TATP - TA Table - EP 1

[00:00:00] **Elliot:** welcome to the first episode of the TA Table, the official podcast of the TATP.

[00:00:14] **Estefania:** The TATP is the [teaching assistant training program](https://tatp.utoronto.ca/) at the University of Toronto aimed at fostering inclusive and innovative teaching practices across the university for TAs and course instructors.

[00:00:26] **Elliot:** On this podcast we talk about the craft of teaching with members of the TATP team, first let's start with introductions.

My name is Elliot Fonarev. I'm a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology. And here at the TATP, I'm a graduate educational developer and EDI coordinator.

[00:00:47] **Estefania:** And I'm your co-host Estefania Toledo. I use she/her pronouns and I'm a PhD candidate in higher education at OISE. And my research focuses on access and equity for historically marginalized students here at the TATP. I'm also a graduate student developer and on the social sciences team.

[00:01:05] **Elliot:** We're excited to bring you conversations with our colleagues here at the TATP and explore topics that often come up for teaching assistants at the University of Toronto.

[00:01:16] **Estefania:** Today on our first podcast Elliot is bringing us an interview with one of our colleagues Amanda Greer. They talk about first time TA contracts as well as battling imposter syndrome as early stage grad students or course instructors. Take it away, Elliot.

[00:01:32] **Elliot:** Thanks, Estefania. So, as you said, I talked to Amanda, and first I'll let her introduce herself.

[00:01:39] **Amanda:** Hi, I'm Amanda Greer. I am the TATP humanities team coordinator here, and I'm a PhD candidate at the [Cinema Studies Institute](https://www.cinema.utoronto.ca/).

I think my favorite course that I've taught, is one where I taught as a CI, a course instructor, and it was a [CIN 360 ‘contemporary film theory’](https://www.cinema.utoronto.ca/undergraduate/curriculum-course-information/all-undergraduate-courses). It was a great experience. And then as a TA, I love being a TA for CIN105 ‘introduction to film study’ and working with first years.

[00:02:06] **Elliot:** I'm sure many of us remember that feeling before the very first course we're assigned to TA, feeling a bundle of nerves and excitement to begin our teaching journey. I asked Amanda to share her experience.

[00:02:19] **Amanda:** My first TA contract was actually when I was a Masters student at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver in the Department of Theatre and Film. And I was definitely a little bit nervous because I left straight from my undergrad into my masters. So I was 21 when I started TAing.

You're around the same age as a lot of your students, and some of them at that stage are a little bit older than you. So there's a bit of anxiety around being able to kind of have the level of respect from students that you're hoping for as a TA. And I went in thinking maybe I'll just be buddy-buddy with them, and that'll be my approach. But I over the years have learned that you can have great, nurturing, and reciprocal professional relationships with students, without trying to be their friend, and then without, on the other side, trying to be an authoritarian. So it was really finding that balance through that first contract.

[00:03:10] **Estefania:** I can definitely relate to that sense of uncertainty, and for most TAs this is the first time we're faced with thinking about what our teaching approach will be.

[00:03:18] **Elliot:** Yeah, and Amanda told me she initially leaned on her own experience as an undergrad to inform her teaching approach.

[00:03:25] **Amanda:** When I came back to U of T, I had done my undergrad here, so I had privileged knowledge of just how U of T works, how my department works—because I had done a degree there before. But it was this interesting inversion, where now I was in the role of educator, whereas the last time I'd been there I had been an undergraduate student. I kind of used my experience as an undergraduate to inform how I could teach, because I had some idea of how it feels to be an undergraduate student, what they might have needed.

[00:03:51] **Elliot:** But Amanda also found that being in the role of the educator can come with some surprises.

[00:03:58] **Amanda:** I remember, the most unexpected thing was confronting the huge, range of skill levels and background knowledge that students bring into an intro course—I was TAing a first year course. And so, some folks were taking it as an elective and were from other departments, and so were maybe third or fourth years taking it as an elective. Others were new to university. When you're a graduate student, it generally means you've been successful institutionally up until that point. And you know how to write an essay or you know how to sit tests and it's a skill that you kind of have. And I think it's really useful to then go—when you're grading and when you're talking with students—to kind of see the different levels of knowledge and skills that they bring into the university with them for various reasons, right?

Some might have gotten to very privileged, private high schools, where they were given a lot of individualized attention. Others might have come from more rural schools where they might not have been given as many resources. So I think that was really eye opening and good to kind of develop into my teaching philosophy and my teaching practice, this acceptance of all background experiences and trying to just get all of the students onto a similar foundation of knowledge that they can all work from.

[00:05:06] **Estefania:** I totally agree, students have diverse backgrounds,

[00:05:11] **Elliot:** And each student has their own unique needs and motivations for being at the university. Amanda shared how she navigated that, as a first time TA.

[00:05:21] **Amanda:** I definitely learned a lot. I think it’s important in teaching that students are juggling so much in their lives. I remember one day we were reading “[The Culture Industry](https://sites.evergreen.edu/arunchandra/wp-content/uploads/sites/395/2018/07/hork.pdf)” by Adorno and Horkheimer, which is a really difficult piece, for those in the cultural humanities who will know it. And the students just had not read it. I think I had one student in the tutorial read it. And it was, you know, deep in the course, it was like February of a year-long September to April course. And I maybe responded in a sort of exasperated, like, how am I supposed to teach if you all haven't read it? And it was frustrating because obviously the student-TA contract is that the students will do their best to do their work to come into class. But I kind of had to slow down after that and go, okay, this time of year students tend to put some readings to the side, and so how might I respond to that? And I started developing a system where I'd bring some key quotations into the class. So we can at least read through some passages together, get on the same page, and build from there. It kind of taught me to be flexible as an instructor.

[00:06:25] **Estefania:** Such a relatable experience. There's definitely this reality in teaching and I found that as a new TA, being flexible as well as adjusting my approach was so important.

[00:06:35] **Elliot:** Absolutely.

[00:06:36] **Estefania:** Did Amanda have any other advice for first time TAs battling nerves?

[00:06:40] **Elliot:** One thing she emphasized was that growing aware of our responsibilities and our position in the classroom can help us feel more confident in our role as educators.

[00:06:50] **Amanda:** bell hooks says something really interesting in [*Teaching to Transgress*](https://www.routledge.com/Teaching-to-Transgress-Education-as-the-Practice-of-Freedom/hooks/p/book/9780415908085), where she says, to actually become better teachers, we need to acknowledge that in the university institution as it is presently constructed, we do have power over our students. And it's what we do with that power that matters. So rather than try and pretend you don't have that power and try and be buddy-buddy, or abuse that power and be cruel unnecessarily to your students, remember that you do have that power to be kind and be nurturing. You also have the power to set your own boundaries and say, you know, certain forms of behavior in the classroom are unacceptable. Or it is the class's collective responsibility to try and do the work to come to class so that your teaching can really flourish. It's okay to make those assertions. It doesn't mean you're too tough on them in one way or too lax in another. It's just kind of knowing where that balance lies. And remembering, again, that, you're not, an imposter in the space, but you deserve to be there and that developing your teaching practice will take time and further experience.

[00:07:48] **Estefania:** I love that she brings up bell hooks and how it informs her teaching.

[00:07:52] **Elliot:** And Amanda actually ran a [TATP workshop](https://tatp.utoronto.ca/events/) this year on the pedagogy of bell hooks.

[00:07:57] **Estefania:** I've learned so much from bell hooks too and make reference to her work in my own teaching philosophy statement. For those listening who are unfamiliar with bell hooks and her pedagogy, we'll add a link to her work in the show notes.

[00:08:10] **Elliot:** A lot of our programming at the TATP addresses how to navigate power dynamics as educators using different strategies and practices that we can integrate in our evolving teaching craft, regardless of our experience. I want to end on how we as educators can also pleasantly surprise students by challenging their expectations of a course, which, as Amanda shared, can be incredibly rewarding.

[00:08:36] **Amanda:** The first course I was assigned to was CIN 201, which is technically ‘called Film Cultures 1’, which is a very broad title, but essentially it's film theory and history from 1895 to 1960. And it's one of the core courses in the Cinema Studies Institute, so at this point they've probably only taken the intro level course. And this particular course, is a year-long course where the first half is completely silent cinema. And a lot of students come in and they think it's going to be really boring and very slow. And you get to see, over the course of the semester, how excited they get by silent film and how much more they want to watch because the course characterizes silent film as a way into seeing historical events in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but also to think about art practice and formal experimentation. You know, a lot of students come in and they go, a black-and-white film will be boring and less exciting to me than something in color. But just kind of watching them get excited about older film and about archival work is really meaningful and kind of profound to watch that happen.

[00:09:35] **Estefania:** That was so beautiful, and I think that's such a great way to end our first episode.

[00:09:39] **Elliot:** We want to thank Amanda for her time with us, and we hope everyone listening found this episode useful and interesting, and if you have any feedback, or topics you want to hear about, we'd love to hear it.

[00:09:51] **Estefania:** You can reach us and learn more about our programming on our website at [www.tatp.utoronto.ca](http://www.tatp.utoronto.ca). We hope you will tune in to our next episode of the TA Table.

[00:10:01] **Elliot:** Until next time!