



# TA/GS NEWS

September 2011

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## Welcome!

Welcome to the third issue of the TA/GS newsletter from the Learning and Teaching Centre. The newsletter was developed specifically for teaching assistants and graduate students at UVic. Inside you will find words of wisdom from your fellow graduate students at UVic, who have kindly shared their personal stories about being a TA and learning to navigate teaching in higher education. As well, our In Focus section features the Department of Chemistry and how TAs are supported in that department.

We encourage your participation in what we have to offer, but please let us know at any time if there is a topic that you want addressed and we will do our best to accommodate your request.

Enjoy!

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By Jon Chui  
Department of  
Chemistry



# Some Words to New Grad Student Teachers

Often, grad students are also teaching assistants, and it is also often the first time that they are "on the other side." A grad student with no experience in teaching - that was me 6 years ago. Since then, I've taught in heterogeneous contexts, ranging from grading, leading labs, teaching one-on-one tutorials, to running workshops on teaching. Nearing the end of my time at UVic, I feel the urgency to leave my colleagues with a few things I have learnt over the years. Most of my teaching experience consists of one-on-one and small groups of about 30, and it is from these areas that I draw my advice.

## From Serious to Sincere

While I had no experience in teaching, I had experienced good (and bad) teaching aplenty. Thus at the beginning I modeled myself on teachers I respected and admired, and a certain Ms. Anne B. strongly influenced my budding teaching persona. Anne bordered on the legendary. She was a Brit iron-lady somewhere between her 40s and 60s — no one knew for sure — who ran, climbed and

skied better than most young men. She was also a hard-nosed, no-nonsense taskmaster who set the bar high and demanded the best from us. She was damn serious, I thought, and I would try to be damn serious too.

Being "damn serious" is hard work. You have to swallow the jokes, and press the lips tightly together when something funny happens (serious people don't smile, right?). Besides needing to get brow massages after all that frowning, what's truly damning about being "damn serious" is that I tended to never connect with the students beyond the elemental level. Some mental imagery that describes my role with the students: that I am the (properly sterilized) Syringe of Knowledge, or that I'm the Sage-on-the-Stage. In both cases, it's a strictly professional relationship consisting of dissemination of information. Good teachers I had in the past seemed to do something different from that, but I didn't have the vocabulary for it: after all, you're either serious or frivolous, and the latter is a Very Bad Thing.

Of course, the secret is that there are other ways to frame the teacher-student relationship. I think the correct attitude I was looking for was not

seriousness, but sincerity. The sincere teacher tries his/her best and asks the right things of the students, but does so not out of professional duty so much as out of care. (Here I'm channeling Gabriel Marcel, in particular his distinction between the *I-it* and *I-thou* relationships.)

## The Guide and Sage

Attitudes provide a range of allowable personas. Being sincere opens up a new role, the *Guide-on-the-Side*, in addition to the *Sage-on-the-Stage*. There are times when the Sage is useful, but I find myself being the Guide far more often. Sages in my little world don't smile, know everything, make no mistakes, and come with a load of performance anxiety when you're just pretending to be one. (After some time in academia, I suspect that this Sage is a construct of my imagination that never could have existed in the first place.)

The image of a Guide reinforces modes of thinking that are useful in teaching: simplicity, humility and a sense of collaboration. As an

“ A grad student with no experience in teaching: that was me 6 years ago. ”

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instructor, being the Guide (off the pedestal) helps get feedback about how much got across and how you are doing. Personally, the thought that I'm "talking" to a student makes marking somewhat less of a chore. Students — this is especially true for students new to the university — like to know that they're not just a number. I think humans have an innate need to connect with one another, and the benefit of having a connection goes both ways.

### Connection with Students

What are some things you can do to foster that connection? The first and foremost is to learn their names. The method I use to help remember names is to ask them to say it, and then I repeat it immediately and use it frequently. Repeating it immediately is important, as sometimes the mind wanders and it's as if you'd never heard the name in the first place. The second is to take the time to actively listen when it's feasible to do so. (Active listening is a specific communication technique. Wikipedia has a good entry on it with links to learning resources.)

This "connection thing" can be hard and sometimes brings you to places you never expected. Students, like everyone else, are dealing with a lot in their lives, and they may feel comfortable enough to share that with you in confidence. While intervention is almost never necessary, it's useful to be aware of the non-academic resources on campus that the student may not know about (and which are usually free for students). At UVic, in addition to one-on-one consultations, Counselling Services hosts workshops on anxiety, time-management and studying techniques that you may find helpful to refer students to. The ombudsperson can help mediate academic conflict, and the Resource Centre for Students with a Disability may be able to help with students that have a disability, whether visible or invisible.

### Teaching with Simplicity

Earlier, I talked about teaching with simplicity, as in simple rather than simplistic. The two words are not at all equal. To teach something simplistically is to lower the standards and bring down the goal. To simplify keeps the standards where they are but strives for the most direct, clutter-free path to get from A to B. (To the natural science-minded readers: to make simplistic is a state function, but to simplify is a path function.) Being an infovore, I often have to rein myself in with the reminder that when I'm in a classroom, it's about the students (as opposed to the ego-boosting pleasures of spouting endless trivia.)

My insistence on the simple is often interpreted as advocating for a particular way of lesson-planning - that we should teach the skeleton of the material before hanging the wobbly nuances on it. That is one of the patterns one can choose but certainly not the only one. While being simple means eliminating the superfluous, the actual methodology of teaching depends on context and there are other ways of lesson structuring that are more efficient than the layering method.

UVic specific: where can you find out more about different teaching methods? The Learning and Teaching Centre (LTC), located in the Harry Hickman Building, hosts workshops on teaching and has a library on pedagogy.

Moving from the strategic to the tactical, it's frustrating when you've explained the damn thing (twice!) but they just don't get it. It's human to be annoyed (and/or defensive: I couldn't have explained poorly - right? - but I don't know the way around it.) Remember how things are often not binary (yes/no), but exist in a continuum? Some students are moving along the continuum by your explanation and are now stuck at a different point, but they've been conditioned to say "I don't get it" when they realize they do not

have the whole solution. Asking questions like "Can you walk me through your solution?" or "Can you tell me where it's not making sense for you?" helps opens up a dialogue and lets you assess the current condition.

### The Gentle Refusal

Being the Guide can mean trying something other than an intellectual approach. Students will sometimes push your buttons to test your boundaries (deliberately or otherwise). Saying "No" is hard when you've built a personal relationship with them. Indeed, for many of us, saying "No" in any context is hard. If this is true for you, the *gentle refusal* is a technique that shifts the framework from an antagonistic denial to a collaborative, solution-seeking one. I learned about this from trainers on

the NEED crisis line, and it has served me well for several years. The *gentle refusal* is a three step process:

- 1. Acknowledge request** – "I hear that you need the weekend to write this take-home mid-term because you had a family emergency that requires you to be out of town." By stating the request, you show that they are understood, and it also prevents misunderstanding.
- 2. Indicate unambiguously the refusal** – "I cannot give you extra time because that would not be fair to other students." The key here is to state your refusal firmly and clearly. The justification is context-dependent and may not be necessary.
- 3. Tell them what you can offer** – "What I can do is to make up a personalized version for you, have you start on Friday, and you get the same 3 days that the other students get. Would that work for you?" Here we are trying to seek out a position that works for all parties involved. Ask if it's what they need; this avoids replacing an unfavorable position with an equally untenable one.

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With practice, this becomes second nature, and it's applicable not only to your interactions with students, but also with peers and professors or coordinators.

## Rewards of Teaching

Interacting with your peers and professors or coordinators is the other part of teaching that new teachers don't often think about. Your colleagues are incredibly important people in your career. Often, they are happy to act as a resource. If you're teaching a course for the first time, ask for advice. Ask if you can sit in their class. Ask if they can sit in your class and give you feedback. Students are very sensitive to whether you care, but they seldom have the vantage point to judge the intellectual composition of your teaching. Your peers can fill in the evaluation gap.

In our department, teaching is part of the stipend package, but my supervisor offered to cover that portion of the stipend so I can focus on research. The decision to not take the offer is a decision that I do not regret. Teaching has been a rewarding learning experience for me, and I hope that will be the case for you as well.

*About the Author: Jon Chui is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Chemistry. He is a recent recipient of the departmental award for Excellence in Teaching as well as the university-wide Andy Farquharson Award for Excellence in Graduate Student Teaching. You can contact him at [jkwchui@uvic.ca](mailto:jkwchui@uvic.ca).*



2009 Andy Farquharson Award  
Recipient **Mr. Jonathan Chui**,  
Department of Chemistry, with Dr.  
Aaron Devor and Dr. Andy Farquharson

# IN FOCUS

## TA support in the Department of Chemistry:

Are you the teacher or a student with a personal growth opportunity?

By Monica Reimer and Dave Berry

This question is the conundrum of life as a graduate student. Just like the proverbial elementary school teacher, TAs in the Chemistry Department are expected to be able to sing, dance and do math at the same time as synthesize a new compound! Not surprisingly, a lot of support is provided to make that happen. Of course, there is no avoiding the steep learning curve at the beginning - much of the information about becoming an instructor meets the new graduate student on the welcome mat.

Most of the TA positions in Chemistry are for instructing a lab where there is only one teacher in a class with up to 24 students. There is not much *Assisting* but plenty of *Teaching*. The responsibilities include introducing the topic of the day, explaining the theory and coaching the hands-on experiment. Safety is a big deal so there is much for the new instructor to learn and impart about the protocol. Marking the reports is probably the most onerous of the weekly tasks and has to be done within a week, regardless of all the other commitments.

The whole process starts in

May, when the ad for the fall term positions is posted on the department's CUPE 4163 notice board and on the department's web site. The applications can be submitted in any number of ways - electronically, by mail, by hand - as long as they meet the deadline, which is firmly observed. Being Victoria, the competition for jobs is quite stiff, but the grad students get priority in hiring.

All applicants who have English as another language are invited to present to a committee to determine if they are ready to teach in the first term. Jumping over that first hurdle gets one onto the draft teaching schedule, which is created by mid-August. This is a giant match between the applicant's wishes and experience and the needs of the department and represents about 120 appointments to each of the 98-hour positions running over a 14-week period.

For the new appointees, there is a series of orientation meetings running over the first few days of September. These sessions are mixed so that some are related to the role of being a member of the department, an active researcher or an instructor. There is a one-day meeting on becoming an instructor in our department. Most of the newbies have done little ...



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previous teaching, but some have experienced UVic as an undergrad. Each segment of the day is facilitated by a guest presenter - often someone who was sitting in the audience 12 months earlier. We cover a multitude of topics such as the framework in which we work, the responsibilities and limitations, the rewards and opportunities (for example, those offered through the LTC) and the expectations. It is a bit overwhelming at first, but the formal list of duties is summarized using the required CUPE 4163 checklist and is given to the appointee at the first meeting of the course instructors.

The nature of our discipline means that everyone must be familiar with all the safety procedures. They get to play with a fire extinguisher under the supervision of the experts (Saanich Fire Department), take elementary first aid and discuss how to respond to chemical concerns and emergencies. The infrastructure of the department is explained later in a meeting with key personnel over coffee or at the general department social early in September.

After this initial barrage of information, a key component of our teaching support is at the weekly one-hour meeting. Each instructor is required to attend a meeting for their course in which the content and, more importantly, the delivery is discussed in some detail. Most of the new instructors begin their teaching in a first-year course, but they may later choose to move into the higher years or elect to become the experienced voices of Chem101.



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Each lab course has a Senior Lab Instructor (SLI) coordinating everything and they also teach a section, so that really helps to create a team atmosphere - the flavour of the meetings tends to reflect this. A first-year meeting focuses on how each of the 40+ sections is progressing and what each instructor should cover, whereas a second-year meeting tends to be more about the content in the context of how the students are learning. The future courses evolve from these discussions. A third-year meeting is often convened with no specific agenda but results in animated discussions on a wide range of topics. Typically, third-year courses run all the experiments simultaneously, with the students rotating through the options. Earlier years tend to have a lock-step sequence in the lab program. The collegial approach to these meetings has resulted in much new material being created for future versions of the course, and in a few cases, graduate students have authored articles in the education literature.

Those teaching in their first term or two will also have some scheduled one-on-one meetings with the SLI. These typically focus on the

practical aspects of marking, or on how to handle delicate situations that they have encountered. At an appropriate mid-point in each term, the CUPE checklist is revisited to ensure the schedule has unfolded as expected.

Lab classes tend to finish a little before the end of term and the final reports are marked as the students head into exams. Once the marks have been posted, the undergraduates are invited to respond to a short anonymous e-survey that solicits comments on their instructor's performance as well as on the structure and content of the lab course. This data is collated and returned to the TA early in the following term, together with some comments from the SLI. This feedback is anxiously awaited as it helps in refining the approach for the next teaching assignment. Sometimes, it is hard to remember that six positive comments far outweigh

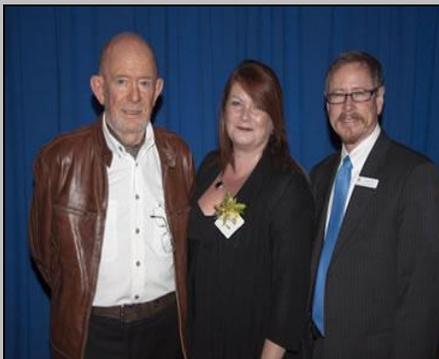
one negative criticism, as the latter always stings.

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The feedback is intended to help the new instructor build upon achievements, and these documents can be the basis of a future teaching dossier.

Although these are usually written with a job application in mind, they may also be used in support of a nomination for an annual department teaching award. One of those winners is selected to be proposed for the university-wide Andy Farquharson Award for Excellence in Graduate Student Teaching. The awards are always celebrated at one of the social events that the department holds. In no time at all, it is January and it all begins again until summer, when a full immersion in research is possible.

For more about the Andy Farquharson Award, please see [http://www.ltc.uvic.ca/services/programs/taproduct/taawards/TA\\_awards.php](http://www.ltc.uvic.ca/services/programs/taproduct/taawards/TA_awards.php)



Dr. Andy Farquharson, (l)  
2010 Andy Farquharson TA Award recipient, **Janet Love**,  
Department of Psychology,  
and Dr. Aaron Devor, Dean of Graduate Studies

# Feature Teacher

By Janet Love

Department of  
Psychology



When I think about being a being a TA, guest lecturer, presenter, instructor or mentor, my first thought is, "I could fill a book." I smile as I say this to you, but alas at this time in my life, it is a good smile (this was not always the case). However, it is a smile of great memories of the fact that I have had the fortune of filling all of those aforementioned positions.

Fortunately, in 2006 someone directed me toward the LTC, and that truly became the beginning of my journey towards embracing the various roles offered to me. Best of all, it was the way that the staff at the LTC supported my desire to incorporate both teaching and research into whatever role I played. I signed up for workshops, classes, presentations or anything that could help me be a good teacher and that enabled me to intertwine my research into the classroom. I had finally found what I was looking for in my education: a support network that mirrored my values. However, if I thought just a few courses would give me what I wanted, I couldn't be further from the truth. What the LTC gave me was a 5-year journey of classroom learning and then a push in the direction of practical application. Fortunately, for every mistake that I have made, the LTC has been there to listen and support and finally to urge me back out there. And mistakes I have made. However, I believe those mistakes have made me better, and I have tried to share them with others as they begin their graduate degree. Here are a few anecdotes regarding some of the roles I have undertaken.

1) For several years I have given a lecture to brand new graduate students about to embark on their first TA'ship. My lesson to them..."**KNOW YOUR AV**"! Don't be me: sweat pouring down my face when I have to admit in front of 100 students and the computer departmental AV person that you don't know the difference

between a CD and a DVD player.

2) Guest Lecturer – **DO NOT FORGET** to confirm the room with the instructor prior. I thought 15 minutes was adequate to get to class and set up my computer with finicky AV in Cornett. Of course, it turned out I was in MacLaurin building, not Cornett. However, even to get to that information took **MUCH** longer than the 15 minutes I had allotted, and it was at least ½ hour into classtime before the sweat was only a minor inconvenience.

3) **BE A GUEST LECTURER.** Take every advantage of this opportunity. Of course, it looks great on your CV but every opportunity helps you become a better speaker, teacher and eventually mentor. Find a way to excite your students with your research or the research in your department.

4) Finally, **THEY TRUST YOU** with a class. It is an amazing opportunity, and it tests your ability to do what you have thought up to this time is your calling. Never underestimate the hours it will take, never underestimate the support you have from the LTC, and never underestimate the rewards it can reap. My only footnote is: never underestimate how many hours

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you will spend on YouTube trying to find the "**BEST**" clip for tomorrow's class!

5) **BE A MENTOR-** Always recognize that there is an undergraduate or a first-year graduate student who is looking to learn from you. When you look in the mirror, remember where you have come from and how far you have come.

If I had a take-home message, what would it be? I could say that the number one answer is to **BE PREPARED**. However, I made mistakes and, yes, I should have been prepared, but the reality is that stuff happens. Learn that and learn you need to roll with the punches. For me, the real value and privilege in being a graduate student is the privilege of collaborating with other graduate students from other disciplines and, ultimately, having the opportunity to make a difference in an undergraduate's life. Find other graduate students. Sometimes they will be in your discipline and sometimes not. Talk with them, and learn from them. Remember that graduate school is a journey. The best gift you can give yourself is to have others make that journey with you.

# International Graduate Student Page

## Letter Home

by Kapil Kalra

I still remember the day when you said goodbye at New Delhi Airport on 30 July 2010 and asked me to call you as soon as I took a breath of air in CANADA. Since then, we have talked a number of times and every time you ask me, "How does it feel to study in Canada?" So, finally today I will walk you through education and life in Canada for an international student and justify why Canada is called the "Land Of Opportunities." I remember when I came out of Vancouver airport and the first thing I saw was a student carrying a banner saying loud and clear, "WELCOME UVIC STUDENTS." After reaching Victoria, on one of the most amazing and beautiful journeys by ferry, I finally got a place to stay with one of my friends from India. Actually, he is one of the main reasons why I chose Canada. Orientation training by an international student for international students is one of the most different things that I saw here. My first month of the program, *Essentials of Business and Leadership (EBL)*, was focused primarily on making us ready for the rigorous and extensive program ahead. It gave me a chance to interact with some of the great minds of both Canada and the rest of the world and be friends with them.

But after EBL, the MBA program showed me the real face of work, with loads and loads of assignments, team projects, lectures and professional development sessions. By the way, my class of **45 students, representing 11 different nationalities**, is the perfect definition of what we call **Diversity** in Canada.

Team projects and professional development programs are two things which I find very unique and practical in the Canadian education system. A strong focus on building and working in teams certainly adds tremendous value to our education.

I feel that the individual learning experience that I gained from India coupled with the team experience in Canada is an asset for both my personal and professional life.

We work day and night in companies to earn our living, we love to spend time with our families, but have we ever wondered why? Studying in Canada introduced me to this mind-blowing subject – professional development. Its main areas include creative thinking, leadership, power and politics in organizations, and mentorship programs. All these topics forced me to sit and ask myself what my values are. Why I am studying in Canada? And what are my responsibilities? Mentors are also one of the great resources for knowledge and another unique feature of Canadian education. In India, we never realized the importance of mentors and creative thinking, but after coming here I realized that these are the factors that are driving the world nowadays.

Finally, I consider coming to Canada a dream come true. I believe that Canadian education is doing a great job developing future leaders who have the ability to make this world a great place to live.

Your friend,  
Kapil Kalra



For full descriptions and registration, please see our current calendar at <http://ltc.uvic.ca/events/index.php>

## September

### **Fall TA (Teaching Assistant) Conference**

Tuesday, Sept 6 - Friday, Sept 9  
9:30 AM - 4:00 PM  
Harry Hickman Building

### **Stand and Deliver: Developing Impromptu Speaking Skills**

Tuesday, Sept 13, HHB 128  
4:00 PM – 6:00 PM

**Facilitator:** Warren Loikke, Public Administration – Dispute Resolution

### **Who are Students Today?**

Monday, Sept 19, HHB 128  
11:00 AM – 1:00 PM

**Facilitator:** Cynthia Korpan, TA Training Program Coordinator, Learning and Teaching Centre

### **Lesson Planning: The Essential Building Blocks**

Wednesday, Sept 21, HHB 128  
3:00 PM – 5:00 PM

**Facilitator:** Cynthia Korpan, TA Training Program Coordinator, Learning and Teaching Centre

### **Setting the Tone and Tracking Task in Classroom Discussion**

Monday, Sept 26, HHB 128  
11:00 AM – 1:00 PM

**Facilitator:** Kathy Bishop, Department of Theatre

### **Speakers' Club!**

Tuesday, Sept 27, HHB 128  
4:00 PM – 5:30 PM

**Facilitator:** Sohad Khadum, Department of Mechanical Engineering

### **Educational Technology for the Non-Technocrat**

Wednesday, Sept 28, HHB 128  
4:30 PM – 6:00 PM

**Facilitator:** Tara Coulter, Engineering and Computer Science/Math Co-op and Career

### **Presentation Skills Workshop (PSW)**

Thursday, Sept 29, 6:00 PM – 8:00 PM

Saturday, Oct 1, 9:00 AM – 4:00 PM

Saturday, Oct 8, 9:00 AM – 4:00 PM  
HHB 128

**PSW Coordinator:** Dr. Jane Gair

## October

### **Campaigning for TA Alliance: what to do if students complain about the professor**

Monday, Oct 3, HHB 128

11:00 AM – 1:00 PM

**Facilitator:** Sheila Porteous, School of Child and Youth Care

### **Learning Styles**

Monday, Oct 10, HHB 128

11:00 AM – 1:00 PM

**Facilitator:** Sohad Khadum, Department of Mechanical Engineering

### **How the Library can Improve the TA Experience**

Wednesday, Oct 12, HHB 128

3:00 PM – 5:00 PM

**Facilitator:** Scott Johnston, Graduate Librarian

### **Learning from Differences: integrating all students into group discussions**

Monday, Oct 17, HHB 128

11:00 AM – 1:00 PM

**Facilitator:** Geoff Cross, School of Public Administration

### **Andy Farquharson Award for TAs: What is it and how to get one!**

Wednesday, Oct 19, HHB 128

3:00 PM – 5:00 PM

**Facilitator:** Janet Love, Department of Psychology

### **Rapport: Why having it with students will make a difference**

Monday, Oct 24, HHB 128

11:00 AM – 1:00 PM

# Fall 2011 TA Workshops

**Facilitator:** Sohad Khadum, Department of Mechanical Engineering

### **Speakers' Club!**

Tuesday, October 25, HHB 128

4:00 PM – 5:30 PM

**Facilitator:** Sohad Khadum, Department of Mechanical Engineering

### **Feedback from Students: How to get it fast and early in the semester to help you with your role as a TA**

Wednesday, Oct 26, HHB 128

3:00 PM – 5:00 PM

**Facilitator:** Adel Younis, Department of Mechanical Engineering

### **Group Assignments: How to help students work together**

Monday, Oct 31, HHB 128

11:00 AM – 1:00 PM

**Facilitator:** Ali Tehranchi, Peter Gustavson Scholl of Business

## November

### **Critical Feedback: The Studio Art Critique as a useful Pedagogical Tool**

Wednesday, Nov 16, HHB 128

6:00 PM – 7:30 PM

**Facilitator:** Doug Jarvis, MFA

### **Voices of Women**

Monday, Nov 21, HHB 128

11:00 AM – 1:00 PM

**Facilitator:** Amy Torsney, Peter Gustavson Scholl of Business

### **Assumptions of the Hidden Curriculum**

Monday, Nov 28, HHB 128

11:00 AM – 1:00 PM

**Facilitator:** Mary Stocks, School of Social Work

### **Speakers' Club!**

Tuesday, Nov 29, HHB 128

4:00 PM – 5:30 PM

**Facilitators:** Sohad Khadum, Department of Mechanical Engineering



## Learning and Teaching Centre

University of Victoria

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