



focus

on university teaching and learning

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Graduate Teaching Assistants at Dalhousie

I am honoured to be asked to introduce this *Focus* issue on teaching assistants at Dalhousie. It is natural for all of us – assistants, faculty, administrators, even students – to conceive of graduate student involvement in teaching primarily in terms of the funding of educations and the managing of workloads. After all, most graduate students require some sort of income, and most Departments some form of assistance in delivering their undergraduate programs; these needs are mutually answered, more or less, by the institution of teaching assistantships. But in addition to such economic and organizational values, the role of teaching assistant has a third and even more fundamental value, somewhat difficult to define and all-too-easy to lose sight of, having to do with the pedagogical mandate of the university itself, with its commitment to transmit the knowledge it houses and fosters. With respect to this value, we will reconceive teaching assistants as apprenticed teachers, whose lecturing, marking, and tutoring principally serve, not as a prop to their research or to an overextended faculty and budget, but rather as a preparation for and participation in a vital professional responsibility. The President's Graduate Teaching Assistant Awards, it seems to me, promote just such a reevaluation, and may be taken as a sign of a renewed appreciation, throughout our community, of the importance of teachers and teaching to the university. I hope this issue of *Focus* will help to further these same ends.

Mark Bruhn
Recipient of the 1991 - 1992 President's
Graduate Teaching Assistant Award

The Role of the GTA

Graduate Teaching Assistants contribute to undergraduate education in almost every department of the university. Tutoring, leading seminars, demonstrating in the laboratory, teaching a section of the material in class, grading papers and exams, GTAs provide significant support for the teaching professors at Dalhousie. Balancing the demands of their own degree programs with the requirements of their teaching duties, they play an indispensable part in undergraduate education at the university.

The President's Graduate Teaching Assistant Awards were instituted to recognize and celebrate the achievements of outstanding GTAs. Mark Bruhn (Ph.D. candidate in English), Natalie Cann (Ph.D. candidate in Chemistry), and Patricia Cole (Masters student in Psychology), chosen from a number of accomplished nominees, were the 1991-1992 recipients of the Award.

The dedication and commitment of these three recipients, the enthusiasm they have for their subjects, and their supportive attitude toward students demonstrate a model of teaching excellence to be strived for by GTAs and teaching professors alike.

The Professors of Tomorrow

Patricia Cole's teaching activities and the support she gives to students impressed students and faculty in the Psychology Department. On her own initiative, Patricia devised additional course and study materials for students. The Psychology Department was so confident in Patricia's teaching skills that she was asked to take full charge of a large second year class for the first three weeks of the semester last year. Asked if she plans to teach after she graduates, Patricia replies with an unequivocal "definitely."

Mark Bruhn's supervising professor was so impressed by Mark's teaching when he went to sit in on classes that "I kept on going because I wanted to learn about the texts that were discussed and about the art of teaching." Mark has been a TA since 1990. His insight into English Literature and his ability to convey his own knowledge and enthusiasm for the subject to his students have won him praise from his supervising professors and his students. Does Mark plan to teach English when he graduates? "Absolutely. My aim in getting the Ph.D. is, above all, to be a professor of English Literature."

Natalie Cann will be completing her doctoral studies in the Department of Chemistry in the next few months and acknowledges that she will have career choices to make. A career in industry offers a high salary and good research facilities; however, Natalie's goal is to continue teaching. Clearly, she has a special aptitude for teaching: an ability to explain difficult theoretical concepts, a genuine concern for students, and a proven interest in teaching improvement activities. "I simply cannot imagine pursuing a career that did not include the personal interactions that teaching allows," she says.

When you are a professor, what will you do for your TAs?

To ensure that my ideas reflected theirs, I've spoken to a number of students about the qualities of a good professor. They preferred a personable professor with whom they could comfortably interact on a one-to-one basis. Accessibility and seeing their professor in the laboratory as well as the lecture room were also important. These will be my goals, too. I hope that all my students, TAs included, would find the courses I teach challenging, interesting, and fun. **Natalie Cann**

In the first class for which I was the TA, I was responsible for the lab component and had 36 students relying on me for information, guidance, and structure. I was scared. But the professor was unique; he allowed me the freedom to try out new techniques I thought would work well. I gained a phenomenal amount of experience and learned a lot about my own strengths and weaknesses in the process. As a result, I hope I will always respect the individuality of my TAs and allow them enough space to "try out" their teaching wings. **Patricia Cole**

Two things come readily to mind: I'll treat them with the sort of respect I've been accorded by my own supervising professors, and I'll encourage them to lecture and lead discussions as often as is practicable. And if they don't know it already, I'll try to teach them the value of teaching. **Mark Bruhn**

Thoughts on Teaching



ABRIEL PHOTO

Natalie Cann Mark Bruhn Patricia Cole

I believe that good teaching, in general, is the unavoidable consequence of the love of the subject, a passion for exchanging knowledge and a willingness to take risks. I am fortunate enough to be studying and teaching in the field of my choice, and that makes love of the subject a natural. The passion for exchanging knowledge, I believe, comes from the part of us that never really "grows up." For me this passion has been increased by my exposure to some really superior students in the classrooms where I've taught.

The willingness to take risks? I guess that means not always taking the same path to the same end, encouraging each class to have a personality of its own, and not minding looking a little silly on occasion. Being a GTA is a lot like being an apprentice trapeze artist who still gets to work with a net. I hope I'm still as much of a risk-taker when I'm entirely responsible for my own classroom.

Patricia Cole

Although my teaching career is just beginning, I have had the good fortune to encounter several exceptional role models. In particular, Donna Silvert has had a strong influence on my approach to teaching. Donna, a senior lab instructor with the Chemistry department, has a gentle, friendly way of encouraging the students to question what they see, smell, . . . This is crucial since curiosity is key in science.

"Being a GTA is a lot like being an apprentice trapeze artist who still gets to work with a net."

Patricia Cole

I thoroughly enjoy chemistry and I hope that the students I have taught have also experienced some of the excitement. I value their questions since, in the exchange, we both learn. In fact, the best interactions are usually initiated by a question which I cannot immediately answer, we reason through the solution together.

The students I have encountered here at Dalhousie have been friendly, intelligent, and hard working. The nomination for the teaching award was a huge surprise – and a great honour. No award, scholarship, or medal could mean more.

Natalie Cann

Thinking back on the teachers who were really effective for me and whom I'd want to emulate, I can say uniformly that all, no matter their field, taught most forcibly simply by showing their own intense engagement with their subject. I could see in them not merely a range and depth of knowledge, but the positive enjoyment to be had from any such range or depth of knowledge, especially in the conveying of it. The success I've had as a teacher I would attribute chiefly to my following their example, not so much by choice or effort, but because their teaching was that persuasive.

Mark Bruhn

Preparing GTAs for the Challenges that Await Them

GTAs are the professoriate of tomorrow. What can departments and supervising professors do to recognize the contributions teaching assistants already make and at the same time allow them to enhance their teaching skills? What supports do GTAs need to make them feel an integral part of Dalhousie's educational mission to provide its students with an undergraduate education unsurpassed in Canada? How does your department score on the checklist below?

✓ TA Preparation: A Check List for Departments

- ___ 1. What provisions are made for coordination between the faculty member and Teaching Assistants who run tutorial groups and labs?
- ___ A. Regular meetings
 - ___ B. TAs attend the lectures
 - ___ C. Lecture, tutorial, and lab notes are shared
 - ___ D. Material to appear on tests is discussed
 - ___ E. Other
- ___ 2. What resources are systematically provided to Teaching Assistants?
- ___ A. Office space, secretarial support
 - ___ B. Instructional materials
 - ___ C. Department policies on grading, plagiarism, etc.
 - ___ D. University policies that directly affect instruction
 - ___ E. Other
- ___ 3. Is provision made for dialogue concerning the professional development of TAs?
- ___ A. Time set aside for this purpose
 - ___ B. Regular discussion at departmental meetings
 - ___ C. List of mentors, faculty, other TAs available for consultation.
 - ___ D. Other
- ___ 4. Does your department have a training programme for TAs? Does it include these topics?
- ___ A. Preparation of lectures and presentations
 - ___ B. Encouraging student participation
 - ___ C. Motivating undergraduate students
 - ___ D. Classroom management
 - ___ E. Establishing rapport
 - ___ F. Tutoring methods
 - ___ G. Effective communication
 - ___ H. Stress management
 - ___ I. Evaluation and grading
 - ___ J. Practice teaching and feedback sessions with other TAs
 - ___ K. Other

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