

Welcome Back!

This issue of *Core* focuses on the Teaching Assistant's role in helping students learn. Written by TAs, this collection of articles offers a series of practical strategies that they have developed not only to help students understand the course material, but also to create a stimulating learning environment and develop critical skills. Taken together, the contributions reflect the range of possibilities for promoting student learning.

The Role of Teaching Assistants in Helping Students Learn

Anna Hoefnagels, CST Graduate Teaching Associate, 1999-2000

Graduate students' roles and responsibilities as Teaching Assistants or Course Directors are various, and often are prescribed by the unit in which they teach or by the nature of the course to which they are assigned. These responsibilities range from grading students' papers and tests, to holding weekly tutorials in which students develop their critical thinking and communication skills, to organizing and presenting three-hour long lectures for classes of 60-200 students. Despite the variability of the responsibilities that graduate students fulfill through their teaching appointments, one aspect of their job is common: their role in helping students learn.

TAs can have a profound effect on students when they show enthusiasm for the course content, passion for learning, and an interest in their students' lives and development as learners. TAs are often a student's 'first contact' in a course: if students have a question or a problem, they tend to raise them first with their TA. TAs are called on to clarify ideas and material and to provide students with feedback on assignments and tests to help them identify the areas that they have mastered as well as those in which they can improve. But our obligations to our students do not end with developing effective teaching strategies. We are also responsible for creating a classroom environment in which students are comfortable expressing their ideas and engaging with their colleagues.

Reflecting Canada's multicultural society, York's undergraduate student body is increasingly diverse, with various ethnic, linguistic, religious and economic backgrounds represented, and a high proportion of female students, mature students, international students and special needs students. TAs need not only to recognize the diversity of their students, but also to accommodate students' special needs and create a safe learning space (1). As Leona Nicolas Welch observes, students of college and university age still need encouragement while they learn new tasks and information to help them combat their fears and insecurities about failure (2). Welch proposes that, by creating a safe and welcoming learning environment, educators help foster the confidence and security of their students.

Issues of power and authority in the classroom are critical to student learning. The relationships of power that exist among TAs and their students are precarious and can greatly impact classroom dynamics and the comfort levels and success of students.

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Negotiating Spaces for Women's Participation in the Classroom

Charity Marsh, Graduate Programme in Ethnomusicology/Musicology

My experiences as a student have shown me that the classroom has never been a particularly safe space for women to share ideas or to engage in classroom dialogue. "Through routine practices of socialization, education, work and communication patterns, women have been excluded . . . [and] as a result of being excluded from the circle of properly authorized speakers and hearers, women's activities don't count" (Gaskell et al. 1989). Even though I am presently studying at the doctoral level and teaching in the university setting, I still often find myself struggling to have my voice heard. Because gender inequity is such a prevalent part of our society, and a deeply embedded element in our classrooms, it is our responsibility as educators to help students identify gender inequity and create a learning space that is accessible to all students. With this in mind I offer one method - the (re)negotiating of a classroom contract - that can be used to help ensure the classroom is a space where women feel their participation will not be silenced and their voices will be heard.

My belief in the value and success of the classroom contract is based on the fact that, even before the end of the school year, a majority of the students in my tutorial had commented on the success of this pedagogical tool in enabling them to be more active within the classroom setting. In this article I will outline how I used the classroom contract process to convince my students that their voice, their thoughts, and their questions were important to the success of the class and their learning.



In our first tutorial together, the students and I began the process of negotiating and establishing classroom dynamics. Collectively we drew up a contract that enabled us to construct a space of safety, opportunity, and tolerance, and a space in which we would show resistance to those who have and continue to silence us. The students were each given a chance to explain what they believed constitutes a positive learning environment, offering what they felt were or were not acceptable in the classroom. They were also asked to comment on what they wanted and/or felt they needed from me as their TA.

By the end of this first discussion we had generated a list of things we would try to accomplish to make our class more conducive to learning, as well as those things that we collectively would not tolerate. Drawing on each other's responses, we drafted a contract outlining the code of conduct and shared responsibility for our classroom environment. Our first draft highlighted the following: trust, honesty, listening, respect, participation, open-mindedness, positive attitudes, communication, constructive criticism, and addressing people by their first names. Together we also decided that we would not tolerate sexism, judgments, put-downs, negative attitudes, homophobia, racism, ableism, ageism, classism, or the excuse of ignorance. Although it may seem we only reaffirmed what should be the basic rules of any classroom, it was obvious from previous experiences that this was not the case.

In our first tutorial we also talked about previous positive experiences in different learning environments. This led us to consider how to incorporate more interaction among the students and between the students and myself. We also reviewed the importance of encouraging one another during classroom discussions and relating personal experiences to the class. In a written anonymous mid-year evaluation of the tutorial, many students addressed the importance of being involved in the negotiation of the classroom contract:

Having a group discussion on the rules of the class helped me to feel like an integral part of the classroom because after all a class is about students. This in turn helped me feel much more comfortable as it was a very welcoming start to the class.

In many other tutorials there is no opportunity to discuss issues regarding women or to celebrate them. At times because we are so conditioned to think a certain way I feel guilty because I do not stand up for myself and for other women. [This space] is helping me to open up to those issues . . . [and] allow[ing] me to question things around me.

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Setting ground rules and talking about the classroom as a safe space allowed us as individuals to be open about who we are and how we feel about different issues that form during classroom discussions.

By encouraging all of the students to take part in negotiating what is and what is not acceptable in the classroom, a collective responsibility for the space was created.

Unlike other contracts, however, this one was renegotiated throughout the year as the dynamics and interactions of the class evolved. Because the contract was not rigid, the students understood that their ongoing input was crucial to the continuing development of the classroom, and this allowed a more communal environment to take shape. With the establishment of our own classroom community, trust was formed between the students and the teacher, but more importantly, between the students themselves. With this type of contract the task of holding people accountable for their actions becomes the responsibility of the entire class.

In a written evaluation of our tutorial, students highlighted their satisfaction with the open and safe environment that we created through our classroom contract:

I've heard numerous stories of women being dismissed, ignored, and shouted down in other tutorials. I feel that I can say what I think and I know my tutorial leader or the class won't let anyone put me down or dismiss my point of view. This tutorial has been a very positive experience for me.

Many classes don't allow us as students to really listen, this one does . . . listening and understanding other views will really help to make me aware of the way other people are feeling and [make them] aware of the way I feel.

Seeing everyone express their opinions and views so openly is something I don't usually see in my other classrooms.

Our classroom developed into a safe environment where women's voices were heard and respected – a space where women did not have to fear ridicule when speaking their opinions. The continuous (re)negotiating of our classroom contract played a significant role in ensuring the participation of all students within the classroom, and, by everyone actively upholding the contract, we collectively made ourselves accountable for our actions.

References:

Gaskell, Jane, Arlene McLaren and Myra Novogrodsky. *Claiming an Education: Feminism and Canadian Schools*. Toronto: Our Schools/Our Selves Education Foundation, 1989: 89-90.

YOU ARE INVITED TO A WORKSHOP ON...***NEGOTIATING POWER IN THE CLASSROOM***

Power dynamics which circulate among students and between teachers and students often produce exclusion, marginalization, disempowerment, and silencing. Such dynamics not only impede learning but are the site of some of the most important and deeply remembered learning.

Participants will identify the practices of power in their own classrooms--between students and teachers, and among students; analyze patterns of speaking and silence; and discuss the development of groundrules to facilitate more inclusive and collaborative classrooms. This is a hands-on workshop. Juice, coffee and snacks will be served.

Note: This workshop will be offered six times.

FOR FACULTY AND COURSE DIRECTORS

Wednesday, February 28	12:30-3:30 (women only)
Monday, March 19	12:30-3:30
Friday, March 30	12:30-3:30
Thursday, April 19	12:30-3:30 (women only)

FOR TUTORIAL LEADERS

Thursday, March 1	12:30-3:30 (women only)
Wednesday, March 28	12:30-3:30

Please pre-register by email (lbriskin@yorku.ca) or leave a message at 77824. Do not hesitate to contact Linda Briskin if you have any questions.