

# 2011

## TA Professional Development in Canada



Dr. Marty Wall, Teaching Dossier Workshop, UVic

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What is the current state of Teaching Assistant (TA) Professional Development at Canadian post-secondary institutions? This report attempts to answer this question and provide a summary of the programs, developments, and initiatives taking place at universities across Canada.<sup>i</sup> At the first annual general meeting of the newly formed special interest group (SIG) *Teaching Assistant and Graduate Student Advancement (TAGSA)*,<sup>ii</sup> members agreed that a report such as this would be beneficial to all members and more importantly, would give a platform through which each centre could share latest program development. Throughout the past year, emails flew across the country gathering the enclosed information. However, the report is only a snapshot and in no way diminishes the large amount of work being accomplished at every institution to support graduate student professional development. Educational Developers in charge of TA and graduate student programs are a busy lot! Each university that contributed is acknowledged but in the interest of saving space, abbreviated forms have been used throughout the body of text.<sup>iii</sup> The information presented here is not exhaustive and we were not able to receive information from all higher education institutions at the time of publishing. However, it is our intent to update this report annually. If you would like to contribute to the next publication of this document, please contact Cynthia Korpan, TAGSA Vice-chair at [tatrain@uvic.ca](mailto:tatrain@uvic.ca). additionally, if you are interested in receiving further information about any of the initiatives listed below, kindly contact the institution's learning and teaching centre directly.<sup>iv</sup>

The report is divided into the following sections: New Initiatives, Latest Research, Program Revisions, Campus Collaborations, Conferences/TA Days, and Ongoing Successes.

## **NEW INITIATIVES**

There are several new initiatives underway with a few common themes that surface.

1. Development of **TA networks** was a theme that emerged from several respondents. At UWindsor they are working on a more decentralized network for recruitment and training of TAs by having departments develop professional development events for their peers, with training and support from a centralized team based in the Centre for Teaching and Learning. This initiative is supported by the learning community, an online social media presence and blog, and a modular GA/TA handbook (available in print and online) that can be easily adapted to suit different departmental needs. McMaster has been developing *Teaching Assistant and Graduate Student Networks* since 2004. The members of these networks are graduate students who participate by attending bi-annual meetings, designing and delivering department specific workshops on subjects related to teaching and learning or professionalization, and by attending university wide teaching and learning sessions. The networks were initiated with the intent of providing support and information for participants. Various online formats are made available for TAs to keep in touch and promote discussion, such as a website at UBC Okanagan. The Teaching Assistant Advisory Council (TAAC) (U of G) continues to be a resource for programming and last year introduced *TAAC'tics*, which is a discussion group that meets monthly to discuss issues related to teaching and learning. Brock University has launched a joinable online course space for TAs to come together to access resources and participate in discussions related to TA topics. Similarly, UVic will initiate in spring 2012, a *Journal Club for TAs*, where TAs will gather to discuss the latest literature related to teaching and learning that specifically addresses TA duties and responsibilities. Carleton is introducing campus outreach with TA Vloggers, individuals representing each faculty will video blog about their TA experiences throughout the fall term.

This is another exciting new initiative that Carleton thinks will allow TAs to connect and create a dialogue about commonalities amongst the different disciplines.

2. **Courses on teaching in higher education** are in development at several institutions. Some are developing new courses (UBC Okanagan, McMaster, Ryerson), whereas others are adding courses to their repertoire, such as (at the University of Windsor): Teaching with the Learning Management System (starting 2011), Teaching for Self-Directed Learning (starting 2013), and Mentoring and Supervision (starting 2013). At other institutions, courses continue to be offered and very popular. At McMaster, Education 750: Principles and Practices of University Teaching is offered three times a year. It's a graduate level course that registers on student's transcripts and is recognized in some departments as course toward degree requirements and in other departments as a supplementary course. Each year McMaster has about 60 graduate students complete the course. At UVic, ED-D591A, Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, which is offered twice a year, has 40 graduates each year. Queen's has recently created an online Focus on Foundations course, which includes modules on key topics of teaching and learning including discussions, groups, active learning, and course design.
3. **Certificate programs** at some institutions provide formal, systematic education and training for TAs. In 2009, UWindsor became the first university in North America to offer teaching certificate programs recognized by the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA), which has been the world leader in teaching certification programs for many years in the United Kingdom and beyond. UWindsor's program features a developmental system of three certificates with a combined total of 13 courses and half-courses, regular mentoring, strategic planning, and the submission of combination learning portfolios/teaching dossiers.
4. **Publications** continue to be a valuable resource for TAs across the country. Several centres revised TA guides to contain most information that TAs would need to successfully approach their role, and other institutions have added guides/newsletters or other publications specifically intended for TAs and graduate students.
5. Some Teaching Centres reported that more and more faculties/departments were identified as adding **TA training** to their roster of offerings to their TAs, with some departments indicating they were revising existing training.
6. Development of **specialized training for TAs for service learning** (SLTAs) courses is a new initiative at U of T. In particular, the training will focus on facilitation skills and assessment skills because SLTAs will be required to lead student discussions around their community-based learning experiences and assess student reflection journals. The SLTA program launched in spring 2011 in preparation for the fall 2011 term.
7. **TA evaluations** are always a sensitive topic but UVic is attempting to come up with a system that will be TA-centered as opposed to department centered in the hope of providing TAs with feedback about their professional skills as an instructor.

## LATEST RESEARCH

There are six major research projects in process at this writing.

1. At U of T, research is underway to examine the roles played by two U of T initiatives in **developing TAs' approaches to teaching and their ability to encourage deep learning in students**. A member of the research team, Carol Rolheiser, says "TAs are a significant part of the teaching that goes on at the University of Toronto, and we want to know more about their impact. We take their roles as members of the teaching team very seriously and hope to learn more about the ways they can be part of a course and shape what our undergraduate students learn." Details of the research project can be found in this article in The Bulletin, U of T's institutional newspaper: <http://www.news.utoronto.ca/campus-news/u-of-t-receives-research-grant-to-study-innovative-teaching-programs.html>. As well, more information is available from Benjamin Pottruff, CTSI Research Assistant, [benjamin.pottruff@utoronto.ca](mailto:benjamin.pottruff@utoronto.ca).
2. UVic is in the midst of a research project looking at ***Role-play as an effective learning strategy for TA Interpersonal Skill Development***. In collaboration with the Department of Theatre and the Applied Theatre group, the research team is in the process of developing role-play modules to enhance TAs' sense of confidence and ability to respond to unpredictable classroom/interpersonal situations. Five critical incidents were videotaped and will be used as the starting point to workshops that will have participants take the incident and role-play until they are satisfied with the outcome. Testing of these workshops will begin in late May so that the complete role-play modules are ready to offer in Fall 2011. In addition, the Learning and Teaching Centre is developing a TA Critical Incidents Series as part of our very popular Critical Incidents Series, which will see these video clips and workshops available to other institutions. For more information, please contact Cynthia Korpan at [tatrain@uvic.ca](mailto:tatrain@uvic.ca).
3. The University of Western Ontario and the University of Windsor are collaborating on a HEQCO-funded project investigating the **effects of TA development at multiple levels**.
4. The University of Windsor has received three years of HEQCO funding to investigate **changes in participant awareness and teaching behaviours in the first and second levels** of its SEDAR-recognized University Teaching Certificate program. The multi-method study includes comparisons of participant survey and questionnaire responses pre and post-certificate, midway and post-certificate interviews, videotaped teaching sessions, and other investigative means.
5. Erin Aspenlieder is embarking on postdoc research to determine what a **teaching assistant/graduate student certificate** in teaching might or ought to look like.
6. At Dal, an on-going longitudinal (10 year) study is being conducted entitled ***Developing Teaching Scholars: The Impact of a Certificate in University Teaching and Learning Program on Graduate Students' Beliefs, Concepts and Practice of Teaching and Learning***. The study involves three stages of data collection, including voluntary entrance and exit surveys, and a post-graduate interview 18 months after completing the Program. The aim of the project is to determine whether or not graduate students' who participate in a Certificate Program can learn to (re)conceptualize their teaching as a scholarly practice over time that includes planning, practice, reflection, self-awareness, change, professional development, sharing of results and community building.

## PROGRAM REVISIONS

Most programs are under constant revision as TA Developers reflect on workshop and program offerings. However, the three below were specifically identified.

1. **Award programs** for TAs vary in numerous ways across Canada, from the number of awards issued (3 to 17) to criteria. Three centres are currently revamping awards granted to TAs in the hope of increasing significance of the role of TAs on Canadian campuses (USask, UBC, UVic).
2. In the fall of 2011, U of T revamped the **microteaching component** of its Advanced University Teaching Preparation Certificate. In an effort to make the feedback process in the microteaching sessions more meaningful for the participants and easier to manage for graduate student staff members, the feedback forms used in the sessions were revised, and new information on developing your approach to teaching and providing/receiving feedback on teaching was both provided to participants in advance of a session and included in a short presentation delivered by centre staff at the start of each microteaching workshop. After one term, the Teaching Assistants' Training Program (TATP) has received improved evaluations of the microteaching sessions from both participants and the centre peer trainers who lead the sessions. To view the new guidelines and feedback forms, please see the TATP microteaching section of the Centre for Teaching Support and Innovation (CTSI) website:  
<http://www.teaching.utoronto.ca/gsta/events/microteaching.htm>.
3. UVic currently has its Professional Development Program in University Teaching (PD-PUT) under revisions. This **Certificate program** did undergo a complete revamp two years ago and it is now time to revisit the structure and adjust to the growing demands for the program. In two short years, the program grew from five participants to forty-five.
4. Over the past year, a completely new program of TA and graduate student professional development in teaching was launched at Ryerson University. This program is based around a **central certificate program**, where participants can earn up to three certificates, upon completion of each level of the program. Level 1 of this program consists of workshops and an introductory course on learning and teaching. Level 2 consists of a Course Instructor Apprenticeship Program, ISWs and an intermediate course on learning and teaching. Level 3 focuses on peer mentorship and the completion of a teaching dossier. Since its launch in September 2011, 107 people have registered in the program. A full description of this program can be found here <http://www.ryerson.ca/lt/taga/pdp/>
5. At Queen's the **Certificate Program in University Teaching and Learning** program was redesigned to reflect the growth of scholarly teachers, experienced teachers, contributors to scholarship of teaching and learning, and leaders in teaching and learning. Initial evaluation and increasing participation indicates this revised program meets TAs needs.

## CAMPUS COLLABORATIONS

The value of collaborative work is well known but UBC and U of T have campus collaborations that they have been fostering.

1. UBC has been busy working closely with **departments** to meet their needs. This includes needs assessment, developing learning outcomes for workshops, providing facilitators, and sometimes running the workshops within departments. All programs are designed in consultation with individual departments according to the needs they express.
2. U of T is now involved with the Graduate Professional Skills (GPS) Program coordinated through the **School of Graduate Studies**, which has subsequently increased attendance at workshop offerings at the centre. GPS is a centrally coordinated program that maintains an institution-wide database of programs and services that develop professional skills in graduate students. Students can register online to participate in the program, and their participation in professional development programming across the university is tracked. Once they have completed a certain number of hours in 4 key competency areas—teaching competence, research skills, communication skills and personal effectiveness—they receive an official citation on their graduate transcript. The program is enormously popular, though still relatively new and thus experiencing some growing pains. For more information see:  
<http://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/informationfor/students/profdev/gps.htm>

## CONFERENCES/TA DAYS

The standard of TA training, the TA Day or Conference, is consistently the most important introduction TAs receive to teaching in higher education.

1. ***Navigating your Path*** is the first and largest conference of its kind held in Canada focusing on TA and graduate student professional development. This conference was hosted by the University of Toronto on May 6 and 7, 2011.
2. **TA Conferences and TA Days** remain the largest events that most centres host for TAs. The majority hold these events each September with a few adding a January offering as well. McMaster has added presentations from the whole day on a USB key that all attendees receive. This way they have the materials from sessions they were not able to attend. Similarly, McGill is providing videos and podcasts of presentations to facilitate access to workshops missed. WLU has changed the name of their TA conference to *Teaching and Professional Development Conference*. This change acknowledges that WLU has a tri-fold focus in their programming - sensitivity awareness, teaching/learning and personal/professional development. This change reflects the broad audience - undergraduate instructional assistants, graduate TAs, graduate research assistants and graduate students in general.

## ONGOING SUCCESSES

As this list will demonstrate, TA developers are offering a lot of excellent programs/workshops for TAs and graduate students.

1. The **Instructional Skills Workshop**<sup>v</sup> (ISW) continues to be offered at most institutions; however an ISW just for graduate students is now being offered at some centres (UBC Okanagan, McMaster, DAL, UofC, Ryerson). BrockU has offered ISW just for graduate student TAs for six years and has made it a component of a GTA practicum program.
2. **Teaching observations** either by a peer system or by centre staff continue to be an enriching experience. At some institutions, it is part of the certificate program and/or by request. At BrockU, TAs who enroll in the GTA practicum observe faculty members teach who have also done an ISW. They then write a reflective piece about what they observed and include it in their teaching dossiers. Many faculty members then choose to incorporate the TAs' written commentary (about the faculty member's teaching) in their own dossiers as well. In the past at UVic, there was a program called *The Lecture Club* that brought a small group of six into classrooms to observe best practice of teaching. The program was very successful but difficult to organize due to scheduling participants and classrooms. In the fall of 2011, UVic will instead try a one-day *Sharing Best Practice* format, which will have several classrooms open to TAs and graduate students so that they can observe best practice in action. After an opening plenary, TAs and graduate students will be able to pick which classrooms they want to observe and a certificate will be awarded to TAs and graduate students who visit more than three classrooms and provide a reflective writing piece about what they learned, what they will be able to use now and in the future, and how the day impacted their understanding of teaching in higher education. Carleton is adding an observation component to their programming as well, which is hoped to become a significant part of the training offered.
3. Mentioned most often were the **Certificate programs** that cover the basics of teaching to the full roster of faculty responsibilities (UBC, UWindsor, UVic, Trent, Ryerson, Brock, UWO, UofC, DAL, UofT, Carleton, SFU, QueensU, UManitoba). WLU is currently developing a certificate program. The certificate would not necessarily have a teaching focus alone and would be highly customizable to reflect the context here at Laurier (more masters programs - one year in duration, TAs mostly markers). The focus would be on providing a mechanism for students to document their learning and achievements personally, professionally, and academically based on the professional skills framework (as a starting point) outlined by the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies and NSERC. WLU may implement a portfolio approach using "e-portfolio" for the program. Similarly, programs that offer communication and presentation skills for non-academic careers are being highlighted for graduate students (UManitoba).
4. Weekly or monthly **workshops** that are discipline specific or interdisciplinary are a mainstay of most programs. The topics vary widely but some examples illustrate the breadth of knowledge being offered to graduate students (for more examples see here <sup>vi</sup>): teaching effectiveness and an online workshop on prevention of sexual harassment (Trent)<sup>vii</sup>; first class success, grading, lesson basics, learning management systems, Turnitin, facilitating labs, active learning, group processes, time management, portfolio preparation, leadership in the classroom/management issues, and Teaching Practices Series (UBC Okanagan); 2008 Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (CAGS) targets for professionalization of graduate students provides the impetus for a

series of workshops on Mondays at McMaster; Introducing Teaching & Learning, Facilitating Discussions, Engaging the Learner, Assessing Student Learning, Developing Presentation Skills, Supporting Diversity & Inclusivity, Conversing with Exemplary Teachers, Teaching & Learning with Technology, Engaging in Reflective Practice, and Designing Your Course (SFU). Queen's has weekly and bi-weekly workshops covering topics such as joy of discovery across research and teaching, effective feedback for students, inclusive teaching and learning, getting feedback on own teaching, informational literacy skills, role of assessment in curriculum design, effective feedback on student writing, equity issues in the classroom, and a discussion on the goals of university education.

5. The **Teaching Dossier** remains an area of important development for all graduate students. The workshops/programs offered range from week-long workshops (UWindsor) to shorter offerings and are often part of the certificate program at that institution.
6. Programs for **International TAs** are well developed (UWO, Carleton, UofC, Queens), whereas others are under development and will launch in September 2011 (UVic). UWO's programs include discipline-specific modules for ITAs, such as "The Language of Teaching in Engineering" and the "Language of Teaching in Science" as well as discipline-specific video teaching samples in its electronic book and culture and communication in the Canadian Classroom for ITAs (<http://www.uwo.ca/tsc/csigs.html>)
7. **TA appreciation** events, such as TA Pizza days (UBC Okanagan) continue to be important.
8. **Help for TAs** is provided in examples such as TA Tuesdays, a drop in time for TAs who need assistance with their TA duties (UBC Okanagan)
9. Programs that encourage **TA Mentors** continue to thrive. Carleton has a TA Mentorship Program where experienced TAs offer discipline specific workshops and support for TAs in their department. This program is very similar to the TA Consultants (TACs) program at UVic where experienced TAs are positioned in departments to provide discipline specific training to incoming TAs. As well, Ryerson and UWO have various mechanisms in place to encourage mentorship, either through peers or faculty.

Thank you to everyone for your time and effort in providing this valuable information to share with your colleagues. There are many great ideas contained here that inspire us all to continue our excellent work in support of TA and graduate student professional development.

Cynthia Korpan

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<sup>i</sup> The information gathered here is from Teaching Assistant Educational Developers at most Canadian Institutions. If we failed to contact your institution, please accept our humblest apologies for this oversight. Similarly, please forgive any misinformation contained within. Feel free to promptly bring it to my attention and I will gladly correct. Contact Cynthia Korpan at [tatrain@uvic.ca](mailto:tatrain@uvic.ca)

<sup>ii</sup> TAGSA is a SIG of the *Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE)*,

<sup>iii</sup> The following abbreviations have been used: University of British Columbia (UBC) <http://ctl.t.ubc.ca/>; University of British Columbia Okanagan Campus (UBC Okanagan) <http://www.ubc.ca/okanagan/ctl/welcome.html>; Brock University (BrockU) <http://www.brocku.ca/ctlet>; University of Calgary (UofC) <http://commons.ucalgary.ca/>; Concordia University (Concordia) <http://teaching.concordia.ca/>; Dalhousie University (DAL)



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<http://learningandteaching.dal.ca/>; University of Guelph (U of G) <http://www.tss.uoguelph.ca/index.cfm>;  
University of Manitoba (UManitoba) [http://www.umanitoba.ca/academic\\_support/ltc/index.php](http://www.umanitoba.ca/academic_support/ltc/index.php); McGill  
University (McGill) <http://www.mcgill.ca/tls/>; McMaster University (McMaster) <http://cll.mcmaster.ca/>; University  
of New Brunswick (UNB) <http://www.unb.ca/saintjohn/teachlearn/>; University of Ontario Institute of Technology  
(UOIT) <http://teachingandlearning.uoit.ca/index.php>; University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI)  
<http://webstercentre.upei.ca/>; Queen's University (QueensU) <http://www.queensu.ca/ctl/indexFF.php>; Ryerson  
University (Ryerson) <http://www.ryerson.ca/lt/>; University of Saskatchewan (USask)  
<http://www.usask.ca/gmcte/drupal/?q=node/4>; Simon Fraser University (SFU) <http://www.sfu.ca/teachlearn/>;  
University of Toronto (U of T) <http://ctl.utsc.utoronto.ca/home/>; Trent University (TrentU)  
<http://www.trentu.ca/teaching/internal.php>; University of Victoria (UVic) <http://ltc.uvic.ca/>; University of Western  
Ontario (UWO) <http://www.uwo.ca/tsc/>; Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU)  
[http://www.wlu.ca/homepage.php?grp\\_id=1573](http://www.wlu.ca/homepage.php?grp_id=1573); University of Windsor – (UWindsor) <http://ctl.uwindsor.ca/>.

<sup>iv</sup> Website addresses are noted above for your convenience in contacting the institutions for further information.

<sup>v</sup> Since 1978, the Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW) has been a highly effective process by which new and experienced educators at universities and colleges across North America enhance their teaching skills. The essential idea behind the ISW is to give educators a chance to practice teaching in a friendly environment. For more information, go to: <http://iswnetwork.ca/>

<sup>vi</sup> Lesson Planning 101, Preparing for your TAs, Facilitating Effective Discussions, Connecting with Students in Large Labs, Facilitating Effective On-line Discussions, Grading Tips and Rubrics, Giving Effective Feedback, Evaluating your Teaching Effectiveness, Academic Integrity and the TA Role, Developing a Teaching Philosophy Statement, Documenting your Teaching in a Dossier, Planning an Exam Review Session and Exam Invigilation, Learning Theories: Active Learning and Student Engagement, Learning Theories: Critical Reflection and Transformative Learning, Learning Theories: Course Design Strategies to Ensure Active Learning and Student Engagement, Learning Theories: A Review of Research on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, End of the Semester Debrief and Celebration, Individual Consultations and Dealing with Difficult Situations (U of G).

<sup>vii</sup> The University of Ottawa's Sexual Harassment Office has granted Trent University the permission to use their online workshop, the Prevention of Sexual Harassment, as a one-hour credit toward Trent's TA Training Certificate Program.