

Teaching and Developing Students' Critical Skills

Pablo Bose, Graduate Program in Environmental Studies and CST Graduate Teaching Associate



The theme for this year's TA issue is "critical skills development": what is it, how do we envision it, and how do we incorporate it into our teaching and into our classrooms? For many TAs, developing critical skills among students is a key objective for the teaching that we do. For others, improving a range of competencies is implicit in the learning of course content. But what are critical skills? Are they tools and abilities that we hope to develop in students? Do they describe particular modes and methods of inquiry that we wish to foster? Or do they indicate instead a more general

way of thinking about encountering and engaging with the world around us? Nailing down precise definitions of critical skills is not easy; as the contributors to this issue illustrate, the notion of what this term might entail varies greatly by discipline, by institution and by individual.

When I think of my own understanding of what critical skills might be and of my own history in developing them, the picture that emerges is fragmented at best. I do not have any clear sense of tools and abilities gained over time that layer together and form a newer and more competent version of myself. Instead I recall flashes of images – a grade ten typing class; a first-year English TA who told me that the overuse of exclamation marks and long dashes were better saved for love letters than essays; a Medieval History professor who gently but firmly urged me not to believe everything I read. Despite this incomplete and imprecise understanding, as a TA and course director in Environmental Studies I am nevertheless expected to impart my wisdom regarding some (apparently) core proficiencies to my students. Similarly, for TAs teaching in the Foundations Program in the Humanities and Social Sciences at York, critical skills development is one of the primary curricular goals. In other disciplines, the same holds true, the idea that engendering some level of critical competencies in our students is a central objective.

... the notion of critical skills varies greatly by discipline, by institution and by individual

But the task is in many ways a formidable one. Developing expertise and dexterity in students often ill-equipped with even basic abilities by their secondary education is not a simple matter. Nor is it easy to encourage students to embrace critical thinking, reading, writing and analytical skills when the worlds of media,

culture, and politics that they are immersed in so clearly valorize conformity and consent. Learning to challenge voices of authority, to critique dominant paradigms and structures, to ask questions about the world where we live is difficult in a post-secondary environment in which students are increasingly treated (and told to act) as consumers, rather than as learners.

(Continued on page 2)

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In this issue

Everyone Starts at a Different Place	2
Critical Thinking/Critical Teaching (Assistant)	3
What Leads to Good Presenting?	4
Teaching Critical Skills in Fine Arts	5
Teaching and Learning Feminist Critical Skills	6
Congratulations UTP Grads!	8

Everyone Starts at a Different Place

Lucinda McDonald, Graduate Program in Communication and Culture



Imagine you have two students in your tutorial who tell you the following:

Student One: *I only understand about half of what the professor says in class and I can read the assigned chapter three times and still not understand it*

Student Two: *To tell you the truth, I'm quite bored in this class because I find it so easy. I really don't try very hard on my assignments at all and I'm still doing well.*

Student One is an 18-year-old woman who had just arrived from China as an international student. She is not only struggling with the traditional first year challenges, such as being away from home for the first time, dealing with large class sizes and coping with feelings of alienation and isolation, but she also has to face massive culture shock and the difficulties of doing post secondary education in her second language. Student Two is a 27-year-old Canadian born white male, with a some knowledge and experience in the course content, having worked as a television producer for CTV and who already has a college diploma but wanted to upgrade to a university degree. How on earth are you supposed to teach in a class like this with such disparity in starting points for learning? This is the exact position I found myself in during my first year as a TA for an introduction to communications full year course.

So how does one handle a situation like this? The first task is to identify how much disparity in starting points exists in your classroom. At first I did not realize how far apart some of my students were. Student One sat quietly with her other ESL friends and rarely participated in class discussions. Her assignments, while not great, were at least passable so I figured she must have been getting the gist of the course material. Student Two participated in class and seemed engaged in conversations. He was doing well on assignments so I assumed he was enjoying the course. I was wrong on both assumptions and I found out due to the planning of a very proactive and seasoned course director.

(Teaching critical skills... from page 1)

Such challenges do not make the necessity to teach and develop key abilities and approaches less important—if anything, they make our role as TAs and our time in the classroom increasingly vital. As the contributors to this issue demonstrate in a diverse set of articles, the approach to critical skills development is necessarily adaptive and flexible in nature, taking into account a variety of educational environments, disciplinary expectations, and teaching and learning styles. Some focus on strategies for improving specific abilities, as in Ravi Mohabeer's piece on learning how to do better presentations. Others, such as Siobhán Smith, suggest more discipline-specific methods, as illustrated by her article on providing a framework for critique to

The first tutorial back after the Christmas break our course director insisted that we hold individual meetings with each student to hand back their exams and papers from the previous term and answer any questions they may have. It was during these meetings that my students explained their true feelings about the course. I highly recommend holding individual meetings with your students at least once during the course to find out how each person is doing, where they could use some extra help and how you can assist them in learning.

The second task is to balance the need to keep afloat the students with little experience in the course content, while at the same time challenging those who bring to the course previous educational and life experience. One technique is to use visuals as much as possible. I write key concepts and phrases on the board and use diagrams to explain them. This assists my ESL learners who may not pick up everything I say but can at least scribble down the words they see and refer to them later. It also gives them a second reference point as, rather than just relying on hearing, they can also collect information visually. I also draft up key points on handouts that the students can refer to them later. Visuals also help my advanced learners. I showed videos (recent CBC documentaries and National Film Board shorts) demonstrating how the topics we study in class play out in the real world. Discussions after the videos allow advanced learners to use theory covered in the course and make practical applications of it.

Another technique is to use active teaching methods. I do not lecture at students but instead provide opportunities for them to engage and physically participate in activities. This involves getting students up and out of their chairs. In one tutorial I designed a role-playing exercise setting students up on a "stage" at the front of the room where they had to act out how the major players in the Canadian film industry interact with one another. In another tutorial, each student was given a piece of paper with a either a fact or a date on it. They had to move around the room until they found the person whose date matched with their fact or vice versa. Then the pairs had to explain why this particular event was significant in broadcasting history. This, again, helps my ESL

(Continued on page 6)

students in the Fine Arts. For some contributors, the most important issue is that of context itself: what do we (as teachers and learners) bring to the process of developing critical skills? Two articles approach this question from different perspectives – Janet Fishlock raises the issue from the vantage of the TA, while Lucinda McDonald considers the distinctions that exist between the students themselves. Finally, we return to more general pedagogical and epistemological questions in an article co-written as a dialogue between Rachel Hurst and Diana Gibaldi on teaching and learning feminist critical skills. Together, these articles provide a nuanced and complex understanding of what critical skills might be, as well as some specific strategies to help develop them.

Critical Thinking/Critical Teaching (Assistant)

Janet Fishlock, Graduate Program in Environmental Studies



I have more questions about developing and teaching critical skills than I have answers. But I do think as TA - people with the power to

pass or fail a student and influence how they digest a course and its content- that we have a unique challenge before us. I see it as the challenge of exploring and developing approaches to our teaching which don't assume or make judgments about where students should be at, but which illuminate, accept, and work with where they really are at. If expanding student's capacity for thinking, reading and writing 'critically' is our primary objective (and getting widespread agreement on that might be a good start), then the first step becomes one of understanding the life experience, the perspectives and abilities, the desires and aspirations, that students bring with them.

My TAship is the first job I've accepted without an interview. I don't recall anyone asking me if I could 'teach', how I understood the role of a TA or even which course I felt competent/comfortable 'TAing'. Two months before starting the PhD program at FES, I received a letter offering me an appointment as Teaching Assistant, and directing me to article 10.02 of the collective agreement (the closest to a job description that I've seen). TA workshops hosted by FES and the Centre for the Support of Teaching have provided some direction (and solace), however the pedagogy of teaching at FES remains unclear to me.

My teaching experience and perspective is flavoured by my background in social work (community organizing and development to be specific) and the fact that I am returning to academia after more than fifteen years in the 'field'. I find the spectrum of students has expanded considerably since my own undergraduate days. There are students who have just celebrated their seventeenth birthday and

others well past their thirtieth. There are some whose English language skills are a serious obstacle to their participation in tutorials/lectures and in successfully completing assignments. There are also those whose life experience is dominated by being white, middle class, heterosexual, suburbia (all of which describes me actually), and others whose social location is anything but. There are students who have been discouraged from (and actually fear) asking questions, thinking critically, and whose potential is untapped and often unknown, perhaps even to them. There are others, who quietly and brilliantly absorb and dissect everything they read, hear and feel, and whose work I am humbled by. Many students are juggling school commitments, with that of family and work - both paid and unpaid.

I am now in the midst of my second appointment, and the two courses I've TA'd in couldn't be more different. Both were foundation environmental studies courses (with enrollments of between 150-300 students). One was more 'content'-oriented, aimed at providing students with an overview of concepts and methods characterizing environmental studies; while the second was a 'process'-focused workshop course on environmental research and action. During the content-oriented course I found myself scrambling alongside my students to understand the concepts and wealth of information being presented, and struggling to design tutorials that were meaningful and relevant. At the end of the year, a number of students told me that although they enjoyed our debates and discussions, they would have preferred I focus more on distilling the content of the lectures.

The workshop course I'm TAing in this year, which draws on an Aboriginal framework of learning and knowing, resonates more closely with my own experience and background in action research and organizing. Yet in spite of feeling more comfortable (and inspired) with the approach and content of the course, my struggle to connect with students - to design and lead tutorials, which speak and build on their life experience, their knowledge base and ways of

knowing, and their skill set- has actually intensified.

The position of TA I find to be powerfully dis-empowering, if that makes any sense. I don't 'direct' the course or its lectures (in terms of content, approach, or components), nor do I develop the exams, or assignments (which I mark). Yet, I spend the greatest amount of time with students, field most of their questions, concerns and anxieties, and in the end, determine who passes, who fails, and by how much.

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It has become clearer to me, through writing this article that lectures and tutorials are two distinct and separate, but connected processes, and should be designed as such. A tutorial should take the time to discover and incorporate who the students are (their life experiences, perspectives, interests and aspirations), it should relate to but not follow a lecture and integrate techniques which encourage self-directed, critical thinking and learning.

In the last issue of CORE (14: 1 p.5-6), Sarah Parsons wrote about teaching art history using a pedagogical strategy, which I found particularly helpful. She recommends 'tethering abstract debates to something tangible (concrete texts or images), giving every student an entry point into the discussion'. She suggests modeling various approaches to critical articles, texts, statements or visual objects, followed by very specific group discussions (i.e. applying a 'jigsaw' instructional strategy to a reading or particular film), which she believes enables students to bring their own voice to the discussion. I'm hopeful that by aspiring to make student's voices (and essence) a fundamental part of every course/tutorial, as Parson's does, that I will judge and assume less, and inspire and connect more.

Reading leads to better writing ... so what leads to good presenting?

Ravi Mohabeer, Graduate Program in Communication and Culture



This year, by the time most students arrive at my classroom they have already completed at least one full year of their university education. More

often than not, many of them are well on their way to graduating. Still, it puzzles me that few of them feel comfortable with presenting, even the ones who write well and speak intelligently in class.

Now I know that it is natural to be nervous when getting up in front of people to talk. More so when someone is judging you on what you say and how well you say it. The blank stare of one's classmates does little to help. Added to that the fact that, for many of my students, the material they are trying to present is both new and outside of their field.

However, the problem I am really left with is not that students are nervous but that they have forgotten the point of presentations. In fact, it almost seems that the point of presentations has become assumed more than stated even by members of the teaching faculty. As a TA it seems that over the better part of a decade I have sat through dozens of student presentations that meet the expectations as set out in the syllabus but just lack any real substance or lasting impact. I am not advocating flash and dazzle in place of rigor and theory, rather, I am questioning if we have forgotten why we ask students to present in front of their peers.

Certainly, it stands to reason that speaking intelligently in a formal manner is a skill to be learned and perfected with practice. But is that the reason that students are asked to present these days? I used to think so but now I am not sure.

When I designed the foundations component of a course I delivered last summer rather than building in a traditional presentation, I decided to call it a 'facilitated discussion.' The idea of facilitation

brings back the one element that I find most lacking in student presentations; interactivity. While I recognize that the point of a presentation is not always for the whole class to participate, it makes pedagogical sense that more than just the presenters should get something out of student presentations. So my approach to preparing students to deliver presentations in a tutorial setting builds on this idea that presentations are a chance for everyone to learn something.

What I did this year to make sure that everyone learns something was to start my foundations skills unit on presentations weeks before the first presentation was slated to take place. I gave my class an analogy to help them understand how to become good presenters. In this analogy I used the advice that everyone gives to aspiring writers. The best writers read a lot. This means that the best presenters observe and participate in a lot of presentations.

At first, they wondered if I expected them to attend other classes and wait for presentations in hopes of finding clues. Instead, I encouraged them to widen their idea of where to look. I suggested that they think about lectures, workplace trainings, instructional videos (even exercise tapes), anything that would open their eyes to how other people convey information by speaking to an audience. I asked them, in particular, to listen for pace, word choices, idea structure and argumentation; to look for technical tools (PowerPoint, chalk, overheads). More importantly, I asked them to think about how or if they were learning while the presentations they were watching unfolded.

Many students were able to speak about presentation styles and tools. But it is the latter area, the internal meta-analysis with which most students had trouble. Asking students to consider themselves as learners in partnership with an instructor, it seemed, shifted their vision of the learning process. After this process of observation, many students were able to

identify areas in which specific elements of the presentations they experienced worked or were less successful. Most were able to take this learning and roll it forward into an action plan for their own presentations.

The next phase in this process involved making more obvious the triad of considerations involved in planning a presentation. These are content, form (method of delivery), and audience. Once students knew what helped them learn as members of an audience, they could more easily recognize the relationship between the presentation form and presentation content. Often, they suggested, while planning a presentation they would spend more time concerned with coming up with enough information, or just the right slides or activities that they forgot about their audience. Instead, I told them to consider each area equally, which most of them have done quite successfully.

The next phase in this process takes place as the presentations occur. During presentations I often find myself biting my tongue so as not to take over accidentally. Offering answers or suggestions to 'help' students through awkward moments in their presentations is something that is easy to do. This, of course, does not help students learn the fine art of assessing if they have met the challenge of knowing their material enough to adapt it on the fly to meet the needs of their audience.

The final step is a class debrief. At the end of each presentation, after thanking the presenters (which is something that is not to be underestimated), I open the floor to the class asking for constructive comments; a meta-analysis of the presentation. If you do this, you will be surprised how many more people will discuss the mechanics of the presentation and link these to elements of the content. After the general tender from the class, I highlight specific elements of the presentation that worked and did not work. I ask the class to come up with solutions, consider where changes could be made, offer an action plan for the next presenters.

(Continued on page 6)

Understanding a work of art: Teaching critical skills in the Fine Arts

Siobhán Smith, Graduate Program in Art History



One of the most important skills that students in the Fine Arts and Cultural Studies programs must learn is the ability to critically evaluate a work of art. However, it is difficult for students not to instantly jump to their opinions based on first impressions when discussing art. Often students respond immediately by saying simply “I like it” or “I think that is a horrible work of

art!” or even “That’s art?” Whether it is a work of their own creation, an historical artwork, or an entire exhibit of art, students must learn critical skills in order to understand and write about art. For those of us teaching in Fine Arts and Cultural Studies, it is our job to help students express informed opinions when discussing artworks.

Our challenge as TAs is to demystify the process of critically discussing art so that students will not be discouraged. A common assignment given to students in the Fine Arts and Cultural Studies programs is to write about a work of art or to review an art exhibition. To successfully complete these assignments, students need to understand the basics of analyzing art. In my own teaching experience, I have found it useful to walk students through the three main steps of art criticism: description, analysis, and evaluation. This model is one used in many disciplines within the Art and Humanities and I have found it to be very useful in teaching critical skills to Fine Arts and Cultural Studies students.

When demonstrating this three-step process to students, use a popular art image with which they can practice (a painting by Van Gogh or Picasso is usually a good place to start). First, explain the components of a description and ask students to describe exactly what they see in the image. It is important that they remain objective for this first step, so remind them to hold their opinions and instead to make only factual observations. Encourage the students to discuss elements such as the subject, medium, form, colour, lines, style, and any other purely factual information about the artwork.

The next step, analysis, allows students to build on the information they have gathered through description and to begin asking questions of the artwork, such as: “How is this artwork arranged?”, “What is this artwork about?”, and “What is the historical and cultural context?” They can make guesses and inferences; however, these should be educated guesses. Analysis can also be personal, so remind the students that their analysis of an artwork may differ from other students and that this is okay. Depending on the assignment that you are preparing the students for, they may need to do some background research in order to fulfill this stage of the process. Suggest that the students begin by reading through exhibition catalogues and artist

statements in order to get a better understanding of the meaning behind the work of art.

Finally, students can evaluate the work of art. At this point it can be useful for the students to pose questions such as “Is this particular work of art successful?” Remind the students that simply saying “I think it’s bad” is not enough. If they have followed the two previous steps of the method, they should now be able to explain why they like or dislike the artwork. How we value a work of art is a personal judgment, but it is also important to encourage the students to understand how certain works of art (whether they like them or not) have made a significant contribution to the history of art and to our society.

Critically assessing a work of art need not be a confusing process for our students in the Fine Arts and Cultural Studies programs. When discussing art, it can be difficult not to jump to personal opinions first, but as TAs we want to help our students to make intelligent statements and educated guesses when it comes to discussing works of art. By introducing these three steps in your tutorial, you will provide the students with essential critical skills and allow them to feel comfortable talking and writing about works of art in a thoughtful and educated manner.

A MODEL FOR CRITIQUING ARTWORK

DESCRIPTION

- Tell what you see
- Subject matter, form, medium, style, lines, colour
- Is it a picture of something recognizable?
- Classification? (e.g. landscape, portraiture)
- Style? (e.g. Impressionism, Expressionism, Minimalism)
- Facts: date, size, name of artist

ANALYSIS

- Why did the artist create this?
- Consider the title—what does it mean?
- Is there a theme being explored?
- Is the biography of the artist significant to the artwork?
- What is the historical and cultural context?

EVALUATION

- What do you think about this artwork?
- Is this particular work of art successful?
- Do you like this work? Why or why not?
- How does this artwork affect you?

(Everyone starts...from page 2)

students in that they don't have to rely solely on one method of learning (reading, listening, writing, watching, etc.) and gives them two or more avenues for comprehension. It also engages my advanced learners who frequently are the first to volunteer and often take on the role of helping other students by sharing their knowledge and expertise.

The third task to find ways to utilize the resources students naturally possess. Students have a depth and breadth of experience that can be drawn on in the classroom. You do not always have to be the one "teaching". Often I asked students to share their own background knowledge as it relates to course material. For example, we studied the role of both privately and publicly owned media in Canada. I asked students to share their experiences living in countries with only state owned media or other combinations of media ownership. The results were amazing. Students felt that they were the experts and could relate the course material back to their own cultural and personal perspective. This served to instill confidence in my ESL students and taught my advanced learners to respect the knowledge imbedded in every student. Advanced learners were also able to demonstrate their expertise on specific subject materials.

Teaching students with widely varying starting points for learning can present significant challenges. But do not fear! These challenges can be overcome by recognizing that disparity exists, balancing the needs of new and advanced learners and using the resources each student already naturally possesses. With creative teaching approaches and a willingness to try new things that nightmare tutorial can turn into a dream class.

(Good presentations... from page 4)

Nearing the end of this course, ten presentations down and two to go, I feel refreshed by the insights my class has breathed into this element of the course. This year, using this process, my students' presentations have extended the course content and helped me recognize how presentations can be about more than just the material.

The Possibilities of Teaching and Learning Feminist Critical Skills



This article is a conversation between Diana Gibaldi and Rachel Hurst, who both teach in Foundations course teams. Diana teaches in a second year course titled "On Women" and Rachel teaches in a first year course titled "Women and Society." In this article, the authors set out to expand on a conventional understanding of critical skills (as active reading or note taking, for example) and discuss the process of teaching students feminist critical skills in first and second year Foundations courses. Women's Studies has roots in feminist organizing, and a commitment to validating women's experience as a source of knowledge and as a locus for effecting change. In the "Women and Society" course, students learn how to recognize their personal experiences as a legitimate form of knowledge, and a valuable position from which to begin research. In the "On Women" course, students are challenged to go beyond validating their experiences and towards contextualizing these experiences as part of a larger collective struggle. Through this conversation, we will discuss the challenges and rewards of teaching feminist critical skills, students' resistance to learning these skills, and some strategies for teaching feminist critical skills.

The Courses

Rachel: "Women and Society" begins by addressing topics that appeal to students' experiences as girls and women, such as media, the family, work, and education. A primary focus in the fall term of the course is to urge students to problematize common sense ideas about gender, race, sexuality, class, and ability, and to ask themselves to locate where they have learned these ideas. Students can relate to much of the material we cover in the first half of the course, and will share their experiences as they address the topics we study in tutorial discussion, in weekly in-class journals, and in their study groups. The winter term of the course covers theories of gender stratification, violence, sexuality, feminist theories, and women's organizing, and encourages students to begin thinking about their experiences as collective, rather than individual moments. The course continually emphasizes women's agency through their organizing for change, which addresses students' pessimistic feelings about the possibilities for women's full liberation and gets students to imagine themselves as change agents in their own lives.

Diana: My course is a second year Foundations course titled "On Women: An Introduction to Women's Studies." This course tends to be seen as the flagship course which functions to bring in new majors and minors, as well as establishes a cohesive overview of the discipline for those students who chose this course to fulfill a university requirement. Being that it is the introductory course for the entire discipline, it covers a wide variety of topics, which include a chronology of feminist theory (ie: liberal, radical, socialist, postmodern, third-wave, queer theory), as well as framing the issues and concerns that feminism and Women's Studies have taken up. The way the course is set up lends the first semester to more historical material and theory, which provides the context and groundwork out of which the feminist movement sprung. The second semester of the course focuses on more recent feminist debates and undertakes the infiltration of current social and political theory as a tool for helping students understand their lives and the world around them.

(Continued on page 7)

(Feminist Critical Skills ... from page 6)

Feminist Critical Skills, Student Resistance and Strategies

Rachel: The majority of the students in my tutorial have just completed high school, so they are around seventeen or eighteen years old. Their understanding of knowledge and research is largely positivistic and privileges the scientific method as the best model of intellectual inquiry. They avoid writing in the first person, they strive for “objectivity” in their work, and these factors result in a hesitation to express their political views. They are quite skeptical of authors who write in the first person, who discuss their personal experiences or their personal connections to their work, and frequently dismiss articles that make a strong political argument. Most of the students think about their lives in individualistic terms, and express many common sense stereotypes about gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability in tutorial, and in their written work. They resist feminist ideas because they consider them to be “biased,” and they resist using the knowledge they have from their everyday lives because they also view this knowledge as “biased” (and therefore irrelevant). This resistance among students to firmly express a political view in an academic setting is supported heavily by their high school education, the news media, and sometimes their other university courses.

The course stresses personal experience as a useful place from which to start thinking about a subject. However, our first task is to challenge students’ relativistic worldview (“Everyone’s entitled to their own opinion”) and support them in problematizing their responses to difficult material in order to persuade students to use personal experience effectively. Professor Linda Briskin, the course director of “Women and Society,” structures the first assignment to include a section in which students reflect upon and problematize their responses to an article about colonization in Canada and First Nations women, and the three-part major essay assignment includes a component of self-reflection and analysis that flows throughout all the steps of this assignment. Using the instructions for these assignments as a guide, each week in tutorial my students write in journals for about five or ten minutes on questions that I have prepared. These questions often focus helping students connect their experiences with the course material, and prepare them for the self-reflective writing they are required to do for their other written assignments. Another effective strategy for teaching this feminist critical skill to students is by structuring class discussions that seek out personal experiences relating to course readings and lectures. However, these discussions have a much different effect than the journals. In these discussions, students begin to appreciate the collective nature of their experiences as girls and young women, as well as the differences between these experiences, which can lead them into discussions of how we can find effective strategies for sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, and ableism. In their final assignment, students perform a “gender violation” or a protest against sexism, racism, and/or homophobia, which facilitates an understanding of the gendered expectations they face in their everyday lives, as well as an understanding of how they might challenge these expectations.

Mark in your calendars...

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Feminist Critical Skills and How to Deconstruct the Hierarchy of the Classroom

Diana: Like Rachel, my students are young, though most of them are second year students and have had the time to get used to university-style learning. This aspect makes my task as a TA of a Foundations course quite precarious, since the students all feel that they come into the course already knowing how to be a university student, and that I will not be telling them anything new. As opposed to first year students who need to be taught about correct styles and methods of citation, my students are past this stage and are asking more critical questions like, “How do you quote last week’s lecture correctly?” This presents an interesting opportunity for me to present “feminist critical skills” as opposed to standard critical skills which are required of Foundations courses. I can take students’ “I did this last year” attitude and attempt to persuade them that the skills they learn at university don’t only have to be about writing papers and passing exams (though these skills can be feminist in and of themselves). Though it may sound old-fashioned and idealistic, I really try to embody the philosophy that the university functions to offer students the opportunity to become better thinkers and people, as opposed to giving them a piece of paper that will help them get a job. I attempt to provide a space for students where they can figure out the answers themselves, as opposed to other

(Continued on page 8)

Congratulations UTP Grads!

The Faculty of Graduate Studies and the Centre for the Support of Teaching extend their congratulations to the following individuals who have completed the University Teaching Practicum since our last report in *Core* (February 2004):

Rifaat Abdalla, *Earth & Space Science*
 Kate Anderson, *Sociology*
 Stephen E. Bosanac, *Sociology*
 Pablo Bose, *Environmental Studies*
 Amiel Blajchman, *Environmental Studies*
 Laura Calvi, *Visual Arts*
 Jennifer Dale, *Art History*
 Judy Eaton, *Psychology*
 Tracey Etwell, *Biology*
 Ozlem Ezer, *Women's Studies*
 Adrian Fish, *Visual Arts*

Michaelann George, *Environmental Studies*
 Deborah Goren, *Biology*
 Ninette Gyrody, *Art History*
 Elaine Maria Hupfield, *Visual Arts*
 Simone Kaptein, *Psychology*
 Gail McCabe, *Sociology*
 Daved Muttart, *Law*
 Riley Olstead, *Sociology*
 Doris Sung, *Visual Arts*
 Bart Verheggen, *Chemistry*

The University Teaching Practicum is a self-directed program of professional development in university teaching for graduate students. Through this program participants engage in a process of in-depth learning about their own teaching – reflecting on their practice, analyzing their approach, applying new strategies and techniques, and documenting their experience. At the same time, they have opportunities to deepen their understanding of pedagogical principles and of student learning theories, and to participate in discussions on all manner of issues related to teaching and learning. For further information about the University Teaching Practicum, please contact the CST.

(Feminist Critical Skills... from page 7)

disciplines or spaces (like many work places) that require them to be receptacles of information and followers of proverbial orders. Through this, I attempt to break down the hierarchy of the classroom and explain that I don't have "the answers" and that they in fact have answers of their own, and I may be a catalyst of sorts to help give language to these answers. The way this plays itself out is actually quite interesting from class to class. For example, one of the critical skills that I am to teach students is how to read theoretical texts and take notes on what they have read. This seems like an easy task at first, and my students look to me to tell them how they are "supposed" to go about doing this. First I deflect the questions and ask students to talk about the ways that they learn and what helps them understand the materials that they read. After a few answers, I go up to the board and take down all their different ideas. What I end up with is a list that tells us that some students are visual learners and take extensive notes about every aspect of an article. Other students are audio learners and claim that their notes are sparse until they come to tutorial and talk out all the ideas that they got out of the material. One or two science students admit to making charts or graphs which plot the points of an argument in a much more ontological manner. At the end of the day, I explained to them that they already have a lot of the information that they need to "get by" and that perhaps I am here to give them the language to make

sense of that information. I push the students to ask questions about their readings, for instance, what *wasn't* there? Did the author account for race or sexuality? Was the author's subject position present? And I further ask them to think about their other classes and other readings, and push them to ask the same questions there, all the while, never having given instructions on what actually is the "best" way to take notes since they have answered their own questions. It is through valuing their knowledge that I feel I am giving them feminist critical skills.

We hope this article can open up some possibilities for conversation amongst feminist teachers to further articulate the category of critical skills that we are calling "feminist critical skills." Teaching feminist critical skills engenders a different response from students than teaching conventional critical skills, because often the lessons of feminist critical skills run contrary to mainstream values of "objectivity" that seek to erase the author's position in the world. Our courses both encourage and support students in recognizing their experience as a reasonable position of knowledge from which to begin scholarly work and as a site of continuous critical self-reflection. Though we recognize our courses happen to be in the discipline of Women's Studies, we also hope this article motivates and inspires teachers from other disciplines to think about their teaching strategies as well as the possibilities and potentials that lie in their hands.

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