CORE

Volume 10, Number 2 February 2001

Welcome Back!

This issue of Core focuses on the Teaching Assistant's role in helping students learn. Written by TAs, this collection of articles offers a series of practical strategies that they have developed not only to help students understand the course material, but also to create a stimulating learning environment and develop critical skills. Taken together, the contributions reflect the range of possibilities for promoting student learning.

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

The Role of Teaching Assistants in Helping Students Learn

Anna Hoefnagels, CST Graduate Teaching Associate, 1999-2000

Graduate students' roles and responsibilities as Teaching Assistants or Course Directors are various, and often are prescribed by the unit in which they teach or by the nature of the course to which they are assigned. These responsibilities range from grading students' papers and tests, to holding weekly tutorials in which students develop their critical thinking and communication skills, to organizing and presenting three-hour long lectures for classes of 60-200 students. Despite the variability of the responsibilities that graduate students fulfill through their teaching appointments, one aspect of their job is common: their role in helping students learn.

TAs can have a profound effect on students when they show enthusiasm for the course content, passion for learning, and an interest in their students' lives and development as learners. TAs are often a student's 'first contact' in a course: if students have a question or a problem, they tend to raise them first with their TA. TAs are called on to clarify ideas and material and to provide students with feedback on assignments and tests to help them identify the areas that they have mastered as well as those in which they can improve. But our obligations to our students do not end with developing effective teaching strategies. We are also responsible for creating a classroom environment in which students are comfortable expressing their ideas and engaging with their colleagues.

Reflecting Canada's multicultural society, York's undergraduate student body is increasingly diverse, with various ethnic, linguistic, religious and economic backgrounds represented, and a high proportion of female students, mature students, international students and special needs students. TAs need not only to recognize the diversity of their students, but also to accommodate students' special needs and create a safe learning space (1). As Leona Nicolas Welch observes, students of college and university age still need encouragement while they learn new tasks and information to help them combat their fears and insecurities about failure (2). Welch proposes that, by creating a safe and welcoming learning environment, educators help foster the confidence and security of their students.

Issues of power and authority in the classroom are critical to student learning. The relationships of power that exist among TAs and their students are precarious and can greatly impact classroom dynamics and the comfort levels and success of students.

(Continued on page 2)

In this issue

(The Role of TAs... from page 1)

While some 'rules' of the classroom may be negotiable (deadlines, assignment expectations, modes of discussion, and guidelines for classroom participation), others are not, for example, no tolerance for racism, sexism, ageism, ableism and classism. A strategy that TAs have found to be effective is to model the behaviour they expect from their students and to be aware of their own assumptions, convictions, beliefs and attitudes while also encouraging their students to be self-reflective.

At the same time, when developing their role as facilitator in the classroom, it is important for TAs not to confuse being in control with being controlling (3). Consider the various definitions that have been given for the word 'authority': "a power to enforce obedience... the power to influence action, opinion or belief... and a capacity to inspire belief (as with the weight of testimony or evidence)"(4). The three verbs used in these definitions – enforce, influence and inspire – reflect different roles and relationships that TAs can have with students. Finding the 'right' balance can be challenging.

In this issue of CORE, four teaching assistants draw on their experiences in the classroom to offer strategies that they have developed to help their students learn. Power and control in the classroom is a topic addressed in this issue in two articles by Melissa West and Charity Marsh. In "Pedagogy and Power Relations," Melissa describes her experiences in negotiating power and authority in the classroom, and questions the extent to which equality should exist between TAs and their students. Charity's article, "Negotiating Spaces for Women's Participation in the Classroom," reflects on how she collaborates with students to create a safe and inclusive learning environment by negotiating and renegotiating a classroom contract.

Teaching hands-on skills in a science laboratory presents very unique challenges for a Teaching Assistant. In her article, "Teaching Techniques in the Science Laboratory," Karen Williams explains how she conceives her role in the lab as parallel to that of a choreographer or sports coach, directing her students' physical development and motor skills. Karen describes a variety of suggestions and techniques for laboratory teaching, which coincidentally help develop and improve students' writing skills.

Finally, in "Having your Students Tell Their Story," Marianne Vardalos explains some strategies that she incorporates in her classroom activities to make the course content resonate more directly with her students' personal lives and experiences.

Every position that a TA holds presents different challenges and responsibilities. The writers featured in this issue of CORE exemplify the different ways in which TAs have responded to these challenges. One has found ways to recognise and respect students' prior knowledge and experiences and another has used the power of analogy to develop innovative teaching strategies. Two writers have tackled the issue of power and authority in the classroom, one by successfully negotiating a safe classroom space for students, and the other by reflecting critically on her teaching. By developing ways to take an active interest in their students' learning, each TA is rewarded by seeing their students improve and develop as the course progresses.

---

(1) See Nancy Van Note Chism, Jamie Cano, Anne S. Pruitt. "Teaching in a Diverse Environment: Knowledge and Skills Needed by TAs." *Teaching Assistant Training in the 1990s*, Fall 1989: 23-35.

(2) Welch L. N. "College Students Need Nurturing Too." *The College Professor*, December 1991: 7.

(3) Welch ibid.

(4) Romer K. T. and Whipple W. R. "Collaboration across the Power Line." *College Teaching*, Spring 1991: 68, citing the Oxford Dictionary of English.

University-Wide Teaching Awards

Deadline: March 16, 2001 (revised)

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 March 16, 2001.

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.

Pedagogy and Power Relations

Melissa West, Graduate Programme in Communication and Culture

"I continued to wallow in liberalism and was blinded to the power differences..."
(Barbara Omolade 1987)

The Deception of Equivalence

At the beginning of the 1999-2000 academic year, I attempted to implement a pedagogy that espoused equality in the classroom, and a fair way of teaching that avoided racism, classism, sexism, ageism, ableism, etc. In retrospect I realize that my views on equality in the classroom encompassed a liberal feminist agenda in which I believed all students could have "equal access to social benefits"(Kenway 1992, 135). However, various experiences throughout this year have led me to believe that this was a naive point of view. In this article, I outline the premises that had informed my intentions in trying to establish a classroom environment of equality and respect. I illustrate how power relations are at play in the classroom, and indicate some of the conclusions I've made regarding the issue of power relations in the classroom.

Naiveté: Mine is the Power to Give Away

In attempting to create an environment of equality between myself and my students, I realize, in retrospect, that it was an oversight on my part to believe that mine was the power to give away. At the start of the academic year I made the following promise (among others) to my students in writing:

> *I would like to create an environment of equality in the classroom. This means that no one person (including myself) is more valuable than the other when it comes to learning and teaching. Each individual has strengths that will contribute to our learning in the classroom. I am merely a facilitator interested in utilizing your expertise to help the entire class learn.*

I thought that I could renounce my position of authority in the classroom. However I have since learned that "… power is a ***relation*** not a possession or capacity" (Orner 1992: 82, drawing from Foucault). I had ignored the fact that power is a part of the very structure of the student/teacher relationship and the institution that supports it. Through my teaching experiences I have come to recognize that there is a fine balance between using and relinquishing authority in the classroom and in my relationship with students.

Navel Gazing: A Contextual Investigation

At the core of feminist pedagogy in relation to power are "the contradictions that emerge between students and instructor around their similar and disparate experiences of race, gender and class" (Omolade 1987, 35). By not questioning power issues in the classroom and my relationship with my students, and by suggesting that my students and I were equals, I had ignored my own identity politics. Being a young, thin, athletic, white, heterosexual woman from a middle class background I experience certain privileges every day. In the context of the classroom my privilege is once again heightened by the very fact that I hold a position of power, that of the teacher! To denounce that position with the goal of equality, I ignored not only my own experience and identity, but also the education and training that have allowed me to hold such a position in the first place.

Powerful Pedagogues: The Empowerment of Students

Attempts to bestow our students with power should not go unquestioned, nor should our students' voices be uncritically accepted. Mimi Orner raises important issues concerning the concept of a powerful student voice, in that she feels it "ignores authority figures in the classroom such as teachers; assumes an egalitarian environment where power is shared by all; and overlooks the power of silence" (Orner 1992: 84). Reflecting on this, I realize that I cannot create an egalitarian environment in my classroom by the very fact that I am the teacher, an authority figure:

> *The teacher [in the institutionally imposed authority role] must give grades, is evaluated by administrators and colleagues in terms of expertise in a body of knowledge, and is expected to take responsibility for meeting the goals of an academic course as it is understood within the wider university. (Weiler 1995, 32).*

(continued on page 4)

(Pedagogy and Power from page 3)

At the end of the day, it is my marking that endorses or rejects the validity and quality of the students' work.

Reclaiming Power in the Name of Feminism: A Personal Experience

While power has become a dirty word in pedagogical circles, Weiler suggests that "the need for women to claim authority in a society that denies it to them" is crucial (Weiler 1995, 33). She goes on to state that "...this use of authority will lead to positive social change only if those teachers are working also to empower students in a Freirean sense" (Weiler 1995, 33). In other words, it is possible to use my privilege to empower my students.

The balancing act between relinquishing and reclaiming power has been a constant personal struggle in my classroom, as has defining my role as facilitator and my responsibilities to my students. I will use one experience that took place in my class this year to illustrate my struggles with the issue of authority in my classroom. I had asked a male student to instruct the class on putting colour on a web page. His explanation was much more scientific than I had anticipated, and as his instructions became increasingly mathematical, the presentation developed into a discussion of the finer technical points of colour dominated by three male students and excluding the participation of the female students.

In relinquishing my own power I had allowed another form of power that privileged technical and objective ways of knowing to exist in my classroom. I was furious and I felt that the space of shared power I naively thought I had created had been violated. In retrospect I recognize that this could have been a moment for me to reclaim my authority and question this student on his pedagogy. However, I did not take the opportunity to regain control of the situation but merely joked with my students that this was much more than they needed to know. By responding in this manner, I believe I diminished my status as an 'expert' while sending a message that the controlling behaviour of this student and his colleagues was acceptable.

> *...[T]he downplaying of ... reasoned argument is itself an interesting transformation of power. Here, it is the knower who can win and apparently topple the power of the teacher, through argument. Disciplining becomes knowing (Walkerdine 1992, 21).*

In effect, by trying to eliminate oppression in the classroom by relinquishing some of my control, I allowed other forms of domination to exist. I did not revert to structures of dominance by reclaiming my power, but perhaps even worse I allowed a more common form of male oppression and exclusion to take place in my classroom.

Power is not a monolithic evil, but it can be a tool for effectively eliminating forms of oppression that we cannot allow to exist in the classroom. Further, as teaching assistants it is crucial to remember that power inequality in the classroom should be viewed not only from the perspective of the teacher, but in the relationship between students and teachers. By carefully negotiating the issues and rules around power and equity in their classroom, teaching assistants can effectively create and manage a learning environment that is favourable and fair to all people in the classroom.

References:

Kenway, Jane and Helen Modra. "Feminist Pedagogy and Emancipatory Possibilities." In Luke, Carmen and Jennifer Gore (Eds.). *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*. New York: Routledge, 1992: 138-166.

Omolade, Barbara. "A Black Feminist Pedagogy." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, XV 3&4 Fall/Winter 1987: 32-39.

Orner, Mimi. "Interrupting the Calls for Student Voice in Liberatory Education: A Feminist Postructuralist Perspective." In Luke, Carmen and Jennifer Gore, (Eds.). *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*. New York: Routledge, 1992: 74-90.

Walkerdine, Valerie. "Progressive Pedagogy and Political Struggle." In Luke, Carmen and Jennifer Gore (Eds.). *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*. New York: Rutledge, 1992: 15-25.

Weiler, Katherine. "Freire and Feminist Pedagogy of Difference." In Holland, Janet Maud Blair, with Sue Sheldon (Eds.). *Debates and Issues in Feminist Research and Pedagogy*. Clevedon: The Open University, 1995: 23-44.

Congratulations!

The Faculty of Graduate Studies and the CST extend their congratulations to the following individuals who have completed the University Teaching Practicum since our last report in *Core* (December 1999):

Glenn Cherny, Theatre
Jeanette Bicknell, Philosophy
Alwin Cunje, Chemistry
Rafael Goldchain, Visual Arts
Rawatee Maharaj-Sharma, Earth & Space Science
Neeta Singh, English
Kay Wan-Kay Li, English

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.

Teaching Techniques in the Science Laboratory

Karen Williams, Graduate Programme in Biology

As a teacher in the science lab I see myself as a choreographer directing and coaching students to learn the course material and contribute to scientific knowledge. This image arises in part from my belief that each student is an important individual regardless of his or her ability to succeed academically or otherwise. In teaching laboratory techniques to my students I draw upon ideas and methodologies proposed for motor learning, movement and dance education because these methodologies can be adapted and applied to the successful teaching of technically complex tasks. In this article I show how I apply the image of myself as choreographer to the laboratory to develop my students' experiment techniques and motor skills. Following this I illustrate how this method of teaching laboratory techniques also helps in the development of students' writing skills, especially as they are required for lab reports in science courses.

My familiarity with some of the research on students' different learning styles has made me realize that students may learn specific techniques, such as dissection or titration, in a variety of ways. Jane Winearls, a movement analyst and researcher, has identified three learning styles that highlight the different ways in which students learn and which are also applicable to learning lab techniques:

(i) *Bracing for learning*: grasping what is to be done intellectually but needing to translate the knowing into physical understanding by doing the task;

(ii) *Feeling for action*: plunging into the task but often lacking accurate details of how the task is to be done; and

(iii) *Actively listening with the body*: seeming to receive an accurate impression and able in their own time to give a fully integrated performance of the task (Winearls 1990).

As TAs, I think many of us teach to those students whose learning style fits only one of these categories, likely our own, leaving the other students to flounder as best they can. I have found that considering students' different learning styles has helped me develop more inclusive teaching techniques, as I can better anticipate what comments and instructions would best help each student.

Dance choreographers and sports coaches often use mental imagery to teach body movement techniques. Research in sports science and movement education supports the hypothesis that the use of mental imagery, "the psychological activity which evokes physical characteristics of an absent object or dynamic event" improves motor skills (Overby 1990). In my role as a science lab instructor, I have found that imagery can also be successfully applied to teaching science laboratory skills and methods. Table 1 shows how imagery may be categorized and also how I have applied imagery in teaching biology lab techniques. I have found that the use of imagery empowers the students in my lab to believe that they are capable of accomplishing technically difficult tasks. For example, diluting a sample of bacteria from a dense bacteria colony was compared to diluting a concentrated drink mix: the implication is that if you understand how to make juice you can do the lab on dilutions. I find that most descriptions and explanations of a laboratory technique can benefit from the animation provided by imagery.

(continued on page 6)

Category	Description	Dance example	Biology lab example
Visual (Paivio, 1971)	A picture in the mind.	Visualize your body as a star.	Locust testicular tubules look like bunches of bananas.
Kinesthetic (Paivio, 1971)	Body feelings. What the body should feel.	Imagine the feeling of your feet on a hot sidewalk.	Cutting through a fungal perithecium feels like cutting a grapefruit with a knife.
Direct (Overby, 1990)	Similar to mental rehearsal or seeing specific movements in your mind.	Visualize yourself performing a leap.	Visualize yourself pouring onto an agar plate.
Indirect (Studd, 1983)	A metaphor for the movement. Exists outside your body.	Move like a dry leaf as it floats to the ground.	Spread the bacteria in each direction on the agar plate as you would paint a wall.
Specific (Hanarahan & Salmela, 1990)	An image directed to a particular part of the body.	Lift one arm and focus on the feeling of heaviness in that arm.	Hold the pipette between your fingers as you would hold chopsticks, and then open the screw-cap bottle.
Global (Hanarahan & Salmela, 1990)	General images that include the entire body.	Imagine your whole body is transparent.	Imagine you are taking pictures each year as a child grows (for periodically monitoring the growth of a bacterial culture).

Table 1. Categorization of imagery adapted from Minton, S.C. *Choreography: a basic approach using improvisation.* 2nd ed. Champaign, IL. 1997. p. 15. I have included imagery I used in teaching genetics laboratory techniques. I used mental imagery to bring to life the descriptions of techniques written in the lab manual and in general it effectively conveys the nuances of movement needed for the performance of the technique.

(Teaching in Science Labs from page 5)

Although the use of imagery may help students understand the processes required for an experiment, TAs may not always be able to utilize this creative teaching technique. In this case, the TA should consider amplifying and explaining the descriptions of the processes that are contained in the course lab manuals. The principles of Laban movement - *analysis, space, time* and *energy* - might be used by TAs to reiterate and explain ideas and techniques outlined in the students' lab manuals. The following example illustrates how the concepts of space, time and energy may be used in the dissection of a fungal perithecium:

i) *spatial information*: the students need to know the location of the fungal cultures and the location of the perithecia within those cultures;

ii) *temporal information*: the students need to know when to cover the preparation with a coverslip; and

iii) *energy information*: the students need to know how hard they should press down on the glass coverslip to obtain a good spread of the pores to be counted.

The use of imagery and description to illustrate lab techniques can greatly enhance students' learning and confidence in the science laboratory. An additional teaching technique that can be used, that relies less on spoken language, is demonstration. Although science laboratories may not be physically suitable for demonstrations (due to high laboratory benches with little open space), nonetheless TAs should strive to include demonstrations for their students so they can see how the required techniques are to be conducted.

Combining imagery, verbal instructions and demonstrations in the lab setting helps students learn how to do the required techniques while developing their confidence and competence as scientists. Furthermore, I have found that talking one-on-one with each student allows me to assess their understanding of the purposes and anticipated results of the experiment at hand, while also providing them with the opportunity for clarification of tasks and ideas. By using a variety of teaching techniques in the lab setting, TAs increase their ability to reach all students, appealing to students individually, according to their learning style.

My role as a teacher in the science lab does not end once the students become proficient with lab techniques. Although students may be able to conduct and understand laboratory experiments, their newly learned skills and knowledge may not automatically transfer to their written lab reports. This is a critical consideration for me as an educator for two main reasons: first, the assessment of my students comes primarily from their written reports; and second, the future success of my students largely depends on their written skills, both academically (applying for research grants) and beyond.

To help my students develop their writing abilities, I questioned what I, as a laboratory instructor, could do. I have found that clearly explaining the instructions and learning objectives for each lab experiment helped my students to write satisfactory reports. What I do is to explicitly state the purpose of the lab and the learning objectives for the written report in my pre-lab talk. I introduce and explain the concepts that are important to the specific lab and report, and I outline why and how the procedures should be done, what results students might expect and how the results could be analyzed. I have found that by clearly outlining the key concepts and ideas of each particular lab, my students are better prepared to conduct the lab and write a satisfactory report.

By applying imagery and description to explain ideas, and movement analysis to demonstrate activities, and by providing clear, logical presentations of the required lab procedures, I have facilitated students' learning and the development of their laboratory skills. Furthermore, their improved understanding of the procedures and activities of the laboratory has translated into the ability to write good lab reports. Like a dance choreographer or sports coach who trains his or her dancers or athletes to perform bodily movement to achieve an artistic or athletic goal, my 'coaching' of science students in the lab allows my students to reach our mutual goal of student learning and success as scientists.

References:

Hanarahan C. and J.H. Salmela. "Dance images: do they really work or are we just imagining things?**"** *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 61, 1990: 18-21.

Krasnow, D.H., Chatfield, S.J. Barr, S., Jensen, J.L. and Dufek, J.S. "Imagery and conditioning practices for dancers." *Dance Research Journal*, 29, 1997: 43-64.

Overby, L.Y.. "The use of imagery by dance teachers: development and implementation of two research instruments." *Journal of Physical Education, Research and Dance*, 61, 1990: 24-27.

Paivio, A. " *Imagery and verbal processes*." New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston, 1971.

Studd, K. Ideokinesis, "Mental rehearsal and relaxation applied to dance techniques". Masters Thesis. University of Oregon, Eugene, 1983.

Winearls, J. "*Choreography: The Art of the Body an Anatomy of Expression*." London: Dance Books, 1990.

TARG - The TA Resource Group

TARG is a peer support and resource group of TAs who meet monthly to discuss the teaching issues they are currently confronting.

TARG meetings serve as a forum where TAs can share experiences, solicit or provide support and advice, and come up with helpful strategies to deal with specific problems.

Meetings are open to TAs at all levels of experience from all University Faculties and Departments.

Is there an issue of particular concern to you? Why don't you propose that it be the topic of an upcoming TARG meeting!

For more information, please e-mail Anik Bay, TARG coordinator, at gta@yorku.ca, subject line "re:TARG".

Negotiating Spaces for Women's Participation in the Classroom

Charity Marsh, Graduate Programme in Ethnomusicology/Musicology

My experiences as a student have shown me that the classroom has never been a particularly safe space for women to share ideas or to engage in classroom dialogue. "Through routine practices of socialization, education, work and communication patterns, women have been excluded . . . [and] as a result of being excluded from the circle of properly authorized speakers and hearers, women's activities don't count" (Gaskell et al. 1989). Even though I am presently studying at the doctoral level and teaching in the university setting, I still often find myself struggling to have my voice heard. Because gender inequity is such a prevalent part of our society, and a deeply embedded element in our classrooms, it is our responsibility as educators to help students identify gender inequity and create a learning space that is accessible to all students. With this in mind I offer one method - the (re)negotiating of a classroom contract - that can be used to help ensure the classroom is a space where women feel their participation will not be silenced and their voices will be heard.

My belief in the value and success of the classroom contract is based on the fact that, even before the end of the school year, a majority of the students in my tutorial had commented on the success of this pedagogical tool in enabling them to be more active within the classroom setting. In this article I will outline how I used the classroom contract process to convince my students that their voice, their thoughts, and their questions were important to the success of the class and their learning.

In our first tutorial together, the students and I began the process of negotiating and establishing classroom dynamics. Collectively we drew up a contract that enabled us to construct a space of safety, opportunity, and tolerance, and a space in which we would show resistance to those who have and continue to silence us. The students were each given a chance to explain what they believed constitutes a positive learning environment, offering what they felt were or were not acceptable in the classroom. They were also asked to comment on what they wanted and/or felt they needed from me as their TA.

By the end of this first discussion we had generated a list of things we would try to accomplish to make our class more conducive to learning, as well as those things that we collectively would not tolerate. Drawing on each other's responses, we drafted a contract outlining the code of conduct and shared responsibility for our classroom environment. Our first draft highlighted the following: trust, honesty, listening, respect, participation, open-mindedness, positive attitudes, communication, constructive criticism, and addressing people by their first names. Together we also decided that we would not tolerate sexism, judgments, put-downs, negative attitudes, homophobia, racism, ableism, ageism, classism, or the excuse of ignorance. Although it may seem we only reaffirmed what should be the basic rules of any classroom, it was obvious from previous experiences that this was not the case.

In our first tutorial we also talked about previous positive experiences in different learning environments. This led us to consider how to incorporate more interaction among the students and between the students and myself. We also reviewed the importance of encouraging one another during classroom discussions and relating personal experiences to the class. In a written anonymous mid-year evaluation of the tutorial, many students addressed the importance of being involved in the negotiation of the classroom contract:

> *Having a group discussion on the rules of the class helped me to feel like an integral part of the classroom because after all a class is about students. This in turn helped me feel much more comfortable as it was a very welcoming start to the class.*
>
> *In many other tutorials there is no opportunity to discuss issues regarding women or to celebrate them. At times because we are so conditioned to think a certain way I feel guilty because I do not stand up for myself and for other women. [This space] is helping me to open up to those issues . . . [and] allow[ing] me to question things around me.*

(continued on page 8)

(Negotiating Spaces for Women's Participation... from page 7)

> *Setting ground rules and talking about the classroom as a safe space allowed us as individuals to be open about who we are and how we feel about different issues that form during classroom discussions.*
>
> *By encouraging all of the students to take part in negotiating what is and what is not acceptable in the classroom, a collective responsibility for the space was created.*

Unlike other contracts, however, this one was renegotiated throughout the year as the dynamics and interactions of the class evolved. Because the contract was not rigid, the students understood that their ongoing input was crucial to the continuing development of the classroom, and this allowed a more communal environment to take shape. With the establishment of our own classroom community, trust was formed between the students and the teacher, but more importantly, between the students themselves. With this type of contract the task of holding people accountable for their actions becomes the responsibility of the entire class.

In a written evaluation of our tutorial, students highlighted their satisfaction with the open and safe environment that we created through our classroom contract:

> *I've heard numerous stories of women being dismissed, ignored, and shouted down in other tutorials. I feel that I can say what I think and I know my tutorial leader or the class won't let anyone put me down or dismiss my point of view. This tutorial has been a very positive experience for me.*
>
> *Many classes don't allow us as students to really listen, this one does . . . listening and understanding other views will really help to make me aware of the way other people are feeling and [make them] aware of the way I feel.*
>
> *Seeing everyone express their opinions and views so openly is something I don't usually see in my other classrooms.*

Our classroom developed into a safe environment where women's voices were heard and respected – a space where women did not have to fear ridicule when speaking their opinions. The continuous (re)negotiating of our classroom contract played a significant role in ensuring the participation of all students within the classroom, and, by everyone actively upholding the contract, we collectively made ourselves accountable for our actions.

References:

Gaskell, Jane, Arlene McLaren and Myra Novogrodsky. *Claiming an Education: Feminism and Canadian Schools*. Toronto: Our Schools/Our Selves Education Foundation, 1989: 89-90.

YOU ARE INVITED TO A WORKSHOP ON...

NEGOTIATING POWER IN THE CLASSROOM

Power dynamics which circulate among students and between teachers and students often produce exclusion, marginalization, disempowerment, and silencing. Such dynamics not only impede learning but are the site of some of the most important and deeply remembered learning.

Participants will identify the practices of power in their own classrooms--between students and teachers, and among students; analyze patterns of speaking and silence; and discuss the development of groundrules to facilitate more inclusive and collaborative classrooms. This is a hands-on workshop. Juice, coffee and snacks will be served.

Note: This workshop will be offered six times.

FOR FACULTY AND COURSE DIRECTORS

Wednesday, February 28	12:30-3:30 (women only)
Monday, March 19	12:30-3:30
Friday, March 30	12:30-3:30
Thursday, April 19	12:30-3:30 (women only)

FOR TUTORIAL LEADERS

Thursday, March 1	12:30-3:30 (women only)
Wednesday, March 28	12:30-3:30

Please pre-register by email (lbriskin@yorku.ca) or leave a message at 77824. Do not hesitate to contact Linda Briskin if you have any questions.

Having Students Tell their Story

Marianne Vardalos, Graduate Programme in Sociology

Teaching Assistants should never underestimate the value of personal experience in the classroom. Though many TAs recognize the pedagogical value of having students share their experiences and aspirations, facilitating such discussion can be a harrowing challenge for a TA. Often an attempt to integrate the rich stories and memories that students bring to the classroom can turn into a cacophony of emotional testimonials. Not wanting to lose control of the class, and feeling unqualified to respond to students' emotional confessions about their past, TAs are often tempted to minimize the personal comments of students to avoid an impromptu free-for-all.

Knowing how and when to draw on the personal experience of your students – as parents, employees, volunteers, and those in various other roles outside the university – involves implementing a systematic plan for eliciting the most useful information at the right time. The trick is to design methods which induce student self-reflection in a way that is relevant to the course material and then to effectively incorporate these methods into the session. One technique I have developed and implemented in my teaching draws from Sam Keen's book *Telling Your Story: A Guide to Who You Are And Who You Can Be* (New York: Double Day and Company, 1973). At first glance, this book might seem like any other self-help book from one of the many Jurassic bookstores teeming with pop-psychology titles. However, upon closer reading, the self-reflection exercises that Keen uses in his book reveal excellent strategies that TAs can adapt to have students explore their roots, realities and 'personal mythologies' in a way that facilitates learning regardless of the subject matter. With creative adaptation and proper implementation of the exercises presented in *Telling Your Story*, any TA can help students recognize the wealth of knowledge and experience that they and their classmates bring to class – experiences as disgruntled employees, expectant parents, recovering alcoholics, devout believers – you name it.

Keen calls his methodology a travel guide for personal journeys, with philosophical maps that prompt individuals to travel in time – the past, the present, and the future – to sight-see their own landscapes. Keen refers to this as finding the 'nations' within the self – the public nation, the private nation and the unknown nation. By public nation, Keen refers to the psychic sphere; the part of ourselves that we reveal to others, including our colleagues, neighbours, friends and acquaintances. The private nation refers to our inner selves where emotions remain hidden from public view. Within the boundaries of this nation we harbour guilt, fear, cruelty, desire, coldness of heart, self-loathing, and secret ideals. The unknown nation contains those feelings, experiences, fantasies and possibilities that we repress, although we wish to act them out. Revealing his Freudian influence, Keen maintains that this unknown part of ourselves reveals itself unconsciously, through dreams, bursts of anger, and intuitive thoughts.

A reflective exercise Keen uses, that is especially adaptable to the classroom setting, is 'Viewpoints.' These are sets of questions designed to take readers on a 'side-trip' during their personal voyage to places within their experiences. The questions that are posed allow each reader to reflect on him/herself, to gain a better understanding of where she or he has come from and where she or he is going, leading the reader to 'tell his/her story.' Each answer that is provided to these 'Viewpoint' questions is like a souvenir or slideshow from the reader's personal journey. For example, the series of 'Viewpoint' questions presented below can be used to explore one's identity. This exercise of self-identification involves organizing a life-story, dividing life into stages.

> *Choose ten scenes from your past which were important pivotal events in your life and describe them. Detail the circumstances, characters, and backgrounds of each scene.*
>
> *How are these scenes you have chosen representative of your life? How did they change or affect you? How has your view of them altered over the years?*
>
> *Make an outline of your autobiography. What are the major divisions? Chapter titles? Subsections? What stages does your life naturally seem to fall into? When did you cease to be a child? (p. 82).*

(Continued on page 10)

(Having Students Tell their Story from page 9)

Another important self-reflexive exercise that Keen promotes focuses on the student's clan or family and reminds students that every person is pluralistic. This exercise is particularly well-suited to developing adults' awareness of the variety of motives people have for taking a course and the multiple roles that students have in their lives. By asking students to think about their traditions and family rules, and the personality, role and types of interaction they have with each family member, Keen proposes that students will gain a better understanding of the influences that have shaped their own lives. The 'Viewpoints' questions below exemplify this type of self reflection.

> *Who are you? Where do you come from? Who are your people? Reconstruct the physical setting of your childhood and you may recover the flavour of the family in which your psyche was first marinated.*
>
> *Draw a detailed floor plan of a house you lived in before you were ten. As you enter each room imagine the furniture, pictures, smells, and events you associate with the room. Where were your secret places? (Where did you stash your comic books or go when you wanted to be alone?) Who lived in the house with you?*
>
> *What was the dominant mood in the household? Which rooms are you unable to reconstruct in memory? Why do you think you forget them? Are there rooms you can't enter? (p. 43).*

By adapting self-reflexive exercises such as these 'Viewpoints' questions to your class plan, you present your students with the opportunity to begin their own trip into self-knowing while making the course material directly relevant to their individual lives and experiences. In a controlled situation, your students can collectively move along the road to increased knowledge while marking special points of interest for later explorations on their own time. By creating a space for individual reflection, group discussion and follow-up exploration, you can ensure that the class will not lapse into a verbal free-for-all.

Self-reflexive exercises such as these can be used by TAs to help students make connections between their individual lives and experiences and course content. For example, a Teaching Assistant in mathematics may have students identify their first recollections of things numerical and trace a line of events that brought them to a career in mathematics. A TA in race relations might ask students to sketch a racial 'map' indicating how they perceived the segregation of ethnic groups in their childhood neighbourhoods. In economics a TA could ask students to imagine how a radical change in the market would directly affect their lives and aspirations.

Teaching assistants may face resistance from students to engaging in these types of self-reflection exercises, as they may be skeptical of the value of such exercises in the university classroom setting. Nevertheless, your persistence will pay off and eventually your students will come to look forward to these opportunities to share their personal experiences and insights with their colleagues.

Whether the subject you are teaching is reason or religion, auto-mechanics or aromatherapy, your students have one thing in common: they are individuals with stories to tell. Good teaching practice recognizes that student learning requires a positive and inclusive classroom environment. Many students are returning to school after years in the workforce or at home raising a family, and for these students the classroom can be very strange and intimidating. Providing opportunities for students to apply course material to their own experience not only facilitates student learning and understanding but also reveals that you, as a teacher, respect the experiences of your students as a valid basis for teaching. The stories and myths that are created through the types of exercises promoted in *Telling Your Story: A Guide to Who You Are And Who You Can Be* are not trivial or self-indulgent but a way to help students navigate their journey on the path of life-long learning.

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 ($11,445 approx.).

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

(3) **Major and/or Minor Grants:** an additional $10,000 is available and the Selection Committee will allocate funds to successful candidates as they see fit.

Application deadline: Thursday, March 1, 2001

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/admin/cst/grants.html.

CST Graduate Teaching Associates

We are delighted to have Anik Bay and Camille Mittermeier as our Graduate Teaching Associates at the CST for the 2000-2001 academic year. Anik and Camille have central responsibility for the University Teaching Practicum and related teaching development activities for graduate students. Together, they plan and organize all Practicum-related workshops, consult with TAs about their teaching, and play key roles in the development of special CST initiatives which they elaborate below.

Anik Bay

Graduate Programme in Environmental Studies

Before joining the CST staff, I had been a TA in biology, the humanities, and environmental studies. Throughout my experience, what reveals itself as a connecting thread is the personal and emotional commitment TAs bring to teaching, and the (usually unrecognized) toll it can take in terms of time and energy. This experience and awareness in many ways guide my approach to developing programmes for TAs here at the CST. Our programmes are designed to explore TAs' commitment to teaching from a number of different perspectives.

The GTA workshop series is designed to explore TA's personal commitment to teaching in various ways:

- The situations that present themselves during TA office hours
- The unique challenges posed by a first-year class
- Creating and maintaining balance among all the activities our lives.

We will also be looking at other issues, such as teaching upper-level classes, and helping international graduate students adjust to being a TA in a Canadian classroom.

Having a support system always helps maintain balance. The TA discussion groups – the TA resource group (TARG) and the lunchtime video series – provide a supportive environment of peers where TAs can talk through problems, seek advice and develop solutions. TARG discussions cover topics from establishing tutorial rules and responsibilities, to teaching and politics. The lunchtime video group explores topics like the intermediary position of the TA as a link between students and the course director, and TAing for one's supervisor. The TARG listserv can also be used as a sounding board for TAs. We welcome new participants and new discussion topics, which can be posted by emailing me (the listerv moderator) at gta@yorku.ca.

The CST also provides the opportunity for TAs to communicate their experiences to a university-wide audience by writing an article for the TA issue of *CORE*. As the editor for the 2001 TA issue, I want to continue exploring the theme of personal commitment to teaching by asking you: "What goes into developing a philosophy of teaching? What experiences helped you find your own approach to teaching? What successes and failures have you experienced trying to implement your approach?"

Without TAs, the university learning experience would be incredibly impoverished. TAs are central to undergraduate education. In my capacity as GTA, I am committed to recognizing and supporting TA effort at York.

Camille Mittermeier

Graduate Programme in Mathematics and Statistics

I have always enjoyed the positions I have held at York – running the gamut from marker to course director – but my favourites have always been the ones where I can make a difference for other TAs. I was one of the original Teaching Development Graduate Assistants (TDGA) in the mathematics and statistics department and now I am one of the CST GTAs! I am incredibly grateful for the wealth of experiences from which I can draw in taking on this much bigger challenge of coordinating teaching development for the entire York TA community.

A major component of my work at the CST is with the TDGA programme which currently involves 25 graduate students from thirteen departments across the campus. TDGAs are responsible for supporting teaching development within their own units and exploring teaching issues that are specific to their discipline. As the TDGA program is now in its fifth year, I have focussed on creating opportunities for closer collaboration among TDGAs and the CST. Beginning with the welcome orientation in September, we – the TDGAs & I – have worked to develop a collaborative series that would explore in-depth issues relating to teaching and learning. A general framework for exploring teaching critical skills would be offered in a CST workshop. This would then lead into several workshops organized by teams of TDGAs to explore the topic within the context of their own disciplines. We also have ideas to involve the TDGAs further in the TA Day 2001 programme. It has been an exciting process bringing us closer.

Together, Anik and I have organized two series of workshops for this academic year: the University Teaching Practicum (UTP) series, and the Graduate Teaching Associate (GTA) series. The UTP series is specifically oriented to cover the UTP curriculum – workshops this year will focus on the philosophy and goals of higher learning, lecturing, assessment, collaborative learning and other active learning strategies, and course design. The GTA series (see Anik's brief) covers topics that are of particular interest to Anik or myself and counts as general credit towards the UTP.

I look forward to planning the winter term and TA Day 2001 with the gang here at the CST. I can't imagine having a better team to work with – the friendship and collaborative spirit I've found here has already made this job one of the best I've ever had.

Revised Schedule of CST Events

Feb. 13 41 Interesting Ways of Getting to the End
Examining strategic options and assessments that can facilitate student success in light of the reduced instructional period (Sylvester's, 201 StongCollege), 1:30 - 4:30

Feb. 21 Completing the Practicum
A practical session to identify programming needs of TAs to finish up their dossiers (N620 Ross, Math Lounge), 3:00 - 4:30

Feb. 28 2:00 - 3:30 TA Resource Group
(Further details TBA), 2:00 - 3:30

Mar. 5-16 TDGA/CST Collaborative Series on Teaching Critical Skills
Explored from a general framework as well as within the context of your own discipline (further details TBA)

Sept. 4 TA Day 2001
A one-day conference of professional development for TAs at York

Further details on these and other upcoming events will be announced shortly.

Please note that events planned for February 12 (Teaching and Learning Symposium) and May 1-3 (Course Design Institute) have been cancelled in light of the revised sessional dates.

Mark in your calendars...

TA Day
September 4, 2001

A Full Day Conference for Graduate Teaching Assistants at York

CALL FOR PAPERS
THE TA'S PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING

Remember when you first started teaching? What did you expect? Did you have an idea about how learning occurs? Or were you simply modeling the teaching that you had experienced, good or bad?

Now that you have some experience, how would you articulate your approach to teaching? What experiences helped you formulate it? What have you done to implement your ideas, and what were your successes and failures?

We want to read your reflections, your observations, your experiences as a TA in your discipline. We want to know how you think about your teaching. The Centre for the Support of Teaching invites proposals for articles written by TAs for next year's Special TA Issue of CORE. Your article may address any of the following questions:

- How do you characterize your teaching style?
- How does your teaching respond to students' learning styles?
- What is learning, and how does it occur in your classes? In your discipline?
- What are your goals for your students, with respect to course content, with respect to acquiring skills in your discipline, with respect to lifelong learning?
- What strategies have you used to implement your goals? What have your learned from your successes? From your failures?
- What is the role of TAs in your discipline with respect to motivation, content, assessment, support?
- How have you grown over time? What are your current challenges? What are your long-term goals?

We are looking for first person, reflective accounts (1000 words max) of how you developed your teaching philosophy as a TA in your discipline. Although you may include experiences as a course director, the primary focus should be on teaching as a TA.

Interested? Please submit a brief proposal (250 words max) as an MS WORD attachment, to gta@yorku.ca, by March 2, 2001. Include in your text your email address, department, campus mailing address and campus phone number. Or you can send a hard copy to: Centre for the Support of Teaching, 111 Central Square, York University. A reference paper and worksheet will be available at the CST to guide your reflection.

UNIVERSITÉ YORK UNIVERSITY

Core *York's Newsletter on University Teaching, Volume 10, Number 2, February 2001*

Guest Editor: Anna Hoefnagels. *Layout and Photography:* Mala Thakoor. ***Core*** (ISSN 1497-3170) is published by the Centre for the Support of Teaching (CST), York University. Material in *Core* may be reprinted in Canada. Please note appropriate credit and, as a courtesy to the author, forward two copies of the reprint to the CST. Address all correspondence to The Editor, *Core*, Centre for the Support of Teaching, 111 Central Square, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario, CANADA, M3J 1P3. (416) 736-5754. Fax: (416) 736-5704. E-mail: cst@yorku.ca.
Website: http://www.yorku.ca/admin/cst/