

Conversations and Collaborations

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This paper looks at how a series of conversations contributed to the development of a newly formed role at the University of Victoria – Teaching Assistant Consultants (TACs). TACs act as departmental mentors for teaching assistants (TAs) in their respective departments, charged with providing support in the form of discipline-specific workshops aimed at improving performance of their duties and increased confidence in their roles, as well as fostering a TA community within departments.

Introduction

Professional development programs for teaching assistants (TAs) at Canadian universities run the gamut from occasional workshops to complete certificate programs. Until recently, the Learning and Teaching Centre at the University of Victoria (UVic) typified this general format with a well-crafted TA program consisting of professional development workshops, annual conferences, and programs leading to certificates. When I was appointed to the newly formed role of TA Training Program Coordinator in the summer of 2008 (now a permanent role on campus), my immediate goal was to set up campus-wide programs to ensure that *all* TAs on campus had access to structured professional development programs that suited their needs and the needs of faculty and staff in a variety of disciplines, and took into consideration the changes occurring for TAs in today's academic world.

To grasp an understanding of UVic's TA climate (I did have some understanding due to my pre-

vious work at the Learning and Teaching Centre for three years as a TA Associate, as well as being a TA myself during my graduate work in the Department of Anthropology), I arranged one-on-one meetings with chairs and/or graduate advisors from each department on campus to talk about TA needs and departmental expectations. These conversations generated the potential for several collaborative projects based on departments' individual and collective needs. In this paper, I first discuss the process and outcomes from the conversations and conclude with preliminary discussion about one of the collaborative projects that developed alongside and grew from these conversations regarding TA professional development.

Getting to Know You...

Throughout the fall of 2008 I met with either the

chair or graduate advisor (or sometimes both) in 40 of the 42 departments on UVic's campus. For each meeting I had a set of questions that were discussed (Appendix A). The outcome from these conversations provided direction as to the needs of each department in order to facilitate the professional development of TAs at UVic. The TA population at UVic in any given semester is typically around 600 (except during the summer term). Each department varies in the number of TAs employed but a typical sampling consists of only a few TAs in departments such as Greek and Roman Studies to as many as 50 in departments such as Chemistry and Computer Science. The majority of departments identified two important campus-wide needs: a strong focus on TA professional development, and that this professional development is discipline-specific and targets issues identified as important to the department. At that time, less than half of the departments had some form of TA professional development (Appendix A, Question 5) in place, either in the form of a short orientation (9), guidance through the course instructor (7), or a specific graduate course about teaching in their discipline (3).

Departments identified that the duties (Appendix A, Question 15) TAs were mostly engaged with were grading (23), leading labs/tutorials (22), and administrative duties, which included holding office hours (22); administrative duties and office hours are grouped because the majority of departments acknowledged that TAs typically took care of some of their administrative duties during office hours. When specifically asked what training (Appendix A, Question 21) TAs needed to complete these duties efficiently, instruction was requested on communication (11), teaching (10), grading (6), professional behaviour (6), and time management (6). These results comply with the *Professional Skills Development for Graduate Students* (2008) report from the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies. The report identifies the following skills as the most pertinent and doable for universities to implement for the professional development of graduate students: communication, management, teaching, and research ethics.

Now That We Know You...

Conversations with each department provided a solid base in which to plan and improve the TA professional development offerings at UVic. The information gathered, combined with previous feedback from participants, led to the following changes: restructuring of conference events and workshops to directly address the identified needs of TAs and departments, increasing the number of TA professional development workshops offered per month from one to at least two or three, conversion of the mammoth *TA Manual* into digestible quick reference sheets called *TA Tip Sheets*, and revamping of the program about university teaching. The new certificate program is called the *Professional Development Program in University Teaching*.

However, the largest project that has grown alongside this restructuring has been the pilot of a new program titled *Teaching Assistant Consultants* (TACs). It was decided that the program would be a pilot so that we could research and evaluate it before considering taking it campus wide. The initiation of this program at UVic aims to benefit all parties involved: undergraduates, TAs, departments, and their members. The director of the Learning and Teaching Centre, Teresa Dawson, brings her experience to the project, having initiated similar programs during her time as a graduate student at Pennsylvania State University and later at University of California, Los Angeles. Teresa was able to see the value and effect of such programs and wanted to share this excellent program with the community at UVic. My role was to help craft a program, with Teresa's support, that would suit the culture at UVic. During my conversations with department representatives, I explained different options for collaboration between departments and the Learning and Teaching Centre in order to increase TA confidence and professional skill development. Collaborative projects suggested included the TAC pilot program, my attendance at their graduate orientations to showcase TA professional development events that take place at the Learning and Teaching Centre, and/or bringing some of those workshops directly into the department. Over one third (17) of the departments were

interested in participating in the TAC pilot program, which indicated strong support for such a program at UVic. Departments that did not want to participate at this time cited reasons such as extremely small departments where such a model would not logistically work, to reluctance to position a TA as a “head” TA.

I refer to the development of this program as collaborative because of how its’ structure evolved and emerged, and due to how the TAC role demonstrates in many ways, collaboration. For my purposes, I take the definition for collaboration as expressed by Pat Parrott (n.d.) to imply a common working relationship, where each party involved is engaged in common goals and share all resources, responsibility for ensuring the delivery of a quality product, accountability for the outcomes, and finally, respect for the expertise that each person brings to their collaborative role. The creation of the TAC role at UVic involved an idea for a role to fill a recognized void on campus that was then shared with the majority of departments on campus. These conversations informed how the roles and responsibilities of the TAC developed, as well as delineation of how the Learning and Teaching Centre and the department would support the newly formed TAC role throughout the year. From inception, the TAC role at UVic has been one of collaboration, which is perpetuated through the TAC’s role in his/her home department between faculty, staff, and TAs.

What is a Teaching Assistant Consultant (TAC)?

A teaching assistant consultant is essentially a mentor – identified as a formal mentoring role since the TAC is appointed in that position, as opposed to an informal mentoring role, which is when a mentoring relationship happens naturally (Anibas, Brenner, & Zorn, 2009). The TAC mentors TAs in the home department by providing support in the form of discipline-specific workshops, one-on-one consultations, and fosters a TA community that encourages discussion about learning and teaching in their discipline; similar roles exist at other Canadian Universities, in

particular York University’s Teaching Development Graduate Assistant (TDGA) program (Force, 2009). Each TAC for the 2009-2010 year was nominated by their department, based on the recognition of the candidate’s interest in teaching and learning in higher education, and their demonstrated skills and experience in related roles, such as a departmental TA. The following is taken from the *TAC Roles and Responsibilities* document:

This individual should be a senior graduate student with considerable teaching experience and demonstrated teaching excellence who would be likely to garner the respect of other TAs and be capable of serving in a mentoring capacity. The TAC reports to the Learning and Teaching Centre TA Training Program Coordinator and is responsible for liaising with the Graduate Advisor (or designate) in his/her home department to ensure the smooth running of services for TAs there.

TACs were required to attend 16 hours of specially designed seminars at the Learning and Teaching Centre about learning and teaching during the month of May and June. The seminars were modeled after the train-the-trainer format. This format dictates that the seminars given by the TA Training Program Coordinator model different teaching strategies so that the TACs experience different ways of presenting material that could then be used for the TA departmental seminars. Each TAC was required to deliver eight hours of instruction in the form of TA seminars in his/her home department during the fall and/or winter/spring semesters of 2009/2010. In total, TACs were allotted 75 hours to attend the Learning and Teaching Centre seminars, set up their departmental seminars, attend graduate orientations, and be available for TAs as needs surfaced. Additionally, TACs were charged with trying to foster a TA community in the home department, which has been identified as crucial for the success of such a program (Force, 2009). Besides departmental potlucks and other forms of establishing community, from the outset TACs were encouraged to set

up a Moodle site to house resources for TAs, as well as to strive for TA engagement through the forum feature on Moodle. Further to community building, the Learning and Teaching Centre has begun a series titled, *A Day in the Life of a TAC*, on our website. This feature showcases TACs delivering seminars to TAs with pictures and quotes from TAs about the benefits of the program.

To conclude the consultant role, each TAC is required to write a short report about his/her departmental seminars, the roles played, and any other information that could be useful to the next TAC in that department. This document, lesson plans, and materials developed for the TA seminar series are to be sent to the TA Training Program Coordinator and department liaison. Of course, current TACs have been encouraged to apply for the role again next year so that they can build on what they have learned.

Continuation of Collaboration and Conversations

To connect the work that the TACs have done in the 17 pilot departments to other programs at the Learning and Teaching Centre, a specialized certificate was developed – the *TA Fundamentals Certificate*, which recognizes TA's individual commitment to engaging in professional development, even at the Masters stage. The certificate requires attendance at all of the TA seminars (eight hours), development of an original instructional material, and a reflective writing piece that has the TA explain his/her instructional material, and experience in the TA seminars. Our hope is that by fostering engagement in the TA seminars and certificates, graduate students will recognize the importance and significance of professional development programs from the very beginning of their graduate program, concurrent with their other duties and responsibilities as graduate students. In this way, graduate students will be enculturated into the academic role where research and teaching coexist. The TA Fundamentals Certificate is also applicable to the *Professional Development Program in University Teaching*. Part of the requirement for this certificate is attendance at 10 hours of professional development

workshops that cover a range of topics, held at the Learning and Teaching Centre. Through this mechanism, graduate students are graduated into other programs at the centre.

To date, preliminary feedback about the program has included many positive affirmations of the value and effect on TAs and their professional development. Most notably, TAs commented on how the seminars provided much needed instruction about aspects of their role, such as how to grade fairly, facilitate discussion groups, and preparation for critical incidents that may occur. Moreover, the majority of TAs identified that an important aspect of the TA seminars was the community building it provided. TAs acknowledged that they now have several colleagues in their department to talk to about their TA role, and especially to share successes and challenges. Building a TA community within departments was an important goal of the program and hopefully one that will foster a greater TA community throughout campus.

However, TACs did run into a series of obstacles. One was with administrative requirements. Room availability for holding seminars was one such issue, as was communicating with those responsible for certain aspects related to their administrative and organizational duties during the summer months. Some of these will be alleviated as the program gets worked into standard yearly procedures. Another obstacle was with the involvement of returning graduate students in the TA seminars. Most TACs were hoping that their colleagues would attend and share their experiences. Some were successful in their department, but others were faced with graduate students who did not want to take the time to attend. An obstacle that was much discussed during the TAC seminars was the inconsistency with some departments making the TA seminars part of TAs' paid hours and other departments making the TA seminars completely voluntary. When TAs were paid and the seminars made mandatory, some TACs recorded that TAs resented being made to attend, whereas on the other side, TACs who had TAs who voluntarily chose to attend, felt that their TAs should have been paid.

Since this is a pilot project, our first year is being researched so as to evaluate the overall effective-

ness of the TAC program so that the program can be carried forward. A research team has been assembled and through journaling by the TACs, documentation of parts of the program, materials gathered from the TAC curriculum that was developed by the TA Training Program Coordinator and focus groups with the TACs, our hope is that this model of collaboration will contribute further to the ongoing conversation about graduate student professional development. These conversations will address many of the challenges and successes that TACs had to contend with during this pilot project.

Overall, the TAC program provides that mentor, resource, and guide at TAs' fingertips, ensuring that graduate students have access to the professional development programs and skill development that they need and seek.

References

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Biography

Cynthia Korpan is the TA Training Program Coordinator in the Learning and Teaching Centre at the University of Victoria. She is interested in the professional development of graduate students, and in particular, the formal and informal experiential learning that TAs engage in through their departmental roles. Cynthia recently graduated with an M.A. from the Department of Anthropology at the University of Victoria.

Appendix A
Teaching Assistant Duties and Expectations
Fall 2008

1. How many TAs are in the department?
2. Which year of their graduate program are TAs starting to TA?
3. How long do they TA?
4. Any restrictions to a graduate student taking a TA position?
5. What kind of training does the department provide for TAs?
6. Are they required to take any type of training?
7. Are TAs assigned a mentor to oversee their teaching?
8. Does the department provide videos, handouts, syllabi, a manual, workshops, or lecture materials?
9. How often do you meet with the TAs?
10. Do the TAs meet together?
11. How often is the way that TAs are integrated into the department reviewed?
12. How are evaluations of TAs managed? By faculty and/or students?
13. Are peer reviews used?
14. How much time does a TA spend per week on duties?
15. What are the specific duties: Office hours? Emails? Grading? Lectures? Labs? Advising students?
16. How does the department follow up with TAs to find out what their experience was like?
17. Do TAs primarily assist with large classes?
18. Do TAs lecture? Run labs? Run Tutorials?
19. What technology is used by TAs?
20. Do TAs design questions for tests? Assign grades?
21. What training do you feel your TAs need to complete their duties efficiently?
22. Do you have a lead TA?
23. What do you think are the strengths of your program?