Cultivating Teaching-Assistant Peer-Support (TAPS) Networks at Your Institution

TAGSA Quick Guide

What are teaching-assistant peer-support (TAPS) networks?

Teaching-assistant peer-support (TAPS) networks are communities of practice involving colleagues from the same or cognate departments or divisions that work as or contribute to the teaching assistant role. Departmental or divisional administrators and teaching centre liaisons can also contribute to the support network in generating conversations and discussions about pedagogical practices, career and professional development strategies, and wellness and mental health resources. TAPS networks operate on the premise that:

- All teaching assistants can improve their teaching practice as it is an iterative process
- The diverse backgrounds and experiences of teaching assistants and administrators can and do contribute to the development of teaching practice
- Teaching development happens inside and outside of the "classroom"
- Collegiality and support foster critical reflections and innovations in teaching and learning practices

What are the goals and benefits of TAPS networks?

Each TAPS network will develop its own set of goals in consultation with its members (see section "How do I get started?"). For example, some networks are focused on offering training and wellness support, while others take on a topic-centred approach, such as discussing online engagement strategies. In general, TAPS networks provide four forms of support (Kelly and Antonio, 2016):

- **Emotional support** through listening, trust-building, and conversation
- **Appraisal support** through feedback, discussion, and affirmation
- **Informational support** through strategy- and resource-sharing, suggestions, and resource development
- **Instrumental support** through in-kind support such as time and labour

Are there different types of TAPS networks?

TAPS networks come in all shapes and sizes. Think about the scope of your network. Does the network strive to cultivate general support, cohort cohesion, or situation support (Mercieca and Kelly, 2018)? For example, will this network host regular monthly check-in and discussion meetings, or will the network produce social media posts? Is the network a result of changes in the environment, such as a pivot to online teaching and learning, or is the network a community for current and future teaching-assistant cohorts? TAPS networks can also facilitate advocacy work and launch diversity, inclusion, equity initiatives among its members.

Considering the goals and scope of the network will help determine its membership. Smaller networks, such as a departmental working group, can work closely with administrators, faculty members, and institutional partners (Malette, 2018). In comparison, larger networks, such as disciplinary Twitter networks, allow different clusters of practitioners to exchange information (Macià and Garcia, 2017).

How do I get started?

Below are some questions to get you started on cultivating TAPS networks at your institution:

- Who are my participants?
- What are the goals or areas of practice we want to attain?
- How do we achieve our goals?
- What support or expertise do we need?
- How will we know that we have succeeded?

Record your ideas and document the process of creating a TAPS network. Creating agendas and resource summaries will maintain the network's momentum and support sustainability from year-to-year.

Resources

Kelly, N., & Antonio, A. (2016). Teaching peer support in social network sites. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 56, 138–149. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.02.007

Macià, M., & Garcia, I. (2017). Properties of teacher networks in Twitter: Are they related to community-based peer production? *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 18(1), 110–140. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v18i1.2644

Malette, N. (2018). *Teaching assistant wellness: Individual, social and structural strategies*. The University of British Columbia. https://sustain.ubc.ca/about/resources/teaching-assistant-wellness-individual-social-structural-strategies

Mercieca, B., & Kelly, N. (2018). Early career teacher peer support through private groups in social media. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 46(1), 61–77. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2017.1312282

University of York. (n.d.). *Peer support for teaching (PST)*. https://www.york.ac.uk/staff/teaching/develop/peer-support

TAPS Network Examples

Our TA Peer-Support (TAPS) Network currently consists of 12–15 members through WhatsApp. New incoming graduate students are added to the group, and four admins help maintain the network. The network provides support ranging from how to live in the city, advice on coursework, and resources for TAs. Members are encouraged to reply to questions and contribute to the forum as much as they like. The network is a casual space with no scheduled events, no expectations, and no outsiders. Graduate students can participate at their leisure, ask anything to the "hive mind," and belong to a community in and out of these "pandemic times."

Our TA Peer-Support (TAPS) Network includes both graduate and undergraduate TAs (roughly four members per term) and is run through WhatsApp. The network is a space where TAs can interact freely, seek help if needed, and respond to each other's questions. Besides sharing updates, events, and TA-related news, posts and discussions are primarily initiated by the TAs, and there are no instructors present. We encourage TAs to brainstorm solutions together, thus generating a greater sense of community and familiarity. The network enables TAs to reach out and offer support to one another in an informal, relaxed, and asynchronous environment. For those starting a TAPS network, include a welcome post! A few friendly words can go a long way in making someone feel comfortable. We adopt a "less is more" approach, much like texting, which allows our members to take less time and mental energy to review clearly and concisely written posts and discussions.