

# Issue#15 First-year TA experiences

By Jennifer Jodell

*As part of a series on teaching, the Graduate Caucus Chronicle seeks input from its readers on the pleasures and perils of serving as a teaching assistant. Interested readers may contact the editor to receive a copy of our survey. We also encourage you to read the report on the status of graduate students by the MLA committee: [http://www.mla.org/pdf/csgspguidelines\\_2013.pdf](http://www.mla.org/pdf/csgspguidelines_2013.pdf).*

*To kick off this initiative, we asked three new teaching assistants to describe their experiences in their first year of teaching. All three graduate students are from the same department in the Humanities at a public university in the Midwest. Their names have been changed to protect their identities.*

*You may see yourself in some of their responses, or you may recognize a radically different experience. You may also wish to jump in with a cautionary or encouraging word.*

*What do you think? Let us know.*

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Ursula, Octavia, and Damon expect to emerge from their first year of teaching with surprisingly few complaints--at least, regarding teaching. This could be due to the excellent support they received in their first semester through their department's mandatory peer mentoring program. The program fosters a meeting of three students with a dedicated mentor to discuss methods and exchange experience before meeting in a large group with a different advanced graduate students. The department also requires attendance at a formal, one-semester Practicum led by a pedagogy specialist.

Octavia was surprised to find that her department offered extensive support for graduate student instructors.

"I'd heard from friends at other institutions that pedagogical training was a hit or miss situation. I didn't know until I arrived here whether or not our department was committed to training us. I quickly learned that our Pedagogy specialist is incredibly dedicated to his vocation. As a role model, he's probably the greatest factor in my success in teaching this year. His energy is contagious, and the assigned course readings were enlightening. As a final project, we were asked to create an ideal syllabus. I've already found that project useful, as I used it to pitch a course for the summer".

Ursula is particularly grateful for her peer-teaching mentor, who meets with her and two other students. Even though they don't meet regularly, "he is very accommodating on an as-needed basis." Her department also provides peer-mentoring sessions for the entire cohort, which are led by advanced graduate students. "[These sessions] are pretty helpful and I've gotten some good ideas from them, including classroom policies, activities, and ways of interacting with students."

Although he appreciates the formal Practicum, Damon also finds the peer mentoring to be the most valuable component of his training. It provides a way to gauge his experiences against those of others. "The first problem I had was with getting students to talk. It was nice to know I wasn't the only one who struggled with this and it was nice to learn how others dealt with it." At the same time, "training can only help to a certain point. Experience as a teacher takes you from there." Damon also credits the professor he's TAing for this semester with some of his success. "The professor has met with the TAs throughout the semester and this has been very helpful in keeping everyone on track. He's actually a great guy."

However, the past few months have also been marked by stress and unexpected hurdles that have affected their lives and their teaching. One, of course, is time management. Octavia has found it difficult to keep up with coursework, teaching, research, and

volunteering for a journal in her field. "I wonder if I should give that up," she said, referring to the volunteer work. "But it's enriching my knowledge of my field."

Another major issue is the constant financial instability. All three believe that the university needs to be more realistic when calculating the true cost of living as a graduate student. "Especially when you factor in the huge student fees," adds Damon. "I know I'm going to go hungry next year." Ursula added that there's also a need for more travel support. "The funding for travel is very limited, and the department has already used up what was available." Octavia agrees that there's a need to better fund graduate student travel. "I received a travel expenses fellowship as part of my package, but that's only for the first year. What will I do next year? I went to Oregon this year for a conference and the flight alone was \$400. That's a significant chunk of my stipend." Ursula notes that it would have been nice to have moving costs covered by the department, but it does not cover such expenses. "The biggest complaint I've heard here regarding money, " Octavia adds, "is that the financial aid office has a habit of offering a large financial aid package and then recalculating later, after your fellowship has been added in, your maximum loan amount. So, suddenly, after you've spent your loan money on your move, you have to pay a portion back. It's outrageous and it's caused a lot of grief and worry for first-years coming in, because they don't realize this can happen."

At least two share the view that TAing is not *actually* a part-time job, as it is generally advertised in graduate curricula. "It's closer to a full-time job, when you factor in everything that happens outside of class that's out of your control, such as extra work created by a plagiarism case, or make-up classes due to weather, or simply meeting with students who missed class due to illness. Next year, I'll have to work a part-time job during the school year next year *in addition* to TAing, which is going to be difficult." Damon has found that his teaching consumes about twenty hours a week, but agrees on the point that the university should not fund it as if it were a twenty-hour position. "You have to factor in the fact

that you're also expected to attend classes during the day. Those are hours that you can't spend at another job." Ursula agrees, adding: "The workload is not commensurate with the stipend."

As for other parts of the financial package, such as insurance, so far all three have found the insurance coverage adequate, though they've never had to use it. "Thankfully," Octavia notes, "the only thing that's come up is the need to go to the dentist for a cleaning. However, I did hear from another first-year that in her first semester here she developed a problem with her molar as a result of grinding her teeth. She learned that, even with insurance, she would be charged \$300 for the operation, so she had to wait another month to save up for the operation. She was in a lot of pain her first semester."

Other unexpected hurdles include the stress and disappointment brought about by bad behavior by students. Octavia and Ursula have already encountered frustrations dreaded by all instructors, such as plagiarism and discipline problems in the classroom. Octavia recalls that, in her first semester:

I had a student turn in a final paper on Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* that was patched together from different Goodreads reviews. One of those reviews contained a wistful vignette in which the reviewer mused upon his experiences as a child growing up in the '50s. Since my student was no older than twenty, this would have been a tip off if I hadn't already noticed that the paper was incoherent. Apparently the student failed to read the reviews before pasting them into his paper. That was an eye-opening experience to have during my first semester of teaching. The professor I was TAing for was wonderful, however, and he walked me through the bureaucratic end of it and also attended the meeting in which I confronted the student. I was also somewhat prepared for this possibility by our peer mentoring sessions.

Concerns about what can and cannot be expressed in the classroom have also arisen. Octavia explains:

In my first semester, the professor gave a lecture on Louise Erdrich's *The Roundhouse* that included background information on Louis Riel. He then gave a lecture on Toni Morrison's *Home* and, of course, covered the Sundown Laws, as they're referenced in the text and affect the plot. A student complained that these lectures were an attempt by the professor to impose his 'liberal views' on the students. The professor laughed it off, but I sat back and wondered how far the student would take it. A professor at a nearby university was recently challenged by her students on similar grounds--meaning, for bringing her own views into the classroom. Not that I think the professor did that in our course, but the students' perceptions are out of our control.

When asked about academic freedom, Ursula responded:

I do think that I hide my political preferences while teaching, though students make certain assumptions based on the material that comprises my dissertation research (poetry, feminist theory, labor issues) that are likely not wholly incorrect. I feel as if I have a good amount of academic freedom in this context, though that may be because I am still so new at this that I'm not itching to try anything transgressive!

On this issue, Damon is cautious but confident:

You don't want to give the impression that you're thrusting your views on the students. They need to feel they can express their own views. But there are some things that need to be said, and you have to be creative about it. You can invite students to go down a certain road...but I think that's all you can do.

We then asked a series of questions on controversial topics such as evaluations, technology in the classroom, and peer observations. When asked if their department encourages new TAs to observe each other teach, Ursula, Octavia, and Damon responded that their program had not encouraged them to do so as of yet. Octavia indicated that this might be

a very uncomfortable situation. On the topic of evaluations, all three expressed sound support. "It's only fair that if you evaluate someone they have a chance to evaluate you," Damon believes. Ursula has a similar view. "I welcome them. I think students are good judges of what works for them."

Different views were expressed on the value of technology in the classroom. "I do not even use a PowerPoint presentation," Damon says, shaking his head. "If I could have my choice, I would take blackboards over whiteboards. I guess I'm old-fashioned," he adds, laughing, "even though I'm a new TA. Then again, I have a discussion section right now. I may not be able to get away with it when I begin to lecture." Ursula agrees. "I don't incorporate technology at all. I use hard copy handouts and write on the board. I have a no-technology policy in my classroom, and I don't want to distract from the material by having to mess around with cables and so on." Octavia, on the other hand, resisted PowerPoint but gave in eventually. "I started out teaching a discussion section that doubled as a writing elective. Midway through the semester, I gave that presentation on basic writing skills using a PowerPoint. That forced me to get over my anxiety--I'm a bit of a technophobe--and I began using more PowerPoints."

We also wanted to get a sense of whether or not the new TAs viewed their teaching experience as a potential learning experience. When asked if he thought it was valuable to teach a course that might be out of his area of knowledge, Damon replied that he would not feel comfortable doing so. "I don't think it's fair to the students, and I wouldn't enjoy having to get up to speed on a topic I know nothing about." Octavia disagrees. "I feel as if I'm so focused on mastering my area of research as a new graduate student that, at some point, it would be nice to be forced to dive into new waters now and then. You never know what you might be able to relate back to your own area."

As for their impression of the department overall, they report a high level of satisfaction with a few minor reservations. "The transparency

could be better," Ursula reports. "But it's not as bad as I imagined." Damon was also ambivalent about the level of transparency. "If transparency means that I understand how decisions are made--such as who gets to teach which courses and why--then no, there isn't much. However, if it means participating in things such as faculty hire lectures or open promotions, then, yes, we're included."

Regarding their relationships with fellow TAs, Ursula views them as surprisingly collegial:

The atmosphere among graduate students is pleasant and supportive. People share information with each other about the ways in which they progress through the program. There is perhaps a bit of a divide pre- and post-exams, socially, but this is likely to be expected as we have such different lives on either side of that benchmark.

Damon agrees--two words that immediately come to mind are "friendly and conducive." Octavia concurs, adding that:

The members of our cohort have gone out of their way to form bonds and familiarize themselves with their colleagues' research interests, and this has paid off.... There are several reading groups by sub-field and that gives us a chance to get to know advanced graduate students, but I think the peer mentoring has a lot to do with the air of inclusiveness among the graduate students overall. I've met three advanced graduate students through peer mentoring and that's helped me get over an initial shyness. You see that they're just colleagues, who want the best for you, and that sets a great tone for the rest of your departmental interactions. Frankly, it makes it easier to jump in and start attending department events. This view could, however, be the result of a thick cataract of naïveté. We'll see. I plan to do my part to keep the spirit alive.