

# TAbloid News

Teaching Assistant Advisory Council (TAAC) Newsletter

Issue 5

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

## Annual Graduate Student University Teaching Conference a Success

Saturday, September 25th, 2010 saw the arrival of almost 200 graduate students to campus to participate in the Graduate Student University Teaching Conference (UTC). This conference provides the opportunity for graduate students 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. This year's conference carried the theme of 'Empowering Future Leaders and Educators'. This theme is an important one, as many graduate students and teaching assistants work to realize their goal of a career in academe. This year's conference therefore looked to explore the development of graduate students as educators and leaders both within and outside the university classroom. The following quote by Rosabeth Moss Kantor encompasses the theme of this year's conference:

*"Leaders are more powerful role models when they learn, than when they teach."*

The day began with a superb presentation from keynote speaker Dr. Julia Christensen Hughes, Dean of the College of Management and Economics. Julia is an advocate for change within higher education and was awarded University of Guelph's John Bell Award in 2008 for demonstrating outstanding educational leadership. Julia served as President of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education from 2004-2007, and she also spent ten years as Director

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of the University of Guelph's Teaching Support Services. During her keynote address, Julia spoke to the changes that need to occur within higher education. Specifically, she asked the audience to consider systematic barriers that persist to prevent change, such as an attitude that "teaching development isn't necessary", as well as a lack of exposure to pedagogical literature. She also provided clear-cut steps to improve teaching in the university classroom. Showing enthusiasm, asking questions, inviting questions, telling stories, moving around the classroom and being organized are all techniques that are inexpensive and relatively easy to implement, but that can at the same time make a world of a difference to students' learning processes. It was an honour to have Julia as part of this year's program, and conference participants greatly enjoyed Julia's address.

The conference program was also comprised of 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, creating an e-portfolio, leading students in tutorials and seminars, and public speaking. Workshops also centered around discussions involving student motivation, the importance of 'followership' in becoming an effective leader, academic integrity, differences in learning styles, and how to achieve balance between research, classes and teaching.

The day concluded with a panel discussion with some of the University of Guelph's recent faculty and teaching assistant award winners. Dr. Andrew Bailey (Philosophy), Dr. Jack Weiner (Math & Stats), Dr. Alice Hovorka (Geography) and Jen Hendel (Chemistry) each spoke to an area or aspect of higher education that needs to change, and how they are leading the way, while also providing the audience the chance to pose questions and join in the discussion. This was a very inspiring session and wonderful opportunity to learn from some of the top teaching models on our campus!

The enthusiasm expressed at this year's conference for the development and growth of teaching knowledge and skills was impressive, and demonstrates the university's continuing support of higher learning.

by **Katie Schlitt**, PhD Candidate, Department of Chemistry

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(The following is a synopsis of the author's Graduate Student University Teaching Conference Presentation, originally presented at the GSUTC on September 25, 2010.)

## Giving Great Presentations

Developing your presentation skills is important for two reasons; firstly, because you want your audience to listen to you when you have something to say, and, secondly, because you will use these skills throughout your entire life. When thinking about what makes a good presentation stand out from a bad one, things like effective use of slides, command of voice, presence, and knowledge of the materials are some of the obvious elements that probably come to mind. But the one secret ingredient that great presentations have is a presenter who is passionate about the topic! Taking this into account, I suggest that the key to a great presentation is to be able to master the skills of a great presentation, while using your personality to show your passion for the topic.

In order to do this, one must prepare in advance. Weeks before the presentation, create your power point slides, write down your speech, and tailor all the material to the audience. Tailoring the material is essential to making sure that the audience gets out of the presentation what you want them to. Tailor the material by keeping in mind the following questions: (1) who is your audience, (2) what do you want them to take away from your presentation, (3) is there anything interactive you can add to facilitate learning concepts, and (4) what is the level of jargon your audience knows. Once you have done this, it's time to practice, practice, practice!

On the day of the presentation, collect your thoughts, be relaxed, find confidence, and get ready to enjoy giving the presentation. During the presentation, keep in mind the tone of your voice, your movements, etc. One useful thing to do is "audience checks" – this is done by looking around to see how engaged the audience is. This will help you determine whether or not you need to take a break, or explain an idea further. Remember to keep yourself engaged in the material throughout the presentation. Personalize the material and tell relevant stories – this will let your audience see the passion that you have for the topic, and make it more interesting for them as well.

After the presentation, take some time to reflect how you did. Was there anything that worked better than you expected? Did you note areas for improvement? How did the audience seem through most of it? Remember, your presentation style is the primary driving force behind the effectiveness of your presentations. View your presentation style as a constant evolution, and always work towards improvement.

by **Tatiana Astray**, M.Sc. student,  
Marketing and Consumer Studies

# How to “Open Up” a Classroom: A Personal Meditation

I volunteered at the Graduate Student Teaching Conference this year, helping out with preparation work and moderating some of the sessions. The day began with the keynote speaker, Dr. Julia Christensen Hughes, presenting an engaging and insightful talk on effective teaching strategies. Next, I was off to moderate my first session, ‘Giving Great Presentations’, by Tatiana Astray, an MSc Candidate in Marketing and Consumer Studies, and it was appropriately excellent. (See *summary of Tatiana’s presentation on page 2.*) My next two sessions were ‘Learning Styles’ with Peter Wolf, Director of Teaching Support Services, and an information session on ‘How to deal with the chaos of grad studies in the physical sciences’ with Kristy Erickson, PhD Candidate in Chemistry. (See *summary of Kristy’s presentation on page 11.*) The last event of the day was a discussion panel on what needs to change in post-secondary education. Throughout it all, I enthusiastically absorbed everything I could about how to be a more effective teacher, and there was no shortage of information on the subject. But how much of it will I actually be able to use?

I have been TAing Introductory Genetics for three semesters now. Twice a week, I present 50-minute seminars going over workbook questions with a group of c.20 students, but the hardest thing in the world seems to be to get them to actually participate. This is a real problem, because I know that if these students got involved in the problem-solving portion of the process they would learn it a lot better. As it happens, this was the very first topic identified at the conference, and the solution made a lot of sense. If you want students to participate, Dr. Hughes explained, you need to make sure that the environment is open, safe, and comfortable. Much of the

rest of the conference seemed focused on how to do that. My conclusion, from the presentations I attended, is that you really just need to get them talking. You can start small by posing a question they can think about for a second, and then follow up by giving the students the opportunity to discuss the question in pairs or groups. Finally, have them take the last step by reporting their answers in front of the whole class. When students attempt this and realize that all is still good, they won’t be afraid to speak up again. I left the conference brimming with excitement and desperate to try out some of what I’d learned on my unsuspecting seminar groups.

As it turns out, the strategy works wonderfully. I entered the class and I opened up the environment. I introduced myself, asked people’s names, told them about the importance of their participation, got them to shout out the numbers for all the questions they had from the workbook, and did whatever I could in those first five minutes to make sure as many of the students were talking as possible. Under normal circumstances, one or two students would have helped me out, grudgingly, as we went along, but this time fully 50% or more of them were actively answering questions. I was so thrilled that I did the same thing in my next seminar and got even better results. Over the last few weeks I’ve been trying to get more and more involvement from my students and, while some days are more difficult than others, the overall trend is undoubtedly greater participation, better understanding, and more fun. For me, the Graduate Student Teaching Conference was an inspiring and fulfilling experience.

by **Daniel Jeffery**, PhD candidate, MCB



# Public Speaking, or, Why Most People Would Rather Die Than Speak to a Roomful of Undergraduates



The fear of public speaking regularly comes at the top of lists of the most common fears. Famously, a study conducted at the height of the Cold War ranked the fear of public speaking as more terrifying to more of the population of the United States than the threat of nuclear annihilation. We began this session by first identifying the specific terror within the broader category of the fear of public speaking: performance anxiety, which can be defined as the fear of failure combined with public scrutiny. We then undertook a quick exercise to show how irrational the fear of failure is, by having everyone in the session take 30 seconds to draw the person sitting next to them. This task is designed to be impossible, yet inevitably solicits apologies from every participant, showing just how embedded in our psyche the fear of failure is. Fear of a performance, however, is not something that needs to be avoided, but oftentimes embraced, as the fear enables an objectively discernable improvement in performance quality.

Following this, we discussed the ways in which different professional performers have dealt with performance anxiety, from the use of anxiolytic drugs to meditation. Though drugs such as caffeine, alcohol and illegal substances like beta-blockers, opiates and stimulants have been used by performers to deal with the stress of performance, we concluded that the solution with the most long term benefits for one's health is regular sleep, diet and exercise.

There are several different models of performance anxiety as described by scientists, two of which we discussed. One model notes that performance anxiety is affected by three factors, including:

- Individual Personality (e.g. which skills one has in coping with stress)

- Task Mastery (i.e. how competent one is at the task being performed)
- Situational Stress (e.g. one's dissertation advisor is in the audience)

Another model of performance anxiety discusses the inability to perform in terms of catastrophic failure, where the individual is able to cope with or use the stress of the performance to a certain level, after which the quality of the performance seriously degrades. In each model, there are forms of maladaptive thinking that precipitate the failure to perform, and contribute to the stress of the situation. The forms of maladaptive thinking that we discussed were:

- Overgeneralization
- "All or Nothing" Thinking
- Disqualifying the Positive
- Ritualism/Superstition
- Catastrophizing
- Self Handicapping
- Self Sabotage

Finally, we discussed the forms of maladaptive thinking, asking individuals to, for now, merely note what form they most often engage in.

by **Andrew Bretz**, PhD Candidate,  
School of English & Theatre Studies

# What's Your "Schtick"?

## Mine's Late-Medieval Poop Jokes

This past weekend, while volunteering at the University Art Association of Canada (UAAC) Conference, held at the U of G this year thanks in no small part to Dr. Sally Hickson, an Undergraduate student who I taught a couple years back both as a GTA and guest lecturer began chatting with me about photography. During a lull in the conversation, I sheepishly admitted to her that I had forgotten her name. I quickly added that I remembered her face – it was just her name I had forgotten. After convincing me that she wasn't offended by this slip of my memory, this student told me she would always remember me because of the visuals I'd displayed during the guest lecture I'd presented to her class – specifically, a set of late-medieval and Early Modern woodcuts depicting humorous (or gravely insulting, depending on your religious bent) scenes of German Protestant peasants defecating into the Pope's upside-down tiara.

I chuckled when she recollected my use of these crude scatological visual aids – not so much because I still find these woodcuts wildly entertaining (don't get me wrong – I do!) – but rather because of the number of times I've used such crude sixteenth-century Protestant anti-Catholic propaganda as a highly-effective "schtick" to successfully lure, or hook, Undergraduate students into the seemingly dry domain of late-medieval and Early Modern religious history. Indeed, many of the professors I experienced as an Undergraduate student had great "schticks", or hooks, that ensured their students would be entertained – as well as retain information – during lecture.

One wildly-popular History professor at the University of Waterloo, for instance, is known for taking on the physical personas of the historical characters he teaches his students about. In the most dramatic of these theatrical portrayals, this professor takes on the role of a ranting, swearing, terrifying American Sergeant during the Vietnam War who tears around the classroom screaming at the students. In another, he sobs uncontrollably in front of the class. These antics – or this "schtick" – seem to work, as it's become virtually impossible to get into any of this professor's classes on account of his popularity, and tales of his screaming, or sobbing, or otherwise electrifying historical monologues have become legendary around Waterloo's campus.

Another one of my former professors, who taught me Undergraduate Renaissance Art History at McGill, had a different

sort of "schtick", or hook, to make his students remember the particular churches, artwork and urban geography of fifteenth-century Florence. Specifically, each time this professor introduced a new Florentine Renaissance church to the class, he'd describe exactly where it was located by detailing how to travel from its front doors to the nearest pub. In this way, this professor familiarized his students with the urban lay-out of Renaissance Florence through stories of his "bar-hopping." It was wildly entertaining, and educational too, as the class began to clearly visualize the holy pilgrimage routes between each of Florence's sacred buildings!

When I took medieval Romanesque and Gothic architectural history at York University, my professor there had a great "schtick" that allowed his students to better understand and virtually experience the myriad of maze-like walkways, tunnels and bridges that run through and under and over the walls and roofs of medieval churches and cathedrals. While clicking through countless photographs taken *by him* that detailed the different vaulting, windows and masonry of particular medieval buildings, this professor would explain how difficult it was to get a particular shot, or how close to death he'd come while attempting to capture a photo by spanning a rotting wooden walkway hundreds of feet above a church's floor, or which lens he'd used (and which shutter speed, and f-stop) in order to focus on a tiny detail hundreds of feet up in the church's ceiling, and so on. That is, his "schtick" was one of his own heroic exploits and photographic methods as he risked his life in the rafters of medieval cathedrals taking photos for our benefit. The fact that

this professor's students were encouraged, through his stories, to imagine what it must have been like to scale such heights in order to capture such incredible photos, enabled them (at least virtually) to place themselves into the very history they were learning. What a great "schtick"!

It is my firm belief that all successful teachers have a "schtick" of some kind. Whether this schtick derives from personal anecdotes or late-medieval poop jokes is up to you – just make sure that if you decide to go with poop jokes, you give me a bit of the credit! (Or maybe I'd be best left out of it...)

by **Christopher Tiessen**, MA Candidate,  
Visual Art & Culture  
TAAC Co-Chair, TABloid Editor



# TA and Instructor Communication

Have you been wondering about your first weeks as a TA at the University of Guelph? Specifically, have you been thinking about all of your new responsibilities, and how you and the Professor you are working with will be able to remain consistent with grading and counseling students in the course? This session offered some strategies for consistent grading, dealing with grade disputes, applying grading rubric models, as well as some suggestions for better communication between you and the Professor you are working with. Experienced TAs Chris Tatham, Julia Woodhall and Sarah Ciotti joined us in this session to comment on these matters and more! Here are a few of the many ideas that were discussed in this session.

## i) TA and Prof Communication, Time for Students, and Office Hours

It is necessary to meet with the Professor you are working with right at the beginning of the semester in order to fill out your GTA contract together. Regular meetings with the Professor helps keep things organized throughout the term. It is very important that you, as a TA, keep a copy of your signed GTA contract so that you and the Professor are aware at all times about what is coming up in the course, and for you to plan your marking, seminar or lab time, and other responsibilities accordingly. Also, be sure to allocate time in your contract for weekly email consultation and for your courselink discussions with students, as these hours really add up. If you do not include an estimate of these hours in your GTA contract, you may find yourself working over your assigned hours.

Try to schedule office hours so that they work for both you and the students in the class. It is great if you are able to schedule your office hours just before or after class to meet the needs of students. This will save you time, as there will not be as many email questions if your scheduled office hours are on the same

day as lecture, when the students should be on campus.

## ii) Clarifying Grading Expectations, Consistent Grading & Grading Rubrics

In order to create and guarantee consistency with marking, the Professor should take the time to discuss grading with you at the beginning of the semester and regularly throughout the term. It is useful for the Professor to supply you with a grading criteria, a list of answer expectations, or, even better, a grading rubric for review prior to receiving the midterms and assignments to mark. When the assignments or midterms are submitted for marking, the Professor and TAs should review the evaluation criteria and format once again. Examining and marking a few midterms or assignments together in a quiet space can be very helpful. Discuss these samples of marked answers with one another and see how consistent you are in your grading. Are you and the Professor following the guidelines set out in the answer expectation list or the grading rubric? Discuss the effectiveness of the marking scheme, the consistency of marks and the feedback that you provide alongside the grade you record on the students' midterm answers or assignments. Make changes as appropriate and discuss with each other why changes may be made.

## iii) Midterm Madness – Announce, Post and Review Midterm Formats

Show students a couple of days ahead of time, on the document camera, what the midterm format will look like - by the way, this will be the quietest moment in your class throughout the whole semester! Post this midterm format on Courselink (posted a week or two before the midterm) so the students have access to it, and they will not be continually emailing you, asking about the format! It is wise to also state

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Example of a Grading Rubric I use for a Letter to the Editor Assignment in a Social Theory Course:

Grading Criteria	A (80-100)	B (70-79)	C (60-69)	D (50-59)	F (0-50)	Mark
Content of "Letter to the Editor"	Excellent, brief summary of the news event or social justice issue you refer to. Excellent and thoughtful discussion of the contemporary news event or social justice issue, as if written from the theorist's perspective. Convincing, excellent, informed arguments in your letter writing.	Good, brief summary of the news event or social justice issue you refer to.  Good discussion of the contemporary news event or social justice issue, as if written from the theorist's perspective. Convincing, good arguments in your letter writing.	Fair, brief summary of the news event or social justice issue you refer to.  Fair discussion of the contemporary news event or social justice issue, as if written from the theorist's perspective with fair arguments in your letter writing.	Poor summary of the news event or social justice issue you refer to.  Poor discussion of the contemporary news event or social justice issue, as if written from the theorist's perspective with poor arguments in your letter writing.	Inadequate	/ 7

the percentage value of each question on the midterm format. (The percentage value of each question should be posted right on the midterm as well.) If it is a multiple choice midterm, it is helpful to place the scantron explanation sheet right up on the midterm format a day or two before the midterm, in order to show students how to fill the scantron out accurately.

#### iv) Grade Disputes

Grades can be a source of conflict and frustration for students, TAs and Professors. Discuss, in advance, with the Professor the preferred approach for responding to disagreements with students.

If a student is concerned about a grade they receive, I ask that the student meet with the marker of their midterm or paper (either myself or one of the TAs). The TAs and I initial the papers we mark so that students will be able to identify the marker. This provides the TA with the opportunity to dialogue with the student concerned about their grade, and to review the answers together. This demonstrates a respect for the TA by both students and Professor. If the student is still unclear about the grading of his or her midterm or paper after discussing it with the TA marker, he or she may come to see me for further discussion about the grade, where I will consider the case, respecting the comments made by the TA.

If the midterm or assignment has clear expectations of grading criteria, the discussion with the student should go well. For example, here is a question I have used on a midterm with clear explanation of grading break-down:

Please answer 1 of the 2 following questions. This answer is worth 10 marks. Your answer should be approximately a page to a page and a half in length.

1. Please state and expand on **three** theoretical contributions of the works of **each of two** of the following theorists: Martineau, deTocqueville, Marx, Engels. For one of the theorists you chose, comment on how one of their theoretical contributions were relevant to a sociological, anthropological or political issue of their day (the period when they were writing) and how their theoretical contributions are relevant to an issue today.

*(Theorist A - three theoretical points and expand - 3 marks;  
Theorist B - three theoretical points and expand - 3 marks;  
Theorist A or B - how their theoretical contributions were relevant to an issue of their day - 2 marks, and today - 2 marks)*

During office hours it is recommended that TAs have, by their side, all Power Point slides or overhead notes that the Professor has provided as course material. When the student comes to see a TA about their grade, the Power Point slides and overhead notes will help clarify the answer expectation if there is any doubt or confusion.

These are just some of the suggestions offered at our very lively workshop session. I hope you find them useful!

by Professor **Linda Hunter**, Dept. of Sociology and Anthropology

(The following is a synopsis of the author's Graduate Student University Teaching Conference Presentation, originally presented at the GSUTC on September 25, 2010.)

## Video Games as Pedagogical Tools

Games and riddles have been used as pedagogical tools in the West at least since Alcuin of York came up with the riddle of the goose, the fox and the corn in the 9th century to teach medieval monks basic logic. Continuing this centuries old trend, today's modern technology allows teachers to create unique active learning environments, designed to facilitate the learning objectives of each class. In this seminar, we began by looking at the history of games in the academy, briefly examining the popularity of the medieval and Early Modern game "Rithmomachia" (or, "War Between Numbers") that, for a time, excelled even chess in popularity, and was designed to teach players the relationships between whole numbers.

From the beginning of the modern era of electronic media, educators have sought to use each new medium to supplement their pedagogy. For instance, the first radio broadcasting stations were university informational broadcasts, while vinyl records were used by the 1930s to create audio editions of Shakespearean texts. Moreover, educational films and filmstrips entered the primary school environment in the 1950s and, by the 1980s, primary schools across North America were beginning to experiment with gaming as a tool to teach literacy skills. Even geography lessons got in on the gaming act with, famously, *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?*

Following this discussion on the history of new media in education, we discussed why universities have been comparatively slow to take up gaming as a pedagogical tool, despite copious evidence of the effectiveness of active learning principles expressed in gaming. I suggested that at least part of the problem comes from the fact that higher education course objectives and content can be as individual as the professor involved, while educational games produced for mass consumption often explicitly appeal to the widest possible set of curriculum goals to ensure the widest possible market.

Other issues that affect higher education's resistance to gaming could be: The conservative attitudes of the institution (who are obliged to be fiscally conservative), the technological limitations of the students (ie. lack of requisite hardware), and even the teacher's own lack of necessary skills to program a game. This final point, of course, can be remedied by using platforms that many teachers/professors are already familiar with, such as MS Office software. New tools like Microsoft's PowerPoint plug-in "Mouse Mischief," as well as creative use of old functionality, such as inserting hyperlinks into Word documents, allow professors to create simple interactive games designed to fit course content, rather than attempting to fit course content to match particular games.

by **Andrew Bretz**, PhD Candidate,  
School of English & Theatre Studies

# What's Citation For, Anyways (your students may ask)?

## Here's what you can tell them

Citation is an important part not only of post-secondary work, but of academic work in general. Any intellectual endeavour may require you to use the work of others. When this happens, we cite whatever sources we use. The **way** we cite depends on the citation style (eg. MLA, APA, Chicago), and the type of material being used (eg.

book, article, diagram, webpage, commercial). This accounts for when and how we cite, **but have you ever wondered why we cite?** The easy answer is that we cite to back up claims we make, and to give credit to other scholars where credit is due ... but citation does more for your work than that...

*Virtually all types of academic work involve substantial reliance on other work. Let's think about just some of the various types of contributions your work can make to your field:*

All of these require the use of other people's work in one way or another. This does not mean that your work is irrelevant or unoriginal. It's quite the opposite. What makes your work relevant is that it fits with, criticises, expands upon, or explains existing work. What makes your work original is how you do so. That is, how you go about your exposition, elaboration, synthesis, or criticism is what makes your work original. The relevance is established by citation, while the originality is established by how you engage with the cited material.

### Exposition, Exegesis, and Explanation

- A comprehensive elucidation of a text, theory, argument, history, or problem.

### Elaboration

- A detailed explanation of another work with added information or support.

### Synthesis

- A combination of multiple works, ideas, or theories to form a new theory, idea, or perspective.

### Criticism

- An analysis and judgment of another work, theory, idea, etc.

### So What Role Does Citation Play?

Citations provide those who read your work with a map to the other works with which you engage, giving readers resources to which they can turn to learn more about the topics directly and tangentially related to your scholarship. Citation establishes the relationship between your contribution and its broader context.

## Myths About Citation

1. *The only reason we cite is to avoid getting in trouble.*

No! Citation will keep you out of trouble, that's true, but there is more to it than that. Citation adds something important to your work by showing that you understand the greater body of work of which it is a part.

2. *If I cite everything I read, it will look like all I did was write what other people thought. It will look like I hardly did anything myself.*

It's the complete opposite! If you do research and understand that research well enough to incorporate it into your own work, then you deserve credit. This is no easy feat! Citation shows off just how much work you've done, and allows the reader to go to the sources you cite for information that might not have made it into your work.

By **Jordan N. Bartol**, GTA, Dept. of Philosophy

# Promoting Yourself as a Respected & Effective University Instructor

Over lunch hour on the last Friday in September, a group of about a dozen Graduate students from across the university gathered together in a conference room in Day Hall to participate in the inaugural monthly TAACtics Graduate Teaching session. These informal discussion sessions, organized by the TAAC with help from TSS Educational Development Associate Dr. Natasha Kenny, focus each month on a particular issue near and dear to the (G) TA experience. I had the opportunity to develop and facilitate the inaugural TAACtics session, and decided to focus on “Promoting Yourself As a University Instructor.” Specifically, I wanted to talk with fellow Graduate students about how we might go about not only establishing ourselves as respected and well-liked instructors (by students and professors alike) through the implementation of different forms of “self-promotion”, but also how we might use “self-promotion” to strengthen the teaching dossier portion of our CV’s, for when it comes time to look for academic or non-academic careers after our journey as Graduate students (hopefully?) ends.

The following is a brief list of points I touched upon re. Graduate students promoting themselves as respected and effective university instructors:

## **(1) Self-promotion through effective communication(s):**

It is important to recognize that most of the time we deal with people at the university, we present ourselves not “in the flesh” but instead “virtually”, through email correspondence. As such, it’s imperative that emails are carefully edited before being sent. Indeed, I suggest that constructing well-written emails (and other forms of written correspondence) is as important as dressing smart and displaying great social skills and confidence in person. My parents, both respected professors with almost 60 years of university teaching between them, still edit each other’s correspondence before hitting “send.” As my dad has told me time and again: “Every conversation should be treated like a job interview.” This goes for emails, too, which should be formally addressed to the email’s recipient, and formally signed in closing. Creating a tasteful signature to go at the end of each email, disclosing your academic standing (ie. MA student; PhD Candidate, etc.), lets your students know that you should be taken seriously as a teacher. By the same token, letting your students know your academic experience, including your interests, specializations, etc., when you first introduce yourself to them in person at the beginning of each term, is also a great way to let them know that you deserve their attention and respect in the classroom.

## **(2) Self-promotion through the university’s prestigious Teaching Awards:**

A great way to gain respect as an effective university instructor is to have one or two teaching awards (or nominations for such awards) under your belt. And while there are undoubtedly many Graduate students on campus who deserve to win such awards, it’s often next to impossible to get nominated for such an award. This is, I suggest, primarily because many of the university’s teaching awards require that the nomination process begin either with the potential nominee’s Undergraduate students or one of the nominee’s professors initiating the process. While Undergraduate students are usually thinking of anything but nominating their favourite

TA for a teaching award near exam time, most professors are too busy to pay any attention to the teaching awards their Graduate students may be eligible for. My suggestion – be pro-active in the nomination process. There’s no rule that says you can’t approach one of your professors to ask whether they might begin the nomination process. It’s essentially like asking a professor for a reference letter. If they think you’re a good candidate, they’ll begin the nomination process. If not, they won’t. And while I wouldn’t recommend asking your students to nominate you directly, I do recommend asking the best and brightest students (or at least the ones who seemed to have taken a liking to your teaching style in seminar!) to write letters on your behalf, for future use. And always encourage all of your students to fill out end of term teaching evaluations.

## **(3) Self-promotion through student teaching evaluations, or testimonials:**

Like I just suggested, make sure that you encourage your students to fill out the end of term online teaching evaluations. While student teaching evaluations used to be filled out in class on written forms – a great way to get each and every student attending class that day to complete an evaluation – the recent method of getting students to fill in the forms online makes it much more difficult to get them to do it. Feel free to let your students know how important these online evaluations are for your teaching dossier, or at least for your ongoing process of improvement as an instructor. Indeed, the more feedback you get from your students via these online evaluations, the more you’ll know which elements of your teaching style need improvement, and which elements work well. I have managed to accumulate many student teaching evaluations over my lengthy time as a Graduate student at Guelph, and I’ve found that an edited version of the best of these written evaluations makes for an excellent supplement to my resume and CV.

## **(4) Self-promotion through guest lecturing:**

I’ve found that another great way to promote yourself as a teacher is to volunteer as a guest lecturer in a professor’s class. This works best when you’re TA’ing in a particular professor’s class already, who you can simply ask whether you might lead a lecture some time during the term. Not only does guest lecturing allow you to practice, practice, practice, but it also looks great on a resume or CV, and garners a lot of respect from the professor for whom you are GTA’ing. And hey, it can be fun too! As a Graduate student, I have managed to guest lecture over a dozen times in three different departments at multiple universities, simply because I’ve taken the initiative to ask whether I can. I’ve never regretted a single guest lecture, as each experience has been vital in my growth as a university instructor.

These are just four of the points I introduced and we discussed at the first TAACtics Graduate teaching session. Feel free to sign up for the next TAACtics session on the TSS webpage. We meet on the last Friday of each month, from noon to 1pm. If you want to sign up, or if you feel like facilitating a session, please email me at [ctiessen@uoguelph.ca](mailto:ctiessen@uoguelph.ca). And remember – there’s free pizza too!

by **Christopher Tiessen**, MA Candidate, Visual Art & Culture  
TAAC Co-Chair, TAbloid Editor

# When the Lab Becomes the Field



No more beakers, no more books, no more students' boring looks. At some point in your time as a Graduate Teaching Assistant, you may find yourself venturing into the field to teach a lab. If this is the case, instead of hiding behind a power point, or some well thought out notes, you will find yourself riding a bus or trucking around in mud, grass, and water while trying to explain to a class of 30 students how some peculiar piece of equipment works.

I have had many TA experiences in the field – both alone and with a professor – and I will admit it can get stressful. However, many of the same effective teaching strategies from classroom/lab settings come into play outdoors, such as integrating the whole class in the experience, asking questions, and, obviously, using real world examples to generate interest!

But while there are similarities between the indoor and outdoor classroom, it is important to note that there are also important differences when outdoors. First and foremost, the whole class must be able to hear you! Therefore, it is helpful to review the lab prior to leaving or while inside the bus - explain the purpose, how each step will be accomplished, and specific tasks of individuals and groups. When outside, speak loud and clear! Secondly, I cannot stress how important organization is when time is constrained. You must somehow direct your students to collect 'x' amount of data in 'y' amount of time, all the while making sure the data is legitimate and that the students are really learning - not just going through the motions. This can be challenging when each student has a different task; therefore, to engage the students in the full

process, walk around to each group reviewing data and asking questions... why is this that way? Do you think this number makes sense? Can you direct your group member in the water where he should be? How about you try using this equipment?

In many instances, you may have to use certain instruments, which (seemingly) always have a funny way of not working when needed most. In such a situation, do not get frazzled; instead, explain to the students that technical difficulties are part of field work, and do your best to make a learning experience of it while you explain and fix the problem. Alternatively, you can use the extra equipment that you were clever enough to bring! Always prepare for the worst, especially for factors you cannot control – weather, equipment malfunctions, bus not showing up (yes, this has happened to me!).

The great thing about field trips is that a number of students are always ecstatic to be able to do actual fieldwork and apply knowledge from lecture; hence, they seem to be the first to volunteer for the hardest tasks. I like to use these students as 'group leaders' when necessary due to their motivation and enthusiasm. Similarly, being an enthusiastic and encouraging TA makes a world of difference in evoking positive participation and understanding from the students, and working efficiently to finish early – which makes for great year-end TA reviews especially if the lab is on a Friday afternoon!

by **Jenni Vanos**, PhD Candidate,  
School of Environmental Sciences

# Bringing Order to the Chaos of Graduate School

As graduate students, we are often faced with the constantly difficult task of time management: that is, of balancing teaching responsibilities, research, and coursework. On top of this, we are oftentimes unaware of the various and unique expectations that may be placed on us throughout our graduate careers. With TAAC's 2010 theme being "empowering future educators and leaders", allow me to use this space to provide some "empowerment" to our university's Graduate student community, by highlighting resources and supports that can be used throughout our time as graduate students at Guelph.



graduate student, so you should begin meeting with them immediately (and on a regular basis) to begin fostering a positive relationship with them.

In addition to being a graduate student, remember that you are also still a person, with responsibilities that fall outside academe. Therefore, it is very important to maintain a healthy lifestyle, and to give yourself "vacations" from your work every so often. There are many on-campus and off-campus clubs, resources, and activities that you can engage in. These "stress-busters" are essential, and can greatly enhance your experience here at the University of Guelph.

Although the amount of pertinent information available for graduate students is far too much to cover in this article, there are two main resources for information readily available for Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs). These include the TA handbook, and TA survival guide. Copies can be found on the following sites:

[www.tss.uoguelph.ca/id/ta/tahb/tahindex.html](http://www.tss.uoguelph.ca/id/ta/tahb/tahindex.html)

[www.tss.uoguelph.ca/id/ta/tapdfs/TA%20survguide%202009-10.pdf](http://www.tss.uoguelph.ca/id/ta/tapdfs/TA%20survguide%202009-10.pdf) (2009/2010 edition)

As a GTA and/or Graduate Research Assistant (GRA), your first responsibility is to uphold the expectations placed upon you as a representative of the University of Guelph. As such, your first line of support is, of course, your RA supervisor or TA advisor. These individuals possess great expertise and experience, and should be consulted on a regular basis. They can help you deal with concerns, issues, schedules, goals and expectations, etc. They are the key to your success as a

From personal experience, I have found that communicating early and regularly with my RA supervisor and TA advisor has made my experience as a graduate student much less stressful, and much more enjoyable. I am more aware of what is expected of me, and I find myself to be much more productive. My "vacations" from work include weekly martial arts and dance classes, as well as public speaking workshops. All three have built up my confidence.

Finally, don't forget that TAAC is here for you to provide support. You are welcome to join workshops, sessions, and/or the committee at any time. All you need to do is contact me at [kerickso@uoguelph.ca](mailto:kerickso@uoguelph.ca).

Enjoy your time as a graduate student at the U of G, and keep up all the great work!

by **Kristy Erickson**, PhD Candidate,  
Department of Chemistry, TAAC Co-Chair

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## What do students really think about group experiences, and what can we do about it?

Group work can enhance depth of learning and student engagement, and students also experience the added benefit of improving their communication, leadership, and team work skills. Group work can pose challenges for students as they strive to enhance their own understanding of the subject matter, while negotiating the complexities of working collaboratively with others. Hillyard et al. (2010) recently assessed students' perceptions of learning in small groups, within an interdisciplinary arts and science program in the US. Their findings encouragingly suggest that all students (n=208) had engaged in at least one small group learning experience, and that

the majority had participated in a substantive group experience, varying in duration from 2 weeks to an entire semester.

Students generally agreed that group work provided them with a chance to experience diverse opinions and ideas, to deepen their understanding of the course material, and to enhance their leadership and communication skills. However, findings also suggested that students felt that group experiences rarely involved equal participation between group members, and that, in the majority of cases, a few members did most of the work. The authors also found that the students' perceptions of

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# Using Written Feedback to Enhance Student Learning

Many GTA positions require hours upon hours of marking laboratory reports, papers, and/or essays. We often spend a ton of time determining and assigning grades to individual assignments and scribbling comments in the margins<sup>1</sup>. These comments in the margins should not only explain why marks were lost – they should also explain gaps in understanding, and provide tips to improve future work. This type of supportive feedback allows students to translate your comments into future action, thereby enhancing student learning. So, how do we give ‘good’ feedback? Based on research investigating students’ perceptions of what constitutes useful feedback, Svinicki and McKeachie (2010)<sup>2</sup> suggest the following formula for good feedback:

- Understandable – use a language that students can relate to
- Selective – comment on 2-3 issues that you believe are the most important
- Specific – use examples from the student’s work to help explain your comments
- Timely – provide feedback in time to inform the next assignment
- Contextualized – feedback should be framed within the assessment criteria
- Non-judgemental – comments should be descriptive, not evaluative

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<sup>1</sup> For grading tips check out the TSS TA Survival Guide

<sup>2</sup> McKeachie’s Teaching Tips, 13th Edition

- Balanced – be sure to also include positives comments and highlight things that students should continue
- Forward looking and transferable – provide feedback in terms of what they can do next time to improve

Generally students find comments on papers incredibly useful; however, we still need to encourage them to use our feedback to improve their next assignment. Students often focus on the grade we assigned instead of the comments we provided. Therefore, it is important to encourage students to pay attention to, process, and act on feedback that we provide. To do this, I have found one technique particularly useful. It involves finding one of your old papers that you received a lot of feedback on – think of all those drafts you have sent your supervisor that have come back covered in comments... the more criticism the better. Show this paper to your students and describe how it felt to get this sort of feedback. Then, show your students the final (potentially published) paper and describe how important your supervisor’s feedback was to getting the paper to this stage, and how much you learned from the process. Students will appreciate your humility, and be motivated to use your feedback to improve their own work. This method shows students that constructive criticism and positive feedback are intended to help the student improve their skills – not just to justify why you deducted marks to distribute the grades.

by **Sherilee Harper**, PhD Student,  
Department of Population Medicine

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the overall effectiveness of group work and the ability of group experiences to enhance learning were most strongly correlated with the academic preparation of peers, and the instructor’s ability to explain why they were using small groups. Perhaps the most interesting study finding was that, “If students had bad experiences in group experiences in institutions prior to enrolling in the program, their attitudes remained negative, regardless of their experiences in the program” (p.17).

The findings of this study draw important attention to establishing a shared learning environment, where both the instructors and students:

- clearly discuss the course learning objectives related to activities and assessment strategies that involve group work (i.e. why they are doing what they doing);
- establish a safe environment for students to critically reflect upon their past group experiences, and to identify and assess the characteristics of positive/effective groups, and of successful group members;
- provide intentional opportunities for students to develop

the skills and resources necessary to successfully negotiate group processes and to equitably delegate tasks among group members (e.g. developing group contracts, establishing a shared vision and clear goals/objectives, scheduling regular group meetings, providing formative feedback, and participating in a critical analysis of group processes).

There is little doubt that group work can enhance student learning and contribute to the development of transferrable teamwork, leadership and communication skills. We must consistently strive to instill the importance of collaboration in higher education, by providing intentional opportunities for students to develop the skills and resources necessary to succeed in group environments.

Reference:

Hillyard, C., Gillespie, D., and Littig, P. University students’ attitudes about learning in small groups after frequent participation. *Active Learning in Higher Education* 11(1):9-20

by **Dr. Natasha Kenny**, Teaching Support Services