

TAbloid News

Teaching Assistant Advisory Council (TAAC) Newsletter

Issue 2

Edited by: Andrew Bretz, School of English and Theatre Studies

TA Winter Orientation 2009



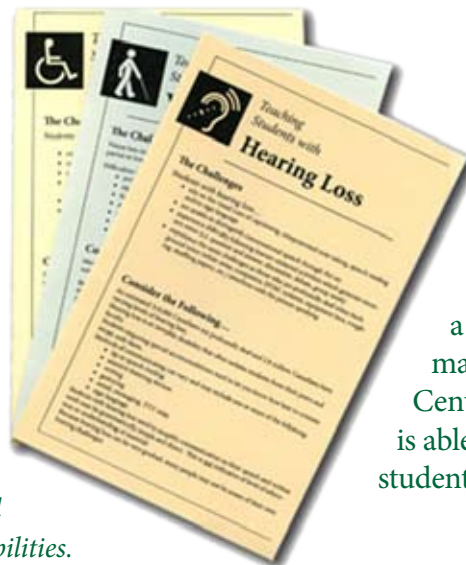
The 2nd Annual TA Winter Orientation was held Wednesday, January 14, 2009. Approximately 40 engaged graduate students attended the three-hour evening workshop, and by all accounts, the event was a success! The interactive workshop offered a variety of sessions designed to provide grad students with opportunities to improve their teaching skills, connect with their peers, and discuss tips and strategies for enhancing their role as a TA at the University of Guelph. The final keynote address given by Peter Wolf (Assoc. Director of Teaching Support Services) on “Emerging Trends in Higher Education” provided an overview of the challenges and opportunities facing universities, and emphasized the profoundly important contribution that TAs have on the University of Guelph’s exemplary academic community. We would like to extend our gratitude to all volunteers who helped make this event a success!



Teaching Students with Disabilities

(Part One, Vision Loss)

Students come to university from every possible background, race and ability yet, for the most part, we live in a culture that forgets the unique challenges posed by disabled students. As a student with a disability who passes as “normal,” this issue is particularly close to my heart. Students with hearing or vision loss and students with mobility issues can be intimidating to teaching assistants and professors alike, but minor accommodations can result in an improved pedagogical experience for all. In this three part series, TABloid will be exploring teaching students with disabilities.



Teaching Support Services in Day Hall offers pamphlets on best practices for teaching students with vision loss and other disabilities. 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 needing accommodations.

Andrew Bretz,
School of English and Theatre Studies

Vision Loss

Students with vision loss can vary from those who are unable to see colours and contrast, to those who are completely blind. With such a wide spectrum of differing abilities, there is an equally wide spectrum of assistive devices available to these students, from guide dogs and Braille note taking devices to text magnifiers and digital recorders.

Here are a few basic suggestions to help you work productively with students with vision loss:

- In classroom settings, describe verbally any visual aids and terms that are written on the board or in PowerPoint presentations.
- In wet labs, try to get access to adaptive equipment like talking thermometers, calculators and tactile timers.
- In performing fieldwork, the teaching team must work with the student to develop an assignment that the student can accomplish.
- Always identify yourself and ask the student if they need any assistance. If you are guiding them, respect their personal space by letting the student take your elbow rather than you taking theirs.

Science Pedagogy

The cornerstone of effective science pedagogy is a strong, factual knowledge base that stimulates and fosters the human spirit of curiosity, investigation, discovery and creativity. Contemporary active learning methods, such as problem-based learning, process-oriented guided inquiry, and peer-led team learning, interspersed with hands-on learning and traditional lecture formats, are indispensable and effective pedagogies of engagement for students of science.

Science educators constantly strive to structure their courses with a variety of such methods centered on “investigation” in order to maximize students’ enthusiasm for science. There is an even greater or equally proportionate need for students of science to be committed to “investigative learning” and to thus appreciate the efforts of their educators who have dedicated themselves to the advancement of scientific research and the teaching of science. Effective science pedagogy is invaluable to the student and to the educator.

Icy D’Silva,
Department of Food Science

The One-Minute Paper

It is nearing the end of the class, and the instructor stops a few minutes early and asks the students to answer two questions: “What was the most important thing that you learned in class today?” and “What question remains unanswered?” After a few minutes, she collects the papers, and then responds to some of the main points and items requiring clarification at the beginning of the next class.



The One-Minute Paper (OMP) has been touted as a simple tool to encourage active listening, to improve student/teacher interaction, to gather informal teaching feedback, and to improve knowledge retention. But does it really work? David Stead presented a review of the OMP in the journal *Active Learning in Higher Education* (2005, 6: 118-131) and concluded that this technique provided a low-tech teaching strategy that, “can produce very beneficial results for a modest amount of time and effort.” Not only do students generally view this technique favorably, but some of the most obvious teaching and learning benefits included gathering timely feedback on students’ understanding of the course material presented in class and even improved test scores. One caution - when overused this technique loses its appeal and both the quantity and quality of student responses decline. However, as both the format and use of the OMP can be adapted throughout the semester, this challenge is easily overcome. Give this simple teaching tool a try a few times throughout the semester, and see if it works for you!

Natasha Kenny,
Teaching Support Services

How to Avoid “Bed-Head”: Starting an Early Morning Seminar

Whether we want to admit it or not, we’ve all rolled out of bed dreading that 8:30AM seminar. We’ve all gone to an early class more asleep than awake and, face it, we probably yawned more than we took notes. As a morning seminar leader, one might ask: how can I avoid a classroom full of bed heads – that is, a classroom full of half sleeping, almost snoring, dazed and confused looking students? Well, here’s a suggestion.

First, begin the class with a participatory activity. Force students to get into groups and do a quick review of previous material. This will not only jog everyone’s memory, but it will set a foundation for the new lesson. Or, time permitting, organize a “Think, Pair, Share Activity” that encourages students to think for themselves, think as a team, and then share their ideas with a larger group.

Making students take initiative and respond to material forces them to be awake, ensuring that they play an active part in the learning process. Even if time is tight a TA can open the seminar with an enthusiastic bang!

Try beginning the seminar with a few questions, rather than launching into explanations, definitions, or statements. Make sure the questions are open-ended and pointed enough to stimulate discussion and generate a collective response.

In sum, think of yourself as a second wake-up call and open the class actively and energetically! It is easy to doze off when you are not required to do anything but take notes; however, it is not so easy when one is asked to participate in the lesson.

Lindsay Liciskai,
School of English and Theatre Studies



Yes, Peer Discussion Improves Student Learning!

In a recent article published in *Science* (2009,323: 122-124) Smith et al., found that when undergraduate students at the University of Colorado-Boulder were posed with a multiple-choice question during lecture, and then were given an opportunity to actively engaged in small-group peer discussion regarding their individual responses, they increased their conceptual understanding of the course material, and were more likely to answer a similar



multiple-choice question correctly. Furthermore, the improvements in learning occurred even if none of the learners in the discussion group actually knew the correct answer to the initial question! So, why does peer discussion work? The authors concluded that, "...justifying an explanation to a fellow student and skeptically examining the explanation of a peer provide valuable opportunities for a student to develop the communicative and metacognitive skills that are crucial components of disciplinary expertise." This study provides further support for the use of peer discussion as a simple and effective teaching strategy to encourage active learning in the university classroom.

Natasha Kenny,
Teaching Support Services

TA Advisory Council

The Teaching Assistant Advisory Council (TAAC) is a volunteer team of experienced teaching assistants who share knowledge and provide advice to motivate and inspire academic excellence by enhancing TA training and professional development opportunities for graduate students at the University of Guelph.

TAAC volunteers meet regularly throughout the academic year to provide creative and innovative suggestions for the continual improvement of TA educational development programs at TSS. They are actively involved in the organization of the Fall TA Conference, TA Professional Development Series, TA Discussion Groups, and the Winter TA Professional Development Workshop. In addition to providing valuable organizational and administrative support, many members participate as facilitators and presenters during these TA events.

If you have any further questions, or are interested in volunteering as a member of TAAC, please contact Natasha Kenny (nkenny@uoguelph.ca, x52963).



GSLI

GRADUATE STUDENT LEARNING INITIATIVE



What is the GSLI?

The Graduate Student Learning Initiative (GSLI) is a collaborative endeavour that brings together key campus services to support graduate student development in a range of academic and professional skills. The GSLI is sponsored and supported by the Learning Commons, Graduate Program Services, and the Graduate Students' Association.

New for Winter 09

In collaboration with Student Life, the GSLI is running a pilot project on the use of e-portfolios for graduate students. Along with other benefits, participants will have an opportunity to create an e-portfolio and assist with assessing the system for graduate student use. For details see the E-Portfolio Pilot Project page.

GSLI Winter Programs

A wide range of free workshops is offered for graduate students this winter on topics such as:

- thesis writing
- grammar and writing for ESL/EAL students
- RefWorks
- using databases in the arts, sciences, and social sciences
- database searching
- specialized software including SAS, SPSS, ArcGIS
- academic presentation skills
- making & presenting a poster
- and more.

After a successful pilot in the fall, we are continuing to offer a number of non-credit courses, varying in length from three to six sessions. These courses expand on successful workshop topics and provide opportunities for more in-depth skill development. Students who demonstrate the target skills will receive a Letter of Recognition from the Dean of Graduate Studies' office.

To view the complete list of programs for graduate students, visit the Reg online registration system.

Other Services for Graduate Students

- individual consultation on data management, thesis writing, library research, time/project management, presentation skills, working in groups
- IT help
- interlibrary loan & document delivery
- specialized services for TAs & ITAs.

More information about the GSLI and its services is accessible anytime on the GSLI website at www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca/GSLI.