

Reflections 2

Any ending can be likened to scaling a mountain. Your lungs burning, hips aching, and feet throbbing all suddenly matter less once you've made it to the top. It would be a huge mistake to miss out on this opportunity to look around, see the path you climbed, see the path you now wish to take, and most importantly, share it with others embarking on similar journeys.

My name is Joe Bales. I am finishing my fall semester studying mathematics and helping my mentor, Dr. Lay-May Yeap, with Math 254—Introductory Ordinary Differential Equations. In my reflection report from May 2021, I warned that perhaps my experience might not speak to those interested in helping with upper-division math courses, but I no longer feel the need to make that statement. This semester I was able to help with grading as well as holding office hours, problem sessions, and review sessions.

Since this is my second semester as an assistant, I was confident in trying to hold my own problem sessions regularly, which was a new experience that my mentor encouraged. In contrast to my previous semester where I had only held review sessions for exams, holding regular problem-solving sessions, albeit now still a difficult task, was not something I would have well been able to handle during my first semester as a UTA. Being given the freedom to take topics from my mentor's class and find ways to compliment her lectures through my examples was difficult to do at times, and pushed me to move past knowing just how to solve the problems and towards considering the students' needs. This also was an opportunity for me to pick problems that I found enjoyable, but in retrospect, I didn't take advantage of this nearly as much as I would have liked to, and would like to make it a focus if I were to hold these sessions again in the future, whether it be next semester or in graduate school.

I also had some wonderful office hours, where I was able to help students one-on-one for more than just a few minutes. I am very grateful for those that came in to ask for help, or just to talk through some problems that they did! Constructive office hours often lead to feelings of euphoria on my end, and I am unsure why any person in a teaching position would avoid the situation. Although it may seem tempting to schedule odd office hours to discourage students from coming, whether it be out of nerves or to avoid the possibility of an uncomfortable interaction with another person, I've found that figuring out an exercise with a student is an opportunity not only to help foster better problem-solving methods for them, but also to help them realize what their brain is capable of—it also exposed any parts of the problem I didn't remember or truly understand. There is a constant comparison of ourselves to others ingrained in our cognition, and it can oftentimes interfere with the learning we want or need to do. But cooperating with another to solve a problem, I find, helps turn the problem into a task rather than a competition. Perhaps it's because I've always had trouble asking for help due to the competitive nature of my secondary education that I find it so enjoyable to eliminate the negative aspects of tutoring that I and others have experienced in the past.

The amount of perspective one can gain from assuming a new role can be pivotal. As I make my way up the mountain of teaching, I can start to see all the various routes open up that connect to my current path. Many of them are opening up simply because my ability to communicate has improved, and others because of the empathy I've gained from having a teaching position. All in all, I'd encourage anyone to apply who would like to capitalize on opportunities to grow in both of these qualities, as well as better understand previous math classes, practice pedagogical techniques, or better develop any of the many qualities referenced in the UTA program reflections.