

## **Let's Value Valuable People: Graduate Students as Teaching Assistants**

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As a science graduate student at two different universities, I worked as a Teaching Assistant (TA) in about 10 courses. For a few of the large multi-section courses, I recall regular meetings where we were basically told how to introduce the upcoming lab to the students. And a few dedicated course coordinators were available for consultation when I asked. There either was no TA training or other support available, or they were not made known to me. I loved teaching (still do!) so tried to learn as much as I could on my own. But we know the value of collaboration and team-based approaches to TA training and development. This was not exactly the stone age, but in the mid 80's and 90's.

Luckily, much has changed. Graduate students take on more roles inside and outside of courses, a variety of programs help them become confident teachers and facilitators and hone practice (often designed and led by peers) and we see more and more scholarly work by and about graduate students and TAs. So I am thrilled to have been invited as guest editor for this special issue by and about these valuable people. Here is a timeline of highlights across Canada in these areas, or as Cynthia Korpan of the University of Victoria (UVic) asks, "What is the current state of Teaching Assistant (TA) Professional Development at Canadian post-secondary institutions?" (2011), and I will apologize now for any omissions in this brief overview – as I am sure there are (!) but what you'll see here really speaks to the current cross-Canada nature of support for graduate students and TAs.

Let's start with the Canadian Association for Graduate Students (CAGS; <http://www.cags.ca/>). It was founded in 1962! This is an example where I had no idea about it when I was a grad student; I am sure it is promoted more broadly today. Promoting graduate education and university research, CAGS organizes the National Three-Minute Thesis competition, and the best dissertation award, amongst others. The 52<sup>nd</sup> annual conference takes place in October, 2014 in Newfoundland. Including an array of topics important to graduate students, it is also a chance for students and those who work with and for them to network and share best practices.

In 1993, Serge Piccinin, Andy Farquharson (of mid-90's University of Victoria Critical Incidents video vignettes for TA development fame) and Elena Mihiu noted the need for

more research on the work and status of TAs

(<http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/cjhe/article/view/183164>) Speaking of videos, in 1999, Shauna Butterwick spearheaded UBC's Supervision Scenes video vignettes. (You can find both sets of videos through a web search.)

And now things start happening at a fast rate indeed:

2007: Developing Professional Skills in New Researchers Workshop, a 2-day event held in Ottawa involving a STLHE, CAGS and the joint Tri-Council - Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR). I was fortunate to be invited; we started discussions of professional development for new grad student researchers, collectively identifying nine areas for professional skills development with four on a short list (see CAGS website for details). Did this lead to NSERC's Collaborative Research and Training Experience Program (CREATE; [http://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/professors-professeurs/grants-subs/create-foncer\\_eng.asp](http://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/professors-professeurs/grants-subs/create-foncer_eng.asp))?

2008: The outcomes of a graduate student training program was the focus of a doctoral thesis by Jennifer Boman of Mount Royal University. Check out Jennifer's 2013 related publication in the Canadian Journal of Higher Education.

2009: A mouthful, but an important one, is the Teaching Assistant and Graduate Student Advancement (TAGSA) SIG (special interest group) of STLHE (Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education) spearheaded by folks such as Megan Burnett, University of Toronto. See their directory and a fine overview called TA Professional development in Canada at <http://www.stlhe.ca/special-interest-groups/tagsa/>.

2011: I won't repeat the great 2011 summary and details that Cynthia includes in the overview, but in a nutshell, she describes, from many universities across Canada, important professional development innovations to support TAs such as certificate programs, online and face-to-face courses, TA days, awards and more. Guides and related resources abound too (at last search I found these at the University of British Columbia (UBC; both Okanagan and Vancouver campuses), Ryerson University, Carleton University and the University of Guelph. I know I have missed some or even many, and I have not even touched on books and book chapters that now exist.

Another recent innovation, the Teaching Innovation Projects (TIPS) Journal (<http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/tips/>) which began in February, 2011, includes capstone projects from graduate students who complete the Advanced Teaching Program at Western University. Natasha Patrio Hannon and Karyn Olsen are Co-Editors.

2013: The first Teaching Graduate Students to Teach conference was held in Vancouver in February, 2013. Organized by Erin Aspenlieder, then at Simon Fraser University and now at McMaster University and Catherine Rawn of UBC, I hope this is the first of many. An excellent and innovative use of conference time was the invitation to submit a draft paper, then receive feedback from colleagues. In fact, one paper you see in this issue (by myself, three TAs and another colleague) is the result of that conference! I urge you to check out the fine new Green Guide about TAs that Erin and

Catherine co-authored <http://www.stlhe.ca/publications/green-guides/>

2014: February, 2014 saw a pre-conference session at the annual Educational Developers Caucus (EDC) conference, hosted by the University of Calgary and Bow Valley College, by Cynthia Korpan, UVic and Suzanne Le-May Sheffield, Dalhousie University about Teaching Assistant Competencies. TAGSA is now working to finalize those competencies for TAs, inspired by STLHE's (1996) Ethical Principles in University Teaching. It is featured in a pre-conference session at the 2014 STLHE conference hosted by Queen's University.

And check out the Canadian Journal of Higher Education and its recent special focus, Preparing Graduate Students for a Changing World of Work. Editors are Cynthia and Megan, as well as Sara Carpenter and Carol Rolheiser, University of Toronto.

Established in 2013, TAGSA awards the best STLHE conference session led by a graduate student <http://www.stlhe.ca/awards/tag-sa-award/>. The first winner was Nathan Lachowsky, a Ph.D. student from the University of Guelph while the 2014 conference saw Betsy Keating, a Ph.D. student from the University of Windsor take the prize.

The TA presentation award is wonderful. Many feel that now it's time to take it a step further and offer awards for top graduate student educators across the country as is currently done for university and college educators, educational innovators, and undergraduate leaders. Who might sponsor such an important new award? "We are hoping to create an award to acknowledge the exemplary contributions that graduate students make to teaching and learning, purposely broad to recognize the myriad of possibilities including teaching, educational development, mentoring, leadership, etc.," notes Roselynn Verwoord, Chair, Student Advocacy, STLHE board.

That pretty much brings us to now (and the immediate future!), and this special issue. What's inside?

- The value of thinking evaluatively about a graduate training program early in its development is illustrated by Lam
- Boman describes the effectiveness of a skills-based TA training program for novices, including an assessment of the addition of reflective writing activities
- The use of first person narrative and a conversational tone, including unplanned conversation, is outlined by Tallman and Smith to discuss graduate student training
- Hoessler and West identify five characteristics of feedback for institutions to consider in supporting the needs and experiences of graduate students as teachers
- Cassidy and colleagues present the unique roles TAs play as part of a collaborative team for a first year course and the positive outcomes TAs note for their continued growth and development
- Fehr and colleagues describe tangible benefits of community engaged learning in a graduate course.

Looks like we have the key stages in the academic lives of graduate students well-covered.

In addition to the focus on graduate students and TAs, you'll see Hargis' toolset for enhancing teaching based on voluntary classroom observations done over ten years across two countries, how Stiles and Skarupski helps junior faculty improve public speaking with "PowerPoint Karaoke" and a predictive model designed by Peplow to better ensure take-up of student and faculty recruits.

Here's to the next generation of professional development for and by graduate students and Teaching Assistants.