Pass the Ketchup:
Assessing the Role of Conversation in the Professional Development of Graduate Student Teaching Assistants

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Abstract:

Informed by feminist theory and methods, the authors adopt first person narrative and a conversational tone as a means by which to discuss sites of conversations in graduate student training. We discuss the creation of a Director's lunch program as a site of planned conversations and traditional workshop offerings as a site of unplanned conversations. We share our lessons learned from the conversations that took place in both locations and focus on how purposeful planning for conversations can shape graduate student programming and help build a teaching and learning community.

Key Words:

Conversation, graduate student training, scholarship of teaching and learning, feminist.

Introduction

Rebecca and Heather: In our many overlapping roles at the university we see a lot of each other and we have spent countless hours having conversations. Whether we are meeting for coffee or brunch or walking up university hill we seem to spend a lot of time talking about teaching. Our many roles at the university yield many different sites for conversation and these roles overlap in a number of ways. These conversations began in our shared relationship as supervisor and graduate student, more broadly as teacher and student. This mentoring relationship has been the starting point for many of our conversations about teaching and learning. The second site in which conversations

have occurred is in our respective roles as professor and teaching assistant (TA). We have worked together in this capacity four times and our debriefs about the classes and tutorials have sparked many conversations about good teaching practices, challenges and our own experiences. The last site of conversation is found in our work at the University of Northern B.C. (UNBC) Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT). UNBC is a small research intensive university located in Prince George, British Columbia. We offer both undergraduate and graduate degrees in a range of field and have a student body of approximately 4100 students. The CTLT is a small unit, with a Director, and ELearning Coordinator and five graduate students working part time as technology tutors and professional developers.

In this space, Heather is the Director and Rebecca is the lead Educational Developer for Graduate Student and Teaching Assistant (TA) Training. In this site we talk regularly about teaching and learning. Each of these conversations, in each of these different spaces and sites at the university, inform our orientation towards graduate student professional development. As will be seen, we believe that through the creation of 'planned conversations' and an awareness of the rich learning opportunities arising out of 'unplanned conversations' we can support graduate student development in unexpected ways and help to sustain the graduate student teaching and learning community.

The origins of this paper started with a conversation and we will maintain this tone throughout the paper. The maintenance of the conversational tone is quite purposeful. In part, the conversational tone, we believe, allows for authentic and grounded reflective practices (Brew 2003; Einfeld and Stasz 2011; Park 2011; Tsang 2009). This article is a space for our shared reflections, supported by scholarly literature. Our starting point was a conversation about what we saw as the needs for the graduate student development program in our Centre. It was indeed a conversation about conversations that then led to a series of initiatives, which we will describe below.

In the next section, and consistent with feminist pedagogies and methodologies, we situate ourselves as practitioner-scholars. We then turn to a discussion of planned and unplanned conversations as they arose in the work of the CTLT over the past year, and thus we are start with practice. By starting with our practices first and then turning to theory, we are engaging in a variation of what scholars Brooke Ackerly and Jacqui True, call 'theory seeking'. "The theory-seeking approach aims to understand and interpret a given phenomenon using conceptual tools while reflecting on the phenomenon in question" (Ackerly and True 2010: 80). After the descriptions of the respective sites of conversations, we link conversations to the literature and we reflect on the value of conversation in our teaching and learning practices. Finally, we conclude our analysis with reflections on the importance of the graduate student voice.

Situating Ourselves as Practitioner-Scholars:
Who are we and how did we get here?

Our first task is to situate ourselves. To situate oneself is a recognition that our practices and interpretations are informed by our positionality, that the subjective and objective are not distinct, and that power and privilege must be interrogated (Ackerly and True 2010: 24). The act of situating oneself is also consistent with reflective

practices that are so central to our educational professional development practices – both in terms of our own practices and the practices that we encourage in others.

Heather: In terms of situating myself I want to address two particular questions: 'who am I' (as a teacher, scholar, and administrator), and what is my orientation towards graduate student professional development?

I am a faculty member who has entered the field of educational development incrementally, although I've been teaching in at post-secondary institutions for over 25 years. As I've articulated elsewhere (Smith 2012; Smith 2013), both my teaching and research is informed by my position as a critical feminist. This means that that I adopt a "feminist curiosity" (Enloe 2004:3), to investigate "sites of everyday life" (Enloe 2004: 5), to challenge disciplinary practices that seek to shape who and how we study (Sylvester 1996; Acklerly and True 2006, 2008; Doty 2001; Zalewski 2006) and to regard "theorising as a way of life, a form of life, something we all do, every day, all the time" (Zalewski 1996: 346). For me, the classroom is a site of the everyday about which we must be curious. Our classrooms are political spaces, subject to disciplinary practices and values and through our teaching we can reproduce and legitimize the discipline or we can disrupt and problematize the discipline. For me, to teach is to theorize.

In my classrooms, I seek to challenge the "culture of positivism" (Giroux 1997: 20) and "banking education" (Freire, 2002: 72-77) because as Giroux (1997:25) argues, "there is little in the positivist pedagogical model that encourages students to generate their own meanings, to capitalize on their own cultural capital, or to participate in evaluating their own classroom experiences". Consistent with feminist (Fisher 2001; Stienstra 2000; Cohn 1999; Bignell 1996) and critical pedagogy (Giroux 1997; Freire 2002), I promote critical thinking, self-reflectivity, collective and cooperative learning. I encourage the students to value their lived experiences, to understand that our "intellectual and emotional selves are deeply connected" (Lawrence 2008: 66), to embrace their "emotional knowledge" (Bleiker 2006: 79).

Central to both my teaching practices and scholarship is the theme of silences and voices. I have recognized that assumptions of authority can be undermined when we shift our understanding of whose voices get included in scholarly practices. One way of challenging assumptions of whose voices counts is to work to include voices typically not included in traditional scholarship and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Too often, our scholarship of teaching and learning is bereft of the voices of our students. Our students become data and their experiences become categorized and measured. We are, of course, required to engage in ethically responsible research and thus the inclusion of students much be done with great care. In our case here, we draw on our own reflections and do not include the views of the participants of the events we assess.

Finally, when asking the "who am I?" question, I need to include the dimension of administrator. I believe that my fundamental commitment to administration in the area of teaching and learning is informed by the fact that support for teaching and learning is at the heart of the mandate of the university. As argued by Joretta Marshall (2005: 33), I think that "institutions have some responsibility to nurture the lives of teachers". The ways in which we do this may be varied but for those of us at the CTLT, the creation, facilitation and support for community is central to what we do.

My orientation toward graduate student professional development and teaching assistant training is consistent with the general vision of the CTLT, I believe that graduate students are part of our teaching and learning community and I am keen to support graduate students as they claim in their voices – as teachers and scholars. I also understand, however, that our institutions continue to be imbued with a "culture of positivism" both in terms of teaching and research. Efforts we might make to encourage TAs to aim for student engagement in the classroom can run directly into a wall composed of assumptions of professorial authority and TA deference where the TA has to run the tutorials in manners generally consistent with the expectations of the professor to whom they report. This is certainly not always the case, but in the design and delivery of our graduate student TA training program I am always mindful of needing to meet the participants 'where they are', understanding that they subject to external forces and disciplinary predilections and traditions which I must respect.

Rebecca: First and foremost I want to situate myself as a learner. I am a graduate student, working on my Masters in International Studies at UNBC. I identify myself first as a learner and as a student and second as a graduate student educational developer. There are a number of experiences and people that have influenced my teaching and the definition of my teaching self. These experiences led me to graduate student educational development.

Consistent with Heather, my research has been guided by feminist approaches. These approaches inform my worldview and underpin my pedagogical practices. As described by Heather in the previous section, feminist scholars seek to identify silences and seek to give voice to those who are rarely listened to, by doing so they challenge dominant disciplinary practices by incorporating these voices as important indicators in the study of how the world works (Enloe 2004). Furthermore, feminist scholars are reflective in their work and attentive to power and boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in their own research (Ackerly and True 2010: 24). Reflective practices, attentiveness to power and listening to voices have closely informed how I define myself as a teacher and a learner.

My undergraduate experiences have reminded me that voice matters in how we approach teaching in higher education. In my first year of my undergraduate training I sat in classes that ranged from 500-1000 students. When I sat in these classes I felt that I had been devalued to a student number and was no longer a person. Knowing what it feels like to be invisible as a student, I believe there is value in reminding students that they matter and what they have to say matters. These deliberative moments of reflection (Ackerly and True 2010: 43) that I have had throughout my experiences as a student have caused me to pause and reflect on the role of a teaching assistant, the importance of teaching and learning and the importance of having conversations about teaching.

When I reflect on my path to graduate student educational development I recognize that there are two experiences that have influenced my transition into this field: my undergraduate experience and my current graduate experience. The first experience comes from my past undergraduate training. I fear that I had a very typical undergraduate experience where I was never once taught in a way that addressed my specific needs as a visual and kinesthetic learner. My classes were primarily lectures

most of which did not include any visual aids and my tutorials and seminars were structured discussions facilitated by a teaching assistant. It was not until I began graduate school at a new institution that for the first time in my life I was handed a marker (and a scented one at that, reminiscent of my childhood!) and told to make a concept map connecting main themes and big questions from the readings. Getting out of my seat and being responsible for my own learning was a totally new concept to me. All at once, tough theoretical concepts made sense. And I knew this was not just because I had suddenly entered the mysterious world of graduate school, because as a TA I was handed the same markers and a pile of chart paper to use in my own classroom. Because of this, I was able to draw on my previous experiences in outdoor education and leadership and bring those skills into the classroom. The second experience which led me to educational development was my experiences as a graduate student and teaching assistant. In this new world of graduate studies I was encouraged to participate in a variety of workshops hosted by the CTLT. At the end of my first year of teaching Heather encouraged me to participate in an Instructional Skills Workshop that I completed at the end of last year.

Despite my excitement about the wonderful world of teaching and learning that I had found myself a part of, when I chatted with fellow graduate students I realized many of them were not having the same journey of self-discovery. Overall, I noticed that there was an inherent apathy among grad students about being involved with professional development activities beyond the regular expectations of their studies. This realization led me into graduate student educational development and working with the CTLT. It has been almost two years since I sat with Heather and had a conversation about the lack of involvement of graduate students in teaching and learning. Since that time I have been involved with the planning and execution of a number of workshops and professional development activities geared towards graduate students.

Planned Conversations: Graduate Student Lunches With the Director

Heather and Rebecca: Having situated ourselves we can now turn to our reflections on planned and unplanned conversations. We start immediately below with the planned conversations – the lunch sessions that we set up with Heather. We describe the goals and outcomes of the activities, from our perspectives. We also provide some reflections on lessons learned. We do the same in the subsequent section labelled unplanned conversations[1].

Heather: I can't exactly remember where the idea for the graduate student lunches arose but I do know that it relates to my sense that as we move up in administration we lose touch with our students. I find it particularly ironic when our administrative positions are related to teaching and learning and in order to meet our administrative obligations we get course buyouts. So, in an effort to talk to graduate students I proposed the 'Lunch and Chat' sessions. The goal was an informal, semi-guided discussion that brought together a cross section of graduate students who had taken our graduate student workshops. We decided to invite a select group of grad students who had taken the workshops, with the aim of trying to lend them some caché. The event was by invite

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1 Readers will note we do not include data from participant evaluations of these events. We do not have ethics approval to do so at this time and so the reflections are ours alone and all participant details have been excluded.

only. We also quite purposefully played on the fact that the invitation was from the Director and the grad student professional developers. In spite of my desire to reject 'authority', I know that authority remains integral to our post-secondary institutions and frankly, I was strategically playing into that norm. I hoped that folks would think that the invite from the Director was special, thus possibly encouraging more attendance. I also assumed that through attendance there would be an opportunity for conversations and community building.

I do recall some initial resistance from the graduate student developers to the idea. I'm not sure if they thought the idea of lunch was lame or maybe 'low end' (in contrast to workshops), or not what they had signed on for when they took on their jobs. Rebeccanotes below that they were tired, but honestly, I think there was more to the resistance then that. Maybe it was the sheer challenge of finding a suitable time, given very busy schedules. Out of respect for their work, I recall saying "ok, let's not do the lunches". But I also recall changing my mind and saying, "no...I want to do these lunches". It was simply a gut response on my part.

The plan, generally speaking, was that I and the two graduate developers would attend the lunches and guide the conversation with the aim of getting some feedback about our sessions. At the same time, I didn't want to be overly deterministic in terms of the conversation and so we allowed for some opportunities for organic feedback by ensuring the questions were open ended.

Rebecca: When Heather first proposed the concept of graduate student lunches, my coworker and I were a little bit skeptical and resistant. Perhaps because at the time she proposed it we had just finished an intensive four weeks of workshops and just needed a break to focus on our theses and research. Regardless, what the director says goes, so despite our initial resistance we jumped on board.

Leading up to the planned lunch, my coworker and I discussed who we should invite and this led us to reflect on what we wanted to get out of these lunches. At first we saw it as a 'thank-you' lunch and so we invited a cohort of students who had participated in workshops in the past.

Leading up to the event we expected Heather to take control and that we would just take a back seat throughout the process. When it came to the day of the first lunch we had a great guided discussion led by Heather. We quickly realized that these lunches were much more than just free food, the amount of notes we took from the first lunch revealed that these lunches were a fantastic way to get face to face feedback about how we could improve our programming at the Centre.

After the first graduate student lunch, we re-framed our approaches to this event. Moving forward we began to come prepared with specific questions to guide discussion in order to get feedback for graduate student educational development. For me, this became the central goal of these events, to listen to the voices of students and see what experiences, comments and questions they wanted to share.

Heather: For me the key outcomes of these events were threefold. First, we were able to have face to face, casual, conversations about the promotion of our events. We were informed that sometimes email isn't the best way to communicate with students

because they often get the same email from different sources and so there is a lot of deleting of emails (not unlike faculty members). This led us to consider returning to the tried and true communication device of the poster and to strategically put posters in areas where we knew there was lots of graduate student traffic. Recently, we've also adopted the use of postcards with event information, again distributed strategically around the campus. We also determined that we needed to work more collaboratively with the graduate student society to promote our events. Second, for me, I felt like I was able to build stronger relationships with some of the students who had attended. The lunches certainly gave me a greater sense of connection to the student body – as I had hoped. The final outcome, one that I didn't really expect, was that it became clear to me how much more work was needed to foster conversations between and among graduate students and the respective university units to either reduce overlap or design programming that more specifically addresses their needs. It seemed to me that there continues to be a need for the creation of safe spaces where graduate students can chat about their experiences and receive mentoring in addition to what they receive in their disciplines and from their supervisors. To that end, this year we are launching a community of practice for graduate student teaching assistants (Brew 2003; Enfield and Stasz 2011).

Rebecca: As stated above, the primary outcome of these lunches was the feedback we received. The same semester we started hosting these lunches we also administered a survey to all graduate students for feedback on our programming. And while the survey yielded feedback that was very valuable to moving forward, the face to face feedback we received at the lunches was enriched with different experiences, challenges and reflections that we may not have been exposed to otherwise.

Beyond what Heather noted above, the discussions over lunch provided a lot of feedback on the structure and format of our blog website dedicated to graduate students. All of this feedback has helped me when I design workshops and events for graduate students in order to address the specific needs of graduate students. For example, during one of the lunches it was indicated to use that graduate students have as many questions about privacy and freedom of information as faculty but current sources of information are not addressing graduate student needs.

Before we held these lunches I drew primarily on my own experiences and knowledge, which is quite limited. However, the diversity of the participants at these lunches and the feedback and experiences they have shared have helped me to developed more well-rounded resources and events for graduate students.

Heather: Upon reflection, I think that the outcomes, for me, were sufficiently positive, that we continued to have the lunches as part of our regular programming. However, there are a few things we have done differently in the recent iteration. First, we ensured the lunches were small in size and no more than six participants overall, including the Director and the developers. For me, the smaller numbers foster more intimate conversation and allow me to chat with each participant. Second, we have seen that the lunches can be the starting point for a graduate student mentoring program or graduate student community of practice. We want to build on the experience of the lunches and graduate students have requested graduate student opportunities after their workshops

experiences. So now we are committed to creating more opportunities that we could find to help genuinely create community and to foster connections beyond the lunches.

Rebecca: I agree with Heather's reflections on the outcomes of the sessions. Beyond keeping these engagements small and using them as a starting point for further developing our programming, I learned that guided conversations can be unpredictable and may not turn out as expected. While we frame these conversations as 'planned' there is some degree of unplanned and unexpected elements to these lunches. No matter how structured a conversation maybe there will always be tangents. And so the tricky part becomes how to keep the conversation focused and organic without devaluing the voice of students.

Heather: I completely agree with Rebeccaon this point. There is a degree of unpredictability in the lunch format and it is a difficult task to balance organic and structured dialogue. This said, I think we need to have a plan as we go into each of these lunches. Sometimes being too informal yields unforeseen results. As well, these are our reflections and not those of the participants – we don't know how the participants felt because we didn't do evaluations of the events.

Rebecca and Heather : Overall, at least in terms of our learning, we believe that the lunches were a success. We received feedback on a variety of CTLT activities, connected to the participants and sought to nurture a space for conversations about teaching and learning. The lunches, as a programmed activity, stepped out of the box in terms of workshop based offerings. We purposefully sought to gather graduate students together rather than have them come to us – which is traditionally the case with workshops.

Unplanned Conversations: Workshops

Rebecca and Heather: Initially we had situated this paper around the graduate student lunches, however when we were in the early stages of putting this paper together we realized there were a number of unplanned conversations that have been extremely valuable to our programming. These unplanned conversations, interestingly, took place in our workshops. As a reader, you might be thinking that workshops are exactly the place where we would expect conversations to take place. What we mean by unplanned conversations is that we were surprised by the turn of the conversations – conversations that took us 'off script'. In this section we seek to understand conversations that may have been overlooked (Raelin 2007, 61).

As is the case with most CTLTs, each semester we design and deliver a series of workshops that address a variety of topics pertinent to graduate student educational development. We typically hold between 4 and 6 workshops at the beginning of each semester. Workshops can run for 3 hours, a full day or two 3 hour sessions over a few days. The topics we cover include: the roles, rights and responsibilities of being a TA, marking and assessment, presentation skills, and teaching with technology. The goals of these workshops are to train teaching assistants and equip them with the tools they will need in the classroom. The workshops are often, but not always, led by a team. There were workshops that were facilitated by Rebecca alone. When Rebecca led a workshop solo, we always tried to debrief on her experiences.

Rebecca: The biggest challenge of hosting these workshops is always turnout. In the first semester we cancelled half of the workshops we had planned to deliver because of low registration numbers. In the second semester we delivered all of the planned workshops because registration was high, but in the end turnout was relatively low.

It was very discouraging to show up to workshops that we had spent countless hours planning only to deliver it to a handful of participants. At times it felt as though we were failing. However, when I reflect on this experience I realize that these workshops create an important space for students to feel safe. As a result there were several unplanned conversations that occurred that may not have happened if we had cancelled the workshop. Re-framing my opinion about turnout made me realize that is extremely important to hold these workshops because it creates a space where students feel comfortable to share their fears and anxieties about teaching.

Heather: As the Director of the UNBC CTLT, of course, you worry about numbers. We always worry about numbers. The CTLT is, at its heart, a service unit. We may undertake any number of activities, but often our 'value' is measured externally by number of workshops offered and the number of attendees. However, I was with Rebecca in a few of those workshops and I can attest to the learning that took place for us as facilitators. The unplanned conversations reminded me that the motivations of participants often run deeper than even the participants assume and it is through the unplanned conversations that we unearth and speak to those motivations.

Rebecca: Recognizing the value of the unplanned conversations that occurred in the workshops was an important lesson for me. As noted above it reframed how I view the success of workshops and reminded me of the value of graduate student professional development. There were two important lessons that I took away from these unplanned conversations that will influence how I shape future graduate student programming at the CTLT.

The first lesson that I have taken away from this experience is the need to be flexible. I have spent hours planning and restructuring workshops to make sure they include the necessary information and tools teaching assistants need in their training while also making sure I can fit all of this information into a three hour time slot. And while the structure of these workshops often include structured and facilitated conversations about teaching, as a facilitator I tend to skip over some very rich conversation in order to stick to my script for the workshop. The ability to pause and reflect on these important discussions will require that I am more flexible in my facilitation to make space for the important discussions that can happen within the workshop space.

The second lesson that I have learned from these conversations is that there are many gaps in our graduate student educational training and development. I noticed that there were many challenges faced by graduate students that I had simply not experienced and so I had not paid a lot of attention to them. Realizing the diversity of the audience within these workshops has challenged me to be more thoughtful in designing these workshops to accommodate the varied experiences and challenges faced by teaching assistants.

Heather: I think the biggest lesson learned for me is that our workshop design is often a reflection of our teaching and learning preferences and that our indices of success may get in the way of our own learning (and possibly the learning of our participants). Moreover, it strikes me that given the small size of our CTLT, that Rebecca, as our lead, and often sole, graduate student professional developer may feel a lot of pressure around workshop design and delivery. She has a lot of independence in the design and delivery of our graduate student programming, but at the same time, independence could translate into a sense of isolation. This links to a bigger question of community for not just our participants, but also community for our staff.

Rebecca and Heather: Unplanned conversations resulted in unexpected reflections about our own work as educational developers and the structure of our CTLT. What began as a concern about workshop attendance, resulted in more profound reflections about how and why we design and deliver workshops. These reflections are based on our experiences over the past year. With this in mind, we now turn to some of the literature we examined.

Linking to the Literature

Rebeccaand Heather: As noted above, this article begins with the case study and now we turn to some of the scholarship on teaching and learning. Below are our reflections on workshops as a site of professional development, centres as sites of community and capacity building and assessment.

Workshops as a site of professional development

Our use of face to face workshops as a tool for TA and graduate student development is consistent with 'good' practices across Canada (Rose 2012: 16). The tradition of our workshops has been to provide support for graduate students who are novice teachers, but it is clear that these activities are consistent with the movement toward competencies and professional skills (Tri-Council 2007: 1-2). And while the link to competencies and professional skills may be a current way to promote the workshops, our orientation toward the workshops is more so informed by the assumption that this format is valuable because it is about "real people with real knowledge in a real room" (Rose 2012: 17). There is still immense value in the workshop format, not only because it involves "real people" with "real experiences" but also because it has the potential to create a safe space for planned and unplanned conversations. It is possible that these kinds of planned and unplanned conversations could take place in an online workshop, but we have yet to move in direction of online delivery, largely for reasons of capacity.

We know that one of the biggest challenges for Canadian institutions, particularly small institutions, is workshop turnout (Rose 2012: 1-2). The success of graduate student professional development programs is often assessed based on the number of students who attend workshops, access online materials or the number of teaching skills they acquire through their participation (White et al 2012: 100-101). The difficulty with attendance numbers becoming the marker of success, however, is that, as argued above, our participants become data points and we effectively drain their experiences of their humanity, to paraphrase Doty (2004) and we lose the richness of the experiences

for both facilitators and participants. Our reflections reveal that while our CTLT is affected by the need for numbers and our work is informed by the trend toward competencies, that we need to use care to not drink too much of that Kool-Aid. The trend toward competencies may arguably be informed by the desire for the adoption of 'effective' graduate student development practices with measurable outcomes, but it is also a trend that is deeply embedded in conservative/neoliberal discourse that is currently influencing our post-secondary institutions. There has to be a place in our workshops and lunches for heart, laughter, fear, anxiety and the joy of learning – for all of us. As Parker Palmer (1998: 17) reminds us: "Many of us became teachers for reasons of the heart, animated by a passion for some subject and for helping people learn. But many of us lose heart as the years of teaching go by. How can we have heart in teaching once more so that we can, as good teachers always do, give heart to our students". Many of us became facilitators for reasons of the heart and we need to keep the heart in our programming.

Centres for Teaching and Learning as Sites of Community and Capacity Building.

Teaching and Learning Centres are commonly described as sites of capacity building and community building (Grabove et al 2012; Randall et al 2013) and that the work of the educational developers is to help enhance capacity and to help create community (Randall et al 2013: 36). Capacity building, according to Grabove et al (2012: 6) is understood to mean "efforts that empower faculty members, administrators, sessional instructors, and other members of campus communities to address teaching and learning problems either independently, or in collaboration with others".

Community building has a different set of goals. Again, drawing from Grabove et al (2012: 7): "It is often suggested that if educational developers can create a critical mass of faculty with a shared interest in teaching and learning, these individuals will provide mutual support and sustainability when the educational developer is required to work on other projects. Forming such a broad community builds capacity and creates linked groups of people with a shared interest in teaching and learning".

Our TA workshops are explicitly aimed at capacity building of the participants. Our lunches, however, are oriented toward a different set of goals. The goal is community building, but it is not community building in the way that is described above. Our lunches are not designed to build a community of graduate students who become a critical mass that is self-sufficient and sustainable when the 'educational developer is required to work on other projects'. Our graduate student developers are an integral part of this process, the Director is included at all the lunches and the aim is to connect the personnel of the CTLT with graduate students. Our efforts are designed to build bridges and to collapse the distance between the CTLT and graduate students through informal conversations. It is a community where the personal is privileged, unlike the skills orientation of the workshops, and where outcomes are not measured for purposes of legitimating the work of the CTLT. The emphasis is on connection (McCormack and Kennedy 2011). Moreover, the lunches shift up the space of the conversations. Similar to the discussion of the 'pop-up CTLT' at the 2013 Educational Developers Caucus, the lunches move our CTLT out of our offices and into a communal space. In contrast to

Grabove et al who suggest that when CTLTs have sufficient staff and resources, "are more apt to have the time and resources for networking" (Grabove 2012: 6) we believe that the lunches provide networking and community building opportunities that are essential for the sustainability of small centres.

Sustainability, however, is a challenge and it is not a challenge unique to our CTLT (Marshall 2005; McCormick and Kennedy 2011). Sustainability is a challenge in a variety of ways. First, there is the challenge of sustaining the community of graduate students that we are seeking to foster. How do we continue to build community or enhance the existing community, given the transient nature of graduate student life and given the multiple demands they face? This is certainly a point that requires further reflection on our part. There is also the challenge of sustainability of the graduate student developers. At our Centre, these are positions that are staffed by current graduate students, not 'professional' educational developers. It is a lot of responsibility given that they too have multiple demands and the position is part time. We need to provide ongoing training and constantly think about transition planning. There may be some relief by seeking to expand our capacity through volunteer positions, not unlike the service work undertaken by faculty in support of the CTLT. The questions becomes, however, whose desk does this task then fall on?

Assessment

Assessment is a theme that runs through our reflections. Assessment of our practices as educational developers, assessment of participants learning, and formal and informal assessment are all raised above. As educational developers it is clear that even through the process of writing a reflective paper we assess our intentions, goals, and values (Brew 2003; Duarte 2007; McGuire et al 2009). We have considered our own practices in the respective sites of conversation and evaluated their value in terms of our goals. Not unlike the reflective practices inherent in writing a teaching dossier, this paper has been a space for our voices, and a space to unpack our own expectations. This space, of written conversation, has provided us with unexpected insights about our own frameworks – insights that would have not occurred except for undertaking this act of written conversation (Brew 2003; Tsang 2009).

It is also clear, however, that we have not included the voice of the graduate student participants in this paper. As noted above, we did do formal summative evaluation at the end of all the workshops and that is a consistent practice. That feedback, and those evaluations, helps us to design and redesign our graduate programming. The lunch conversations were always assessed, at least by us as organizers, but we never thought to bring in a feedback form to give those who joined us for lunch to find out what they learned from the lunches or to find out if they thought the lunches helped build community.

The question becomes, should we assess those lunches? Does the quality of the lunch conversations change somehow if we say at the end of the lunch: "hey, could you fill out this feedback form?" And what if we go one step further and say, "Hey, we're engaged in the scholarship of teaching and learning and we are taking notes about our lunch so we can use it in a research project?" What happens to the safety of the space if we make it a space for research about conversations? Our sense is that the dynamic

would change and the sense of bringing people together to just have lunch in an informal manner, just to chat, would be undermined. Our lunches would become data. While there are many ways we could assess the lunches and embed them in a research project and get ethics approval, we are not convinced that the lunches should be subject to any kind of formal assessment.

Concluding Reflections

Rebecca and Heather: The planned and unplanned conversations that we have had with graduate students have value. If we did not hold the workshops or events, these conversations may not have happened. We learned through from those planned and unplanned conversations that as educational developers we need to change the ways in which we measure the success of our programs and instead listen for the voices of the graduate students who are standing right in front of us. We did notice, through our reflections that there are dilemmas associated with given voice – in both our teaching and learning programming and in our research. Our conversation above reminds us to be willing to be surprised – when planned workshops become something other than we intended, and when lunches move in unexpected directions.

In terms of the workshops we see a need for more flexibility and in terms of the lunches, we think that they might need to be more structured. These endpoints will require more reflection as we move forward. In spite of the vagaries of planning, the dilemma around research, we firmly believe that paying attention to conversations matters. These conversations are important and they need to be taken seriously. Students need to feel valued. As educators, "we need to hold students words tenderly, we need to open safe spaces for students to feel like they belong" (Wiebe and Guiney Yallop 2010: 180). The voices of graduate students have the ability to shape our programming and make it more effective in our delivery (Park 2011, 354). Just as we encourage teaching assistants to draw on their previous experiences when they are in the classroom, as educational developers we should reflect on our past experiences in order to shape our programming (Brew 2003; Duarte 2007; Raelin 2007). This often involves reflecting on the conversations we have had with graduate students in the spaces of graduate student professional development.

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