

# TAbloid News

Teaching Assistant Advisory Council (TAAC) Newsletter

Issue 4

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

## Inclusive Teaching and Academic Integrity Take Centre Stage at the 2010 Graduate Student Winter Teaching Workshop

Each winter semester, TSS hosts a three-hour graduate student teaching workshop. At this year's event, Mahejabeen Ebrahim, Associate Director of the Human Rights and Equity Office facilitated an interactive discussion regarding the importance of inclusive teaching in higher education. The University of Guelph prohibits any and all acts of discrimination and harassment based on the Ontario Human Rights code, and there are many ways that instructors and TAs can remove barriers to learning, by creating an accessible learning environment that respects our diverse abilities and our collective diversity. The participants actively identified and discussed how to address and eliminate barriers (practical, organizational or attitude-based) which may exist in academic environments. Through awareness, acceptance and appreciation, our teaching practices can have a profound impact on establishing a universally accessible learning environment. For more information on the University's Human Rights policies visit:

<http://www.uoguelph.ca/hre> . For more information on the University's seven principles of Universal Instructional Design (UID) visit: <http://www.uoguelph.ca/tss/uid/index.cfm>.

During the second half of the workshop, Philip Zachariah, Judicial Officer, Office of the Associate Vice President Academic presented a session which actively explored academic integrity at the University of Guelph. Participants were provided with an opportunity to discuss the university's policies and regulations regarding Academic

Misconduct, and to explore some of the challenges and practical strategies related to promoting academic integrity. As a member of the University of Guelph's academic community, we all have a responsibility to promote and to create an academic culture based upon integrity, and to apply teaching and learning strategies that help reduce academic misconduct. Graduate students play an important role in promoting Academic Integrity, as highlighted in this issue's article *Teaching Assistants and Academic Integrity* (p.7).



# Benefit of the Doubt? (Almost) Always!

Over my five or so years as a Grad student at Guelph, I've had my fair share of GTA assignments – over thirty of them, actually, spread across two departments. And while I've taught some superb students, and participated in tons of excellent seminar discussions, and graded some pretty unique assignments, and heard some splendid excuses from students who couldn't meet particular deadlines, recently I received an email from one of my undergrad students that may take the cake for the most absurd request ever! You see, as I arose from bed to the sound of church bells (my iPhone plays these horrible church bells that drive me insane, and have effectively turned me off real church bells forever) one morning during Week 12 this past semester, I checked my email before hopping into the shower, only to find a new message from one of my students, entitled "IMPORTANT. IMPORTANT." Not knowing what to expect, I opened this particular email to find out that the student wanted to let me know that he had missed the first 11 weeks of seminars, and needed to find out exactly how he might "make up for these absences." His excuse for the missed classes? The semester had been just too hectic to find the time to attend even one seminar class!

I am not telling you this as a sort of humorous anecdote that sums up the seeming lackadaisical attitudes of so many of this current crop of undergrads. Instead, I wanted to share this story with you because I fear that, in some form or other, almost all GTAs will face similar (although perhaps not so "extreme") requests from students requesting to "make up" for missed seminars, or late assignments, or no assignments, or... Specifically, I am writing this column to let you know how I have approached similar situations over the past five years in such a way that 1) keeps me sane, 2) keeps students (relatively) happy, and 3) keeps things "fair" for everyone. Please allow me now to present you with five things to look for when students approach asking for extensions, etc., that might help you to make a quicker, surer, fairer decision as to whether a particular student deserves (or doesn't deserve) an extension, a lost participation (read: attendance) grade, another chance, etc.:

**1** Quality Communicative Approach: If students see me in person about missed classes, failed assignments,

poor participation grads, etc., I tend to take them much more seriously than if I receive an email from them. (Emails that aren't signed are taken even less seriously. How am I supposed to know who's written me an unsigned email anyway?! The U really should offer a first-year course in email signing!)

**2** "Official" Excuses (ie. Doctor's note, etc.): If a student shows me a doctor's note, or professor's letter, or form signed by the President of the University, or team coach, etc., I ALWAYS give them the benefit of the doubt. Why waste your time trying to figure out whether the student's doctor is in on some conspiracy with the student to receive an extension, etc., when such a note effectively lets you off the hook as much as it lets the student off the hook!

**3** Concerted Effort: If students visit me during my office hour to discuss their plight, they are always taken seriously. Honestly, how many students does a GTA get to see each term visiting during office hour? One. Two. None? I thought so. If students take the time not only to figure out when you hold your office hour, but also where it is located in the university, they deserve to be heard!

**4** Make-Up Work: By far the main request I receive from students wanting something concerns "making up" for missed seminars. Here's what I do – simple and sweet. I let the student know that I'll take their absence into consideration (ie. I'll give them their participation grade for the missed seminar) if they complete a simple, one-page assignment. (It doesn't matter what the assignment is – just make sure it's related to the course you're helping teach.) And then leave it to them! Over the years, what I've found is that the serious students complete the assignment, while the not-so-serious students don't! If you get an assignment back, give the student their lost grade. No questions asked. If you don't receive an assignment, don't give them a grade. No questions asked. This tactic places all of the onus on the student, and none on yourself.

**5** Other Considerations: Is the student who's requesting an extension, or challenging a grade, or pleading for another chance, a joy to teach? Does the student in question attend class regularly? Does s/he participate in seminar



*Excuses... Excuses...*

discussion? Does s/he know your name? Are his/her previous grades awesome? If so, why not give these students the benefit of the doubt. In my eyes, they've earned it! If, on the other hand, you don't even recognize the student demanding a make-up exam, etc., perhaps you might hold off a bit before granting their request! (A sure way to see whether a student's ever been to seminar? Ask them your name! And then prepare for the awkward silence that ensues...)

To conclude: Remember that as a GTA, you're (probably) also a full-time Grad student. You have your own classes to attend, or your own research to complete, or conference papers to present. You're not a judge, and you're not a jury – so give students the benefit of the doubt unless it's quite obvious they don't deserve that benefit! After all, we were all undergrads too – wasn't it nice receiving that extension? I thought so!

Oh, and I almost forgot – you're probably wondering how I replied to the student requesting to make up for the 11 missed seminars? I simply told him to make sure he gets to



the twelfth one, for a single, sparkling, participation grade. And if he wants to discuss the issue more? Then he can see me during my office hour – that is, if he can figure out when, and where, it is!

**Christopher Tiessen, MA Art & Visual Studies**

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## Podcasting as Pedagogical Tool

Technology is increasingly a part of the classroom experience, changing the way both professors and TAs interact with students. Places like Duke University in the United States have developed corporate partnership deals with Apple, where every new student receives an iPod for 24-hour-a-day access to audio and video files of lectures.

Ideally, the implementation of a multi-media pedagogical strategy will increase engagement on the part of students, but it also comes with a number of possible costs, including decreased attendance at lectures, disengagement with more traditional forms of media (such as textbooks), and the expectation of the professor to “perform” their materials.

TAs have the advantage of being able to try new things without being unduly penalized for such innovation. The recent move to D2L across campus has enabled University of Guelph TAs to mount recorded lectures and seminar discussions online for students to access at their leisure.



If your course does not have a D2L site, Teaching Support Services supports TAs through helping us distribute podcast lectures or seminar discussions through iTunes. Furthermore, microphones and recording equipment can also be booked through TSS.

My own experience with podcasting lectures has been overwhelmingly positive. Student attendance does not significantly drop and those who are unable to attend no longer have to rely on the kindness of their colleagues for notes.

There is literally no excuse for students not to be engaged in their own learning process when they are given such opportunities. More importantly, students recognize that the responsibility is more than ever on them to keep up with the class work, shifting their implicit model of education from the “you fill my head” banking model, to the “I seek out opportunities to learn” engagement model.

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

# Giving Great Presentations

## Introduction:

It appears to me that within the university community there exists a growing epidemic of bad presentations. While on the outside this may not seem like a big problem, when you look at the implications, it is pretty serious. Bad presentations are not just troublesome because the audience feels bored sitting through them. Instead, they are dangerous because a) they waste the time of both presenter and audience, b) they don't successfully transfer knowledge, c) they lack any sort of productivity, and d) they hinder future presentations by "lowering the bar". Because TA's essentially give weekly "presentations" to Undergraduate seminar classes, I thought it would be useful to outline the background process that should go into developing a presentation – or seminar. Remember that the presenting should be fun for both you and the audience. If it doesn't feel fun, then it's time to improve!

## A Couple Weeks Before Your Presentation:

Before developing a presentation, you should first ask yourself the following questions: 1) Who is your audience? 2) What are the essentials that they should take away from your presentation? 3) Can you add some interactive parts to facilitate learning? 4) How can you simplify explaining a complex idea? Remember not to make your audience work to understand the information you're presenting. Instead, it is your job to make the information accessible.

A presentation is usually comprised of two basic components – the audio and the visual. Specifically, the visual serves as an aid to the more detailed audio part. Visual presentation aids can include PowerPoint and hand-outs. I am a big fan of PowerPoint presentations, as they

are relatively easy to create, and tend to be very helpful for the audience! When creating a PowerPoint presentation, keep it simple and to the point. Indeed, the best PowerPoint presentations have minimal information per slide. If your PowerPoint presentation slides include paragraphs of writing, then you need to simplify and reformat them, including only a few points for each sub-header. Hand-outs can be used to highlight particular PowerPoint slides, so that your audience is able to re-read certain important slides that contain important information. Hand-outs can also include additional information not included in the PowerPoint.

Make sure to be aware that your audience will include individuals with different types of learning styles. Thus, you should include elements of your presentation that cater to unique learning styles, including visual elements (graphs, charts, pictures, videos, etc.); oral/aural elements (your own voice, groups discussion, music, etc.); and tactile elements (objects, etc.)

From an aesthetics standpoint, remember that people are attracted to things that are visually compelling, symmetrical, and consistent. Adding some colour to your presentation, making your slides visually symmetrical and uncluttered, utilizing a consistent template for each slide, and beginning your presentation with a table of contents will all work toward a successful presentation.

## Just A Few Days Before Your Presentation:

Now that your PowerPoint is completed, it's time to practice your part! Remember that the audio (ie. your voice!) goes hand-in-hand with the visual, aiding in the explanation and detail of the topic. Make sure to go over your presentation



several times, so that when you present it doesn't come off as if you are reading it for the first time. If you've read it several times beforehand, you will be much more confident and relaxed when presenting to a live audience. You will also know your material. This is extremely important, because if you don't, your audience will sense it the way dogs smell fear! An interesting tool for practicing your presentation is by videotaping yourself before-hand, using a camera or a computer web-cam, and then critiquing your mannerisms.

### **Just Hours Before Your Presentation:**

Before giving your actual presentation, prepare yourself psychologically. Be comfortable. Be confident. Be energized. These states of mind will translate into a better presentation, even if you stumble. By relaxing yourself, you will come off more confident.

### **During Your Presentation:**

When giving your presentation, keep in check your posture, your voice, your facial expressions, and body positioning. Make sure to use the space around you – take advantage of it by walking around. Be wary of standing in one spot, at the front of the class, for the duration of your presentation. Standing in one spot does not entice interaction. Show the participants that you are not the end all and be all of knowledge; instead, invite them to share and to answer questions with you.

Do audience checks, where you mindfully look at your audience to gauge their attentiveness. Are they looking confused? Are they disconnected? Are they smiling? Try to adjust yourself by reading the tone of the room. If

your audience seems disconnected, then break from your presentation for a moment and try to engage them. This can be done by asking a question for the audience to answer, by raising a hypothetical scenario, or by getting the audience to theorize using the information from your presentation. Is it time to play a little video, or maybe it's just a time for a mental break?

Toward the end, make sure you leave some time for a question and answer period; however, remember not to leave all the questions until the end. And make sure you are providing answers as you present so that your audience doesn't get confused, and stop following the presentation.

At the very end of your presentation, make sure you do an audience check one last time to gauge your audience's reaction to your presentation style and the material you covered.

### **Post-Presentation Reflections:**

Reflect on your presentation and figure out what worked and what didn't. Remember that while the presentation topic may change, your presentation style can be honed during each successive presentation, as your style is the primary driving force behind the effectiveness of your presentations. It would be helpful to view your presentation style as a constant evolution.

**Tatiana Astray, MSc Marketing & Consumer Studies**



# Meditation: An Hour In The Life Of A First-Year GTA

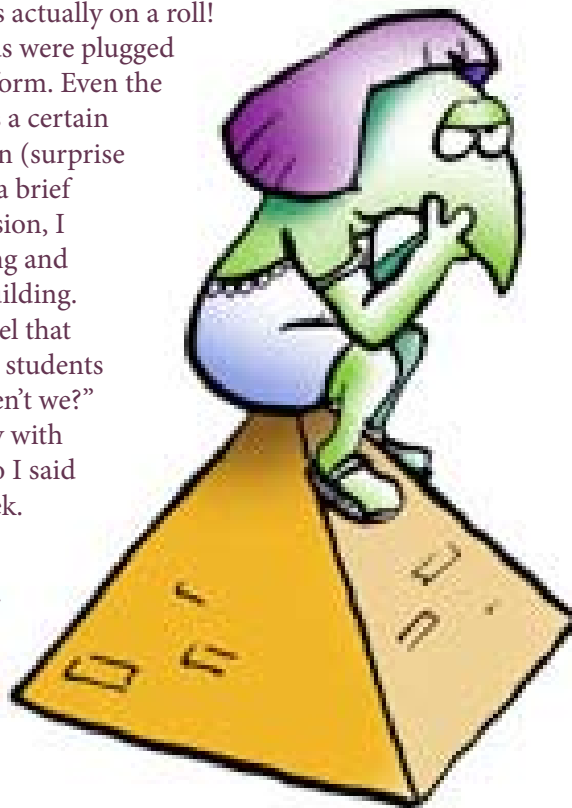
I begin each tutorial in a brief state of shock – shock brought on by the fact that I am standing in a room in which students have actually shown up. They showed up for the first class and now they continue to show up each week! It absolutely floors me. Of course, I am not so naïve as to think that it is because of my brilliant teaching methods and witty rapport. Instead, these students paid to take part in these lessons and a portion of their final grade requires them to attend. It is just unfortunate that the first hurdle they must overcome to achieve this grade is to put up with a first-time TA, bumbling her way through fifteenth-century art. But I do not let such trivial matters discourage me (at least, not for very long) and I hold onto the hope that at least one of my students shows up just for the sheer thrill of seeing my beaming face each week.

My Thursday class has been struck with bad luck. Beyond my terrible jokes and stuttered sentences, there are also the technical malfunctions. Each week we review an online podcast and each week the overhead speakers break down to the point where it sounds like the teacher from Charlie Brown is mumbling about 15th-century dome construction. One other incident involved a misplaced power cord which caused a computer to crash in the middle of a midterm review (just whose computer that was is not important). Recently, I was excited to find that I was actually on a roll! The speakers were working, power cords were plugged in, and I was speaking in full sentence form. Even the students seemed to sense that there was a certain spark to the air. At the peak of my lesson (surprise surprise), the fire alarm went off. After a brief moment of staring at the class in confusion, I remembered my primary school training and got everyone to file calmly out of the building. As we stood shivering in the wind tunnel that had formed outside Axelrod, one of my students came over and asked, “We’re cursed, aren’t we?” Honesty has always been my first policy with students but I like to remain positive, so I said “Yes, of course we are. See you next week. Fingers crossed everyone!”

Most of you who read this will wonder why anyone in their right mind would allow me to take charge of a group of students. I often wonder the same thing. The lesson to be gained, if there has to be a lesson, is this: No matter how many adversities

I may face as a TA, no matter how often I doubt myself or embarrass myself, I keep going. After the fire alarm incident I received an email from a student who thanked me for being such a dedicated TA. Again, I was absolutely floored, but it is moments like that which remind me why the hell I’m here in the first place.

**Katie Green, MA Art & Visual Studies**



# Teaching Assistants and Academic Integrity

Graduate students play an integral role in the teaching and learning community at the University of Guelph. Teaching assistants are dedicated to a variety of roles, including leading labs and seminars, marking assignments and exams, and providing effective feedback and support to students. TAs can have an enormous impact on promoting a positive learning culture, based on a fundamental commitment to academic integrity. Gallant (2008, p.6) states that, "The aim of the integrity strategy is to develop in students the character necessary to resist misconduct and the fortitude to choose actions that align with institutional rules..."

**"...higher education plays an essential role in democratic society – one that requires us to provide our students with a high quality education, to develop moral and engaged citizens, and to uphold the highest standards of integrity. We need a total recommitment to this role."**

(Christensen Hughes and McCabe, 2006a, p. 59)

The following teaching and learning strategies will help you foster a culture of academic integrity in your role as a TA. They have been adapted from the recommendations provided by Gallant (2008), and Christensen Hughes and McCabe (2006a; 2006b).

**Discuss** regularly the concept of academic integrity and why it is important within the academic community and society as a whole.

**Become** familiar with the University's policies and regulations regarding academic misconduct (see section VIII of the Undergraduate Calendar for a full description of the University's policies, procedure and regulations related to Academic Misconduct).

**Discuss** the University's policy and regulations regarding academic integrity and misconduct openly with both the instructor and the students. What are the roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders in upholding these standards (e.g. the institution, administration, faculty, TAs and students)?

**Promote** a collegial community by getting to know your students and encouraging student participation, engagement, and socialization.

**Discuss** the course expectations and norms directly with the course instructor. For example, how much collaboration is too much? Can students avail themselves to previously used examinations, lab reports and/or essays?

**Discuss** and give clear instructions and guidelines regarding the course assignments and exams.

**Provide** opportunities that encourage students to regularly assess their progress in relation to the course content and learning objectives.

**Provide** opportunities for students to develop and structure their scholarly work using organization strategies such as outlines and concepts maps.

**Provide** opportunities for students to discuss and review assignment drafts.

**Carefully** review submitted exams, assignments and research papers for inconsistencies in content, grammar, flow, and citations.

**Provide** timely and effective feedback that provides specific steps to improve the students' future learning experiences and academic work.

**Discuss** the importance of and encourage the honest reporting of data, including both expected and unexpected research and laboratory results.

**Help** students avoid plagiarism by reviewing:

- appropriate citation methods (i.e. how and when to cite another's work and why it is important)
- effective research methods for finding credible scholarly sources of information
- note-taking strategies for keeping track of and paraphrasing works cited

**Be** a vigilant invigilator by actively circulating the exam room.

**Promptly** report suspected cases of academic misconduct (e.g. plagiarism, falsification, obstruction, aiding & abetting) to the course instructor.

**Above all, model academic integrity in your own academic practices.**

Natasha Kenny, Educational Development Associate

*A version of the above article will appear on the University of Guelph's forthcoming Academic Integrity website. It has been reprinted with permission.*

## References:

- Gallant, T. B. (2008). *Academic Integrity in the Twenty-first Century: A Teaching and Learning Imperative*. ASHE Higher Education Report. Volume 33, number 5, Jossey-Bass. 144p.
- Christensen Hughes, J. M., & McCabe, D. L. (2006a). Understanding academic misconduct. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 36(1), 49-63.
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# Great Teaching and Great Questions

In a 2009 article published in Peer Review, Ken Bain and James Zimmerman explored how great instructors inspired a deep approach to learning. In comparison to surface learners, deep learners are said to take a superior approach to learning by relying less on memorization, and more on questioning premises, challenging assumptions and considering the implications and applications of the course subject matter (Marton and Saljo, 1976). It is within this learning realm that students more thoughtfully construct an understanding of course material and, perhaps most importantly, where they are more likely to carry their learning experiences forward.



Bain and Zimmerman (2009, p.11) summarize that, “Human beings are most likely to learn deeply when they are trying to solve problems or answer great questions that they have come to regard as important, intriguing and beautiful.” Students thrive in learning environments which provide them with an opportunity to explore and reflect upon how the course material has both personal and “real-world” relevance, and fundamentally challenges how they see the world around them. It is under these learning conditions that we, as instructors and fellow learners, become wonderfully consumed by an inspired sense of curiosity and inquiry that is driven almost solely by the students.

The authors continue by stating, “...the best teachers – and this may be their most profound ability – find ways to link their own disciplinary concerns and interests with those of the students. [They have] the ability to frame questions in ways that would both capture the students’ imagination and challenge some of their most cherished paradigms” (p. 11). Great instructors engage in a poetic dance between student and instructor, between comfort and challenge, and between the known and unknown – it is a complex dance that may take years to perfect. Yet, the reward is an educational system based on the very premise of providing students with the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to approach the world’s most complex challenges. If I could change one thing in higher education it would be to change our solution-driven quest for learning, to one that encourages instructors to ask and seek great questions that challenge the basis on

which the instructor’s and learners’ understanding depends. When we ask great questions, we may just inspire a whole new generation of great problem-solvers.

Bain, K. and Zimmerman, J. 2009. Understanding Great Teaching. Peer Review 11(2):9-12.

Marton, F. and Saljo, R. 1976. Approaches to Learning. In Marton et al. (eds) The Experience of Learning (pg. 36-55).

**Natasha Kenny**, Educational Development Associate

## Graduate Student Teaching Development Program (TDP): Teaching Passport

The TDP is coordinated by Teaching Support Services (TSS) and provides a variety of events, workshops and resources for graduate students who are interested in developing their pedagogical knowledge and skills during their graduate studies. Each semester, TSS offers a number of events and workshops for graduate students with an interest in university teaching. In recognition of their participation in the TDP, students who participate in a minimum of 12 hours of TDP workshops and events during their graduate studies will receive a Recognition of Participation signed by the Director of Teaching Support Services. Workshops offered as part of the TSS graduate student workshop series, the fall conference on university teaching, and the winter teaching workshop can be used as contribution towards completion of this program.

Passports can be obtained at any of the TDP workshops or in the Teaching Resource Centre, Room 125, Day Hall. For further information please contact Natasha Kenny at [nkenny@uoguelph.ca](mailto:nkenny@uoguelph.ca).

