills including direct peer assessment and elements of gamified learning⁴⁴.

Certifying practical skills ensures that everyone is learning the same set of practical skills, and also helps to align teachers and TAs. In addition, it also prevents breakage of instruments since functionality and measurement protocol is transparent and practised by all users.

Concept

Start with an introduction and demonstration of a skill, explaining the method, purpose and applications. Then, the students are given a list of practical tasks, a tick off list of skills they need to master, aligned with the LOs. The certification follows a skill ladder:

1. Practice with a partner, correcting each other until they reach confidence
2. When confident, demonstrate the skill to someone who is certified
3. Become certified if the skill is successfully demonstrated
4. Participate in certifying others. This allows students to learn and practice while they are certifying others.
5. Physical "certificate" distributed. In a first step, the students receive a marker (e.g., a sticky note) stating that they are certified. Upon completion of the course, issue a more formal document indicating which skills have been acquired.

If there is a second certification step, this process is repeated for the next skill to be learned (see example below).

⁴¹ Adams, C. (2020) A constructively aligned first-year laboratory course. *Journal of Chemical Education*, 97. <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.jchemed.0c00166>

⁴² Biggs, J., Tang, C. & Kennedy, G. (2022) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, 4 edn. Open University Press

⁴³ Adams, C. (2020) A constructively aligned first-year laboratory course. *Journal of Chemical Education*, 97. <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.jchemed.0c00166>

⁴⁴ Eidesen, P. B., Bjune, A. E., & Lang, S. I. (2023). “Show me how to use a microscope” – The development and evaluation of certification as direct assessment of practical lab skills. *Ecology and Evolution*, 13, e10592. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ece3.10592>

Observe these guidelines throughout the process:

- Practice partners cannot certify each other.
- Upon failure, a student has a five-minute quarantine to practice, after which they may try again.

Example: Slope Angle Measurement by Compass

Introduction: The slope angle is the steepness or degree of inclination of a surface. Its measurement is valuable for determining slope stability or the angle at which the sun hits the ground. It is also decisive for different vegetation types, from snowfree ridges to snowbeds at the bottom of a slope.

Demonstration & Explanation Steps:

1. With a partner, determine where your eyes “meet” the other person’s eyes when looking horizontally.
2. Explain the components of the compass relevant to this measurement: magnetic needle, movable dial with scale, clinometer, mirror, slit.
3. Show how to set up the compass for slope angle measurement, extended in a straight line with the dial aligned with the white scale markers.
4. Send your partner up or down the slope (in the classroom use a chair).
5. Tilt the compass and sight along the top until aligned with the same height where your eyes met your partner’s eyes.
6. Carefully tilt the compass sideways without disturbing the clinometer to take a reading.
7. Repeat the measurement to double-check the values.

Students practice and attain certification: Give the students time to practice and ask questions. Certify the first 1-2 students yourself, then allow students to certify each other.

The certification process can also be done in several steps: These certification steps can be done successively to gradually teach a more complex skill. For example, when using a light microscope, the first step would be to name all the parts of a microscope and explain their function, the second step would be to set up a microscope for work, and the third and final step would be to examine a slide underneath the microscope⁴⁵.

⁴⁵ Eidesen, P. B., Bjune, A. E., & Lang, S. I. (2023). “Show me how to use a microscope” – The development and evaluation of certification as direct assessment of practical lab skills. *Ecology and Evolution*, 13, e10592. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ece3.10592>

Checklist for TAs

The following checklist provides a structured overview of tasks and considerations relevant to TA work before, during, and after fieldwork⁴⁶. It is intentionally comprehensive and covers everything from administrative steps like contracts and role clarification, to in-field communication and post-fieldwork debriefing.

Not every item will apply to every course or situation. TAs and course responsables are encouraged to adapt the checklist to their specific context: items can be removed, reordered, or supplemented with course-specific tasks. It can be used as a full reference, or trimmed down to a simple pre-fieldwork reminder list.

The checklist is best read alongside the relevant chapters of this manual, where the reasoning behind many of the items is discussed in more detail. Its primary purpose is to give TAs, especially first time TAs, a practical starting point and a sense of the full scope of what good TA preparation and fieldwork support can look like.

Teaching Assistant Field Checklist

UNIS TA Manual — Practical Advice

BEFORE FIELDWORK

Administrative & Contracts

☐	Sign TA contract — <i>Confirm dates, hours, and compensation</i>
☐	Clarify total hours and breakdown — <i>Teaching hours vs. preparation</i>
☐	Check insurance coverage for fieldwork activities

Role & Responsibilities

☐	Meet with the course responsible to define your role and tasks — <i>What are you expected to lead, support, or observe?</i>
☐	Clarify boundaries of your responsibility — <i>Assessment involvement, decision-making authority</i>
☐	Understand grading/assessment criteria if applicable
☐	Identify other TAs and divide responsibilities if in a team

⁴⁶ [iEarth project report Teaching Manual for field assistants by Florina Schalamon](#)

Content & Location Preparation

☐	Study old field reports from previous course runs
☐	Review maps and satellite imagery of the field area
☐	Study the area in terms of cultural heritage, conservation status, special natural features or status etc.
☐	Talk to former TAs or instructors who know the site
☐	Familiarise yourself with key scientific content — <i>Background reading, species lists, geological context, etc.</i>
☐	Prepare Plan A and Plan B for activities — <i>Account for weather, access, and time constraints</i>
☐	Know the learning outcomes of the tasks students will perform

Equipment & Logistics

☐	Check and test all instruments before departure
☐	Pack spare batteries, cables, and consumables
☐	Prepare datasheets, field notebooks, or digital forms
☐	Confirm transport arrangements and departure times
☐	Confirm food, water, and shelter logistics for full-day fieldwork
☐	Pack personal safety gear — <i>First aid kit, communication device, weather clothing</i>

Student Briefing

☐	Brief students on objectives and expected outcomes
☐	Explain Plan A and Plan B clearly
☐	Cover safety rules and hazard awareness — <i>Slippery terrain, wildlife, weather, cold</i>
☐	Inform students what to bring — <i>Clothing, food, personal equipment</i>
☐	Assign groups or roles in advance if possible
☐	Set expectations for behaviour and communication in the field

IN THE FIELD

Communication

☐	Use clear, simple English — avoid jargon — <i>Especially important for international student groups</i>
☐	Give one instruction at a time
☐	Check for understanding before moving on
☐	Use visual cues and demonstrations where possible
☐	Maintain regular check-ins with all student groups

Student Engagement & Learning

☐	Assign subtasks so all students are actively involved
☐	Rotate roles within groups to share experience
☐	Ask questions rather than give answers directly — <i>See principle of minimum help</i>
☐	Observe group dynamics and intervene if someone is excluded
☐	Encourage students to record their own observations
☐	Adapt pace and complexity to the group's progress

Safety

☐	Conduct a brief on-site safety check on arrival
☐	Know the location of the nearest emergency services
☐	Ensure all students are accounted for at all times
☐	Monitor weather conditions continuously
☐	Apply the go/no-go decision framework if conditions change
☐	Do not hesitate to abort the activity if safety is at risk

Adapting to the Unexpected

☐	Stay calm and communicate clearly if plans change
☐	Bring spare chocolate, warm socks, handwarmers, a jerven duk etc. for students that are struggling
☐	Switch to Plan B without alarming students unnecessarily
☐	Document unexpected events for the debrief and future TAs

AFTER FIELDWORK

Debrief with Students

☐	Hold a structured debrief directly after return if possible
☐	Ask students what went well and what was challenging
☐	Connect field observations to course learning outcomes and assessments (relevant for reports, posters etc.)
☐	Address any confusion about data collection or methods
☐	Acknowledge student effort and contributions

Debrief with Field Instructor Team

☐	Meet with course responsible and fellow TAs
☐	Discuss what worked and what should be improved
☐	Report any safety incidents or near-misses
☐	Share observations on student group dynamics
☐	Provide written notes for future TA reference

Equipment & Administration

☐	Clean and return all instruments and equipment
☐	Submit hours and any required paperwork
☐	Return borrowed materials to storage
☐	Flag any broken or lost equipment to course responsible

Personal Reflection

☐	Note your own teaching moments — what you would do differently
☐	Consider what feedback you want to give or receive
☐	Check your TA hours against contract and flag discrepancies early

Stories and Experiences

These stories are shared from anonymous TAs and course responsables during previous iterations of the UNIS Field TA Course. Our experiences, positive and negative, as both students and instructors in the field, play a huge role in informing how we effectively and successfully address and manage situations that can arise. Whilst we may have many of our own experiences that we can learn from, the stories and experiences of others can be very important in broadening our own bank of scenarios and allows us valuable lessons when considering what we would have done had we been in those situations. Further, knowing that others have dealt with similar or more serious situations allows us to better contextualise our own leadership conundrums and to realise that we're not alone in having to deal with these issues.

Story 1 - Facilitating for Equity

"During a field course, we used to handle toilet breaks by just separating students into "guys" and "girls". After one course, I found out we had a trans student, which made me rethink how we approached this."

"Now, instead of making assumptions, I say things like, "Those who'd like more privacy can go here" or "those who would prefer to sit down can go there." It's simple, but it ensures everyone feels included. It also helps others with specific needs, like students managing health conditions, without singling anyone out. For me, it's about giving people the freedom to choose what works best for them."

Takeaway message:

- Avoid assumptions about students' identities; instead, offer flexible, choice-based options that allow everyone to participate comfortably.
- Small, inclusive adjustments in everyday teaching practices can significantly improve students' sense of belonging and inclusion.
- Think about how we can organise toilet breaks without relying on the assumption that there are two genders.

Story 2 - Students as a Resource

"As a geologist, a lot of our work involves crossing challenging terrain, and not everyone feels comfortable with that. I remember one time in Pyramiden, we were climbing a steep face, and one of the students was really struggling."

"What stood out to me was how another student stepped up to help. They took the time to sit with him, talk him through his fear, and guide him across the mountain face. They handled it so calmly and thoughtfully - it was inspiring to watch."

"That experience really stuck with me - it showed me how much students can bring to the table."

Everyone comes with their own skills and experiences, and sometimes they're the best resource in a tricky situation. It reminded me to trust them, give them the chance to step up, and create an environment where they feel comfortable helping each other out."

Takeaway message:

- Students bring valuable skills, perspectives, and experiences that can support both their peers and the learning process.
- Creating an environment of trust and collaboration enables students to step up, support each other, and enhance collective learning.

Story 3 - Different Cultural Backgrounds

"One experience really opened my eyes to how cultural differences around authority can play out. I was working on a field project with a group from Korea and a group from UNIS. The Korean team had a much more vertical hierarchy - students were expected to handle tasks like maintaining the camp, while the teacher took on more of a supervisory role."

"This clashed with the UNIS group, where everyone, including the leaders, pitched in equally around the camp. It created some tension, and the atmosphere in camp got a bit uncomfortable. Looking back, I'm not sure what the perfect solution would have been. For the Korean teacher, it was a bit of a pinch, stepping in to help might have been seen as a "loss of face" in front of their students."

"If I faced a similar situation again, I think a meeting beforehand to set expectations on both sides could really help. That way, everyone's approach is clear from the start, and we can avoid misunderstandings like this in the future."

Takeaway message:

- Cultural differences in expectations around roles, hierarchy, and participation can shape group dynamics and may lead to misunderstandings if not addressed.
- Setting shared expectations early and creating space for open dialogue can help prevent conflict and support respectful collaboration across different cultural contexts.

Story 4 - Challenges During Group Work

"One of the trickiest parts of group work, especially in geology, is managing groups spread across a large area. It's impossible to be with every group all the time, and you have to trust them to stay on track while checking in on others."

"I remember a specific example during fieldwork in Adventdalen. Some students decided to walk off to Sukkertoppen, essentially "checking out" of the fieldwork. They claimed it was because of equipment issues or something similar, but word got back to UNIS, and they ended up being reprimanded by the safety manager."

"That situation highlighted a bigger challenge: managing what groups agree to do. When you're out in the field, it can be fine to explore or investigate something nearby, but only if the supervisor

agrees, the whole group is informed, and it's safe to do so."

"It taught me how important it is for TAs to step up and keep groups focused, but also how much responsibility lies with the course leader to set clear expectations before heading into the field—leadership in these situations means ensuring TAs are aligned with the goals and ready to help enforce them - it's definitely a balancing act."

Takeaway message:

- Clear expectations and communication are essential in group work, especially in field settings where supervision is limited.
- TAs play a key role in maintaining focus and safety, but effective leadership requires alignment between course leaders and TAs before activities begin.

Story 5 - What makes an effective/ineffective TA?

"A good TA is someone who's not afraid to take responsibility and make decisions. They're independent enough to come up with an idea and just go for it, instead of second-guessing everything. It's also great when they ask thoughtful questions—like about how things might play out or what the overall vision for the course is. Good communication is key too—just being direct, upfront, and helpful makes such a difference."

"On the other hand, challenging TAs tend to either ask too many small, unnecessary questions or just coast through, doing the bare minimum. It's tough when they're not stepping up or fully engaged."

"One thing I really appreciate is when TAs think about how they can make things better for the next team. I had one TA who voluntarily made this little equipment manual—it wasn't part of their job, but it was so useful. Later TAs kept adding to it, and we still use it today. It's those kinds of contributions that really stand out."

Takeaway message:

- Effective TAs take initiative, communicate clearly, and engage thoughtfully with both the course and students.
- Going beyond minimum expectations—by contributing ideas or improvements—can have lasting value for future teaching and learning.

Story 6 - Lesson Learned

"This goes back to one of my first fieldwork experiences. We had some problems in the camp - it got a bit chaotic, and I noticed the senior researcher panicking a bit, which was unexpected. Meanwhile, the youngest team member was the one calmly stepping up, making hot drinks for everyone and providing an atmosphere to get things under control."

“That moment stuck with me. It taught me to not assume the most senior person is the one who will handle a situation best. Seniority doesn’t always mean someone will stay calm under pressure - it can be unpredictable. It also reminded me that anyone can step up when it’s needed, regardless of their position or experience level.”

Takeaway message:

- Do not assume that leadership or composure will come from the most senior person; effective responses can come from anyone in the group.
- Creating a supportive environment allows individuals at all levels to step up and contribute when it matters most.

Story 7 - Group work and Group Contracts

“I always use group contracts in my courses, and I’ve noticed a big improvement in student behaviour because of them. The contracts give students a chance to discuss things that might not otherwise come up - Like if someone has other responsibilities outside the course or if someone is aiming for a top grade. It helps bring those “hidden agendas” to the surface.”

“They’re also a great way to address cultural differences and set the stage for how the group will work together. For example, a discussion on what to do if conflicts arise is very helpful. The contract also gives the groups a sense of ownership over the project from the start.”

“I also make sure to use defined roles in the groups. The ones I use are Project Leader, Data Manager, Logistician, and Secretary. This makes organisation easier, both for the course responsables and internally in the groups. But it is important to emphasize that everyone needs to be informed of the whole project, at any time every student should be able to explain exactly where the project stands.”

“Many of these courses don’t have traditional tests, we use the certification process instead. It ensures all the students have practiced the necessary skills and can demonstrate them confidently. It’s very effective in both learning and accountability.”

Takeaway message:

- Group contracts and clearly defined roles help set expectations, surface potential challenges early, and support effective collaboration.
- Structured approaches (e.g., roles, certification) promote accountability while ensuring all students remain engaged and understand the overall project.

Story 8 - Setting Expectations and Feedback

“I’ve learned that it’s really important to set expectations right from the start. I’m pretty strict at the beginning of a course - I make sure everyone knows the rules and understands what’s expected. There are always a few people who might not get it initially, but setting those expectations clearly helps avoid problems later on.”

“Part of this is also setting expectations for feedback. I always explain that every course will include both oral and written feedback, along with how and when it will be delivered, so students know what to expect. It’s important to set the tone early, so there are no surprises and everyone knows how we’ll work together throughout the course.”

Takeaway message:

- Clearly setting expectations at the start of a course helps prevent misunderstandings and creates a structured, supportive learning environment.
- Being transparent about feedback, its format, timing, and purpose, helps students engage more effectively and reduces uncertainty.

Story 9 - Role of TAs

“The role of a TA is about leadership, in their assigned area. Each TA takes responsibility for a specific part of the course - whether it’s managing equipment, focusing on safety, or teaching a particular topic. They’re like a co-pilot to the course responsible, but when it comes to their assigned area, they take the lead while the course responsible steps back a bit.”

“It’s important to clarify expectations with the TAs at the start as well. I expect them to ask questions and check in for approval before making larger decisions. That said, the most important thing a TA can do is listen - both to students and to the course responsible. They need to be open to feedback and know when it’s time to call on the course responsible for support.”

“TAs should step up and make decisions when needed - but communication is key. They’re essential in mediating between the students and course responsibility, and it’s important to keep that connection strong.”

“Good TAs ask critical questions to the course responsible. When it’s done well, it can create more work in shaping the course, but it pays off. The course becomes more focused, the course responsible has to critically think about what they are teaching and the course becomes more valuable to the students as a result.”

Takeaway message:

- TAs act as leaders within their areas of responsibility, balancing independence in decision-making with clear communication and alignment with the course responsible.
- Effective TAs listen actively, ask critical questions, and serve as a bridge between students and course leaders, strengthening both learning and course quality.

Teaching Assistant Experiences

The following section draws on interviews conducted with TAs at UNIS. The accounts reflect real experiences from the field — what worked, what was challenging, and what shaped their understanding of the TA role. The aim is to give future TAs an honest and practical perspective that goes beyond general guidance, grounded in the specific context of teaching and fieldwork at UNIS.

1. Becoming a TA: Learning by Doing

Across the interviews, several TAs described stepping into the role without formal training. For some, it was a “learning-by-doing” experience where they were suddenly responsible for an entire student group. Others found themselves navigating new tasks—such as drone flights, unfamiliar locations, or additional instruments—while simultaneously supporting student learning. The common thread was that the TA role often began with improvisation and rapid adaptation.

2. Responsibilities in the Field

Many tasks centred on facilitating fieldwork—coordinating group movements, managing instrumentation, ensuring safety, and bridging communication between students, course leaders, and external experts. One TA highlighted balancing multiple technical tasks (teaching, measurements, or polar bear safety), while yet another described supporting student-led decisions and ensuring they understood their responsibilities.

3. Group Dynamics: Setting the Tone

All TAs stressed the importance of group atmosphere. When groups had good energy, things went smoothly—even when equipment malfunctioned or sites were hard to access. Maintaining positivity helped students stay engaged and adaptable.

Challenges arose when individuals were left out or quieter students withdrew. TAs pointed out that subtle intervention, openness to dialogue, and early tone-setting helped prevent exclusion. Having a diverse TA team—especially gender-diverse—was described as crucial for helping all students feel comfortable and seen.

4. Organization: The Achilles Heel

A consistent issue was lack of preparation. Some TAs reported long, last-minute planning sessions the night before fieldwork, or unclear expectations about roles and assignments. Others described logistical overload: too many locations in one-week, multiple instruments, or insufficient familiarity with field sites.

The TAs agreed that fieldwork succeeds when:

- Tasks are clearly assigned early.
- Site visits or briefings happen before the field week.
- Someone acts as a central coordinator.
- Logistics are secured well in advance.

When this didn't happen, stress and improvisation increased. When it did, the entire excursion ran more smoothly.

5. Decision-Making in the Field

Most TAs described a balance between guiding the group and letting students take ownership. They noted that students often made solid decisions on their own, even when these differed from what the TA initially expected. Effective TAs were described as leaders who provide structure while respecting student autonomy. Ineffective TAs, in contrast, were seen as either too detached ("too loose with control") or disorganized, creating confusion and undermining learning. Note that, due to its sensitivity, the process of decision-making in the field should be addressed proactively with TAs by the course responsible prior to fieldwork.

6. Examples of Success and Challenge

Positive examples included:

- Groups that stayed motivated despite poor weather or malfunctioning equipment
- Excursions where planning was thorough, roles were clear, and logistics were well coordinated.
- Students gaining valuable experience with multiple locations and measurement techniques

More challenging cases involved:

- Overloaded courses with too many students.
- Responsibilities falling disproportionately on one TA.
- Not clear communication about responsibilities.
- Complex multi-instrument field days without prior site familiarity.
- Last-minute changes forcing improvisation in the field.
- In difficult situations, teamwork among TAs can compensate for gaps in organization.

7. What TAs Would Improve

Common recommendations included:

- Stronger preparation before the field period.
- One dedicated fieldwork coordinator available throughout planning and execution.
- Earlier communication of roles, expectations, and logistics.
- Site scouting before fieldwork begins.
- Structured feedback sessions that include both TAs and students.

Overall, the TAs emphasized that preparation and communication are what transform fieldwork from chaotic to empowering.

The feedback in this manual is drawn from the experiences of TAs at UNIS. We welcome further contributions, so if you have worked as a TA, please consider filling out our short anonymous survey:

[TA Feedback Survey](#)

Case studies

Following are a collection of situations you may encounter as a teaching assistant. First the situation is described, and then a series of questions are posed as to actions or advice applicable in these situations. Take a moment to answer the questions yourself. Subsequently, some solutions to these questions are given. It is important to note that these do not represent the only solution, merely a possibility which could be applied. Your answers may differ and be equally correct, and creative approaches are always encouraged.

Additional case studies and field experiences from (UNIS) TAs and course responsables are continuously being added to the shared resource folder. These cover a wider range of situations and courses and are updated as new feedback is collected. The full collection can be found here: [Feel free to add your example!](#)

Case Study 1: Engaging Students

Situation:

You are excited to begin work as a teaching assistant. You are working on a course that is focused on topics you care about and with an instructor you respect and admire.

You are trying to make the class engaging but students don't seem interested. When you ask questions, it's very silent. When you assign small groups tasks, most groups just work alone –looking up answers on their computers and rarely talking.

You keep trying approaches but nothing works. When you walk by other classes, it seems the opposite – students are talking, everyone looks engaged. When the instructor asks how the course is going at lunch, you are feeling reluctant to answer.

Questions:

1. What are the issues in this case study?
2. What advice would you give to this person now?
3. What would you recommend to someone at the start of this course to avoid this scenario?
4. If this was you, who can help with this scenario? How can they help?

Possible Answers:

What are the main issues in this case study?

The main issue here is student disengagement. It's clear that the students aren't connecting with the material or each other, causing silence during discussions and isolated work during group tasks. This could stem from how the tasks are designed or how participation is facilitated. Another issue is the TA's reluctance to share these struggles with the instructor, which prevents collaboration on finding solutions. The TA also seems to feel inadequate when comparing their class to others, which can be discouraging but isn't necessarily a fair comparison.

What advice would you give to this person now?

First, don't be too hard on yourself - it's normal to hit bumps when trying to engage students, especially early in the course. Instead of asking general ones like "Does everyone understand?" try something more specific and thought provoking, such as "What would happen if we applied this idea in a different context?" or "Can someone walk us through the first step of solving this problem?" Allow time for students to process before expecting responses, and consider pairing them up for brief discussions before asking for answers. This gives students a lower-pressure way to engage. When it comes to group tasks, try adding a structure that encourages interaction, such as assigning roles (e.g., one person as the note-taker, another as the presenter) or breaking tasks into smaller steps that require collaboration. Check in with groups to guide them toward working together rather than individually. Keep your tone supportive and curious - ask questions like, "How is your group approaching this task?" instead of "Why aren't you talking?" Finally, don't keep your struggles to yourself. Share what's happening with the instructor. You might say something like, "I've noticed that students seem quiet and are working individually during group tasks. Do you have any tips for encouraging a more active discussion?" Instructors have often seen similar challenges before and can offer practical advice or even model engagement strategies during their parts of the class.

What would you recommend to someone at the start of a course to avoid this scenario?

At the start of the course, set clear expectations about participation. Let students know that discussion, collaboration, and engagement are essential and explain why - it's not just about completing tasks but about learning from each other. You might say, "I'm here to support your learning, but the best way to understand this material is by engaging with it together." Learn students' names and consider opening the classes with a brief, low-risk icebreaker or a quick pair and share activity to set a tone of collaboration. When assigning group tasks, be explicit about their structure and goals. If possible, gather feedback from students early on, even informally. Ask, "How are the group tasks working for you? What do you think of our class discussion so far?" Adjusting your approach based on their input shows you're invested in their learning, which can encourage them to engage more actively.

If this was you (really), who can help you with this scenario? How can they help?

If I were in this situation, I'd start by reaching out to the instructor. They've likely taught this course before and may have ideas for fostering engagement. You could say, "I'd like to make the group work more interactive - what have you seen work well in the past?" Their insights can help you feel less isolated and give you practical tools to try. Your colleagues and fellow TAs can also be a great resource. They might have faced similar challenges and can share what's worked for them. Consider asking them to observe your class if they are available. Finally, don't underestimate the value of feedback from the students themselves. It can feel vulnerable to ask, but students can often have good ideas about what would help them participate more. Creating an anonymous feedback form or having a quick class discussion about what's working and what isn't can give you a clearer sense of what adjustments to make.

Case Study 2: Preparing for the Field

Situation:

You have been working in a course for a few weeks in a great course. Students are excited about the upcoming field trip. In the week before the field trip, two things happen:

- A student tells you they have a chronic illness and they are wondering about some details about what will happen in the field. They don't want to bother the course instructor.
- A small group of students is talking in the hallway about the list of recommended clothes – one of them asks you if everything is really necessary. They all nod after you insist the items are needed.

You have a 30 min meeting with the instructor this afternoon to go over the field teaching component once more before the trip.

Questions:

1. What are the issues in this case study?
2. What advice would you give to this person now?
3. What would you recommend to someone at the start of this course to avoid this scenario?
4. If this was you, who can help with this scenario? How can they help?

Possible Answers:

What are the issues in this case study?

There are two main concerns here. First, a student with a chronic illness is uncertain about how the field excursion will accommodate their needs. They're hesitant to approach the course instructor directly, which might indicate they worry about being seen as a burden or drawing unwanted attention. Second, a group of students is questioning the necessity of the recommended clothing list - while they nod in agreement after you insist, there's a risk they might not fully appreciate the importance of this gear. This could lead to inadequate preparation for Arctic conditions, impacting both safety and learning outcomes.

What advice would you give to this person now?

I'd encourage you to proactively address both concerns during your upcoming 30-minute meeting with the instructor. First, gently bring up the student's chronic illness: for example, "One of our students has asked about field accommodations due to a chronic condition - can we discuss any particular adjustments we can make?" This acknowledges the student's needs without exposing them unnecessarily. Second, clarify why the clothing items are essential and share these reasons with the students: "The reflective vest makes you visible to cars and snow scooters." or "The extra wool sweater is a replacement if your other layers get sweaty from hiking." Emphasizing the real-world impact of these items can help students understand the rationale, rather than seeing it as arbitrary rules.

What would you recommend to someone at the start of this course to avoid this scenario?

Early in the course, ensure that **preparation** is framed as an integral part of learning, not just a checklist. You might share stories or past examples illustrating how the right heart or accommodations made a significant difference in the field. Incite students to ask detailed questions during these prep sessions - don't wait until the week before the trip. Also, try to make it clear that any student with specific health concerns is welcome (and encouraged) to speak with you or the instructor confidentially. When students see that you genuinely care about their wellbeing, they're more likely to raise concerns early.

If this was you (really), who can help you with this scenario? How can they help?

If I were in this position, I'd start with the instructor. They can confirm any specific accommodations or protocols for health-related needs and can address the group about clothing requirements with the authority of course leadership. I'd also reach out to student support services or disability coordinators - they often have guidelines or best practices for field excursions involving students with chronic conditions. Colleagues who have organized similar excursions can share practical tips about how to communicate equipment necessities or offer personal experiences about why each item on the list is essential. Finally, the students themselves are again a great resource - the students who approached you in the hallway may not be the only ones with concerns, organising a space for the students to talk these concerns through can give them a chance to share other issues with you which may also exist.

Case Study 3: Communication

Situation:

You are working with an instructor you have not met yet. You were supposed to have a meeting with them before the first class but you were sick. Now you are heading to teach a new group for the first time but still have remaining questions about expectations.

You managed to get through the first day but it felt really awkward. There were questions you could not answer and some of what you planned to do in class didn't really work. The students said they already knew this content from the lecture. Students asked lots of questions about the course project and field work but you were not sure how to answer the questions.

You are trying to reach the course instructor but they are very busy. Your next class is in 2 days and you are feeling very worried.

Questions:

1. What are the issues in this case study?
2. What advice would you give to this person now?
3. What would you recommend to someone at the start of this course to avoid this scenario?
4. If this was you, who can help with this scenario? How can they help?

Possible Answers:

What are the issues in this case study?

The primary challenge here is walking into a class without a clear understanding of the instructor's expectations. Because you missed the initial meeting due to illness, you're now in a situation where you're not entirely sure how your teaching goals align with the overall course structure. This uncertainty became evident in class when students already knew the content, you'd planned and asked questions about the course project or fieldwork that you couldn't answer. The awkwardness you're feeling stems from a gap in communication and planning. With the next class only two days away, time is short, and the instructor is busy, adding stress to an already challenging situation.

What advice would you give to this person now?

First, try to gather as much information as possible in the limited time you have. If the instructor is too busy for a lengthy meeting, propose a brief conversation by email or phone. Even ten minutes of focused discussion can help you clarify what the students are expected to know and the scope of upcoming classes. Let the instructor know you want to stay consistent with their vision and effectively answer student questions about the project or field trip.

Meanwhile, be upfront with students about what you do and don't know. If a question goes beyond your current knowledge, it's perfectly okay to say, "That is a great question. Let me confirm with the instructor so I can give you an accurate answer." This honesty builds trust and shows you value their inquiries. Finally, try adapting your next class activities based on what students have told you - they already know parts of the content so consider asking **effective questions** that go deeper or apply the content in new ways, rather than reteaching the basics.

What would you recommend to someone at the start of this course to avoid this scenario?

If possible, have a clear conversation (or email exchange) with the instructor before the course begins. Ask about the course layout, what students already know, and where your lessons fit in. You might say, "I'd love to understand your goals for this course and how I can support them - could we chat briefly about the content and expectations?" This upfront planning prevents confusion and helps you feel confident from the start.

It's also helpful to do a quick informal assessment of what students already know. This can be done with a short quiz or by asking them to write down two or three things they recall from the lecture. That way, you don't spend time covering material they've mastered. Additionally, establish a system for handling student questions about future assignments or field trips: if you can't provide a definitive answer, assure them you'll follow up once you've checked with the instructor or course materials.

If this was you (really), who can help you with this scenario? How can they help?

Your first stop is the course instructor, even if that means catching them in the hallway or scheduling a quick phone call during their break. Let them know what students are asking and where you need clarity. If the instructor truly can't meet in time, ask if they can forward you key course materials or guidelines so you can answer questions more confidently.

It's also a good idea to connect with colleagues or other teaching assistants who've taught similar classes or worked with the same instructor. They can share insights into how the instructor prefers to structure lessons, how much freedom TAs have, and where they've found helpful resources.

Finally, don't forget the students themselves can be an asset. They might have official handouts from the instructor or information in the syllabus that can guide you. Inviting them to share those details in class can create a more collaborative atmosphere, reducing the pressure on you to have all the answers immediately.