

Taryn M. Graham

PHILOSOPHY AS A GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT

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As a Graduate Teaching Assistant, my responsibility within the classroom is to help facilitate a rich learning environment where mutual respect and understanding exists. To set this tone, I like to start each semester with building classroom norms by openly asking students what they expect from me and by **communicating effectively** what I expect from them. From me, students can expect someone who is consistently “approachable”¹ and “professional”¹ in her words, attitudes, and actions. I purposely arrive early to every class, setting up the slides and making a conscious effort to welcome students by name. I openly value diversity and aim to make every student feel as though they have been given the chance to thrive. As one student expressed, “I really appreciate the TA’s help. I’m an international student. She’s always very patient with me”¹. I am clear about my boundaries, including when and how I communicate online and in-person. For example, when students write me an e-mail requesting to meet, I kindly respond by asking them to specify which concepts or what concerns they hope to discuss. Inviting students to set clear objectives allows me to **prepare thoroughly** for our meetings. Students describe me as “very quick to respond to emails”¹ and “open to meet”¹.

Having attained my BA in Humans Relations at Concordia University, I received extensive training in interpersonal communication, facilitative leadership, and conflict resolution, all of which have created a solid platform upon which I continue to build my **effectiveness in teaching practices**. I interpret learning as a transformative process that occurs when we challenge our usual ways of seeing things. To this end, I feel comfortable facilitating classroom discussion surrounding controversial issues. Throughout the course I assisted in the Fall 2016 semester, homelessness was used as an illustration of a public health issue that could be explored through various social science lenses. When invited to provide a lecture as part of my assistantship duties, I presented on the topic of pet ownership among people experiencing homelessness. Throughout, my aim was to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning and to be mindful of their impact on others. I began my lecture with a social media piece, asking students to write down their first impressions of a person panhandling beside his dog. Next, I presented relevant theory and research on the topic, followed by facilitating an experiential learning activity. After debriefing on the outcomes of the activity, I finally brought back the media piece to see if and how students’ impressions had changed. Students found it “interesting to learn about [my] personal research and relate it back to the course content”². One student believed that “[my] use of social media made [the lecture] so much stronger as [I] pulled on [her/his] own misconceptions”². By challenging students to test their assumptions and by supplementing lectures with real-life scenarios, I aim to foster **critical thinking skills applicable beyond the classroom**.

I am committed to continuous improvement, which means that I actively embrace and intentionally encourage **formative feedback**. As evidenced by one instructor I previously assisted in teaching, I “[am] open to feedback so as to improve [my] approach with others”³. Indeed,

¹ See **BHSC STUDENT EVALUATION OF TA PERFORMANCE**

² See **STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVES OF MY GUEST LECTURES**

³ See **PERSPECTIVES OF FACULTY I PREVIOUSLY ASSISTED IN TEACHING**

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whenever I deliver guest lectures, I come prepared with feedback forms, created of my volition, which include both quantitative and qualitative measures for students to anonymously fill out. I critically reflect upon feedback received in order to improve student learning and to enhance my teaching. When possible, I let students know what I learned from their comments and what changes I plan to make in response.

I also place immense efforts in providing students with helpful feedback. In the Fall 2016 semester, I was accountable for **engaging students in developing expertise** in paraphrasing. Specifically, students were asked to properly reword excerpts from published readings. Doing so allowed them to refine an essential skill needed for academic writing and furthermore offered a creative means by which the instructor and I could assess whether core concepts were being correctly understood. Overall, students were able to successfully achieve desired outcomes in academic writing as a result of the “thorough”¹, “constructive”¹, and “clear”¹ feedback I provided on their assignments. One student even conveyed that I contributed “[g]reat comments that improved [her/his] writing skills”¹. Another student, however, found that I “sometimes [have] trouble verbally communicating [my] thoughts or students sometimes have trouble understanding [my] answers”¹. In the future, I plan to ask students to restate my verbal instruction. This strategy will allow me to assess whether the intent of my message is being correctly understood by all.

Teaching assistantships typically last a few months, yet I intentionally aim to create an impact beyond the term I am responsible for. On a weekly basis throughout Fall 2016, I engaged in **critical reflection with the instructor** to assess what went well and to determine what could be improved, both throughout the semester and for the future. I independently produced templates in Excel for future graduate assistants to use, so as to improve their efficiency when calculating grades, summarizing peer evaluations, or organizing group projects. I saved such templates in clearly identified folders that could be easily retrieved by the instructor. I also learned from and collaborated with other Teaching Assistants. For example, when completing my Graduate Teaching Development Badge offered by the Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning, I worked closely with peers to discuss effective teaching practices and to share relevant resources within the University of Calgary community, should student referrals be required.

Part of **motivating students to attain high standards in learning** involves staying up-to-date on important student resources. I like to include tips from the University of Calgary’s Wellness Centre on how to best manage stress, especially if first-year undergraduate students are present within the classroom. Balancing school with employment, social life, and other responsibilities can be overwhelming for students, and I have a responsibility to lead by example regarding self-care. I keep a teaching log every semester to assess how I am feeling and to see how this may impact my approach with others. Ultimately, I believe that tending to my own health through engaging in mindful activities (e.g., yoga, meditation, dog walking) allows me to be an effective teacher and learner.