

TAbloid News

Teaching Assistant Advisory Council (TAAC) Newsletter

Issue 3

Edited by: Christopher Tiessen, MA student, Art & Visual Culture

Graduate Students Committed to Teaching Development

On Saturday, September 19th, approximately 200 graduate students gathered in Rozanski Hall for the Graduate Student Conference on University Teaching: Learning to Teach and Teaching to Learn. The conference gave graduate students, from a wide range of backgrounds, TA experience and disciplines, the opportunity to further develop teaching skills, learn new techniques, engage in exciting discussions about teaching and education, and share their own experiences and advice within a professional academic atmosphere.

The day began with an opening plenary, which included a powerful performance by three graduate students who read from
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“Making a Difference” and “Silences”, scripts published by The Council of 3M National Teaching Fellows and The Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. This performance, which highlighted the silences that often accompany teaching and learning, and the impact that teaching and learning has on the lives of students and faculty, stimulated a spirited discussion of the reading by all conference participants.

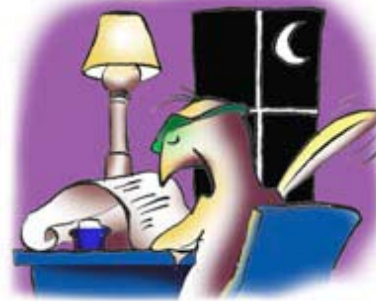
The latter part of the morning and the afternoon were filled with a wide variety of almost thirty workshops on teaching and learning. Many conference participants remarked that deciding which workshops to attend proved to be a difficult task, as so many of the workshops covered such interesting pedagogical topics. Graduate students, educational developers from Teaching Support Services, lecturers, faculty, and members of the Learning Commons all presented workshops, with topics spanning the teaching spectrum. Conference participants had the opportunity to develop skills for facilitating effective discussions, effectively assessing student writing, running engaging science labs, and even learned how to use video games as pedagogical tools. Absorbing discussions were also held on enquiry-based learning and teaching, the new frontiers in multi-media engagement, how to find a balance between research, classes and teaching, and the style and substance of university teaching and learning.

This conference would not have been possible without the work of the Conference Planning Committee (spearheaded by the exceptional leadership of Educational Developer Dr. Natasha Kenny), the efforts and enthusiasm of the many conference volunteers, and the generosity of our sponsors. The commitment witnessed for teaching development and skill growth was inspirational, and we hope this enthusiastic support for teaching and education on our campus only continues to grow.

By: Katie Schlitt,
PhD Candidate, Department of Chemistry



Tutelage & Acolytes



Dear Athena, goddess of wisdom and all things smart: I am starting Grad school soon and I have been given a G.T.A. position. I desperately need your help. Do you possibly have tucked under your wing somewhere, a manual? A comprehensive one would be best with tips on teaching, grading, giving feedback, sucking up to profs, avoiding any remotely good-looking undergrad and other helpful info you may have. PowerPoint format is preferred – Oh, and please post it on my Facebook wall so others can consult it. Thanks, wishing I'd joined the Marines... P.S. Do you twitter?

Dear Marine,
Buck up, you spineless wimp! Your mother has more guts than you do! These are *undergrads*, not insurgent forces! Manual? What you need is ten hours of scrubbing toilets with a toothbrush – a good punishment for students who hand in their papers late, by the by. Get it together and most importantly **act like you are in charge!** That's what all of us immortals do when you mortals come whining around us with your petty complaints. Whatever you do, DON'T be yourself!
Sincerely Yours,
Staff Sgt. Athena, a.k.a. Minerva, the Owl, etc...
P.S. Owls do not twitter – we hoot!

Dear Staff Sgt. Athena,
You really helped! Thanks so much! Nothing like a verbal beating to set one on the right track! As soon as I read your reply I dropped the textbook I was highlighting and went to the nearest Armed Forces Office to sign up. They made me scrub toilets right then and there, just for asking to join! It was awesome and I have truly found myself. No more G.T.A. worries. Sorry to bother you - I know you immortals have so much important business to get up to like sleeping with mortals and starting wars - hey, maybe I'll get to fight in one!
Cheerio!
One Merry Marine.

By: Janet Williams,
MA student, School of English & Theatre Studies

Teaching Students with Disabilities

(Part Two, Physical Disability)

In part one of this three-part series on teaching students with disabilities, we explored the unique challenges faced by Teaching Assistants who are teaching for the first time a person with loss of vision. This time, we will approach the issue of students with a physical disability. In the final part of this series, we will consider students with hearing loss and how we can best approach their learning requirements

Physical Disability

I am a student with a disability, yet you would never know it. Many students will not appear to have any disability, yet will need some accommodation for certain tasks. Conditions such as the following may require some accommodation, while having no obvious signs of disability:

- Arthritis
- Epilepsy
- Haemophilia
- Peronal Muscular Atrophy
- Joint Replacements
- Diabetes
- Parkinson's

With students who “pass” and with those students who use a wheelchair, scooter or assistance dog, simply become aware of the student's condition and ask him/her if there is anything that you can do to reasonably accommodate them. Offer assistance, but don't provide it unless the need is emergent.

In the classroom, assignments and handouts should be made available in an online format as well as easily accessible and well-arranged paper copies, so that students can avoid undue bending and turning. In the lab, consider providing extra time to allow for any difficulties in gathering supplies and equipment. When communicating, position yourself in front of the person so that they don't have to change positions to face you.

Teaching Support Services in Day Hall offers pamphlets on best practices for teaching students with physical disabilities, www.tss.uoguelph.ca/resources/pdfs/Mobility2.pdf, from which much of this article has been drawn. Further, individual members of the support team are able to help professors and TAs come up with a pedagogical strategy that provides maximum inclusiveness. Also, the Centre for Students with Disabilities is able to offer on-campus support for students who need accommodations. Visit <http://www.csd.uoguelph.ca/csd/> for more info.

**By: Andrew Bretz,
School of English and Theatre Studies**



Are Teaching Assistants Loving It?

Here's a common scenario: You are a teaching assistant. Class ends near dinner hour. You dismiss your students and begin to ponder over your personal dinner menu. Murmurs and whispers of a greasy, juicy quarter-pounder reach your ears before the students even depart at ten to five. Drat, those undergraduates and their cheap, time-efficient meals – mac and cheese, a hotdog, a hungry man, or even McDonalds. The intense attention to curriculum detail and thought-provoking classroom activities breaks down your resistance of avoiding those Golden Arches. You recall your undergraduate mindset, which involved being unsure of future choices and wondering whether university would be right for you. You recall hearing that becoming a graduate student was meant to signal personal growth (*not a Big Mac*), and now you've arrived. Those Golden Arches tug and tease at your tired mind and frayed willpower. You summon enough strength to pause for a moment, and wish for more time to seek out the unique and sublime culinary establishments and food markets of Guelph's colourful community.

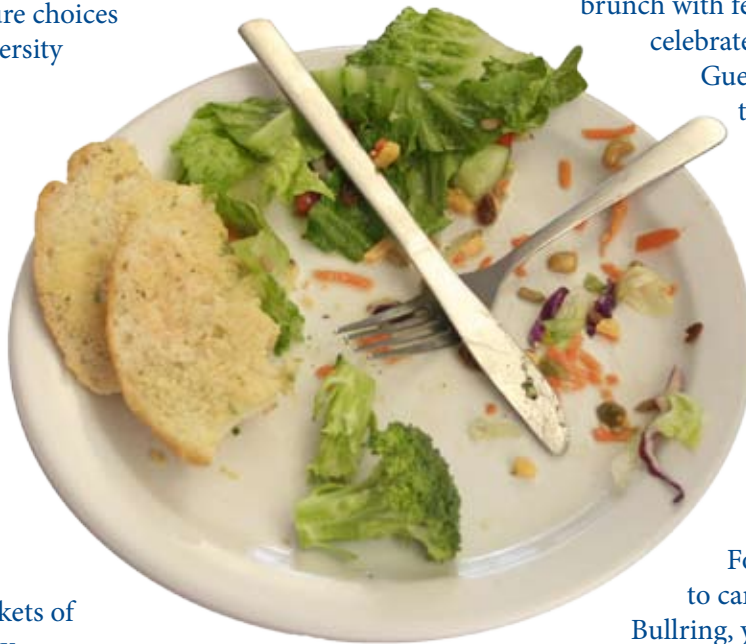
Guelph is a centre filled with a variety of food flavours and opportunities. (Yes, Guelph – not to be mistaken for “cow town” or a small city with few places to nurture your new metropolitan lifestyle as a graduate student.) Many bistros, cafes, and quality vegetarian alternatives can be found at the heart of this small, yet bustling, city.

For a special occasion with a partner, restaurants with romantic lighting and considerate service, such as Babel Fish, or friendly staff and renowned cooking, like Friends in our Kitchen (both located in the heart of Guelph's downtown on Macdonell Street), are never far off. Friends in our Kitchen is run by a single chef and owner, Gino. Try the creamy mushroom chicken and you shall not be disappointed.

For those TA's craving a music scene, call in to Manhattan's Bistro, a jazz and no-cover club with intimate lighting, live

entertainment and great food. Remember to phone ahead to book your reservation, as it tends to get busy.

As for cafés and vegetarian alternatives, there's really no need to take the one-hour-and-twenty-minute Greyhound to Toronto. The Bookshelf is a bookstore, restaurant, alt cinema and bar all in one. Go there for a great dinner, followed by an intriguing film, followed by a cocktail or two at the Bookshelf's E-Bar. (And make sure to check for their regular dinner / movie specials!) With the Grain, just off Woolwich Street, is a perfect location for brunch with fellow graduates. Having just celebrated their tenth anniversary as Guelph's favourite eat-in bakery that also serves unbelievable sandwiches, soups, salads and more, With The Grain is a must-visit for all grad students. (A tip: getting there either before or after the lunch rush is a good plan, as it's usually filled beyond capacity during peak hours!)



For something a little closer to campus, why not hike to the Bullring, your campus living room?

On the menu are fresh sandwiches, as well as vegetarian and salad options that will support healthy eating. Fresh mac and cheese is also available for the home-cooked pasta lover in us all.

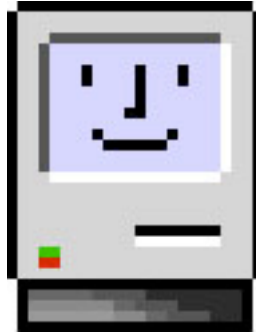
And if you cannot stomach a night on the town or a trip to the campus' Bullring, take the short trek (by foot, bike or bus) to Guelph's Farmers' Market, open Saturday's from 7am to noon. Located on Gordon Street at the foot of downtown, the market will surely satisfy your home-cooking needs.

Teaching assistants can eat like professors simply by taking the time to branch out beyond the Golden Arches – the seeming staple of the undergraduate diet. There's plenty of fabulous choices out there, of which I've pointed toward only a few of Guelph's famed establishments. After all, didn't we mature in to grad students to leave all that childish mcfood behind us?

By: Kirsten Nicholson, MA student, English

Computers and TAs

Computers are becoming more and more popular in classrooms. Indeed, it seems as though almost every classroom now includes a desktop computer, at least, and a great number of classrooms are also either hard-wired or wirelessly hooked up to the internet and/or overhead projectors. Moreover, many students bring their own laptop computers to class and seminar, adding an entire other dimension to computers “in the workplace.” While there are infinite roles computers can play in the classroom learning environment, allow me to suggest that computers play two primary *contrary* roles in the learning process inside the classroom – one positive and one negative.



The most obvious positive role that a computer in the classroom plays for TAs is as a teaching support, in both providing the course material and enabling and promoting the communicative process between students and their respective TAs. Conversely, the most obvious negative role that a computer in the classroom plays is that they provide students with easy access to chatting and gaming during lesson and discussion time, thereby detrimentally affecting the classroom seminar learning process of the students chatting or playing online games (whose attention is anywhere but on class discussion); other students in the classroom (whose concentration may be diverted and whose classroom environment and quality of discussion is effectively debased); and, perhaps most obviously, the TA (whose “undivided attention” from students is anything but!). I suggest that it is the TA’s responsibility not only to dissuade online chatting and gaming in the classroom, but also to learn how to employ computers in order to enhance the learning environment and make learning more interesting, exciting and effective.

Several basic tools and techniques can be used for employing computers in the teaching process. For improving the clarity of the lesson and also for saving time, for instance, TAs can prepare PowerPoint presentations for each session. Just make sure to avoid writing too much on each slide – oftentimes a single line or image is much more effective than lots of text.

Simply pointing students toward the course website also supports the quality of the teaching process. Indeed, most course websites provide pertinent updated information such as the class schedule and reading/assignment list, and links to related readings for 24 hours, 7 days a week. (Indeed, online course websites can benefit the novice or experienced TA as much as they can benefit any student!) More sophisticated course websites can enable control of assignment deadlines, and websites can also include online discussions that enable exchanges of the student experience. (Since many professors are reluctant to set up and oversee online class discussion forums, devising and overseeing such forums might be a great opportunity for TAs to undertake as part of their contract.) And while online chatting and gaming by students using their own laptops in the classroom is something to be avoided, School of English and Theatre Studies PhD Candidate (and experienced TA) Andrew Bretz has explored the benefits of gaming – and specifically games designed and led by the TA such as course-related Jeopardy – as pedagogical tools!

To sum up, computers in the classroom are a reality and they’re here to stay. In order for computers to remain positive pedagogical tools, TAs should really look toward taking advantages of all that computers in the classroom



have to offer. Indeed, there is no reason for TAs or professors to feel intimidated by computers, or to feel as though computer technology is “invading” the sacred “human-to-human” teaching environment. As has been made clear by M.D. Roblyer in his textbook, *Integrating Educational Technology into Teaching*, “teachers always will be important.” At the same

time, computers have also become important. In order to reconcile the complex interrelationships between teachers and computers, then, TAs should imagine, explore and implement different learning techniques that include computers in the classroom for achieving the objectives of the course while at the same time limiting the usage of computers for non-educational purposes during lesson time.

**By: El Sayed Mahmoud, PhD student,
Computing & Information Science**

Silence Is Golden: Or Is It?

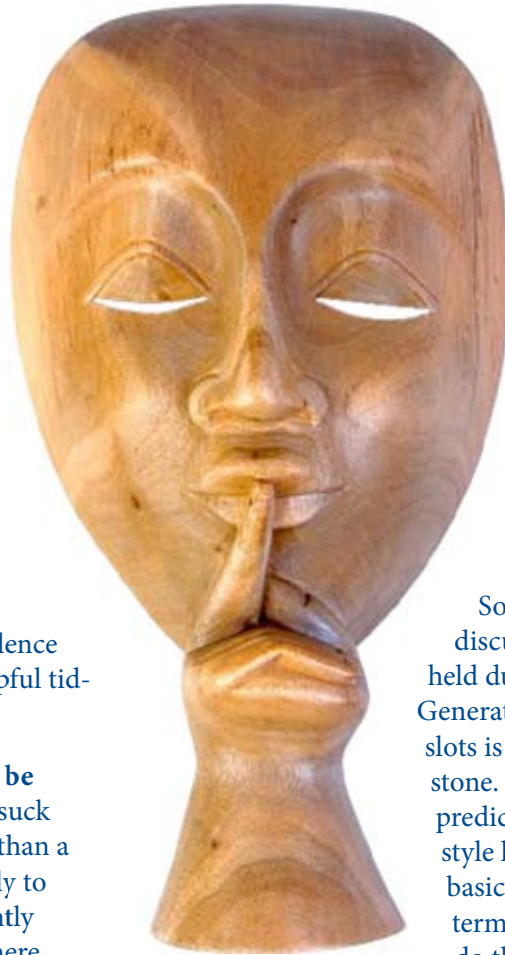
We have all heard the saying: “Silence is golden.” Apart from now having the Four Seasons ‘60’s song playing in your head (probably for the rest of the day), this oft-repeated quote might remind you of quiet Autumn walks, a calming sit-down with a book, or a relaxing afternoon on a deck somewhere with a drink in your hand. But may I suggest that silence isn’t always golden – particularly for Graduate Teaching Assistants trying to breathe a bit of life into an awkwardly-silent seminar discussion. Indeed, for TA’s, silence in a seminar discussion is what can keep us up at night, in a cold sweat.

So what’s a TA to do in order to avoid silence in seminar? Here’s some (hopefully) helpful tid-bits for you to nibble on:

If you get to class early, be prepared to be chatty! Indeed, there’s nothing that can suck the life energy out of a classroom faster than a TA who arrives at her/his class early, only to ponder their notes quietly or wait patiently – silently – for class to begin. If you’re there early, then get chatting! Not only will you get to know your students better in a more informal, “before class” environment, but transition from chatting about the weekend to discussing Martin Luther’s 95 Theses will more likely spill seamlessly one in to the other.

Don’t call on individual students! When I was an Undergrad, I’d literally drop *any* class that had a seminar component in it because I was afraid that I’d have a TA who would “pick on me.” After TA’ing countless seminar sections as a Grad student, I have found that not picking on individual students, but instead letting *them* initiate conversation after a question’s been asked, is the best way to go. By allowing students to begin speaking on *their* terms builds trust between TA and students, and eliminates unwanted stress that builds in students afraid they’ll be “picked on.”

Group work can save you! Although I’ve never been a huge fan of splitting students into smaller discussion groups, this past semester I’ve begun to use this tactic (it’s a great lesson



prep time-saver!) with marvelous success. Not only can group work with a few directed questions save a floundering TA who can’t seem to get conversation rolling, but it is also often seen as a less intimidating environment in which the shyest students are more likely to speak up.

Have enough to say! Have you ever had to lead a Friday morning, 8:30am seminar class? How about Monday afternoon at 3:30pm? If so, you’ve probably experienced a classroom full of students who look as though they wanted to be anywhere – *anywhere* – other than in your seminar class!

Sometimes no matter what you do, discussion cannot be generated in classes held during the “dead hours” of the week. Generating great discussion in these time slots is as unlikely as drawing water from a stone. A good solution to such a horrible predicament is pre-planning a full lecture-style lesson. I’ve led seminars in which I was basically a second lecturer throughout the term – with resounding success! Not only do the students learn new things from a perspective (yours) that’s different from that of the professor, but you also get to practice lecturing for when it’s your turn to get called up to the “big leagues” of sessional teaching!

Most importantly, enjoy yourself! I would say that the most important way to make seminar a fruitful bastion of rich discussion in a non-threatening environment is to enjoy what you’re teaching. Almost nothing encourages a great atmosphere in a seminar environment than a TA who’s smiling, encouraging, and having fun him/herself.

So get out there and teach with vigour and teach with verve. Just make sure to be anything but silent!

By: Christopher Tiessen,
MA student, Art & Visual Culture
2006-2007 College of Arts GTA
Teaching Excellence Award, Recipient
2007-2008 College of Arts Sessional
Teaching Excellence Award, Nominee

Making Wikis Work for *You*

Most of us are familiar with the concept of Wikipedia – if only because we spend our time trying to convince our students not to cite it as a reference! However, there is far more to the world of wikis than Wikipedia. A wiki is just a simple website that allows pages to be created, edited and linked together. Although they can be made “open” so that anyone can add information (like Wikipedia), it is also possible to make a private wiki accessible only to the creator and anyone they add as a user.

This opens up a multitude of possibilities for the use of this tool. Of particular interest to graduate students, a wiki can be an excellent tool for managing a project (such as a Masters or PhD dissertation) or a collaboration. A wiki used to manage a PhD dissertation, for example, can have sections for information that the student would like to keep close at hand. Specifically, a list of projects currently underway could contain hyperlinks to separate pages dedicated to each of these projects. These subpages could contain drafts of papers, links to PDFs of relevant articles, meeting notes, teaching notes, lists of equipment, and any other useful information that the student would like to keep in one place. Because files can be uploaded to a wiki, it can also be used as a storehouse for articles related to particular topics.

In order to use a wiki for collaboration, all group members should be given read/edit access by the wiki creator. Drafts of collaborative work can then be posted and edited by all group members. Most wiki software saves all versions of a page, meaning that every single change to drafts can be viewed and, if necessary, reversed. This is an excellent solution for collaborating over geographical distances, as it avoids the necessity of sending a million Word documents by email as each new draft is created. Instead, each group member can see the latest version online (complete with a list of changes that have been made).

Personally, I have used <http://pbworks.com/> to set up wikis for both project management and collaborations. For a list of other sites that provide similar services, see (where else?) Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_wiki_farms has a list of wiki providers, many of which are free. Give it a try!

**By: Anne Ferrey, PhD student,
Psychology - Cognitive Neuroscience**



What is your definition of a **good teacher**?

In a recent article published in the journal *Active Learning in Higher Education* (2009, 10: 172-184), Bartram and Bailey explored the responses of students to this very question at a university in the UK. Four predominant themes were noted (in relative order of importance):

1. *Teaching Skills*: Students felt that an effective teacher explained ideas and concepts well; motivated and sustained student interest; used active-learning techniques; and acted as a facilitator to encourage and guide learning.
2. *Personal Qualities*: Students valued personal qualities such as, "...being kind, helpful, patient, enthusiastic and having a sense of humor."
3. *Relationships with Students*: Students appreciated instructors who were friendly, approachable, and took the time to "get to know" them.
4. *Teacher Knowledge*: Subject-matter expertise and knowledge emerged as the lowest ranked theme.

They summarized that, "...students appear to define good teaching largely on the basis of a range of skills and attributes that emphasize empathy and aspects of interpersonal relationships." These findings support Chickering and Gamson's (1987) classic *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education*, where an effective teacher is described to:

1. Encourage contact between students and faculty;
2. Develop reciprocity and cooperation among students;
3. Encourage active learning;
4. Give prompt feedback;
5. Emphasize time on task;
6. Communicate high expectations; and,
7. Respect diverse talents and ways of learning.

The reality is that effective teaching goes much beyond developing subject matter expertise. From my experiences in higher education, great teachers share two common characteristics: an extraordinary sense of humility; and, a strong commitment to continual improvement, based upon a fundamental motivation to inspire student success. Take a moment to reflect upon and record how you would describe the best university teachers? This simple reflective exercise is sure to inform your own approach to teaching in higher education, and your definition of an effective teacher will likely evolve as your academic career progresses.

**By: Natasha Kenny, PhD, Teaching Support Services -
Educational Development Support**

