TATP TA Table E2

[00:00:07] **Estefania:** Welcome to another episode of the TA Table, the official podcast of [the TATP](https://tatp.utoronto.ca/). We're your co-hosts, Estefania Toledo and Elliot Fonarev.

[00:00:16] **Elliot:** Today, Estefania is talking to Veronica Curin about making the leap from being a teaching assistant to teaching your first course. Veronica runs the TATP's [Course Instructor Camp](https://tatp.utoronto.ca/job-training/), also known as CI Day, and other professional development opportunities throughout the year for graduate students who are taking on their first course appointment or looking to develop their teaching skills.

[00:00:40] **Estefania:** I had a great time connecting with Veronica and learning about the resources available at TATP. We spoke about navigating challenges and concerns when teaching your first course. This episode is full of thoughtful insights, care, and empathy, and most importantly, fostering courage in teaching.

[00:00:57] **Elliot:** I'm excited to hear more.

[00:00:58] **Estefania:** First, I'll have Veronica introduce herself.

[00:01:02] **Veronica:** I am a recent graduate of the PhD program with the [Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures](https://german.utoronto.ca/), and I'm still currently working in the role of course instructor for that department where I've been teaching German language classes for several years. At TATP, I am the Course Instructor Coordinator, which means that I organize training specifically for new graduate student course instructors, Both online and in person, and I also sometimes provide some consultation for new course instructors, I actually have another role as well, I am the Graduate student Support Coordinator at the [University of Toronto Scarborough](https://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/home/), where I actually organize, professional development opportunities for graduate students on that campus.

[00:01:49] **Estefania:** I remember getting my first teaching appointment and feeling both thrilled and very overwhelmed. At the time, I didn't know about specific professional development opportunities for CIs and was left to figure it out on my own.

[00:02:00] **Elliot:** That sounds terrifying.

[00:02:02] **Estefania:** It totally was. But you know what? It worked out fine. I learned as I went. I received great student feedback at the end of the course, but I remember feeling so stressed out that semester. I wanted to deliver the perfect course, give students the best experience, and be the faculty member I wish I had in my undergrad.

[00:02:19] **Elliot:** That's a lot of pressure.

[00:02:21] **Estefania:** I know, and this is something that, you know, a lot of graduate students do, and I was curious if this was like a me problem or if other first time CIs felt this way, and I asked Veronica to share what some challenges or worries first time CIs have.

[00:02:37] **Veronica:** One thing that comes up frequently is a worry about the rightness of policies and procedures, really getting it correct, like only doing things exactly the right way. And there are a lot of supports for you to understand those policies and procedures. we have, many guides to different things you might be dealing with in your course and with your course structure.

However, there's also a lot of flexibility and a lot of choice for a graduate student course instructor. And I think very often new course instructors feel like there is a right answer to how to. how to organize a course, how to present certain assignments, how to frame the grading scale, things like this.

When actually a course instructor has a lot of flexibility at U of T to set these things themselves or to decide, for example, late penalties and make up test policies and participation grades, in fact, you should choose to do things the way that makes the most sense to you. And that's the number one thing I really try to tell course instructors at the end of CI Day, is we've provided you with lots of different strategies, with a lot of different, opportunities to try different things that you might not consider trying otherwise.

But if something feels false to you and you're just doing it because you think you ought to, that will come across in your teaching. I just really try to tell graduate student course instructors to have a bit more confidence and also be a bit more relaxed about it. There's not as many clear yes and no answers of how to do these things as one would expect.

[00:04:17] **Elliot:** It's really great to get that faculty perspective. I remember as a student too, having instructors with a wide variety of styles and approaches, and I often noted, approaches that I liked and wanted to use if I was teaching.

[00:04:34] **Estefania:** That's so true. I knew I wanted to apply all the great teaching strategies I picked up over the years and felt that I needed permission to design the course just like I wanted to.

 And as a first time CI, we often forget the autonomy we have in building the learning environment we want. Obviously, we're responsible for meeting the course learning outcomes, and it's easy to forget to have fun and incorporate play in learning.

[00:04:58] **Elliot:** Who doesn't love fun?

[00:04:59] **Estefania:** Right, and we get to decide how we want to plan our lessons, how we want to plan our assignments, and what grading policies we want to introduce to the course. For example, when I taught my course, I offered academic flexibility and introduced choice in assignments, including arts based assessment options, and also removed late penalties by inviting students to reach out to set new deadlines if the ones that I had shared in the syllabus didn't work out for their schedules.

[00:05:26] **Elliot:** This level of care requires a lot of planning.

[00:05:30] **Estefania:** Yeah, I think it does. And Veronica explained a really great PD opportunity here at TATP that she runs, which is called CI Day.

[00:05:39] **Veronica:** I work primarily on the course instructor camp or CI day. We have different names for it. which is a half synchronous and half asynchronous event that takes place three times a year. This is aimed at graduate students who are going to be preparing for their first course, or perhaps just their first course at U of T. this provides graduate students with a lot of flexibility because this is a six-hour event, first three hours take place asynchronously through a Quercus module, which is monitored by me, and includes live conversation with other, future course instructor graduate students. And so if you don't have time for the synchronous training, there are a lot of resources through this Quercus course, that allow you to see the step by step, principles of creating a course, of planning a syllabus, of thinking about learning outcomes. If you are able to attend the three-hour synchronous portion, we then really rarefied that information, giving an overview of course design and an intro into managing your class day by day, so how you think about one lecture at a time, and starting to plan that as well.

[00:06:54] **Elliot:** That's so helpful. I will definitely be signing up for CI Day before I teach my first course next year.

[00:07:02] **Estefania:** You totally should. I highly recommend it. I helped out this past year and facilitated a session. Veronica also told me about other forms of [professional development](https://tatp.utoronto.ca/certificate-programs/certificate-programs-f-a-q/) and support available for CIs.

[00:07:16] **Veronica:** At TATP, we offer teaching consultations for graduate students. These are one-on-one one-hour meetings, to discuss very specific questions you might have. So if there's an element of the course design or how you're trying to work with Quercus, for example, trying to achieve something that you'd like, but you don't exactly know how to achieve it through the current structures that you have, you can actually book an appointment like that and have a meeting with one of our staff members to discuss those things and get a little bit more insight on that process.

I also would highlight the in-class observations that we do at TATP. These are really beneficial because it's a check in from someone who is no relation to you in terms of your work, has no supervision over you, has no other relationship other than as a peer providing some feedback on what they have experienced.

So with an in-class observation, if you have someone come to your course, you get this idea of what they see out of it and what suggestions they might make. You can also ask specific questions about, did this, I tried something different here, did this seem like it works for you? That gives you the double benefit of not only having that feedback and being able to respond to it and work with it, but also of then having a document that you can use in future teaching dossier, applications that provide some insight on what your teaching looks like to one of your peers.

[00:08:43] **Elliot:** I don't know about you, but there's nothing quite like this kind of professional development for teaching offered in my department. And I know I'm biased because I work here, but I'm genuinely so glad that TATP exists.

[00:08:57] **Estefania:** I know, me too. And Veronica had some great advice for new course instructors or folks interested in developing their teaching skills.

[00:09:05] **Veronica:** my biggest advice is once you've looked into all of these resources and thought about your learning outcomes and thought about how you want to structure your course. Just being confident that you can do things in the way that makes sense to you the most. And if you try anything else, that's where you're going to start feeling uncomfortable in your own course, or in the way you're carrying out your own lessons, or however it goes. Or how you feel about grading the assignments, for example.

But for the most part, the feedback I get from first time course instructors, that are graduate students, is that it was a really rewarding experience. Their undergraduates tend to really appreciate the energy that graduate students bring. We are often, really close to our research.

We are very passionate about our disciplines. There is a reason that we're doing this work, and that is conveyed to our students very clearly. We often, actually do care very much about trying to be in communication with them, and these things are noticed. And so, for the most part, although there's all sorts of things that you can be nervous about before beginning the course, I think the takeaway for most graduate student course instructors that it's a wonderful experience to actually have that opportunity.

[00:10:17] **Estefania:** we totally agree. Thanks for joining us, Veronica. We hope that you enjoyed this conversation with Veronica Curin and picked up some strategies to support you with your upcoming CI position.

[00:10:30] **Elliot:** You can reach us and learn more about all the TATP's programming on our website at [www.tatp.utoronto.ca](http://www.tatp.utoronto.ca) and we hope you'll tune in to our next episode of the TA Table.

[00:10:47] **Estefania:** Until next time!