Authority as Trust and Commitment

Authority as a teacher is **not something to be gained or lost on the first day** of class but a relationship that is **built over time**. Instead of something **scary** that is wielded—“power, control, clout, the last word”—authority could be seen as **gaining someone’s trust**, a **relationship to be earned, nurtured or maintained**.

Trust needs to be grounded in mutual commitment: students trust that GSIs wouldn’t ask them to do anything they wouldn’t do, or anything that wouldn’t help them learn the material. One of the most important aspects of maintaining students’ trust is commitment to your job, **commitment to teaching and student learning, commitment to students**. Many authority problems can be avoided if a new GSI can demonstrate to a student that she/he is committed to teaching and student learning, wants students to do well, and is interested in their progress.

Research has shown that students find instructors more credible when they can demonstrate their commitment to teaching and student learning. You can do this by:

- coming to class well prepared
- answering students’ questions (if you don’t know the right answer in the moment, tell them you’ll find the answer and get back to them)
- following the policies laid out in the course syllabus
- learning students’ names
- showing interest in students’ lives outside the classroom
- sharing more about yourself than simply your name and academic discipline. (What kind of research are you engaged in? What real world experience do you bring to the class?)

It is much more difficult for students to show disrespect when they know that the GSI cares about them.

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**Transparency:** Authority problems often occur when there is no trust.

If undergraduates sense a lack of commitment on the part of the GSI, then they worry that what they are being asked to do is arbitrary. You can solve this by making sure that the reasons for assigning an exercise or activity are transparent. Students need to be told why they are being asked to do something. For example: Let them know why the homework is worth 30% of their grade, why group work is a valuable part of the course, or why the quiz was a useful exercise. They may need to be told again and again.

On a more practical note, emphasizing trust and commitment as a way to establish and maintain authority is useful because it can help allay GSI concerns about credibility that they may feel are out of their control or unchangeable. For example:

- When a GSI is concerned about teaching out of their subject area.
- When a GSI is concerned about being visibly different than most of their students.
- When a GSI is nervous talking in front of large groups and is concerned this will be evident to students.

In all of these cases, focusing on establishing authority through trust and commitment allows the focus to shift away from the identity of the GSI and onto the subject matter of the course and the GSI’s commitment to student learning. It also allows GSIs to ask the same of their students – so that they too can be committed to that learning community.