C⊙RE

T his issue of Core focuses on the Teaching Assistant's philosophy of teaching. Written by TAs, this collection offers some reflections and observations on their experiences as TAs in different disciplines on how they conceptualize teaching and learning in their discipline, what goals they have for their students, and how they put these concepts and goals into effect in the classroom. Together, the contributions reflect a range of teaching approaches and practices, which we hope will in turn stimulate further discussion about the distinct philosophies that inform the teaching that we do.

TA issue
is made possible
through the
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CUPE Local 3903 and the
Centre for the Support
of Teaching

The TA's Philosophy of Teaching

Anik Bay, CST Graduate Teaching Associate

Every year, the Special TA Issue of CORE provides an important means for communicating our diverse and meaningful experiences as TAs to the wider university community. I am extremely proud to introduce this collection of articles written by TAs from our very own York University graduate student community.
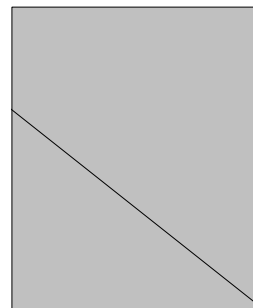
Our TA community engages in a huge share of the teaching at this university. We lecture, we explain, we grade, we provide support, we interact with students one-on-one. Year after year, we guide our students through their courses, often with a considerable commitment of time and energy on our part. Our experiences as teachers change us, as instructors, as scholars, and as people. Each one of us travels a unique path to develop that particular combination of theoretical principles and instruments for their implementation that we call our Philosophy of Teaching, and that expresses who we are as educators.

A Philosophy of Teaching statement is not simply an exploration of theories of post-secondary education or a summary of research on adult education. It is a personal statement of our identity as teachers: what our strengths and weaknesses are, what our professional goals are, how we see our roles in our students' educational lives, and what we think the place of post-secondary education is and should be in contemporary Canadian society. But it is more than that: our Philosophy of Teaching directly affects what happens in our classrooms. In every one of our classes we are communicating, albeit tacitly, how we see ourselves as teachers, through our choice of teaching styles and strategies, through our development or application of course policies, through our production of educational aids like lab manuals and tutorial handouts, and through our willingness to take chances in class by trying out a new teaching method or a new educational technology. Developing or adapting classroom strategies to meet our

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CORE ⊙ York's Newsletter on University Teaching ⊙ 111 Central Square, York University, Toronto, Canada M3J 1P3   1

(TAs Philosophy of Teaching... from page 1)

classes' educational needs is a necessary component of our maturation as teachers.

The experience of maturing as a teacher is what each author, in his or her individual way, shares with us in this Special TA Issue. We learn that the process is not an easy one. Developing a Philosophy of Teaching is not arrived at without uncertainties, questions, struggles, and failures. In fact, one of the threads connecting all four articles in this issue is the experience of having turned perceived weaknesses into strengths, and having learned and grown through this process. All four authors took ownership of situations they perceived as problems, and turned them into learning opportunities, for them as well as for their students.

Heather Sparling and Richardine Woodall's articles recount how their willingness to confront feelings of perceived inadequacy resulted in increasing their confidence in the classroom, in developing their skills as teachers, and in improving their relationships with students and between students.

It is a fact of life for TAs that, for a variety of reasons, they often possess less authority in the classroom than their course directors do. Many TAs look young, and in fact are very close to their students in age. For some students, the title "Professor" immediately commands more respect. I will leave aside for today the ways that gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and even height, factor into student perceptions of TAs. What I wish to highlight here is that, regardless of their true mastery of the subject they are teaching, TAs are keenly aware of their position as students in the university institution. After all, are we not pursuing higher education precisely because we want to keep on learning?

In practice, our dual role as teachers and students, and our awareness of it, can result in situations that lead us to question our confidence and our authority. Woodall and Sparling's responses to their respective challenges reflect their own particular and unique situations. Although each author addresses her concerns in a very different manner, there are strong similarities between them: their willingness to take chances, their courage to question the effectiveness of their teaching methods in fulfilling their teaching goals, and their commitment to take action based on their reflections.

For Cecilia Tagliavia and Michael Palamarek, fulfilling their teaching goals meant learning to share effectively their enthusiasm for their respective subjects. Tagliavia's main challenge was teaching in a different university system in a different language. Palamarek was faced with stimulating students' interest in theoretical material, whose relevance to students' lives was not immediately apparent. Although their specific educational concerns were quite different, both authors succeeded in fostering a classroom environment where students were encouraged to engage actively with the course material and to develop their own understanding of the subject.

Any serious reflection on our role and our effectiveness as post-secondary educators brings us face-to-face with complex and difficult questions, such as, what is learning, and how do we facilitate it? Part of our development as teachers may involve re-evaluating our answers to these questions. All four articles give us vivid examples of this process. Although we all have our own path to travel to answer these questions for ourselves, informed by who we are as people and by what we have experienced in and out of the classroom, I truly believe that we will find that teaching is not so much a task we accomplish as it is a lifelong process leading to personal growth, not only as instructors or as Faculty members, but as human beings with contributions to make to the world at large. ᘖ

LIBRARY ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

Individuals wishing to improve aspects of their own teaching, enhance their teaching strategies and assessment techniques, or refine their courses will find helpful resources in the CST resource library – a specialized collection of books, articles, periodicals and reports on new developments in teaching in higher education. All material may be borrowed by faculty and teaching assistants. The collection includes such topics as:

Active learning	Lecturing in large classes
Improving teaching skills	Critical skills
Assessing student learning	Collaborative learning
Evaluating teaching	Course design
Teaching and technology	Diversity and inclusivity

Instructors are welcome to drop by the Centre for the Support of Teaching to browse through the resource collection. We are located at 111 Central Square and are open from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday to Friday.

My Approach to Teaching

Cecilia Tagliavia, Graduate Programme in Biology

I am an Italian graduate student who came to York to study biology. Before I began to teach at York University I had some experience as a tutor of Italian in Britain and of mathematics in Italy. These were one-on-one situation. So at the beginning of my teaching assistantship I was not prepared for a bigger audience (I had 24 students in my first York tutorial), and on my first day I was really nervous. I had no public speaking experience, and was still learning English, as Italian is my first language.

To give a more complete picture: we do not have Teaching Assistants in Italy where I received my undergraduate degree, so I had to figure out what was involved in being a TA before I could be successful at it. My first teaching experience at York was therefore not smooth, since I was anxious and not sure what my duties and responsibilities were. Fortunately, TA Day and the CST and TARG workshops that I attended gave me confidence and support in how to understand the North American university system and how to improve my teaching skills.

My feelings about teaching have changed a lot since my first teaching day. At the beginning I felt that I had to perform well, like I might feel during an examination.

Now that I am more confident I feel that I am helping people understand some-

> I am really careful to guide the students through their discovery of science but not to reveal the answers for every question.

thing I really care about, biology, and I am more relaxed in doing so. I moved from the idea of teaching as a one-way process, of giving information (me→ students), to a two-way process of teaching. I now believe in an interactive approach (m e← students), where the students' questions and feedback are really important teaching factors.

When teaching, my primary concerns are: 1) to be well prepared on the subject of each tutorial, 2) to speak English as clearly as I can and use the blackboard effectively, and 3) to mark fairly and give useful feedback in the form of comments on assignments and laboratory reports, so that students can improve their report writing skills. I am careful to guide the students through their discovery of science but not to reveal the answers for every question. The objective for me is to teach the students how to

ask themselves questions and how to answer them logically, and to facilitate learning about biological experiments using the material and methods provided, with attention and precision.

My short-term goal as a teacher is to have students leave each tutorial with the feeling that they learned something new and useful. My long-term goal is that at the end of the course the students will have a complete view of the course material and the importance of their practical experience within it. My personal goals are to keep improving my teaching style and to use new technologies effectively. My strengths are the use of the blackboard and my deep knowledge of the subject I teach. My weaknesses are probably two: first, my expectations of my students are often too high; second, I express myself sometimes less clearly than I would like to, because English is my second language. These are the areas that I plan to improve upon.

In the past two years at York I have been a teaching assistant and a lab coordinator. As a TA I usually get to the lab 10 minutes before the scheduled meeting with the students and organize my notes on the blackboard. When the students come in I do a ten to fifteen-minute presentation where I explain the goal of the tutorial, the importance of learning about the specific subject, and how to use the materials and methods to perform the experiment successfully. I spend a few minutes at the end of this time answering students' questions. Students then start their experiments and I walk around the room and answer students' questions individually.

Since the structure of the lab tutorials does not allow for a group discussion it is sometimes hard to judge student development and critical thinking. The questions included in the laboratory handouts are designed (by the lab coordinator or course director) to remedy this situation by encouraging students to think critically to answer them well. My role is to assist this process by stimulat-

TA Workshop Schedule for Winter 2002

All sessions will be held in CS 130, Scott Library

Tuesday, Jan. 8, *2:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m.*
How am I Teaching?
TA Resource Group
Practicum Category: Self-Evaluation

Wednesday, Jan. 16, *1:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.*
Introduction to Course Design I
TA Workshop
 Practicum Category: Course Design

Thursday, Jan. 31, *2:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m*
Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences
TA Resource Group
Practicum Category: Learning Theories and Learning Differences

Monday, Feb. 4, *1:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.*
Suspect plagiarism? What to do Next
TA Workshop
Practicum Category: Ethics, Human Rights and Equity

Tuesday, Feb. 19, *3:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.*
Developing one's own Philosophy of Teaching
TA Resource Group
Practicum Category: Philosophy and Goals of Higher Education

Wednesday, Mar. 6, *1:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.*
Introduction to Course Design II
TA Workshop
Practicum Category: Course Design

Thursday, Mar. 14, *3:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.*
TBA
TA Resource Group
Practicum Category: General

Tuesday, Mar. 26, *2:00 p.m. - 3:30 p.m.*
Completing the University Teaching Practicum
Roundtable
Practicum Category: N/A

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ing student thought with questions like 'why' and 'what' while they perform the tasks assigned, so that they can answer the handout questions in a logical and informed manner.

I am careful to avoid discriminating among students: this year a student kept speaking to me in Italian, so I made sure to tell him clearly that he should speak English in class so that everyone can understand what is being said. Some students also asked for personal favors like extensions on report deadlines, which I did not give since I think that course rules must be applied uniformly to the entire class for them to be effective.

In between tutorials students can reach me in various ways: email, by appointment, or during office hours. I use a variety of resources and technologies to support students as they learn the material, such as the lab manual and the textbook to inform the lab session, PowerPoint for lab quizzes, and videotape for lectures.

I think that I am the kind of teacher that I liked as a student: I am prepared and I have high expectations of my students. During tutorials I am friendly but I do not like to mix personal matters with professional ones. I see myself as a mentor and as a guide. ❧

CUPE 3903
Teaching Development Grants

The CUPE 3903 Teaching Development Fund has been established to assist contract (part-time) faculty members in CUPE Unit 2 to:

- **develop a new programme of study**
- **develop new teaching materials**
- **develop teaching skills**
- **or any combination of the preceding**

Two types of grants are available through this Fund:

(1) **Major Teaching Development Grants:** two grants each in the amount of one full course directorship ($11,674 approx.).

(2) **Minor Teaching Development Grants:** (five grants in the amount of ($1,000 each).

(3) **Minor Grants:** an additional $10,000 is available to be distributed according to criteria currently being established by the Labour/ Managment Committee.

Application deadline: Friday, February 1, 2002

To receive grant guidelines and submit an application, contact Mala Thakoor, Centre for the Support of Teaching, 111 Central Square, 736-5754, mthakoor@yorku.ca. For further information, email Mary-Jo Nadeau (mjnadeau@yorku.ca), or visit the CST website at www.yorku.ca/cst/grants.html.

How Admitting "I Don't Know" Facilitates Learning

Heather Sparling, Graduate Programme in Ethnomusicology

It is hard to say, "I don't know." As teachers (and teaching assistants), we repeatedly assure our students that there are no stupid questions. It's okay for students not to have all the answers. After all, that's why they're taking courses in the first place. But what does it mean when a teacher doesn't have all the answers either? Does saying, "I don't know" imply an admission of incompetence? Or can we use our own lack of knowledge to facilitate learning?

In 1998, I was awarded a teaching assistantship for Introduction to Multimedia, a course designed to teach Fine Arts students how to create Internet and multimedia projects. I had applied for the position because I had always wanted to learn how to create a website. I figured that I would never find the time unless I was teaching the subject, in which case I would be forced to learn the material (inside and out, at that). I had no qualifications for the course. Really. But the course director was persuaded by my assertion that I was comfortable with computers and that I had confidence in my ability to learn the necessary concepts and techniques.

That first year proved quite difficult. I taught two three-hour labs of 25 students each week. Although the students also attended a weekly hour-long lecture with the course director, the TAs taught all the hands-on techniques in the computer lab at Winters College. The course director provided a weekly outline and designed the assignments; the TAs determined how to approach and teach the labs. Basically, I managed to keep ahead of the students by about one to two weeks.

Frequently, my students would ask me, "What about these other techniques?" Generally not knowing the answer, I would reply, "Uh… We'll be covering that soon." Immediately after class, I would desperately search for the answer so that I could teach it the following week.

I was too embarrassed to acknowledge my ignorance about the subject. I was afraid to tell my students that I had never TA'd the course before, or even taken it or anything like it. I was afraid that to admit to a lack of knowledge was to admit to inadequacy. I was afraid that saying, "I don't know" would result in students glancing at each other in disbelief, dropping the course while muttering, "She's a complete fraud."

> Admitting ignorance resulted in at least two positive outcomes: 1) it developed the relationship between students and teacher, and 2) it sparked student participation.

What I learned during my second year of TAing for the same course, however, was that I *still* didn't know all the answers. Students encountered new problems with new software. I started to notice that "I don't know" was an answer occasionally provided by other more experienced TAs, or even the course director himself. Amazingly, the students weren't walking out. In fact, the course was invariably full (over 200 students were enrolled).

Moreover, informal course evaluations indicated that students regularly considered it one of their favourite courses.

Instead of delaying my response to my students' questions with the excuse that the answer would be taught "soon," I began to admit that I didn't always know. I began to ask the class if anyone else knew the answers. An amazing thing happened. I began to learn from my students and they began to learn from each other. Admitting ignorance resulted in at least two positive outcomes: 1) it developed the relationship between students and teacher, and 2) it sparked student participation.

When I admitted that I did not know an answer, my students came to trust me. Unafraid to acknowledge my own lack of knowledge, I showed them they could be less afraid to admit *their* ignorance and uncertainties (which could then be addressed). Moreover, my imperfections demonstrated that I am a human being rather than a lean, mean, marking machine, which made students feel more at ease when approaching me

(How Admitting "I Don't Know" from page 5)

with questions and ideas. Better yet, my ignorance offered students the opportunity to enlighten me with their own information. They felt empowered by their knowledge and students discovered that it was possible to learn from each other.

Students were excited to share their expertise with classmates. Students discovered that their classmates had a wealth of knowledge that they could access when I was busy with other students, or when they were working on projects outside of our lab time. Students came to realize that, while I am a good resource, I am not necessarily the only – or even the best – resource available in the class.

For instance, I taught basic techniques of Photoshop, a sophisticated program that enables students to create and manipulate their own images. As a graduate student in music, I have never been particularly proficient as a visual artist, nor did I have extensive experience with the program. However, many of my students had used Photoshop as Design or Visual Arts majors. In my first year of teaching, if a student asked me how to execute a particular technique in Photoshop, I would have said, "we'll be covering that next week." Now, I simply said, "I don't know. Does anyone else know if this is possible?" Usually, someone did.

The effectiveness of admitting "I don't know" was reinforced when I held my first course directorship last year, a world music course. I obviously included a unit on my specialty, Celtic music, but I also covered sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and India. Before the course, I had only the barest knowledge of music in any of the latter three areas. When I discovered that several of my students had actually been involved with some of the

musical cultures first hand, my immediate reaction was to feel threatened, fearing that these students would find mistakes in my lectures. Instead, they often were able to reinforce what I taught, augmenting the information I presented with colourful stories about their own personal experiences with the music. These stories brought the cultures to life for the other students, and enabled them to relate to these cultures. Even when students disagreed with what I had to say, we were able to engage in a discussion about multiple perspectives, and explore the kinds of information that academia values. Sometimes students asked questions that just hadn't yet been addressed in the literature. My admission of "I don't know" helped students to see that we were only scratching the surface of these cultures. On one memorable occasion, one student took it upon herself to find the answer to an unsolved class question. She *did* find the answer, which we then shared with the rest of the class.

I must admit, I still occasionally find it hard to say, "I don't know." As a teacher, it sometimes feels as though I should have all the answers. And yet I have chosen to pursue graduate work *because* I recognize that there is always so much more to learn. Is the admission of "I don't know" the best or only way to deal with a lack of knowledge in the classroom? Predictably, my answer is, I don't know. But I'm hopeful that my admission will open the topic up for discussion and thereby give everyone the opportunity to learn something from my experience. ✑

University-Wide Teaching Awards

Deadline: January 18, 2002

Do you know an instructor who deserves recognition for excellence in teaching?

York University now has four annual university-wide awards for excellence in teaching. Their purpose is to provide significant recognition for such excellence, to encourage its pursuit, to publicize such excellence when achieved across the University and in the wider community, and to promote informed discussion of teaching and its improvement. The awards demonstrate the value York University attaches to teaching and recognizes those who, through innovation and commitment, have significantly enhanced the quality of learning by York students. The Awards are sponsored by the York Parents' Association, and the recipients are selected by the Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning (SCOTL). Recipients receive:

- · A monetary award of $3,000
- · Inclusion on the University-Wide Teaching Award plaques in Vari Hall
- · Recognition at York's Convocation ceremonies

Nominations should be submitted to the Secretary of SCOTL, University Secretariat, S883 Ross, by January 18, 2002.

Further information and nomination forms are available at www.yorku.ca/admin/cst/res/uwta.htm or the Centre for the Support of Teaching, 111 Central Square, 736-5754.

TARG
The TA Resource Group

The TA Resource Group (TARG) provides a forum where graduate students interested in discussing teaching issues can meet on a regular basis, share experiences, solicit or provide support and advice, and develop helpful strategies to deal with specific problems. For Winter meeting dates see page 4.

Teaching Theory

Michael Palamarek, Graduate Programme in Social and Political Thought

Teaching assistants whose own academic work focuses on the theoretical traditions within their discipline are driven by a genuine interest in, if not passion for, the history of ideas. The main challenge in a tutorial setting is to stimulate this passion for concepts among students. While all TAs must cover purely theoretical material at one point or another, the teaching challenges involved in presenting and discussing such abstract material are considerable. In what follows, I draw upon my own TA experiences in the social sciences in order to outline the difficulties involved in 'teaching theory' as well as a number of useful strategies for addressing them. I further try to define and describe some clear learning outcomes for students, as well as rewards for both students and TAs.

Many students find the style and structure of theoretical texts unfamiliar, even impenetrable, especially if they have never taken a course that focuses on the theoretical traditions in their discipline. Thus, many may not have developed a set of reading skills which allows points of access into a text or the ability to reconstruct the logical flow of an argument. Add to this the need for students to develop their own interpretation of the text, where, infamously, there is no 'right' answer, students commonly experience frustration and doubt with respect to their learning capacities. These anxieties can often lead TAs to question their own teaching abilities.

Faced with these challenges, one of the most crucial tasks a TA must perform is to draw attention to the power of ideas within the context of historical and contemporary events to effect change. Connections must continually be drawn between the abstract concepts under discussion and everyday life. While this is a general task throughout the tutorials, I have distributed short newspaper articles and even song lyrics to students and asked them to work together to apply the concepts under discussion to this contem-

> Connections must continually be drawn between the abstract concepts under discussion and everyday life.

porary material. This past year, for example, we looked at how existentialist themes such as anxiety, time, and mortality could be identified in lyrics from Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, and how some of the course readings on Freud could help explain the anti-globalization protests that took place recently in Québec City.

The goal of these exercises is to cultivate a productive engagement with theory by generating a reaction among students to the concepts under discussion, whether positive, negative, ambivalent, or impassioned. On the basis of these reactions, students can be encouraged to take up and defend a position with respect to the material. With these objectives in mind, there are four strategies I have employed which have consistently proven effective.

One of the hardest challenges in a tutorial is simply getting participants to speak, and so I often break the tutorial down temporarily into groups in order to create a more intimate and less intimidating environment for students to express their ideas, doubts, and questions. All or each one of the groups is given a question to answer or a concept to discuss, and is responsible for presenting its findings to the tutorial. Apart from asking students questions of concept definition, questions such as 'Which concept or idea of thinker X do you find most interesting, engaging, or even annoying?' or 'Which do you find the most or the least convincing? Why?' usually work out well in terms of generating a prolonged discussion. The main advantage of this group work lies in the opportunity for students to learn from their peers and to contribute reciprocally to their peers' learning. Indeed, one of the most useful comments a student has ever made to me concerned how much she had learned from hearing other students work through their thoughts and ideas.

Another way to give students the opportunity to learn with their colleagues is to ask for volunteers to present assigned readings,

without being formally evaluated. The reading is divided up between two or three students, each of whom is given five minutes to present on what they take to be the main points or arguments of the text. The short presentation time is a deliberate choice on my part, for it reduces the pressure of speaking in public, and encourages concision. Moreover, seeing and hearing their colleagues talk about theory demonstrates by example that theory really isn't so impossible after all, and stresses the participatory aspect of the tutorial. If a full complement of presenters cannot be put together, I will take a section myself. My participation also helps to convey by example how one could approach a theoretical text and tease out salient material.

Once students have reached a degree of comfort with the material, classroom team debates can be organized. Two teams of two participants each are asked to explain what they see as the three central ideas of a particular thinker, and three reasons why their fellow students should or should not ascribe to this thinker's way of interpreting the world. The most memorable debates we conducted this past year focused on whether or not we should all become Kierkegaardians or Nietzscheans. Because students had to take up a position with respect to each thinker, the debate was lively, engaging, and covered a good deal of theoretical ground.

The final strategy I will discuss is the use of student journals. Like the other activities, consistently giving students five or ten minutes to write down their reactions to and ideas about the concepts at hand creates yet another opportunity for a constructive engagement with theory. This exercise begins to accustom students to writing about theoretical concepts and potentially provides raw material for essays and assignments. Thus far, I have not ever asked to see the journals, as the aim of the exercise is simply to have students express themselves. Towards the end of the course, I ask students to review what they have written and comment upon how their ideas have developed.

I orient the role I take up as a TA in these strategies around three core activities. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, I prepare questions which are designed to generate an engaged response.

I also aim, with care and respect, to clarify discussions and comments that get off-track or demonstrate difficulties with the material. Finally, I endeavor to serve as a guide and sometimes as a participant in fleshing out particularly important points or ideas as they come up in discussion.

All of these strategies aim to build students' confidence in their ability to understand and respond to theoretical texts, as evidenced in their increasing capacity to ask pertinent questions and participate in constructive discussion. This outcome also builds the confidence of TAs. The most gratifying rewards for both students and TAs lie in those moments where impassioned, collective learning takes place, and all participants sense that *new ways of thinking about the world have been opened up.* C3

MICRO-TEACHING

Micro-teaching has been described as one of the most powerful techniques for improving teaching and providing a basis for self-reflection and professional growth. It is a laboratory approach to teaching development aimed at helping to develop and refine one's teaching skills and to practice constructive criticism.

In these sessions, participants review basic ideas about teaching, check their current practices, observe and learn new ideas from colleagues, try out new strategies, and share feedback with colleagues in a constructive atmosphere. Participants design and deliver a 10-minute teaching segment followed by an exchange of ideas and issues related to the presentation. The teaching segment is also video-taped for each presenter as a basis for self-reflection and ongoing development of their teaching style.

Micro-teaching is a requirement of the ***University Teaching Practicum*** for graduate students, and contributes to candidates' ongoing, systematic development of their teaching practice and performance while they are teaching. The micro-teaching requirement complements the student and colleague evaluation requirements, and the results of all these components inform the development of a plan for ongoing self-improvement of teaching.

Micro-teaching sessions will be offered by the CST on the following dates:

2001	2002
December 6 11:30 – 2:00	April 9, 2002 2:00 – 4:30
December 10 2:00 – 4:30	April 12 2:00 – 4:30
December 13 11:30 – 2:00	April 17, 2002 2:00 – 4:30

Space in these sessions is limited to 5-6 participants per session, so those interested in participating in a session should register with the CST as soon as possible. Space is allocated on a first-come, first-served basis.

Mark in your calendars...

TA Day
September 5, 2002

A Full Day Conference for
Teaching Assistants at York

Failure is Part of the Game:
One TA's Philosophy of Teaching

Richardine G. Woodall, Graduate Programme in English

My earliest experiences teaching in a classroom were both powerful and humbling. Being responsible for my students' knowledge terrified me. My obligation to impart knowledge forced me to work very hard. I spent hours in the library mastering my material. How could I not? I had to be an authority. I had to teach everything. I could not predict what my students would be able to retain from the course, or what they would need to know for the exam. What if my students all failed? This would reflect badly on me, and I would be a failure.

My desire not to fail my students, and to *drag* them into knowledge, compelled me to take very tight reins in my tutorial. As I soon learned, that was my first mistake. The classroom is a dynamic environment. TAs have authority in the classroom: we mark, grade, and assess students' knowledge. However, students are also a very powerful force. TAs and students work and learn together. My practice of *dragging* students toward knowledge was my downfall and ultimately my liberation. My experience of failure in the classroom did not come from any lack of preparedness – I had my own learning style – and I had given thought to many complex teaching issues. I had developed solutions to specific problems. Yet, despite all my thinking and planning, I experienced a failure which ultimately led me to re-evaluate my philosophy of teaching.

My earliest teaching experiences led me to develop a particular teaching style, one that was controlling, where I tried to "force" students to learn. Teaching styles can be loosely defined as models, stepping-stones or strategies to facilitate learning in the classroom. For instance, one effective teaching style is the Socratic method where the facilitator poses questions for students to answer. As another example, in the discipline of English, teaching tends to centre on particular texts, and involves close reading and analyzing passages. Whatever the style, however, the main objectives are to impart knowledge and create an environment where learning can occur.

> My solution was to spread out my goals and objectives for the students' understanding of the material over the course of the year.

But how do we impart knowledge? How can we create an environment where learning can occur? In teaching English literature, how can we teach students to master content when quite often only one or two classes are devoted to a specific text? And again, how can we most effectively use that finite time in tutorial when other issues can arise and interfere with teaching new content, such as questions about the lecture? Furthermore, what is learning? Is learning a specific and definable thing? Or is it dynamic and ever changing? Is the classroom static? Are the students static?

These are very difficult and complex questions that I attempted to address through thinking, planning and implementing helpful strategies. In my discipline, English, learning is enhanced through critical thinking, close reading of critical texts and passages, and honing communication and writing skills. Mastering content in a few short tutorials was problematic – my solution was to spread out my goals and objectives for the students' understanding of the material over the course of the year. Also, I assess their comprehension with brief reviews and questionnaires administered periodically.

Moreover, I have found that neither the classroom nor students are static. Students change from year to year, and class dynamics differ from one tutorial to the next. In addition, as facilitators we need to be sensitive to other issues that produce and affect students' learning, such as gender and race dynamics and students' different educational and financial backgrounds. Students do not all learn at

(Failure is Part of the Game from page 9)

the same pace. Some students are more receptive to visual aids. Some students learn best when there is a clear methodology. I have found that an outline of the issues to be covered or objectives to be achieved on the blackboard or in handouts is a wonderful learning aid. Similarly, an outline of the goals for the course - such as, by the end of a unit students are expected to have a keen knowledge of the course material to enable them to formulate ideas and discuss certain issues – helps students stay on track. Adaptability and flexibility in our teaching styles are crucial to tackling limitations and other constraints.

But even with all of my thinking, researching, planning, and adapting it was still possible for me to see failure in what I saw as my duty – teaching and nurturing learning. I still remember my first such experience, I was teaching Shakespeare, and the play we were studying was one I found to be particularly intriguing and provoking. My students, however, were not as intrigued, or so it seemed to me. So I tried everything I could to motivate them. I tried to lighten the atmosphere with a silly joke. I moved around the classroom, trying to inject enthusiasm. I divided the class into groups, usually a wonderful way to generate discussions. I tried the question and answer method. All of these efforts were met with silence and downcast eyes. I saw students looking at the clock, indicating boredom and disinterest. Worse, I saw the blank look that students can get when they just don't get it. I remember walking out of the classroom that day feeling dejected, thinking that I had failed my students. I felt so strongly about my responsibilities to my students that I demanded nothing less than the best from myself. What I didn't realize until later is that students also have a responsibility for their education, and sometimes they fail themselves.

I had come to class that day with a genuine interest in helping my students learn. I was dedicated, passionate and excited about the material. Despite my best efforts, I had been unable to *drag* them into learning – I could not even nurture or encourage them. They simply refused to participate.   I believe students realized that I was working as hard as I possibly could, because later some of them apologized for their passivity. One student even said that she appreciated my efforts; she then revealed that she found Shakespeare's language difficult. Now having some idea of what produced her silence, I was able to work toward overcoming her difficulty. I had assumed that the text was straightforward and uncomplicated. I had assumed incorrectly. I learned not to assume what my students know. In addition, having assignments due in other classes, many students had not prepared for my class. From this failure, I discovered that I should not rely on even my best students to have understood the material. I thought that with control, I could make the students learn. I also realized that I had assumed all the responsibility for learning. Students have to come to knowledge. I realized that, even with the best intentions, my teaching style stifled learning. I had to learn to loosen the reins.

My failure in the classroom is also my greatest success. I still want too much. I still want to instill my love of literature in my students. However, I have learned that this is my love, not theirs. I have learned that students have their own goals and reasons for being in the classroom. Students do not always demand the best of themselves, or sometimes they are simply tired, overworked and overwhelmed. I felt failure primarily because I care, and because I genuinely believe that we can make a difference in the classroom. However, I also came to realize that my assumptions about learning do not always match the students.

Through this experience, I realized that teaching <u>is</u> learning. Just as learning is a lifelong process, so is teaching a lifelong journey of growth, exploration, and even sometimes failure. ☙

Congratulations!

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 2001):

Gabriela Aceves, Visual Arts	*Jean Allen, Visual Arts*
Christina Halliday, Education	*Lenke Harcsa, Visual Arts*
Ken Hare, Environmental Studies	*Teresa Janz, Psychology*
Kitty Mou Kit Leung, Visual Arts	*Natascha Niederstrass, Visual Arts*
Dawn Owen, Visual Arts	*Cecilia Tagliavia, Biology*
Karen Williams, Biology	

The University Teaching Practicum is a self-directed programme of professional development in university teaching for graduate students. Through this programme 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.

CST Graduate Teaching Associates

We are delighted to have Anik Bay and André Goldenberg as our Graduate Teaching Associates for this academic year. Anik is a doctoral candidate in Environmental Studies and her research area is in the critical understanding of human-animal relationships. André recently completed his Master's Degree in Anthropology at York, where he studied urban Aboriginal health and governance. He is currently in his first year at the Osgoode Hall Law School.

Together Anik and André have central responsibility for the University Teaching Practicum (see sidebar) and related teaching development activities for graduate students. They jointly plan and organize all Practicum-related workshops, coordinate specific programs within the Practicum, and consult with TAs about their teaching. If you have questions about teaching, TA professional development, classroom environment and other related issues, don't hesitate to contact Anik and André at gta@yorku.ca.

To help graduate students complete the requirements of the Practicum, the CST Graduate Teaching Associates coordinate the following programs:

TA WORKSHOPS

TA development workshops are held throughout the academic year, and are designed to provide TAs with foundational information on a range of teaching-related issues as part of the Practicum curriculum. The workshops are not discipline-specific so as to be accessible to all TAs irrespective of their specialty.

THE TA RESOURCE GROUP (TARG)

TARG is a peer-support and resource group of TAs that meets monthly to discuss common teaching and learning issues. TARG meetings serve as a forum where TAs can share experiences, solicit and provide support and advice, and develop helpful strategies to deal with specific problems. Meetings are open to all TAs at all levels of experience from any university Faculty and department.

TEACHING DEVELOPMENT GRADUATE ASSISTANT (TDGA) PROGRAM

The TDGA Programme complements the university-wide teaching development events by offering opportunities for graduate students to reflect on university teaching, theory and practice from the perspective of their own disciplinary training and requirements. TDGAs in departments across campus organize activities that assist TAs in their work and allow Practicum participants to fulfill the disciplinary-specific study requirements.

TA DAY 2002

Planning for the 20th annual TA Day is currently underway and it will be held on Thursday, September 5, 2002. This is a wonderful opportunity for TAs at all levels of experience to participate in a full day of activities designed to make their teaching experience interesting, enjoyable and rewarding. There are many opportunities for graduate student involvement in the planning process. Contact gta@yorku.ca for more information!

UNIVERSITY TEACHING PRACTICUM

The University Teaching Practicum is a self-directed programme of professional development in university teaching and learning for graduate students. Founded on the principles of best practice in university teaching, the Practicum provides opportunities for participants to explore the theory and practice of teaching and to reflect on their ongoing teaching development and experience. Upon completion of all components of the Practicum, dossiers are reviewed by the CST and the Dean of Graduate Studies and successful candidates receive a certificate of completion from the Dean.

The Practicum is comprised of three main components:

1. GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF PEDAGOGY

a) **Twenty hours of study exploring specific teaching and learning topics.** This requirement can be fulfilled through any combination of workshops, TARG sessions, conferences, independent study, or by completing UTAL 5000.03, plus

b) **Five hours of discipline specific study** that can be fulfilled through TDGA workshops, related discipline specific teaching workshops or independent study.

2. PRACTICE AND ANALYSIS OF TEACHING

a) **One full TAship** or equivalent, or a Teaching Apprenticeship
b) **Analysis of teaching** through self-evaluation with video component, plus colleague and student evaluations

3. TEACHING DOSSIER

Development of a dossier that includes:
1) a statement of teaching philosophy,
2) teaching strategies,
3) experience and professional development, and
4) analysis of teaching.

CALL FOR PAPERS

From York Graduate Students

Special TA Issue of *Core*,
York's Newsletter on University Teaching,
Published by the Centre for the Support of Teaching

"Reality and the borders of the classroom:
How TAs incorporate the world around them in their teaching"

DEADLINE: Friday, January 18, 2002

The troubling events of September 11th, 2001, and the equally troubling events that followed, represent both challenges and opportunities for TAs at York University. Amid fears of terrorist attacks, restrictive borders, heightened national and international security, threats to civil liberties, air strikes overseas, violence and racism at home, anthrax scares and an increasingly pervasive sense of anxiety and worry, TAs continue to face difficult choices about how much they should (or should not) incorporate these "real-world" issues into their course materials and tutorials. For some TAs, the course itself offers ample opportunities to discuss these issues, as students are encouraged to reflect on historical, cultural and economic developments in the world around them. For other TAs, the "real world" seems difficult to incorporate into their teaching, sometimes too distant and remote, sometimes too close and emotionally draining. Added to this are the difficulties many TAs face in trying to squeeze extra materials, issues or discussions into an already overloaded academic curriculum.

In preparing the next TA issue of our Core newsletter, the Centre for the Support of Teaching invites all current and former TAs to share their experiences in confronting the world around them and choosing how and whether to incorporate it into their teaching. We invite you to consider any or all of the following questions:

- How did you deal with the events of September 11th, 2001 and the events that followed in your classroom, if at all?

- classroom"? Should TAs avoid addressing current events and difficult issues in order to ensure that their

- Or, should TAs have a greater role in ensuring their students think about their courses within the context of the world around them?

- What are some of the ways in which the world around us influences our teaching and our role as TAs, both in terms of course content, and pedagogical form or technique?

ideas with their colleagues across the University. We would like to hear what you have done to incorporate "the real world" into your classroom and into your teaching, or what you would like to accomplish; conversely, we would also like to hear

issues or events besides those of September 11th.

Please submit a brief proposal for an article, discussion piece or short essay you would like to contribute to our next TA issue of *Core*, dealing with these questions. The proposal itself should be 250 words long (maximum), and the final article/essay (to be submitted by March 1, 2002) should be 1000 words long (maximum). Send your proposals as MS WORD attachment via e-mail to: gta@yorku.ca. Or, send a paper copy to the Centre for the Support of Teaching (CST), 111 Central Square. You should include your full name, e-mail address, department or academic unit, year and programme of study, a campus mailing address and a campus phone number at which you can be reached.

For more information, please contact André Goldenberg at the CST, either by e-mail (goldena@yorku.ca) or by phone (416-736-5754).