

TA Tales:

[Re]storying the Teaching and Learning Experiences of University Teaching Assistants

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## Abstract

This inquiry examines reported critical incidents that shaped the lived experience of 5 university TAs as they negotiated multiple roles and relationships within the teaching and learning context. Questions and ensuing conversations explore the ways in which these critical incidents in teaching contributed to the TAs' understanding of themselves as teachers, of teaching and learning tensions in higher education, and of the institutional contexts in which they work. The inquiry also explores the ways in which narrative, particularly creative fiction, can represent the stories TAs tell of their experiences.

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## Foreword

This dissertation is a story about the ways in which 5 university Teaching Assistants (TAs) attempted to make meaning of their past and present experiences of teaching and learning in the university context. Throughout this story there are a number of narratives. In addition to the teaching stories told to me by the TAs, there are also stories of the research process, of methodological choices, of reflection, of analysis, and of the power of narrative. As a result of my own reflections on teaching during this inquiry, I have interwoven a number of short “fictional” stories called the “TA Tales.” I use the terms “fiction” and “tales” mindfully, knowing that some readers will be uncomfortable with what appears to be imaginative renderings embedded within a work of research. Yet, the tales, along with the narratives told to me, are the children of the research process, birthed as a result of inquiry and conversation. Although they are imaginative in that I have used creative licence to write them, they draw upon the feelings, issues, and events articulated in this study and, for some readers, may be a portal by which they come to care about, and more fully understand, the experiences recounted.

The TA Tales can be found at the end of each section, in a kind of liminal space (Neilsen, 2002) at the edges of academic analysis. They are single spaced, and may be read separately from the dissertation. For those who choose to enter the conversation through the “Tales,” it is hoped they may provide context, set the stage, and evoke recollections of one’s own experiences in teaching. They are meant to engage the heart, and open up possibilities for understanding and meaning.

The context and autobiographical motivations for my approach in this dissertation were shared with my committee at the dissertation defence. At their request, the

presentation comments have been included as an appendix to this document. Also included are a mind map of the dissertation chapters and a Word cloud, an image representing the 250 most commonly used words in this thesis. It is hoped that all three of these documents will provide greater context and clarification of the methodological approach and its influences.

## ***TA Tale: I Could Teach A Monkey To Do That***

### ***(On Compassion)***

*The following “TA Tale” was created as a short story following the interview with one of my TA participants. We were discussing her motivations to reach out to an undergraduate student in her care who was experiencing a highly stressful time. She recounted a story of her own stressful experience at the hands of an uncaring supervisor during an undergraduate nursing practicum. That experience taught her how to teach. Using creative licence I restoried the events and feelings of that incident into a TA Tale on compassion.*

\*\*\*

Monkeys, like students, are a diverse lot. Some of them are cute and cuddly, like the little fuzzy howler that clung to the bedpost of my daughter’s bed, limp and needy. Others are proud and slightly angry, like the mandrill at the zoo who managed to reach through the fencing to extract a clump of hair from my friend’s head before he even knew what had hit him. But the ones I like most are the apes, especially the orangutans, with their human-like soulful eyes, their gentle manner, and their babies tucked under their bellies for protection and support.

The night I received the phone call was the night I fixed the monkey. The monkey that held fast to my daughter’s bedpost was in need of a little TLC. My daughter was distraught and, although I had a term paper to write and seminar responses to mark, I knew I needed to make some time to be with her, to listen to her fears, and to offer some simple reassurances. On that night, the problem took the form of the monkey’s left arm. It had developed a small hole in the joint and was dangling by a thread. The arm was in danger of amputating itself, and then of being lost in the bed covers or in the toy box, never fully recovered.

I had also just received a call from Bruce, the professor I TA’d for, telling me that one of my students had been hospitalized. Stress, he said, as if that summed up enough explanation for why a 20-year-old should find herself on anti-anxiety medication, unable to eat, get to school, or complete assignments. Stress. Stress can do funny things. It can motivate, and make us determined to succeed despite the obstacles people put in our way. But it can make you want to step in front of a truck as you cross the road, purposefully not looking at what is barreling down in front of you. It can make you want to sleep, to pass days and nights under the covers with only the fabric of the sheets to contemplate, worrying whether the interwoven threads that cover your humiliation might come unraveled, if someone would just pull a little here or give a push there.



Hospital sheets never unravel. If they begin to look frayed, someone removes them, replaces them with white, crisp, sterile fabric that promises to heal and protect. Somebody, usually also dressed in crisp whites, replenishes the linen cart daily with sheets, towels, and horrid patient gowns, those sickly green or blue wrinkled pieces of cloth that help strip otherwise intelligent, dignified individuals of all sense of self-worth.

Years before I had been in hospital, not as a patient but as someone learning a practice, the practice of caregiving. I was a student of healing, excited and naïve, young and eager, an eagerness that didn't last long in the face of the uncaring environment I was placed in. Care is given to the patients but not always to students caring for patients. To learn about care and to receive none is an oxymoron thriving only in teaching hospitals and in universities. I did rounds with senior students, waited on patients, changed bedpans, took temperatures, and listened to those who needed to be heard. At night I completed assignments. I cared for those who were wounded, physically and spiritually, and I did it because I believed in the power of care, the power of one human being to nurture and support another.

I was placed at the hospital to do a practicum. Doctor White was my supervisor. Mid 40s, she was powerful, assertive, and always in a hurry. I do not know if she had a family. If she did, she never told me, neither did she care about mine. She was a no nonsense woman who had little time for patients and almost no time for me. She barked orders, gave me instructions, and scowled if I hesitated. My stress increased. I did as I was bid, but felt my anxiety rise. As I said, stress does funny things. Compounded with anxiety and humiliation, it can strip you of your senses. Make you hear less, see less, unable to think straight. Good teachers know this.

In my third week in the practicum, Dr. White barked an order at me, one I didn't understand. Perhaps I didn't hear it or perhaps on some deeper, hidden level, I chose not to hear it. I am not a stupid person but I am a defeated person in the face of aggression, anger, and intimidation. Power intimidates me. Knowledge intimidates me, even when I question the veracity of what knowledge is. All I remember from that day was staring down at the bed sheets, and the ringing in my ears getting increasingly louder as if the fire alarm had been pulled but only I could hear it. And then her words:

*I could teach a monkey to do that.*

I continued to stare at the sheets of the bed we were beside, the fabric stark and white and clean. In one corner there was a small tear, the threads pulled back to expose a hole in the making, a flaw in the otherwise flawless cover. Like me, it would be gone tomorrow. And, at that point, under the revered supervision of the great Dr. White, my life began to unravel.

In the weeks that followed, my career hung by a thread. I could not return to Dr. White's supervision. She responded to a call about me from my academic supervisors, but told them I was incompetent and that I should not be allowed to continue. Where did this acrimony come from? I had always believed that if you worked hard you would be treated with respect and with dignity; that people only need to be cared for with professionalism and integrity. What was it about me that was so very, very lacking? I had no idea what I had done wrong. My university supervisors were sympathetic but unsupportive. They were afraid of Dr. White, her power and her status, which she

wielded like a broadsword in battle. She had taken students in her charge before me and, no doubt, would take others, more deserving.

In danger of losing my program altogether, I made a decision to hang on, to stand up for myself. I asked my supervisors to consider another placement, a last chance to prove that I could successfully complete the practicum. To add to my humiliation, I was put on probation. Three weeks to prove I was worthy, worthy of providing care for others.

My alternate placement was much more promising. In fact I passed with flying colours. No acrimony, no shouting, no belittlement. When asked questions in a professional manner, I was able to respond in a professional manner. When shown how to conduct a procedure, respectfully and systematically, I was able to replicate the steps. I passed my practicum and shortly after graduating, went to work in a professional care setting for many years. Dr. White helped me in an unexpected way. I had had to fight to stay in my chosen discipline, and now I rarely back down in the face of professional intimidation. When challenged, I state the facts, clearly and assertively. I will no longer be bullied.

The monkey sat woefully at the foot of my daughter's bed. Well loved, it had been her bedtime companion for many years and it was important that it continue to thrive, intact. I sutured the wound. Later that night I went to the computer and drafted an email to my student. I knew she wouldn't get it while in hospital, but it would be waiting for her when she was discharged. "I wish you better", it said. "You simply need time. If you need help. I am here. You can do this."

Three weeks later the student was back in my class. She came to me and expressed her thanks for my email, my support, and the fact that I had shown confidence in her ability to succeed. She told me she was applying for graduate school. I don't know if I made a difference to that student. She told me it had helped. But I do know I did no harm. I do know that I have never belittled, intimidated, or humiliated a student. I have tried to live my life according to the principles I learned in my profession, a caring profession. For me, teaching is a caring profession regardless of the age of one's students. As a TA, it is that care that sustains me, my care for them and others for me. For what it is worth, I know I could teach a monkey to do that.

\*\*\*

This story is based on a true experience, a critical incident identified by one of my participants in this inquiry who recalled the emotions that fostered her belief in treating all students with care and respect. It does not read exactly as it was told to me. It has been restoried, using expressive and figurative language, to invite readers to resonate with the themes, the emotions, and the images that are evoked in the telling. I begin my dissertation with this tale because it serves as a meta-tale for the themes of the study: it is

a story of relationship, of struggle, and the satisfaction that comes with knowing you have made a difference to another human being. But I am getting ahead of my story, the story of why I embarked on this exploration, the stories of the people who shared their experiences and insights with me, and the story of what I discovered - about them, about both the positive and negative incidents that impacted them as TAs, and about the teaching and learning issues that frame their journeys.

## **CHAPTER ONE: BEGINNINGS**

This inquiry examines reported critical incidents that shaped the experience of 5 university TAs as they negotiated multiple roles and relationships within the teaching and learning context. Questions and ensuing conversations explore how to represent the stories TAs tell of their experiences and the manner in which these incidents contributed to the TAs' understanding of themselves as teachers, of teaching and learning tensions in higher education, and of the institutional contexts in which they work.

### **My Story**

My own interest in this topic is 12 years old, kindled when I began to work for an educational development centre in an Ontario university and to develop programming for TAs that would assist them in their roles. Much of the programming featured expert testimony on various classroom-based issues in higher education. Workshops, lectures, orientations, discipline-specific training, and formal consultations made up a broad program of professional development for those who wanted to expand their pedagogical understanding. However, it was the coffee time stories that interested me the most, the sharing amongst TAs of the trials and tribulations that were flavouring their day-to-day interactions with students, with professors, and with the academy. This was the hidden curriculum of being a TA, the tales from the trenches that still today inform and transform beliefs about teaching in higher education. Connelly and Clandinin (1995) have called stories like these the “personal practical knowledge” of teacher education, while van Manen (1995) refers to them as recounting “lived experience.” For me, these stories of experience were rich in detail, infused with feeling and shared with passion. More often than not, they were told in hushed tones, punctuated by personal statements of

belief about students and about the academy that did or did not always fit with my own experiences. Many were salacious vignettes of exploitation and intrigue, triumph over student resistance, hurt feelings, and ethical dilemmas. In the time-bound nature of student life, I watched many of the storytellers move on, taking their narratives with them, only to hear similar stories repeated again by those new to the academy. I made a decision to try to document some of the oral story telling tradition of the TA experience and, subsequently, restory the narratives into “TA Tales.”

I am, of course, in a privileged position. I hear stories from TAs throughout the year as part of the programming I offer, but I also hear stories from the professors who employ TAs, the faculty members who juggle multiple graduate students, who are bound by collective agreements around whom they can hire, who have no funding for training or professional development, and who often feel getting a good TA is predominantly the luck of the draw. I have also hired and supervised TAs, have had both phenomenal and despairingly bad experiences with TAs, and, like many in academe, I have been a TA.

I also attend conferences and meetings on TA development where, with my professional colleagues, we attempt to identify the skills and competencies of the TAs for whom we develop programming. But although much has been written about how TAs can and should be socialized into the academy, very little has been written about how the TAs themselves experience their roles. Their voices are absent. Reflecting on this, I chose to embark on this inquiry with the hope that an exploration of the positive and negative critical incidents that impact these TAs might give us some insight into how these TAs, and perhaps others like them, identify the tensions and ambiguities of the academy.

The manner in which these experiences can be shared with those who read this work is also of interest to me. How can readers become participants in this inquiry in a way that causes them to reflect on their own experiences and understandings of this world? In this respect, this inquiry is twofold. As a conceptual inquiry, I explore the experiences, issues, and institutional contexts identified by the TAs as influential in their reflections on teaching and learning. As a methodological inquiry, I investigate how narrative and creative fiction can be used as a vehicle to heighten the themes and feelings identified by my participants. In restorying resonances of the critical incidents into “TA Tales,” I hope that readers will come to a place of empathy, reflection, and understanding of the TA experience that complements traditional ways of knowing in educational research. As Eisner (2008) writes:

Experiencing a situation in a form that allows you to walk in the shoes of another is one way to know one aspect of it. Empathy is a means to understanding, and strong empathic feelings may provide deep insight into what others are experiencing. In that sense, the arts in research promote a form of understanding that is derived or evoked through empathic experience. (p. 6)

### **Background**

In coming to a place of understanding some of the issues and challenges faced by these TAs, it is important to set the stage for a more expansive view. Faculty shortages and rising student enrolments mean that a growing amount of undergraduate teaching at North American universities is being carried out by TAs, a figure estimated at between 30 and 55 % (Johnson, 2003; Pocklington & Tupper, 2002; Prieto & Meyers, 2001). TAs serve as a bridge between the faculty and students and their contributions to the

teaching/learning environment cannot be underestimated. Yet, surprisingly, we do not know a great deal about the day-to-day experiences of TAs. The roles performed by many TAs potentially become increasingly complex as they move through academia, responding to different needs and demands. One of the biggest challenges facing TAs is negotiating the tensions and balances between their different constituencies, their different mentors, and the different expectations of their performance (Nyquist, Abbott, & Wulff, 1989; Rice, Sorcinelli, & Austin, 2000). They can be the recipients of mixed messages around what it is they are to do and how well they are to do it; they can be mentored by supervisors or left to struggle, some navigating their way without support or direction; and they can be empowered and excited by their teaching and learning experiences or potentially left feeling fraudulent, wrestling with anxieties. As students and teachers, the TA experience can be challenging, diverse, multifaceted, and complex.

Having more experienced TAs share their insights with others, especially those who have just begun to embark on the journey, has been hugely helpful to novice TAs, many of whom feel they are being thrown into the classroom with little support or preparation. It is, in my observation, these stories of experience that appear to resonate most with novice TAs (rather than more formal pedagogical training), allowing them to check their own experiences against those of others.

However, as students graduate and leave the university, this “practitioner knowledge” (Brookfield, 1990; Connelly & Clandinin, 1995; Hunt, 1987) is lost. As the one person who has “remained behind” year after year, I have been privy to a wealth of stories that reflect insights and pedagogical understandings as they begin to emerge. I hope this inquiry represents some of those insights and challenges in a way that

contributes to a broader understanding of the lived experience of TAs in order to better mentor and support them as they journey through the academy.

### **Questions Motivating the Inquiry**

The central purpose in this inquiry was to explore the critical incidents that shape the lived experience of university TAs as they negotiate multiple roles and relationships within the teaching and learning context. There have been a number of studies on the support and training needs of TAs (Abbott, Szego, & Wulff, 1989; Austin, 2002; Bellows, 2008; Gaff, 2002a, 2002b; Nyquist & Wulff, 1996; Wulff & Austin, 2004) and the impact of training programs on perceptions of TA competence and self-efficacy (Abbott, et al., 1989; Taylor, Schönwetter, Ellis, & Roberts, 2008). However, there is very little qualitative work on the lived experience of TAs, of the critical incidents that impact that experience, and how they respond to the roles and relationships that influence them, both positively and negatively. An analysis of the stories that TAs tell about critical incidents in their work provides an opportunity for a greater understanding of how the TA experience shapes the TA, both personally and professionally. Some of the primary questions addressed by this exploration include:

1. What incidents shape the TA experience, both positively and negatively?
2. How do TAs respond to and learn from these incidents?
3. What roles and relationships impact this experience?
4. What do these TAs learn about themselves in the process?
5. What do they learn about the academy?



### **Why Explore the Experiences of TAs?**

There are a number of compelling reasons to gain a better understanding of the TA experience. While some studies have examined the efficacy of TAs in the university context, little is known about how the experience is perceived by the teaching assistants themselves. Work as a TA is temporary and is seldom a career choice. As such, it is not the same experience as that of a new or beginner teacher who has chosen teaching as a vocation. Given that many TAs are on their way to doing other work, their experience of the teaching enterprise is transitory.

What the TAs experience in these relationships may impact what they come to believe about teaching and about the value of teaching in higher education. Staton and Darling (1998) completed a number of studies on the socialization of TAs both into the role of the TA and into TA culture related to the norms of a department within a particular institution. They found that teaching assistants tend to learn about teaching from peers rather than from professors. For doctoral students, the socialization of TAs can also mean socialization into the professoriate and, therefore, has ramifications for understanding the support needs of potential future faculty (Major, 2006; Sprague & Nyquist, 1989). This socialization may occur through formal mentoring (Boyle & Boice, 1998; Desjardins, 1993; Major & Dolly, 2003; Zachary, 2000) or informally through collaborative or peer relationships (Major & Dolly, 2003). Understanding these relationships and their impact on TAs can contribute to the scholarly literature on mentorship and faculty socialization into the academy. It can also assist those concerned with supervising the work of TAs or implementing professional development initiatives and mentoring opportunities.

The participants themselves potentially benefit from engaging in discussions related to their critical incidents as TAs. Research suggests that talking about one's teaching and sharing teaching stories can be extremely helpful to teachers (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995; Huberman, 1993; Merriam, 2002; Schön, 1993). Making meaning out of one's life is important to developing self-knowledge and identity (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Palmer, 1998). Sharing in a dialogue about TA issues allowed participants to revisit what had happened in their classrooms and gain insights into their pedagogical decision making. At the very least, the opportunity to share one's story with an empathetic listener can be cathartic:

Narrative allows us to enter emphatically into another's life and being – to join a living conversation. In this sense, it serves as a means of inclusion, inviting the reader, listener, writer, or teller as a companion along on another's journey. In the process we may find ourselves wiser, more receptive, more understanding, nurtured and sometimes even healed. (Baxter Magolda, 1999, pp. 40-41)

Also of importance is the knowledge and understanding needed by those who support or supervise TAs in their instructional roles. Typically, TAs are supervised in their instructional role by the faculty member who teaches the course. Problematic in this supervisory relationship is that frequently the faculty member has no training or institutional support in assuming the roles of manager, educational model, and mentor, all of which have been identified as important responsibilities in the supervisory relationship (Nyquist & Wulff, 1996). Moreover, some faculty members may not understand the support needs of TAs, or the diversity of skills and prior learning that TAs bring to the task. In the absence of training and support for faculty in this area, they tend to supervise

as they themselves were supervised (Denicolo, 2004; Nyquist & Wulff, 1996), which can be problematic if their own experience in graduate school was one of competition and survival. When a faculty member supervises both the research and instruction of a TA, roles potentially overlap or compete, particularly with respect to the time being spent on teaching or research activities. Complicating the TA-faculty relationship is that TAs might also find themselves serving “multiple masters,” in that the faculty member who supervises a student’s graduate work may well not be the one who supervises instruction. In this respect, it is important that faculty members themselves become familiar with the literature on TA support and development.

Educational developers and university administrators might also benefit from reading stories of the TA experience. As DeCew (2003) points out, many faculty and administrators see TAs as apprentices in the educational “guild” model, serving under “masters” who provide personal training on the job (Bellows, 2004; Nyquist et al., 1989; Prieto & Meyers, 2001). However, TAs at many institutions are now carrying out responsibilities within a unionized environment which can be quite different from the graduate student experiences of the faculty member supervising TA work. Differing institutional contexts and procedural expectations can lead to tensions between TAs, their faculty supervisors, and academic administrators. Experiencing such tensions may impact the willingness of TAs to serve the university within the “apprenticeship” model of teaching. A better understanding of how the TA role is experienced can contribute to the research on higher education.

Lastly, but of primary importance to this inquiry, is that TAs and graduate students can read both the critical incidents and “the tales” in this dissertation to come to

a deeper, hopefully resonant, and enriched understanding of their own experiences as TAs. The opportunity for resonance through reading stories of experience is what has motivated me to embark on this inquiry: as Merriam (2002) writes, “[b]ecause of the connection between narrative and identity, stories offer enormous potential as a mode of personal change. Sometimes that change comes from identifying with a powerful story that makes sense of a person’s experience in a new way” (p. 88). In reading the stories offered here, and the literature that frames the inquiry, TAs and those who support them might examine their practice with a renewed sense of curiosity and commitment.

### **Conceptual Frameworks**

I have drawn upon two conceptual frameworks in helping me position the experiences of the TAs in this exploration: narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Sameshima, 2007) and Eisner’s (1991) concepts of educational connoisseurship and educational criticism. Narrative inquiry provides a way to understand how contextual knowledge is further shaped by the stories we tell of our experiences. Although narrative is often considered a methodology, it is also a viewpoint, an orientation to the world which says that we come to understand how things work by virtue of the stories we believe and the stories we tell (Baldwin, 2005; Butler-Kisber, 2002; Connelly & Clandinin, 1995; Dunlop, 1999; Geelan, 2003; Sameshima, 2007). In discussing the educational possibilities of narrative inquiry, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state, “the educational importance of this line of work is that it brings theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experience as lived” (p. 3). Listening to stories of the TA experience in higher education helps us gain insight into the ways in which TAs develop an understanding of themselves and the teaching and learning context

of the institution in which they work. Educational connoisseurship (Eisner, 1991) enables me as writer to frame the stories in an accessible way. As someone who has heard a multitude of stories over the years, I bring echoes and resonances of many individuals to the stories articulated by a few. Educational connoisseurship invites me to take the bones of the story and dress them.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

There are four important ways in which narrative is used to construct knowledge about the teaching experience: self-understanding, fostered by the telling of one's story and in reading the stories of others (Geelan, 2003; Rosenwald & Ochsberg, 1992); reflection and instructional development (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995; Schön, 1983; Wulff, 1993); developing an understanding of the context and constraints in which teaching takes place (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Geelan, 2003); and valuing self and others' contributions (Frank, 2002). Rosenwald and Ochsberg state, "personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned" (p. 1). Frank (2002) tells us that stories depict the world as a narratable place; assigning narratability to something gives it value and helps us to understand how we should live our lives. He cites the example of Berube (1996) who tells stories about his son with Down's syndrome because he feels that for this son to be valued, his life must be just as narratable as his brother's: "Narratability means that events and lives are affirmed as being worth telling and thus worth living. Being narratable implies value, and attributes reality" (Frank, 2002, p. 5).

The act of articulating one's story invests our experience with a reality and a weight that authenticates the experience. In turn, this experience has the potential to be

integrated back into what we know about teaching and to affect our beliefs and our classroom practice (Geelan, 2003). I say potential because, in many instances, stories about teaching may be told and left in the air, without any explicit connection to our understanding of teaching or our behaviour in the classroom. In some instances, stories may not impact us for many months or years to come. At other times, their impact may be imperceptible in terms of behaviour but a shift takes place that allows us to be more confident, more intentional, or more committed in our interactions with colleagues and students (Geelan, 2003). Through reflection and conversation, however, we can come closer to knowing the meaning of the stories we tell about ourselves and our practice.

Narrative has the potential to teach us about context and constraints (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Geelan (2003) states that “[n]arrative methods in qualitative research live in the tension between the tales we live and the tales we tell” (p. 8). In a similar vein, Huberman (1993) argues that teachers tell secret, sacred, and cover stories. Secret stories are those we know about ourselves as teachers but are reluctant to share with others, sacred stories are those that enter into the mythology of teaching, and cover stories are those we tell the outside world. As Huberman writes in *The Lives of Teachers*:

Our best understanding of teacher knowledge is a narrative one. In this view of teachers’ knowledge, teachers know their lives in terms of stories. They live stories, tell stories of those lives, retell stories with changed possibilities, and relive the changed stories. In this narrative view of teachers’ knowledge, we mean more than teachers’ telling stories of specific children and events. We mean that their way of being in the classroom is storied: As teachers they are characters in their own stories of teaching, which they author. (p. 12)

Coming to understand the tensions inherent in our secret, sacred, and cover stories is important to understanding teaching experiences. Geelan (2003) argues,

[i]n research the telling of tales is a means of making abstract something about a concrete but complex situation – the lived tales of teachers and students in classrooms, cradled within the lived tales of administrators and governments and the whole community. (p. 8)

It is the telling of tales that brings to light some of the tensions faced by teachers in their classroom practice and in their relationships with those who affect their practice.

Ultimately, the goal of reflective practice is to come to a better understanding of what we do and why we do it. It is also to improve our practice. As a teacher, I am interested in how these TAs experienced their journey; as an educational developer, I am interested in how these TAs learned about teaching in order to support them, and their practice, more effectively; as a qualitative researcher, I am interested in how I can authentically portray their experiences in a way that enriches the issues and resonates with others.

### **Educational Connoisseurship and Educational Criticism**

The second framework that guides this exploration of the storied experiences of TAs is Elliot Eisner's (1991) concepts of educational connoisseurship and educational criticism as outlined in *The Enlightened Eye: Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice*. Each is explored here.

**Educational connoisseurship.** Eisner (1991) proposes that educational connoisseurship and educational criticism, based on a long tradition of criticism in the arts and humanities, are valid and helpful approaches for qualitative research in

education. Educational connoisseurship is, according to Eisner (1991), “the means through which we come to know the complexities, nuances and subtleties of aspects of the world in which we have a special interest” (p. 68). Like a connoisseur of wine, we use our senses to perceive qualities in situations. For example, we come to know that observing a lecture given by a new teacher is not the same as one delivered by a veteran. In analyzing these two lectures, we bring our knowledge of educational theory, of experience, and of lectures to bear in our judgment and we use our connoisseurship to guide our observations and our analysis of the phenomenon. Connoisseurship is essentially the art of appreciation, but Eisner (1991) distinguishes appreciation from liking:

To appreciate the qualities of a wine, a book or a school means to experience the qualities that constitute each and to understand something about them...nothing in connoisseurship as a form of appreciation requires that our judgments be positive. What is required (or desired) is that our experience be complex, subtle and informed. (p. 69)

This notion of educational connoisseurship provides the epistemic framework for the inquiry. It clearly has implications for the role of the researcher whose educational connoisseurship and experiences impact how the participants’ experiences are interpreted and understood. It is a helpful framework to position how our understanding, interpretation, and analysis of an experience are contextually bound. As the context changes, so too does our appreciation, our understanding, and our judgment. My own biography in this inquiry is necessarily part of the inquiry. Moreover, I do not need to apologize for its presence, but rather recognize and celebrate it.



**Educational criticism.** Just as the purpose of educational connoisseurship is to perceive qualities or nuance in educational settings, the purpose of educational criticism is to illuminate what others might not see. Eisner (1991), who aligns educational criticism with literary criticism, argues that the purpose of this kind of criticism is not to critique or find fault but rather to use language to persuade readers to see a new perspective or to resonate with a theme that had previously been hidden. Critics also use expressive language (metaphor, allusion, image) to move readers emotionally. It is this vein of criticism (i.e., the work carried out by critics of literature as well as critics of books, film, and art) that Eisner (1991) maintained can also work for qualitative research in education.

The four dimensions of *educational criticism* are: description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics. Description originates from the work of critics of visual arts or literature who count on perception to interpret for others. The aim is to describe an event or experience through rich language using common rhetorical devices of writers. Similarly, in phenomenological descriptions, researchers aim to describe a phenomenon or experience through perception and an evoking of the senses (van Manen, 1995). The second dimension of educational criticism is that of interpretation. As an example, Eisner (1991) delineates between a smirk and a smile; both can be described in a similar way but a smirk requires interpretation that is contextually bound. The third dimension, that of evaluation, is intrinsic to criticism because all evaluation is value-laden. One cannot simply describe or interpret without evaluating whether the phenomenon is good or bad or healthy, because even if we say we are not judging what we describe, our descriptions implicitly do so. The fourth dimension of educational criticism is *thematics* in which critics identify the “dominant features of the situation or person, those qualities of place,

person, or object that define or describe identity” (Eisner, 1991, p. 104). Thematics allows us to elucidate themes, groupings, categories, similarities, and differences in the experiences of our participants. In doing so, critics can provide “lessons to be learned,” stories that can be read and experienced by others. Together, these four dimensions of educational criticism offer possibilities with which to describe human experiences, to interpret these experiences, to assign value to them, and to identify the themes that potentially allow others to see themselves in the retelling. Educational criticism, used as a framework for positioning this inquiry, allows me to collect, analyze, and retell TA experiences in a way that not only acknowledges my own presence and influence in the work but, in fact, frames that influence as fundamentally intrinsic to the process.

In the 12 years since Eisner (1991) proposed educational connoisseurship and educational criticism as ways of knowing, many researchers have adopted increasingly creative and nontraditional methods for undertaking qualitative research. More about this is discussed in Chapter Three with respect to methodology, but it is offered here as a conceptual framework that guides not only the inquiry process but the findings as well.

*TA Tale: A Found Poem*

*(On Impostership)*

Their eyes look right through me.  
They talk to one another. They know I don't know.

I am teaching a theorist I have never even read, like the blind leading the blind.  
"My voice is just my voice. I freeze in groups. But when I am driving in the car I could be Einstein". (1) I heard that somewhere and it stuck. More than the readings.  
My thoughts are just my thoughts. I don't know any more what is mine.

An original contribution. Words come and go, fragments of ideas, flotsam and jetsam.  
No rigour. Rigor mortis.

I am perfectionist, a hard worker.  
I'll read him late into the night and prepare some notes. Maybe they won't know.  
He said he could teach a monkey to do that.(2)

There's a name for it, this feeling, you know, feeling like a fraud.  
They think you can do it; I think they made a mistake,  
Even though you are here and, so far, it's okay.  
Brookfield(3) said we should talk about it.

My family doesn't understand. You are a professor? No.  
Just a helper, an assistant in the course.  
But you prepare all night, you teach, you mark?  
Yes, but just a helper...

But, where are the findings?  
Here, in the poem.

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from "Finding Voice," (Butler-Kisber, 2002, p. 233) in which she shares the process of creating a found poem taken from participant narratives.

<sup>2</sup> References "I Could Teach a Monkey To Do That," the first TA Tale in this dissertation in which the narrator recalls her experience being humiliated by the doctor supervising her nursing practicum.

<sup>3</sup> References Stephen Brookfield's (1991) discussion of the imposter phenomenon.

## **CHAPTER TWO: OTHERS' STORIES**

Reading what others narrate about TAs made me more fully appreciate the considerable diversity in institutional culture around the employment of this demographic. Much of the literature on TAs focuses specifically on the training for faculty roles of graduate students, generally PhDs, who hope to gain a foothold in the academy. Yet, a considerable amount of TAing is done by graduate students for whom the Master's degree is the terminal degree. There are also a number of TAs who are employed solely as TAs, particularly in departments that do not yet have graduate programs and/or offer specialized programming. Some TAs are undergraduate students who support small group learning.

In this study, I attempt to maintain a focus on the experiences of the 5 TAs who participated, 4 of whom were graduate students undertaking a Master's degree and the 5th was a graduate of the program who continued to assist the department. Yet, since their stories may have resonance for others, it is important to review the existing literature on the TA experience, as well as TA development and training as a field of scholarship. In situating this inquiry, I am also drawing on the larger body of literature on understanding development which includes faculty development literature, reflective practice, adult education, and, in Chapter Three, narrative as a way of knowing.

To come to a situated understanding of this inquiry, this chapter explores the related literature in three distinct sections. First, I examine who and what a teaching assistant is, the various kinds of roles and relationships that a TA may engage in to carry out her/his instructional responsibilities, and the institutional contexts in which she/he works including a look at TA unionization and collective bargaining (which is either a

symptom of or contributing to a changing university). The second part of this review then explores the primary areas of research in the field of TA development, including descriptions of existing TA training and instructional programs and the literature on TA socialization. All of these provide a framework with which to understand the tensions and complexities of the culture from which these experiences are shaped. The last section draws upon the larger literature that informs this inquiry, namely mentorship, adult education, reflective practice, and a more focused exploration of the imposter phenomenon. Although literature specific to this inquiry is introduced in these three sections, I also draw liberally from related literature and theorists in an attempt to contextualize the issues as they are introduced, provide support and explanation, and hear other voices in the ensuing discussion.

### **Who and What is a Teaching Assistant?**

Teaching assistantships first began in the late 1800s in order to attract students to graduate studies (Hendrix, 1995). Originally, they were primarily financial awards. After World War II, however, TAs were expected to assist with grading and, over time, assumed instructional responsibilities. The literature points to varying and, at times, conflicting definitions of a TA. Staton and Darling (1998) state that “a TA is a graduate student and simultaneously a teacher” (p. 15). Teaching assistantships are often awarded automatically as part of a graduate studies program. However, not all TAs are graduate students. Some institutions that experience a shortage of graduate students (GTAs) turn to other pools of expertise to serve as TAs, such as undergraduates (UTAs), graduated students, or professionals in the community. As a paid position, such TAs are employees of the university and are deemed TAs whose contractual obligations are to assist with

instruction as determined by the professor or department (DeCew, 2003). Some of these TAs have completed their academic training and are professionals in their chosen occupation. Many are motivated by the opportunity to earn a few extra dollars while seeking full time employment or waiting to enter professional school; others enjoy the flexibility of academia and may or may not also pursue instructional contracts at the sessional level. Many simply enjoy the opportunity to maintain a connection with the university and to interact with students.

The employment of undergraduate students to perform TA roles and responsibilities is also part of many institutional cultures. The literature on undergraduate teaching assistants (UTAs) often refers to their involvement in curricular programs designed to offer one-to-one peer mentoring (Eby & Gilbert, 2000; McKeegan, 1998). Some researchers discuss the use of undergraduate students as TAs as pedagogically innovative, citing experiential learning as a major rationale for their involvement in the course (Dotterer, 2002; Eby & Gilbert, 2000; McKeegan, 1998). In these cases, the UTAs are students who receive course or experiential credit for their contributions and are not institutional employees. Yet, there are many Canadian and U.S. institutions that employ undergraduates to assist with instruction: These students are “employees” of the university with contractual obligations. In many cases, they are unionized, as are their graduate counterparts.

A definition of a TA is governed by the programmatic and curricular needs of individual institutions and can be undergraduate, graduate, or graduated students. Many assume responsibilities in a smaller section of a course, such as seminars, labs, or tutorials, held to augment lectures given by the professors. For the purposes of this

inquiry, a TA is defined as a student, graduate student, or a graduated student who “assists” with course delivery. Responsibilities range from facilitating discussions, assessing student presentations, demonstrating procedures, assisting with administrative responsibilities, and marking. TAs differ from sessional or part-time instructors in that they do not assume full or primary responsibility for a course.

### **Multiple Roles and Relationships**

Although there appear to be different institutional models for who serves as a TA in universities, it is apparent from the literature review that many TAs experience tensions as a result of balancing a number of roles and responsibilities. The most obvious balancing act, that of student and teacher, has implications for time management as TAs juggle the time commitments required of both. Like faculty who balance teaching and research responsibilities, and at times privilege one over the other, TAs must negotiate the tensions that emerge from being both a student and teacher. Staton and Darling (1998) maintain that the two components of teacher and student are distinct and potentially disparate in that “success in one role can detract from success in another” (p. 15). TAs also assume or are asked to fulfill other roles: Their TA position may require that they be mentors for at-risk students, course coordinators, course web developers, or they may be asked to serve on university committees as representatives of unions, alumni, or the “student voice.”

In addition to multiple roles, TAs must negotiate multiple relationships with a number of people across the institution. These multiple relationships vary from university to university, depending on institutional and departmental culture. For many undergraduate and Master’s level TAs, they must negotiate relationships with (a) a

professor(s) who teach(es) the course for which they TA, (b) the professor who serves as the thesis supervisor (who may or may not be the same as the course professor), (c) the students in their classes, (d) other TAs who are peers within the course, (e) other TAs who TA graduate students (i.e., a Master's level TA who has a doctoral student as a TA for a graduate course), (f) educational and/or TA developers, (g) administrative assistants, (h) collective bargaining agents, and (i) university administrators such as course coordinators and departmental chairs. Within these relationships, TAs may find themselves negotiating tensions and possibilities that arise from diverse and nontraditional types of interactions. For example:

1. A doctoral student who is a mature and experienced TA may work with a novice, inexperienced professor.
2. A Master's level student may TA a group of students with whom they socialize.
3. A doctoral student may TA for a Master's level class full of professional students (e.g., nurses or teachers) who bring to the learning a life experience quite distinct from that of the TA.

As an educational developer responsible for TA training, I have engaged in conversation with many TAs over the last 12 years and am continually amazed at the programmatic and disciplinary differences that contextualize the relationships that TAs must negotiate. The following multifaceted relationships have been informally identified by TAs who have participated with me in training programs related to their TA role.

### **TAs and Students**

The relationship between TAs and students is potentially complex given differences or similarities in age, gender, race, life experience, and disciplinary and/or



curricular knowledge. Age differences can be advantageous or disadvantageous to the TA. Sometimes older TAs cannot relate to the younger students and a perceived gap exists. At other times, older TAs may relate more to older students and this may be seen as favouritism by other students or an older TA may be invested with the power and expectations normally expected of the faculty member. The reverse is often also true. Younger TAs may be seen by mature students as inexperienced and, therefore, unable to offer proper guidance in the subject matter. Gender and race issues also provide a layer of complexity to the TA-student relationship where one or the other may be influenced by personal biases regarding perceived barriers or threats.

In other cases, TAs and students who are or have been "friends" throughout their program may suddenly find themselves in hierarchal positions. This is particularly the case in institutions where undergraduate students serve as TAs and senior students may be grading the seminar or tutorial participation of peers. However, even in graduate programs, many TAs may find that they are TAing students who have previously been student peers. In an informal discussion recently, a TA told me she had just discovered that someone who had moved into the student housing where she lived was a student in the intro language class she taught. Another TA said that he had been assigned to TA a class where three students were ex-girlfriends. Clearly, the path to potential ethical and other dilemmas can be part of the multiple relationships experienced by TAs.

Another potentially complex relationship is that between TAs and students in new professional programs (i.e., nurses) who may bring with them a wealth of practical expertise which is at odds with the theoretical understanding of the TA. At another TA session, one individual indicated that she was the TA for a nursing course and was also a

senior student in the department; however, she found it extremely difficult to be the “subject expert”, as clearly the students (all of whom were nurses returning to school) were far more experienced than she. In other cases, TAs are unsure of how their role may differ from that of the faculty member and feel the weight of their lack of both life experience and subject experience.

### **TAs and Faculty Members**

This inquiry also explores the relationships between TAs and faculty members. Some TAs must negotiate pedagogical and epistemological differences between their own thesis supervisor and the faculty member who instructs the course for which they TA. In some instances, TAs work with multiple professors who assume responsibility for different sections of the same course. TAs who work with sessional faculty may know more about the institution than the faculty member and, in some instances, the TA may be more experienced in teaching than a newly hired junior faculty member or instructor. Each of these relationships provides the TA with opportunities for reflection and growth.

### **TAs and TAs**

A third set of relationships revolves around TAs as peers. Some work together in the same course or program and either formally or informally engage in conversations about teaching. In some instances, TAs may find that a student in one class is their own TA in another: In my own discussions with undergraduate TAs, one student reported that her peer was her TA for one course, she was his TA for another, and they were students together in a third. TAs who TA other TAs may find themselves in an interesting ethical position when they each disagree with the other’s instructional approaches.

### **TAs and Administrators**

TAs must also negotiate their way through professional relationships with course coordinators (who may be senior TAs or staff members), departmental chairs, departmental administrative assistants, and academic support units such as centres for teaching and learning, library services, student support services, and technology services. At times, the stated policies of one unit may complement or contradict recommended practice in another. For example, in some departments, the chair or course professor may caution TAs against soliciting any form of mid-term feedback from students because of marking responsibilities. Yet, centralized TA workshops on evaluation likely recommend that TAs solicit feedback for the purposes of instructional development.

### **Academic Unionization**

A chief source of tension in TA relationships may well be that created by the disconnect between perceptions of TAs as employees of the institution versus TAs as apprentices to the educational guild (Decew, 2003; Johnson, 2003; Luppicini, 2006; Rhoades & Rhoades, 2002). The notion of graduate students as apprentices to faculty is a long-standing one in academe and harks back to a time when students were not working part-time jobs, raising families, and amassing huge debt loads as a result of their education. Johnson argues that increasing corporatization of the university means that full-time tenured faculty positions are being replaced by adjunct and graduate student workers, largely as an economic measure to reduce labour costs. Given the vast disparity in the type of work undertaken by graduate students, the apprenticeship argument becomes shallow:

An apprentice would teach in or at least close to her field of expertise; graduate teachers are used to meet the demands of undergraduate enrollment. They thus teach far from their fields, and even outside of their disciplines. They teach heavily subscribed courses like history surveys and basic language sections, even though their dissertations (and thus their supposed future job prospects) are far likelier to concern narrow periods and specific bodies of literature. ...most graduate teachers do the same basic work, especially the grading and basic language instruction most unappealing to senior faculty, over and over and over. Most important, the rhetoric of apprenticeship begs the question of why so much teaching is done by graduate students. The simple answer is that they are an easy source of cheap, flexible, and highly motivated teaching labor. (Johnson, 2003, p. 64)

University administrators are, quite naturally, reluctant to let go of the claim that graduate student teaching is an essential part of the graduate school experience. A review of union grievances against university administrations suggests that how TA work is perceived depends very much on who is doing the perceiving. *The Policy Statement on the Employment Status of Graduate Students* from the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT, 2004) states that it views TAs as employees of the university, subject to the same benefits, rights, and responsibilities as other employees, but also sees their increasing deployment as cheap labour in the face of increasing student enrollment and diminishing faculty jobs as problematic:

CAUT is concerned that, as faculty-student ratios continue to climb, graduate student teachers will be used increasingly to staff courses and ongoing teaching

needs will be met with cheaper, more casual, and more vulnerable positions. To ensure that this does not happen, collective agreements must include language to ensure that: 1. All university teaching is employment. (para. 2-3)

A number of institutions that have attempted to prevent unionization of graduate students by arguing that being a TA is automatically part of graduate student work have been unsuccessful in their claims. In a groundbreaking decision in 2000, a U.S. National Labour Relations Board ruled against New York University in its fight against its graduate student union, stating:

Student work is largely educational, acknowledging that even if TAs do gain educational benefit from their teaching and research, their work is not generally a requirement for gaining an advanced degree, nor is it part of the graduate student curriculum in most departments. (Decew, 2003, p. 92).

However, the Labour Board overturned its decision in 2004, deciding that under federal labour law, private universities do not have to allow its members to form unions (Smallwood, 2005). Although it seemed that private universities were safeguarded from unionization, more recently (October 2010), the U.S. Board has revisited its earlier stance and has ruled that unionization efforts at New York University deserve a full hearing:

The union fight at NYU has plenty of history behind it. In 2002, when the Clinton administration's NLRB ruling still governed the question, NYU became the first (and, to date, only) private university to recognize a grad student union. The university negotiated a contract with the UAW unit at the university. In 2005, after the 2004 ruling took away grad students' right to a union, NYU announced that it would not negotiate a new contract with the UAW and that it believed the

union relationship had not been productive for the university. The union went on strike in November of that year, hoping to force the university to recognize the union -- even without NLRB requiring that it do so. The strike was highly visible at the beginning, but gradually lost force and officially ended in September 2006, without NYU recognizing the union. (Jaschik, 2010, para 6)

Regardless of what happens in this latest hearing, graduate student/TA unionization is an increasing trend in North American universities (Wickens, 2008). According to Rhoades and Rhoads (2002), American graduate student unions increased from 5 in 1990 to 23 by the year 2000, with at least 19 others initiating unionization. As mentioned above, private colleges in the United States are not subject to unionization at the present time, leaving only publically funded institutions able to form unions.

In Canada, faculty and graduate student unionization is more prevalent which Luppicini (2006) suggests is largely owing to the fact that most Canadian institutions are publically funded. Approximately 41% of Canadian graduate students are unionized, with the heaviest concentrations in British Columbia and Ontario (Zinni, Singh, & MacLennan, 2005). In Canada, unionization began in the 70s with a ruling by the Ontario Labour Relations Board that stipulated that TAs were considered employees of the university:

[t]eaching assistants were employees because the work was of direct and immediate benefit to the employer" (*Graduate Assistants' Association v. York University*, 1975). Further, the research and teaching work performed by the graduate students is not considered an integral aspect of their academic programs. (Zinni et al., 2005, p. 148).

In the early days of unionization in Canada, the chief issues being negotiated were around equitable wages and hours of work. The apprenticeship model of graduate education meant that there were huge discrepancies in pay and work conditions, not only between universities but also between departments in the same institution:

In 1973, some TAs at the University of Toronto were paid an annual minimum of \$400 yearly for four hours a week, while the maximum was \$2,400 in the department of political economy. There were 444 pay categories for graduate students (McCracken, 1973). Rates of pay varied from department to department. Some students were paid by the hour or by the marked paper. Students could be fired without cause and had no avenue for appeal. The first collective agreement at University of Toronto reduced 444 pay categories to 3. (Zinni et al., 2005, p. 160)

For the next 30 years, graduate student unions saw greater equity in terms of workload and pay, but the allocation of teaching assignments still seemed murky.

Luppici (2006) examined graduate student perspectives on unionization in one North American university that was considering forming a union. His study, along with a review of relevant literature, suggests that graduate students perceive the advertising and awarding of teaching appointments as being problematic and, as a result, hope that unionization can assist with systematizing their allocation. More recent efforts to unionize have been motivated by rising tuition and a lack of opportunity in the job market for TAs post graduation (Zinni et al., 2005). Given that conducting work as a TA is not a career per se, nor a requirement of an advanced degree, the need to make ends meet while completing studies remains an ongoing tension.

## **TA Training and Preparation**

Much of the literature on TAs revolves around training and support for either current or future roles. Nyquist et al. (1989) reviewed the trends in TA training from the 1940s to the late 1980s in preparation for their seminal work *Teaching Assistant Training in the 1990s*. They found that despite calls for better preparation of TAs to prepare them for their teaching role in the late 30s, little had changed in 40 years.

Abbott et al. (1989) cited the literature review completed by Carroll (1980) and by Levinson-Rose and Menges (1981) in their examination of TA development prior to 1980. They then reviewed the work that had been accomplished during the 80s to provide a comprehensive account of the developments that had emerged in response to Carroll's call for more effort assessing the effects of training programs for TAs rather than descriptions of innovative programs.

### **Types of Training**

Abbott et al. (1989) identified the research on TAs from 1980 to 1989, focusing on studies that included systematic evaluation of TA needs, performance, and/or description of programs. Schönwetter, Taylor, Ellis, and Koop (2008), in a more recent inquiry, reviewed the graduate credit courses on teaching and learning offered at 155 North American universities between 2002 and 2004, looking for course trends. Through an examination of each course outline, they explored the stated goals and outcomes of each course, the teaching methods, the texts and readings used, the prevalent content areas, and the assessment strategies. The most prevalent content areas in teaching and learning courses for graduate student TAs included (a) curriculum development and course design, (b) evaluation and assessment, (c) teaching strategies, and (d) the use of



technology. Of the 98 universities in Canada offering graduate programming, only 21 offered these types of courses (Schönwetter et al., 2008) all of which were doctoral institutions. This is a significant national increase since Piccinin and Picard (1994) identified six pedagogical courses in existence in 1994. However, it should be noted that many institutions offer other types of training for TAs and graduate students such as the 3-day Instructional Skills Workshop, topic-based workshops, orientations, and departmental training.

In a separate study, Taylor et al. (2008) examined the perceived effectiveness on teaching of the TAs' involvement in such programs. Like the studies identified by Abbott et al. (1989), Taylor et al. reported that TAs self-identified greater preparation for instructional responsibilities as a result of involvement in their professional development programs. They also attempted to assess participants' sense of the importance of teaching and their sense of "perceived control" as instructors. Not surprisingly, participants rated teaching as important given that they had been committed to taking the professional development programs, but the study also revealed that some participants felt less in control than before they took the certificate program. The researchers suggest this might be accounted for by participants having developed a greater sense of the complexity of teaching as a result of the professional development program versus their initial assumptions.

Initial research on TA training by Nyquist et al. (1989) had identified a strong rationale for why TAs should be prepared for their instructional responsibilities. They suggested that TAs needed "new ways of teaching new types of students" for the following reasons:

1. Knowledge acquisition had accelerated in recent decades requiring TAs to be familiar with ways of finding and processing information and ways to teach information literacy skills to their students.
  2. TAs needed to be increasingly aware of the needs of a diverse student population, including variations in cultures, age, gender and sexual orientation.
  3. TAs were required to be conversant with the different ways students learn in order to be inclusive of all types of learners.
  4. Increasing expectations of TAs around pre-doctoral scholarly publications placed a strain on their instructional roles.
  5. A number of national bodies had called for a better education for undergraduates, a great deal of which was delivered by teaching assistants.
- (pp. 9-10)

Although it has been over 2 decades since Nyquist et al. made these recommendations, they remain as compelling today. Changes in the type of students, the emergence of new digital technologies, and knowledge about how students best learn continue to impact TA effectiveness and are core components of ongoing preparation programs.

Major (2006), in her interviews with 16 faculty members at a college of education in the United States, identified four sources of training or preparation in graduate school that could assist in readying graduate students for academic tasks. For teaching, these included: (a) formal preparation, such as taking courses on teaching; (b) vicarious experiences, such as mentoring, talking with peers, and observing master teachers; (c) mastery experiences including team teaching, and taking sole responsibility for courses

they will likely teach; and (d) formal feedback in terms of student and peer evaluation, being observed teaching and compiling portfolios. All of these experiences can assist in preparing students for their future roles. The issue, however, becomes one of where students and their faculty supervisors choose to devote their energies and, by extension, where the university chooses to allocate its resources.

One aspect of the research literature on the preparation of TAs for their instructional role examines training programs that specifically teach or employ an instructional design model. This is of interest to this inquiry, given that my participants were selected from those who had completed the Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW), a program of instructional development that includes an instructional design model. Some studies indicate that acquainting TAs with a model of instructional design appears to be an effective form of professional development. Hardré and Chen (2006), in their study of 23 TAs who received an instructional design toolkit, reported that an instructional design model was valuable and useful for TAs in improving overall motivation and perceived competence for students in their classes. What was interesting, however, was a trend that suggested that the most productive and fertile form of professional development for TAs was a “combination of an optimistic and broad self perception of purpose and an environment that included support of creativity and innovation” (p. 51). Hardré and Chen suggest that some TAs feel constrained by the structure imposed on them by their supervisors and are reluctant to innovate or take risks in their instructional responsibilities. If they felt their supervisors would not approve of or support teaching innovation, TAs were likely to resist implementing an instructional design model into their teaching. Other TAs may have had freedom to innovate but felt they lacked

guidance or support in doing so, suggesting that TAs may be creative and student-centered in their teaching if their professional development is supported and valued by those for whom they work.

### **Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW)**

Although the Instructional Skills Workshop is over 30 years old, research literature on this specific program is sparse. However, describing its origins and structure can be helpful here in that the participants in this inquiry have all taken the ISW and are familiar with its content and philosophy. The ISW is a program of professional development in higher education teaching designed to strengthen instructors' skills through intensive and practical exercises in learner-centred teaching (Morrison, 1995; Wilbee, 1997). Developed in the late '70s in British Columbia, the program was created as an experiential learning opportunity to foster reflection and improvement of teaching skills through learner feedback. Mixing small and large group interaction, the workshop engages participants in: (a) planning and delivering "mini-lessons", (b) developing participatory instructional techniques, (c) listening actively, (d) generating effective feedback, and (e) learning and teaching collaboratively.

Through a 3- or 4-day workshop, facilitators provide constructive feedback, encouraging participants to experiment and attempt new methods not normally used in their discipline or practice. Videotape/DVD recordings are used to provide an individualized record of progress and participants are actively engaged in the feedback process. A primary goal of the ISW is to build skills and confidence, and to enable participants to learn from and foster partnerships with colleagues from other disciplines or backgrounds (ISW International Advisory Committee, 2006).

During the workshop period, each participant conducts a 10-minute mini-lesson each day (three total) in a small group of no more than five people receiving oral, written, and video feedback on her/his performance. The facilitators spend a considerable amount of time establishing a safe learning environment for all participants through team building, group exercises, and icebreakers. Participants are sent a letter in advance of the workshop outlining the “Six Elements of a Mini-Lesson” that follows a lesson planning model arising from the literature on instructional design and delivery. Participants may choose any topic that appeals to them but are encouraged to teach something not related to their disciplines so that the group can focus on the ISW process rather than the content of the lesson.

Each teaching/feedback cycle is 40 minutes long, consisting of: (a) a 10-minute set up period, (b) a 10-minute instructional period, (c) 7 minutes of written feedback by the group while the participant and facilitator debrief, and (d) a 13-minute group feedback process. The instructional cycles are interspersed with large group discussion (if more than one group is running simultaneously) on teaching-related questions such as student motivation, facilitating groups, assessment issues, teaching/learning styles, and other topics identified by the group. On Day 2 and 3 of the workshop, each person again presents a 10-minute mini-lesson prepared the evening before.

Two fundamental contributions to the development of the instructional skills workshop model originate from the research and literature on reflective practice (Brookfield, 1990; Schön, 1983; van Manen, 1995) and Kolb’s (1984) work on the experiential learning cycle. Kolb maintained that learning is a process grounded in experience: “The experiential learning model pursues a framework for examining and

strengthening the critical linkages among education, work and personal development” (p. 4). In the experiential learning model, individuals follow a cycle of learning development according to four learning stages: (a) concrete experience (learners involve themselves fully in new experiences, (b) reflective observation (the learners reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives), (c) abstract conceptualization (learners create concepts to integrate their observations into meaningful theories), and (d) active experimentation (learners use these theories to make decisions and solve problems). In the ISW program, participants are encouraged to develop teaching that is experiential in nature and that takes into account the diversity of learning preferences that learners bring to the task. The ISW is designed to encourage reflective practice and to assist participants in developing their ability to provide effective feedback to their learners as well as to instructors. A main underlying philosophy of the workshop is its emphasis on building community that can be utilized in both the classroom and in the institution (ISW International Advisory Committee, 2006).

Currently, the ISW is being offered throughout British Columbia and in many colleges and some universities throughout the rest of Canada and the United States. In Ontario, it has been offered at four universities and a number of community colleges. While there are few empirical studies of its impact, there is considerable anecdotal evidence as to its strength as a program that assists with personal as well as instructional development. Morrison (1995) interviewed faculty and TAs who had participated in the ISW from two community colleges and one research university. The participants reported increased self-confidence as instructors and improved teaching skills, particularly lesson planning, use of participatory learning techniques, knowledge of learning styles, and

development of one's own teaching style. Faculty also reported that they felt renewed by participation in the ISW, they had developed ongoing collegial relations with others who had participated, and they were more likely to engage in ongoing instructional inquiry that included reflection on teaching, gathering student feedback, and experimenting with teaching strategies (Morrison, 1995).

Other literature on TA training describes a number of types of programming available for TAs, depending on the size of the institution and the number of graduate programs. In North America, almost every institution now offers some type of programming for TAs ranging from workshops and orientations to credit courses for graduate students on course design and delivery (Bellows, 2008; Lewis, 1991; Nyquist et al., 1989; Schönwetter et al., 2008; Weimer, Svinicki, & Bauer, 1989). In the United States, there has been a significant push for the preparation for academic responsibilities for PhD students, and many institutions offer the Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) program which works with doctoral students to better prepare them for academic roles (Border, 2008; Gaff, 2002a).

### **TA Socialization**

This next section examines literature that provides context with respect to the larger sociocultural influences that impact TAs. This includes discussions on mentoring and supervision, adult education, reflective practice, and the imposter phenomenon.

### **Mentoring and Supervision**

Almost all the literature that incorporates recommendations for practice for TAs cites the need for more formal and informal mentorship opportunities. The following section examines the literature on mentorship with a view to exploring the ways in which

TAs serve as mentors to students and ways in which they themselves could be better mentored to prepare and support them in their instructional responsibilities.

The term “mentor” is loosely defined in that it can incorporate a number of roles or identities for those who do the mentoring and those who are mentored. Zelditch (1990) described five mentor roles that faculty members potentially fulfill for graduate students: (a) Advisors, who have career experience and share their knowledge with graduate students; (b) Supporters, who give emotional and moral encouragement; (c) Masters, who serve as employers to graduate student “apprentices”; (d) Sponsors, who act as sources of information and opportunities; and (e) Models of identity, who serve as academic role models (p. 11).

McGinn and Frake (2006) interviewed recipients of the Canadian Society for Studies in Education (CSSE) mentorship award and their supporters and noted that “no single definition can capture the range of activities and relationships” and that, in conclusion, “mentorship is a composition of influential relationships” (p. 3). In their study, participants used relational key words in describing mentorship such as “personal connections, support, respect, encouragement and motivation” (p. 3).

Often, however, the mentorship relationship can sour during the time a graduate TA and faculty supervisor are together. Issues of supervision, time for advising and feedback, abuse of power in the supervisory process, and other factors serve to create a poisoned environment between the supervising professor and the graduate TA. In a study by Nyquist et al. (1999), 99 graduate students from three U.S. institutions were interviewed over a protracted period. Four years later, 68 participants remained in the study. All expected to hold a TAship at some point during their time in the program. At a



mid-point in the study, participants were asked to draw pictures of their graduate student experience. As the researchers noted: “whatever we remembered from our own experiences, whatever we thought we knew then was wrong with the system, we were not prepared for the threatening cliffs, precipices, chasms, impossible passages and the like revealed in their drawings” (p. 1). Many GTAs drew representations of the graduate supervisor as obstacles in their academic journey and, rather than being mentored, many reported feeling isolated and without support:

Of more concern to us was the absence in most of the pictures of safety nets, guides, ropes, pitons or other means of assistance. The majority of students see themselves as alone, facing down the odds and slaying the dragons along the path by themselves. These trials are perceived by some students as unnecessarily difficult, unproductive and “simply not worth it.” (p. 3)

Mentorship from professors of TAs presumably allows TAs to be socialized into the discipline and the pedagogy of the discipline. Staton and Darling (1998) completed a number of studies on the socialization of TAs into both the role of TA and into the culture of a TA (the norms of a department within a particular institution) and found that TAs tend to learn about teaching from peers rather than professors. For many TAs, it is less intimidating to discuss teaching challenges with peers than professors (Dolly, 1998) unless a successful mentorship relationship has been established (Boyle & Boice, 1998; Desjardins, 1993; Dolly, 1998; Zachary, 2000).

Also of note is that faculty members themselves are in need of mentoring and support. Many faculty members were TAs themselves during their graduate school experience. How they were trained for their academic responsibilities may become their

only source of knowledge about how to mentor or support the TAs they supervise. In the absence of stated policies and procedures about supervision, or in the absence of institutional supports for faculty around supervision and mentoring, many faculty members interact with TAs and graduate students in the same way they were treated (Austin, 2002; Denicolo, 2004; Staton & Darling, 1998). As Denicolo writes in discussing supervising responsibilities in the UK model of graduate education, “The training and support of supervisors has historically been disregarded...the assumption was that the possession of a research degree or equivalent research experience should prove adequate preparation for the task of supervising others in the field” (p. 12). Over years of supervisory practice, this results in a social and cultural reproduction that characterizes the academy as an archaic institution loathe to change.

### **Adult Education**

Knowles (1992) writes, “in any situation in which adults’ experience is ignored or devalued, they perceive this as not rejecting just their experience, but rejecting them as persons” (p. 58). It seems prudent to include a review of pertinent literature on adult education in an inquiry that explores feelings arising from the critical incidents that shaped TA experience. Adult education is a broad field that encompasses many epistemologies and ideologies. It is different from the literature of higher education with its focus on student learning, pedagogical development, faculty development, and scholarship of teaching. Adult education distinguishes itself as being concerned with a focus on individual experience as integral to the development of understanding (Brookfield, 1990; Clark, 2001; Jarvis, 1987; Knowles, 1992; Kolb, 1984; Lindeman, 1961), a recognition of diversity of learning approaches and perspectives (Cranton, 1994;

Kolb, 1984); the social context of learning (Jarvis, 1987; Knowles, 1992; Lindeman, 1961; Noddings, 2005), and an exploration of reflection as a means of personal growth (Brookfield, 1995; Kompf & Bond, 2001; Schön, 1983; van Manen, 1995). Adult education allows us to situate this inquiry with respect to the social context of the participants themselves, all mature learners for whom the TAsip was an opportunity for personal as well as academic growth. And although the students in their classes are also deemed adults, the focus here is how the literature informs our understanding of the concerns and values of the TAs themselves as mature adults in a learning context.

Mature TAs, whether Masters or PhD students, or nonstudents who assist with instruction, are for the most part very different than the students who arrive in first year. They have been successful in their studies, they have a commitment to either further study or to teaching at the university level, and many may have begun to question the nature of learning and to acknowledge the limits of their knowledge (Baxter Magolda, 1999). Although younger students, and certainly many young graduate students, focus on completing their education in order to secure career prospects, mature learners, such as the TAs in this inquiry, may be more inclined to do what they do based on a desire to make a difference in the world and to seek meaning from their teaching and learning experiences.

The desire to make a difference in the world as a chief characteristic of adult learning is suggested in Lindeman's (1961) treatise on adult education. As an early theorist on adult education, Lindeman asserts that what makes adult learners different from younger students is, among other motivations, a need for purpose: "We have, indeed, become weary of being counted. We want to count for something" (p. 38).

Adults' desire to make a difference in the work they do is also supported by Brookfield (1990, 1995, 2005), Jarvis (1987), Palmer (1998), and others who write about the transformative power of learning (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 1991).

The drive to make a difference in our world is also related to Noddings' (2005) notion of the ethic of care. Although Noddings writes about care with respect to the moral education of children, she also notes that care in adulthood means that "we remain at least partly responsible for the moral development of each person we encounter" (p. 299). The ethic of care is relational. As adults we learn to care by drawing upon an idea of care as experienced in childhood, when we were looked after by others. Learning to care develops from relational acts. As Noddings describes it, "how I treat you may bring out the best or worst in you. How you behave may provide a model for me to grow and become better than I am" (p. 299). Integral to developing ethical caring is reflection and self-understanding. This has implications for adult learners and adult educators for whom a sense of purpose and personal meaning in learning is important.

Brookfield (2006), Jarvis (1987), and Knowles (1992), among others, also describe the importance of the relational in adult learning. Tennant (1991), in his discussion on establishing an adult teacher-student relationship, cites Knowles' (1984) emphasis on creating an appropriate psychological climate for learning in adult education settings: "This climate should be characterized by mutual respect, collaborativeness, mutual trust, supportiveness, openness, authenticity, and humanness" (p. 202).

The notion that students and teachers are mutual partners in the learning enterprise is a key feature of adult education, though one that is criticized by Tenant for being naïve in its humanistic emphasis on "attitudinal precepts" (i.e., those principles of

care, support and mutuality that characterize adult learning). Brookfield (2005), while supporting mutual trust and responsiveness between teachers and learners, addresses this charge of naïvety by offering critical theory as a way to understand adult learning, deconstructing the power discrepancies that exist in all teaching and learning contexts and making them explicit: “A critical theory of adult learning must focus on understanding how adults learn to challenge ideology, contest hegemony, unmask power, overcome alienation, learn liberation, reclaim reason, and practice democracy” (p. xii). In examining the ways in which adults unmask power, Brookfield (2005) argues that they learn about their own power through sharing ideas, strategies, knowledge, successes, and failures; secondly, adults learn how to “face down and subvert power structures” (p. 48) through collective organization and democratic processes. By learning to exercise both individual and collective power, adults learn about their own agency.

This is relevant to this inquiry on TAs. As they develop a greater understanding of the impact of their own power in the classroom as well as the power structures that control their teaching and learning experiences, TAs are better able to appreciate the complexity of the teaching and learning enterprise and the institutional contexts and constraints in which they work.

### **Reflective Practice**

The literature on reflective practice also informs this study as the research inquiry into the experiences of the TAs triggers significant reflection on past events (Brookfield, 1995; Schön, 1983; van Manen, 1995). As Brookfield writes, “our practice is informed by our implicit and informal theories about the processes and relationships of teaching” (p. 185). Reflective practice is a fundamental activity associated with adult development,

particularly in professions such as teaching. Schön maintains that practitioners who reflect on their practice may do so in situ in what he has called reflection-in-action. In this respect, reflection is triggered as a result of encountering a surprise or something different than from what we might expect:

Much reflection-in-action hinges on the experience of surprise. When intuitive spontaneous performance yields nothing more than the results expected for it, then we tend not to think about it. But when intuitive performance leads to surprises, pleasing and promising or unwanted, we may respond by reflection-in-action. (p. 56)

Similarly, Brookfield (1986) has identified that learning can occur when we are subject to unsettling or disturbing experiences that trigger reflection. Identifying critical incidents in one's teaching, such as those identified by the TAs in this inquiry, can then be catalysts for reflection and growth.

It is also important to note that although reflective practice has the potential to transform our understanding of our practice, insights into who we are as teachers and how we teach do not necessarily lead to greater experience or confidence. Jackson (1992), in defining various practical and institutional ways in which to assist teachers with their professional development, outlined what he ultimately called the "fourth way," namely, the intangible and unknown processes by which teachers come to a changed understanding of who they are and how they affect or influence those in their care. This process, according to Jackson, is akin to when "our vision is transformed in some fundamental way" (p. 66) and we "might come to a deeper, broader and richer understanding of what we do" (p. 67). Its initial effect may not be an improvement in

practice. In fact, such discovery and insight may make teachers reexamine themselves, making them feel worse as teachers, more doubt-ridden, saddened, or puzzled: “we might possibly develop a more hesitant manner, a kind of pedagogical stammer, as a result of our reflection and our newly won insight” (Jackson, 1992, p. 67). Such insights evolve as a result of deep reflection on one’s practice and as a result of meaningful dialogue with others who share the joys and discomforts of teaching (Kraft, 2002).

### **Imposter Phenomenon**

A review of literature on impostership is also warranted in a study on TAs given that they are juggling multiple, and sometimes competing, roles as students, teachers, and employees of the institution, all of which potentially foster role ambiguity and a struggle with self-efficacy. The term “imposter phenomenon” was first coined in the late 70s by Clance and Imes (1978) in their work on women who suffered from feelings of inadequacy despite evidence that they were, indeed, successful. Imes and Clance (1984) identified the imposter phenomenon as “an internal experience of phoniness” amongst people who are “highly motivated to achieve and can often push through the fears and self-doubts to produce superior work, get promotions, attain advanced degrees, and so on” (p. 69). Although their work was initially focused on women, other studies determined that men experience imposter phenomenon to the same degree as women (Langford & Clance, 1993). Originally rooted in psychology research, the phenomenon began to be discussed as prevalent in higher education when it became apparent that successful scholars, as well as graduate and undergraduate students, were experiencing feelings of incompetence and fears of “being found out” (Brookfield, 1991; Harvey & Katz, 1984; Turman, 2001; Zorn, 2005). Graduate students who are still in transition

from student to more permanent roles can suffer feelings of impostership in ways that prevent them from successfully moving forward. They fear being found out making mistakes, and have difficulty taking credit for their work.

Zorn (2005) proposes that, although the imposter phenomenon originated in psychology as a syndrome requiring treatment in psychotherapy, it is now fostered by the social conditions and culture of higher education:

Rather than a psychological trait, I understand the imposter phenomenon as a cultural trait of higher education – a shared, learned behaviour common to high achievers. The psychological model focuses on self conceptions and emphasizes individualism, thereby failing to acknowledge the role of culture and institutional structure of the university in fostering imposter feelings in graduate students and faculty. (p. 2)

As a cultural construct, the imposter phenomenon appears to flourish in academe. Zorn attributes its pervasiveness to cultural attributes of academia that are well known: “the valuing of product over process, scholarly isolation, aggressive competitiveness, lack of mentoring, and ‘disciplinary nationalism’ (p. 2). Her suggestions for reform include collaborative teaching, mentoring, and establishing communities of practice. However, many scholars have made similar suggestions for educational reform without significant results. More research is clearly needed in this area to examine the cultural impacts of the institution and ways to mitigate this phenomenon in graduate students.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

The research into the TA experience tends to be either aimed at improving classroom practice or summarizes advances and trends in TA training and professional



development. Moreover, studies of TA roles and responsibilities and TA preparation tend to focus on doctoral candidates since the TAship at the doctoral level in larger research universities is the most prevalent model. As a result, many researchers are interested in examining mechanisms for supporting doctoral students in preparing them for the academy (Austin, 2002; D'Andrea, 1996; Davis & Kring, 2001; Gaff, 2002a; Gibbs, Jenkins, & Smith, 1993; Nyquist et al., 1989; Prieto & Meyers, 2001; Rice et al., 2000; Taylor et al., 2008; Tice, Gaff, & Pruitt-Logan, 1998). However, many graduate students who serve as TAs never go on to become members of the academy (Bellows, 2004; Golde, 2006). This is not only true at the doctoral level but many Master's students leave university to enter the work force. Research, however, into the experiences of Master's level students as TAs has yet to receive the level of interest and attention similar to the doctoral level.

Another identified gap concerns the experiences of undergraduate TAs who potentially negotiate a different set of challenges in simultaneously being students and teachers. Issues of power, of declaring conflicts of interest, of student confidentiality, of access to student grades, and of peer mentoring are all experienced by the graduate student who supervises undergraduate work but are intensified and ethically more complex in undergraduate TA relationships. Critics of the undergraduate TA experience cite these concerns as the rationale for not employing undergraduates in the TA role. However, the TA experience for undergraduates can be one of the most significant learning experiences of a student's academic career. Students often learn more when they teach (which is not atypical in instructional settings). Undergraduate students who assist with instruction develop a number of essential skills including: (a) critical thinking, (b)

problem solving, (c) communication and group interaction skills, (d) administrative ability, and (e) a greater understanding of curricular issues (Eby & Gilbert, 2000; McKeegan, 1998; Mendenhall & Burr, 1983). Swartz (1996) also discusses how the undergraduate TA experience creates passion for the discipline, and eases the transition to graduate school. Greater understanding regarding the ways in which the undergraduate TA experience assists with the development of the “teacher as learner” (Wulff, 1993) can help those who need to make informed decisions about who can appropriately assist with instruction and how.

### **Summary**

A review of the literature suggests that while some (but not enough) research has been conducted on TA development and TA training, more research needs to examine the complexity of teaching and learning (Brookfield, 1990; Palmer, 1998; Weimer, 1993; Wulff & Austin, 2004), the multiple factors affecting TAs as they negotiate their way through academic life, and how the convergence of these factors may affect the TA experience (Nyquist et al., 1989). Abbott et al.’s (1989) review of the TA training literature to 1989 reported that “the complexity of the teaching/learning act must be considered if TAs are to be appropriately prepared for their instructional assignments” (p. 120). Their review also revealed that there were “few case studies that have employed modern qualitative methods” (p. 120).

In the last decade, literature has revolved around defining the field of TA development as an emerging scholarship. There has been an increased emphasis and call for empirical measures of effectiveness in teaching as well as an increased focus on measuring the impact of TA programming and preparation for instructional roles. The

literature has also suggested that a broadening of definition from “TAs” to “graduate and professional students” (Border, 2008) would better reflect the academic, professional, and career aspirations of graduate students as they move forward in academe. Many are destined to leave academia to work in industry rather than the academy, and, as a result, require support and training in areas such as career preparation, leadership, diversity, team working, and communication as well as teaching and research responsibilities (Bellows, 2008; Denicolo, 2004). To reflect this change, the only journal devoted to TAs, *The Journal of Graduate Teaching Assistant Development*, was renamed in 2008 to *Studies in Graduate and Professional Student Development*.

What remains missing from the literature on the TA experience are the voices of the TAs themselves. Although there have been TA-authored essays on the graduate school experience (Casanave & Li, 2008) or the challenges of being supervised (Buxton, 2001), there is very little literature written directly by TAs about their classroom experiences. Moreover, there are very few studies that position the TA experience narratively. Although narrative has been used extensively to explore teacher education and teacher identity in public education at the elementary and secondary levels (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Huberman, 1993; Jackson, 1992; Kompf, Bond, Dworet, & Boak, 1996), using narrative to explore TA experiences in higher education opens up new possibilities.

## *TA Tale: The Model in the Mirror*

### *(On Identity)*

I am a model. No, not the kind that appears strutting the runway and being the envy of every 14-year-old semi-anorexic teenager.

No, I am a nude model for a first year visual arts course. It pays well, at least per hour, and supplements my work as a TA at the university. It's easy. I stand around, naked.

It's funny how no one ever told me how to do this. I simply saw an ad on the hallway wall. Model wanted for first year drawing course. No experience necessary. Of course, you had to be a student. I guess they didn't want some semiprofessional coming in off the streets to model and demand professional wages for a job that a student could do with no training.

"Will you teach me how to do this?" I asked the instructor.

"Don't worry," he said. "Just stand there and act natural. Just get them to draw." Yea, like standing at the front of the room without any clothes on while the students stare at you is *natural*. What high school did he go to?

So, here I am, in a small studio lab with about 18 students, elevated on a platform between the scaffolding and the blackboard. I drop my robe. They are looking at me now, some nervous, some defiant. I recognize the looks I am getting from the class I TA for. Their eyes say it all. *Oh no what if she looks at me? What if she talks to me? What if she knows I am looking at her breast? Where should my eyes be?* Or, better yet, the ones that scowl. *Go ahead. Teach me. I dare you.*

They are so young, some of them. They are afraid. Some of them show it, like that guy over there, chewing on the tip of his pencil like he's a beaver building a dam. Or that girl, swinging and swishing her long blonde hair back over and over again. It's a wonder she doesn't get whiplash. They are clearly uncomfortable. Well, this isn't easy for me, either.

I look at the instructor. Ok, tell me what you want me to do. Should I hold my arms a certain way? Should I sit? Stand? Fifty minutes is a long time to hold a pose.

"Just do whatever works," he says.

I sit, fold my legs, and drape my arms over the back of the chair. An unnatural pose but it helps hide certain strategic bits. The pencils leap into action.

I have no idea if I am doing this right. I have no idea if the students will find this pose helpful or anatomically confusing. The instructor does not seem to be concerned. In fact, he has left the room.

There is a mirror on the side of the room behind the paint supplies and I catch a glimpse of the white skin, illuminated by spot lights, in stark contrast to the dark clothing all around. It unnerves me at first but I grow used to it. Is that what I look like? How did I end up doing this work? If anyone had told me 3 years ago I would be sitting in front of a group of undergraduates as they stared at every inch of who I am and who I am not, I would have told you you were hallucinating. But here I am.

At first it was about the money. But now I rather enjoy it. The students appreciate my boldness. They are not at the stage of their lives when they would disrobe in front of

others. As a senior student, I have more experience, more life knowledge. They recognize in me the confidence they still lack, even though every day I am still amazed I got into grad school.

My arms ache. The 50 minutes are almost up and I see the students' pace has increased. Some are drawing madly, no longer looking at me but absorbed in their own representations. When the class ends, I throw on a robe and walk around the room, looking at what they have accomplished. Hmmmm, that pose really does look unnatural. I make a mental note not to place my arm in that position. It throws off the perspective. That one is lovely; for a brief moment, I feel stunningly beautiful. In some drawings, the pictures are more abstract and I do not recognize myself. Wild lines and heavy-handed circles denote a movement that I have never felt in that particular joint. I wonder if I was even in the room at the time. Interesting.

My family doesn't understand what I do. I can't talk to them about it. But I have learned that I enjoy seeing myself through the students' eyes. I love to see their renditions of our 50 minutes together. And the time I spend in front of their gaze allows me to think, about who I am, and what I want to do.

The students pack up and nod at me shyly as they leave the room. Later, when they see me in the hall between classes, they'll smile at me nervously. As the weeks pass, some of the bolder ones will even start to ask me questions about what it is like, as we line up for coffee at Tim's. For the most part they feel a connection to me, because they have stared at me, standing beside the scaffold, naked, trying to understand.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE METHODOLOGICAL MUSE

*Evelyn remembers struggling with her doctoral dissertation, wanting to intertwine texts of poetry and journals into the text, wanting the power and eloquence of creative work. Arguments with her supervisor about the requirements of a dissertation and what constitutes research. "You can not excel at both scholarly writing and creative writing. You must choose." Evelyn refuses to choose. She knows this refusal to demarcate, the blurring of genres, marks her in the academy. She does not care. She wants her writing to be plump with blood and bread. (Dunlop, 1999, p. 40)*

In 1999, Dunlop completed the first novel in education to be accepted as a PhD dissertation. Her motivations to cross disciplinary boundaries and her articulation of fiction as a viable form of research resonated strongly with me as I struggled to find a form that would engage readers to not only read about TA issues but also to respond to them in a visceral way born of shared experience. In her introduction to that novel, *Boundary Bay*, Dunlop writes about the power of literature to speak to readers' sensibilities: "If a literary text affects its readers, it also tells us something about them. Literature becomes a divining rod, locating our dispositions, desires, inclinations, and reflecting the phenomenological nature of human existence" (p. 5).

Like Dunlop, I had wanted to find a methodology that would allow me to bridge disciplinary boundaries between education and literature and to explore the experiences of my participants through creative writing. My discussions with the TAs were concerned with their perceptions of their lived experience as university TAs and the roles and relationships that contributed to their understanding of themselves, the teaching/learning processes, and the institutional contexts in which they worked. I knew that those

experiences needed to be framed and discussed in ways familiar to readers of traditional social science research, but I had also wanted to go beyond descriptions of data analysis and findings to recreate some of the ambiguities and intuitions characteristic of arts-based research. What follows in this chapter is a description of the participants, methods and procedures of the inquiry. I begin, however, with a discussion of the ways in which this inquiry is positioned within the framework of arts-based qualitative research, and secondly, how narrative as both a methodology and as a way of knowing contributes to our understanding of these particular issues.

### **Arts-based Qualitative Research**

Cole and Knowles (2008) state that the “central purposes of arts-informed research are to enhance understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) processes and representational forms of inquiry, and to reach multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible” (p. 59). They share their stories of how they came to develop and support arts-based research as university professors: “The language of the academy and all that it symbolized fell short in its ability to capture and communicate the complexity of human experience in all its diversity” (p. 57). Rather than conform to conventional forms of scholarship, Cole and Knowles among others, have taken up the charge to “reenchant research.” They describe seven defining elements of this type of research:

1. It commits to a particular form that frames and defines the inquiry.
2. It possesses methodological integrity.
3. It involves a creative inquiry process in which researchers are open to imagination and intuition.

4. It involves researchers who have artistic sensibilities and artistry.
5. It involves researchers who are reflexively and subjectively present in the research.
6. It involves research that speaks to audiences within but also beyond the academy.
7. It serves as a catalyst for transforming understanding as a result of the audience's active engagement. (p. 61)

In this respect, arts-based research requires an audience to interact and engage with the research in a way that allows for meaning and understanding to emerge. Literature, among many other forms of arts research, with its efforts to open up spaces for interpretation, has the potential to do this.

In a similar vein, Butler-Kisber (2002) summarizes Eisner and Barone's (1997) definition of arts-based qualitative inquiry in which they also articulate seven principles or features of arts-based work: (a) the creation of a virtual reality, (b) the presence of ambiguity, (c) the use of expressive language, (d) the use of contextualized and vernacular language, (e) the promotion of empathic understanding, (f) the use of the personal signature of the author, and (g) the presence of aesthetic form. Butler-Kisber further posits that these qualities have the capacity to pull the reader/viewer into a world that is recognizable enough to be credible, but ambiguous enough to allow new insights and meanings to emerge.

### **Narrative and Story**

In my inquiry, the methodological processes of collecting "data" and reshaping those data into TA Tales attempt to represent some of the elements of arts-based research



as defined by Cole and Knowles (2008), Butler-Kisber (2002), Eisner (1991, 2008) and Barone (2008). My own understanding of the world has always been through literature, with its ability to transport me into others' struggles and understandings. Claims of being able to come to knowledge of a particular area through narrative has been a contested area in educational research but has gained considerable ground in the last 2 decades (Banks, 2008; Barone, 2008; Butler-Kisber, 2002; Cole & Knowles, 2008; Eisner, 1991, 2008; Neilsen, 2002; Richardson, 1998) and many researchers have argued that narrative opens up possibilities of interpretation and meaning that are truer to who we are as ambiguous and ambivalent human beings. Neilsen maintains that story creates a space for understanding where our traditional notions of knowledge are no longer relevant:

Story, especially fiction, is a liminal space where we are neither here nor there; it is a space where we refuse "grounded theory" in our limited notions of it, and we refuse the nomothetic enterprise. Story and narrative--whether nonfiction or fiction, as if we could locate that border--are liminal spaces that do not call for an answer in the same way our conventional notions of knowledge seek an answer. Fiction asks many things: it challenges, extends, enlightens, and stretches us. It teaches us, guides us. Fiction does not enter into the realm of truth claims or accept burdens of proof in the same way as do our conventionally academic exercises around research. (p. 209)

Similarly, Dunlop (1999), writing of her own research, maintains that her conversations with beginning teachers kept bringing her back to fiction and literature as places where understanding could evolve:

[T]hose engaged in education programs talked about works of fiction that influenced their philosophies, affected their perceptions and their teaching worlds in powerful ways. It was the power of imaginative fiction that held them: the costly textbooks and curriculum materials and case studies were not valued but quickly discarded and rarely referred to during the next years in teaching professions. (p. 7)

In engaging in dialogue with my own beginning teachers, it became clear to me that it was the power of story, their own and mine, that assisted them in coming to an understanding or belief about who they were as teachers. In telling these critical incidents of teaching, they attempted to make sense of their understanding of teaching and learning in the classroom, and the value of teaching both within their own lives and within the academy in general. Within the TA training program I oversee, I hear many stories from the classroom and TAs are often anxious to share experiences with one another. Yet, readings about teaching and TA work are not easily embraced and are considered theoretical rather than accessible. Theoretical treatises or third-person descriptions of studies on teaching can potentially not only distance readers, but also minimize or fail to recognize the ways in which people are impacted by their teaching experiences affectively:

Participants in my inquiry and many others I have engaged with in conversation, found that the readings done in professional practice training programs failed to provide understandings or insights that might have helped them prepare for the physical, philosophical and emotional upheavals that the teaching profession caused in their lives. (Dunlop, 1999, p. 7)

Although Dunlop is referring to teacher education programs here, TAs who engage in ad hoc professional development, such as workshops on teaching, also experience a disconnect between the expert model generally provided by these programs and the emotional upheaval of TA work. My participants noted that they had not been prepared for their own emotional response to teaching and that what happened to them in the TA experience is generally not shared. Story then becomes a way to reach out to such individuals and establish community. It provides a shared sense of purpose and experience that connects to the world we occupy on a day-to-day basis.

Others posit that story has the power to teach about life through vicariousness. Baldwin (2005) discusses story as the heart of language imparting four gifts: (a) story creates context, (b) story highlights relationships, (c) story changes behaviour and potentially leads to action because we have experienced vicariousness, (the human ability to imagine ourselves into relationship with experiences that are not our own), and (d) story becomes a force for restoring/restorying the world:

When we participate in another's story we are able to learn how to be better human beings as a collective; the story has the potential to move out of the specific into the general – to everyman or every woman. (p. 67)

The ability of story to offer resonances to readers is precisely why narrative as a form of qualitative research is a powerful tool. In undertaking this work, I had wanted to engage with both a methodological process and a product that would speak to readers, whether TAs, faculty, or those who support TAs, through familiarity and resonance. For many new to the teaching experience, particularly in higher education, resonances with others'

stories of [in]experience is a gentle invitation to join the discussion. Baldwin (2005) states,

[O]ther people's stories send us scrambling through our own story looking for correlations, similarities or different possibilities. ...the stories that rise in us while listening to and reading other peoples' narratives contain information and insight we can apply to our own choices. (p. 125)

In this sense, the use of storying to research the TA experience is not just a methodological choice but an ontological choice as well.

### **Data Sources: Participant Narratives**

Participant narratives were gathered from three separate sources in order to assemble a rich description of the TA experiences. I chose to solicit the narratives in three different forms in order to better contextualize the data and layer the narratives with as much as detail and description as possible. The three forms were: (a) a reflective written description of two critical incidents arising from the TA experience, (b) an in-depth interview that explored the TAs' perceptions of their experiences, and (c) a mind map of the TA roles and relationships they engaged in during the critical incidents.

### **Critical Incident Questionnaires**

Brookfield (1990) defines critical incidents as brief written reports compiled by individuals about some aspect of their learning within a particular context. Events are recalled vividly and easily because they stand out in "sharp relief to the broad canvas of experience" (p. 31). As a tool for prompting reflection and self-understanding, critical incident questionnaires can employ a trigger question or series of guided questions that prompt individuals to reflect on and make sense of their experiences in terms of their own

learning. Using a Critical Incident Questionnaire (Brookfield, 1990), participants were asked to write reflectively about one positive experience that most engaged them during their time as TAs and the one negative experience that most disengaged them. (See Appendix A for a copy of the Critical Incident Questionnaire).

An integral aspect of critical incident questionnaires is the emphasis on promoting reflection. Brookfield (1990) argues that reflection on critical incidents allows students to develop a sense of themselves as learners within the broader context of teaching and learning:

Reflecting on their educational experiences helps students understand and take control over this crucial aspect of their lives. It means they can be initiators rather than reactors. They can choose teaching approaches and teaching personalities they find most congenial. They can learn how to anticipate and adjust for their most obvious weaknesses. They are better placed to prepare themselves for the inevitable periods of pain and anxiety that are endemic to learning. (p. 34)

Brookfield (1990) offers the following scenario as an example that could be used in a critical incident questionnaire:

Think back to the last time when you felt ready to give up trying to learn a particular skill, subject, concept or piece of knowledge – a time when you hit bottom and said to yourself, “Things can’t get worse than this.” Why did you keep on learning? What was it that stopped you giving up completely? Write down whatever you remember about the factor or factors that helped you through this low period in your life as a learner. (p. 33)

I am working from the assumption that, just as students may come to know themselves as learners by virtue of reflection on their learning (Baxter Magolda, 1999), TAs may also come to a greater understanding of the complexities of teaching and learning, the role of the institution in shaping those experiences and their own identity as teachers. The critical incident questionnaire served as a helpful tool not only to collect narratives of the TA experience but also to explore the process by which the TAs' knowledge about teaching is created and understood.

### **Interviews**

The narratives collected from the critical incident questionnaires were used to form the basis of open-ended questions in a follow-up 90-120 minute interview. A pilot interview was conducted prior to the participant interviews to refine and edit the questions. However, it should be noted that although guiding questions were prepared in advance, the interview was meant to be dialogic and to unfold based on the responses of the participants. (See Appendix B for a sample of the questions that formed the basis of the interview).

The interviews were conducted in various locations of the participants' choosing, including on campus at the participants' university, one at the participant's home, and one at a university in another province. The interviews consisted of asking participants to describe in detail the critical incidents they had chosen, beginning with the positive experience. Questions were asked throughout the narrative to seek clarification about chronology, roles and relationships, decision making and feelings. Follow-up questions solicited responses concerning their backgrounds as TAs, their level of preparation for the work, and whether they had been mentored during their TA experience. Lastly, the

participants were asked to identify what they had learned from their reported incidents, what they had learned about the academy, what the academy had gained from employing them, and what advice they would give to incoming TAs.

The interviews were conversational rather than formally structured and, in many instances, responses to questions spawned other, albeit related, topics of exploration. Fontana and Frey (1998) note the importance of allowing interviews to naturally unfold to engage in authentic and honest dialogue with others:

Unstructured conversation, mere chitchat, listening to others without taking notes or trying to direct the conversation is also important to establish rapport and immerse oneself in the situation, while gathering a store of “tacit knowledge” about the people and the culture being studied. (p. 68)

Given that I am part of the institutional culture in which these TAs were immersed, I also asked for their advice about what kinds of centralized supports would improve their TA experience.

The interviews were taped using the microphone capabilities in a Mac laptop with a portable voice recorder as backup. All digital files were kept in a password-protected folder and back-up tapes were stored in a locked cabinet. The conversations were transcribed verbatim into a Word document and a transcript of the interview was provided to participants to revisit their responses to change, edit, or revise as needed. A follow-up discussion took place either face-to-face or through e-mail to ensure all participants were comfortable with the transcript and my intent to write stories from their experiences. The transcript provided both an opportunity to “member check” (Merriam, 2002) and to allow further analysis and probing of particular tensions and possibilities

that had been identified. The follow-up discussion allowed us to clarify perspectives and ensure that the essence of the feelings and intent behind the narratives had been represented as authentically as possible.

### **Mind Maps**

At the beginning of the interview, participants were asked to complete a mind map of each of the two critical incidents identified in the first task, defining both the TA roles and the TA relationships they engaged in during these critical incidents. (See Appendix C for a copy of the mind map template). The mind maps were completed by all participants with some offering more details than others. Depending on the flow of the conversation and the comfort level, some were asked to create the mind map before we starting talking about the incidents, while others were asked to create it at some point during the discussion, particularly when switching discussion topics.

The purpose of the mind map was to allow participants an opportunity to revisit the incidents visually and brainstorm the various roles and relationships that impacted that particular experience. It was hoped that a brainstorm activity would assist the participants in remembering more detail about the events and essentially prompt their reflection about the various institutional and relational factors influencing the incidents. Examining the mind map during the interview became helpful in that it allowed both the participant and me to collectively identify particular aspects of the incidents in order to explore them in greater depth. I was also able to point to the mind map to ask participants to identify a title for each incident and to write it on the map. This encouraged them to determine the focus of the incident and helped me identify primary themes and tensions.



Participation in the inquiry required a time commitment on behalf of the participants to write narratives of each incident, to respond to questions in an interview, and to read the follow-up transcripts. Every effort was made to schedule interviews at the participants' convenience. Participants were told that they could withdraw at any time, but all 5 remained active in the study. Follow-up conversations through e-mail occurred with each participant to inform him or her of the progress of the analysis and writing.

### **Participants**

The participants in this inquiry were all members of a university where I direct a number of instructional development programs, including programs designed to teach TAs about pedagogy in higher education. An e-mail was sent to all of the TAs who had participated in a 3-day Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW) at some point in the previous 2 years. The ISW is an internationally recognized program focusing on experiential learning and reflective practice. The e-mail invited the TAs to take part in the study. At the time of recruitment, this constituted approximately 50 ISW workshop graduates. The e-mail advised the graduates that the purpose of the inquiry was to story the experiences of TAs, in particular their perceived roles and relationships, as they engaged in academic work.

There were three reasons for inviting participants who had completed the ISW:

1. **Engagement:** ISW graduates have begun to think about the teaching and learning context as it applies to their own experience by virtue of their ISW participation. ISW graduates have a common experience and a common language with which to discuss teaching and learning issues and are already engaged in teaching and learning reflection.

2. **Commitment:** TAs who have completed the ISW frequently comment on the need and desire to engage in continued dialogue about their TA experience; they frequently attend professional development initiatives. Participation in this inquiry provided an avenue for continued engagement and dialogue and served as a vehicle for ongoing reflection.
3. **Learning Community:** As the key organizer of the ISW program at Brock, I am familiar with many of the TAs who have gone through the program, though not all. It is, in fact, many of their stories told to me informally that prompted me to want to explore these reflections in a formal study. For many of my study participants, researcher-participant rapport had been previously established in the ISW as I facilitated or co-facilitated them through the ISW process. Much of the ISW involves asking participants a number of questions to prompt reflection. For this reason, rapport and relationship were extremely important to establishing an honest, reflective, and trusting environment for discussion.

TAs were invited to participate based on their willingness to write a reflective description of two critical incidents, meet with me for a 90-120 minute interview, and engage in a “member check” process.

Cole and Knowles (2001) discuss considerations in qualitative research in which critics might argue that inviting participation in a qualitative study (rather than utilizing more traditional sampling methods) is akin to preaching to the choir. They argue, however, that participants need to be trusted in the research relationship:

We remind critics of the quality of the relationship and its sustained nature, not to mention the value of reflexivity for uncovering deep seated meanings of

experiences, and the “utility” of working with people who are highly informed about the process and intentions of the inquiry. We are, quite naturally, honoring the participants’ intelligence and integrity. (p. 71)

From the initial e-mail invitation, a small number of TAs volunteered to join the inquiry and I confirmed participation with the first 5 who responded. Four of the participants who volunteered were mature TAs, ranging in age from 30 to 55 years approximately. The fifth was in her mid-20s. Four out of the 5 were women. Each is introduced in detail in Chapter Four.

### **Scope and Limitations**

Although the small number of participants in this exploration might be considered a limitation, I would like to reiterate that the intent is not to generalize to the TA population but to represent, in some depth and in some detail, the experiences of a few. At the very least, I provide one snapshot of one experience of one TA and, at most, the Tales provide a narrative landscape for others who are beginning the journey. As Cole and Knowles (2001) state, we should not assume that an exploration of one life is to understand the collective. However, attempts to understand a life, including the context of that life, helps us to understand “the complexities of lives in communities” (p. 11):

Always, lives are understood within their respective and collective contexts and it is this understanding that is theorized. Clusters of individual lives make up communities, societies and cultures. To understand some of the complexities, complications and confusions within the life of just one member of the community is to gain insight into the collective. (p. 11)

Institutional culture was a key factor in exploring the experiences of these TAs. The inquiry was confined to the identified critical incidents of a small group at one institution with individual and disciplinary differences and, although their experiences were simply their experiences, a glimpse into how these 5 members of a community experienced the community is nonetheless pertinent.

### **Ethical Concerns**

There were a number of ethical issues created as a result of this inquiry, many of which are rooted in the challenges inherent in conducting research in my own workplace and with and alongside those who undertake professional development through the programs I coordinate. Many of these issues are similar to those experienced by teachers engaging in classroom action research. As Zeni (2001) asserts: “Ethical dilemmas seem to be complicated by the very nature of the practitioner-researcher role. The insider has responsibilities and relationships that are fundamentally different from those of an outsider doing research in schools” (p. 11).

Although an insider perspective can add considerable contextual knowledge to the data, I was concerned that participants might identify relationships with individuals who continue to work at the institution. Therefore, it remained important that my participants not be identified as a result of their participation in this inquiry. (See Appendix D for the Research Ethics Board Clearance letter). Given that my institution employs over 1,000 TAs, and that 50 of potentially 1,000 participants have taken the ISW, the risk of identification was not significant. Those who have attended the ISW are generally not identified to the university community, unless they have given their consent to be placed in promotional material. Moreover, the dissemination of embedded data within a story

alleviated the risk of identification. Maintaining both the confidentiality and anonymity of my participants was a prime consideration in the writing process; consequently, with the exception of the last TA Tale, pseudonyms have been used throughout this document.

### **My Role as Researcher**

This is as much my story as it is the stories of my participants. My experience within the institution and my knowledge of TA roles and relationships was identified by virtue of my profession and has contributed and flavoured my understanding of TAs' experiences. Eisner (1991) calls this "the positive exploitation of our own subjectivity" (p. 34). It is, in fact, my past experience in this area and my genuine interest in fostering TAs' reflective practice that works to establish a safe and ethical environment for the participants. My interest in undertaking this inquiry arose from discussions with TAs that occurred year after year. They shared with me the trials and tribulations that characterized their experiences and, while I was privileged to be invited to comment on and counsel them in their practice, I was also struck by their feelings of isolation, and their concern that they had no one to talk with about their challenges.

Like Eisner (1991), Patton (1990) gives credence to the personal experiences of the researcher as important in the research process:

The researcher comes to understand the phenomenon through shared reflection and inquiry with coresearchers as they also intensely experience and reflect on the phenomenon in question. A sense of connectedness develops between the researcher and research participants in their mutual efforts to elucidate the nature, meaning and essence of a significant human experience. (p. 72)

Establishing relationship between researcher and researched is important to my belief that engaging in this process constitutes an opportunity for reflective practice for both me and my participants.

### **Credibility**

There is very little research that can make claims to being exact representations of lived experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). We can only filter descriptions according to our own understanding of the world and hope to capture snapshots of others in ways that are familiar, at least, to those whose likeness they reflect. Given such a condition, a number of researchers cite strategies that can be helpful in qualitative research to check for reliability and dependability such as member checks, peer review, and establishing an audit trail (Merriam, 2002, p. 26). An audit trail provides information that links the identified themes with their source. In my inquiry, an audit trail was recorded by virtue of transcription notes, coding, and journaling and describes “in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry” (Merriam, 2002, p. 27). The research notes also included a chart denoting each participant, his or her positive and negative incidents, the primary and secondary themes for each, and their connection to and intersections with the other themes in other incidents. In this way, interpretations can now be traced back to original data sources and rationales for interpretation can be provided and explained.

In this inquiry, multiple sources of narratives were collected to provide “structural corroboration” (Eisner, 2005): “Structural corroboration is a process that seeks to validate or support one’s conclusions about a set of phenomena by demonstrating how a variety of facts or conditions within the phenomena support the conclusions drawn.” (p. 46).

Utilizing three different sources and types of narrative allowed for a contrast and comparison to ensure that chronologies were clear and that descriptions were rich in detail. Rather than “triangulation,” Richardson (1998) refers to this as “crystallization,” in keeping with qualitative research that employs mixed-genre texts such as both fiction and more traditional social science writing:

Crystallization, without losing structure, deconstructs the traditional idea of “validity” (we feel how there is no single truth, we see how texts validate themselves); and crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know.” (p. 358)

The different sources of narrative, their interpretations, and the restories, essentially provide different perspectives on the same recorded incident, thereby contributing to our understanding of its complexity.

### **Coding**

Coding was done while reading the transcripts and identifying themes, connections, tensions, images, and gaps. Subsequent readings of the transcripts were aimed at identifying themes through a lexical and semantic analysis (i.e., an examination of the word choice and syntax in the transcript, the participant written narratives, and the mind map). The choice of language and wording is important in identifying both conscious and unconscious attitudes towards the narrative being constructed (Patton, 1990) and was a primary rationale in asking participants to identify their own theme or title for each critical incident. For example, participants identified titles such as “The Frantic Learner,” “Embarrassment,” and “Good Cop, Bad Cop,” which all serve to help

inform an identification of the primary issues. The participants' conscious choice of language to describe the event in their critical incident narratives and the language used to describe the event in the interview were compared and contrasted for potential tensions in participant attitudes and beliefs about the events they identified.

### **Analyzing the Narratives**

For each of the three types of narrative provided, themes were identified and coded inductively (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Eisner, 1991; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 1990). Categories were used to group themes or subthemes. Patton describes two forms of typologies that can be used to generate categories that reflect the understanding of the participants: (a) "indigenous typologies" which are created and expressed by participants through analysis of the language they use (p. 393); and (b) "analyst constructed typologies" (p. 398) which are not explicitly identified by the participants but are found in the narratives and created by the researcher (whom Patton calls "the analyst"). Both these typologies offered a framework to coding similar to literary criticism in which themes are either connected directly to the language of the text, or are identified by the critic and connected to imagery, allusion, or lexical patterns that are not immediately evident. Just as writers are not always conscious of some of the themes that are in their literary creations, participants in a study may not perceive themes or connections evident to others.

The main source of thematic analysis came from the transcripts of the interviews. Once themes were identified from the transcripts, the participant narratives along with mind maps were revisited to identify additional details that might inform the themes. The mind map for each participant named the roles performed by a number of individuals



who may have influenced or impacted the incident. Doing this allowed me to ask specific questions during the interview to flesh out the incident such as: How did [the course coordinator] assist you in this incident? Identifying roles in this way created a broader, more layered portrait of the TA within his or her institutional context. Although disciplines are not named in this study due to reasons of confidentiality and anonymity, the various roles performed by individuals peripheral to these teaching incidents is significant in providing an appropriate backdrop against which these incidents occurred.

### **From Storying to Restorying**

In this inquiry, I not only identified themes from the narratives provided but also recast the themes in the TA Tales in an attempt to recreate the feel and flavour of these experiences. The tales differ from biographies, case studies, or portraits of individuals in that they combine threads of individual experiences to dramatize certain themes and to heighten awareness of the issues that these TAs faced. Restorying the TA experience in such a way takes advantage of the tools of literary expression such as character, plot, and literary language (i.e., metaphor, imagery, and allusion) to bring experiences into sharper focus, magnifying the potential for resonance and reader response. In writing “tales” of the participants’ and my own experiences, I filter and reshape the narratives. By virtue of this writing process, analysis is ongoing and organic. In the end, the tales draw upon facets of the experience but not all of the experience is represented. As Eisner (1991) writes, the role of the researcher is not necessarily to reflect, but to recast:

No narrative that seeks to portray life experience can be identical to the experience itself; editing, emphasizing, and neglecting through selection are all ineluctably at play. Hence we seek not a mirror but a tale, a revelation, or a

portrayal of what we think is important to say about what we have come to know.

This narrative should be supported by evidence, structurally corroborated and coherent, but it cannot be a disembodied listing of what somebody did or saw. It needs both a cast and a plot; it needs to have a point. (p. 190)

Restorying the narratives into TA Tales allows readers to make more explicit connections with the issues identified. In keeping with the purposes of educational criticism (Eisner, 1991), the tales aim to describe, interpret, evaluate, and thematize the TA experience.

The fictional evocations of the word “tales” may be problematic for some readers, conjuring images of make-believe and fantasy. Yet, as Neilsen (2002) writes, “the shift in educational inquiry marked by alternative forms of representation, including the literary arts is a shift as much ontological as it is epistemological. Fiction is knowledge.” (p. 208). Banks (2008) writes about the productive ways in which fiction can be used to communicate scholarship and even advocates that fiction writing should be taught and appreciated as a form of research reporting. Where does our uneasiness with fiction as research originate? Barone (2008) explores the way in which the traditional dualistic thinking about the nature of fact and fiction has undermined social research in its need to label writing as either fictional or nonfictional. He outlines two opposing forces or tendencies that characterize the reading of texts, namely a centripetal force and a centrifugal force. Centripetal forces attempts to convince the reader of “a final, standard, authoritative unambiguous, conventionally truthful rendition of events” (p. 109). Centrifugal forces, on the other hand, lean towards the ambiguous, towards formlessness, the imaginary, and the fantastical (p. 109), not offering specific absolutes or truths.

According to Barone, the creative tension between these two forces is a place of knowing:

The prevailing binary of truth and fiction (or fantasy) is thereby replaced with a complex conception of the act of reading as one in which a delicious dialectic tension between actuality and imagination may be experienced. Indeed a boundary between fact and fiction has never been, itself, an objective, strictly “factual” entity. Rather it is a human (social) construction, an artifact of convention, one born out of a general need for unambiguous classification of otherwise indeterminate entities. A persistent yearning for the resolution of ambiguities regarding what constitutes fiction and nonfiction may indeed be viewed as an ongoing manifestation of an ancient desire to reduce anxiety about the indefinite. (p. 109)

As fiction, the Tales then offer the possibility of making room for tension and ambiguity of the issues identified. Although this inquiry includes recommendations for practice based on the TAs’ experiences and additionally what I have read, heard, and observed over many years of this work, practice will always be guided by institutional, disciplinary and personal contexts, and by extension, shades of ambiguity.

## *TA Tale: The Missing Professor*

### *(On Communication)*

When Carter went to seminar at 4:00 o'clock that afternoon he was in no mood to put up with any of the crap that was coming his way. The students were restless, anxious about the exam, and unsure of what had been happening in lecture. His own trials centred around the call he had that afternoon. His father informed him that he had contacted an agent to sell the house. Carter knew he would be doing a shift with his mother for the rest of the week. His parents' fighting had intensified throughout the past few months and they were no longer talking to each other. They were both talking to Carter though, and he felt pulled in two directions, each wanting him to be their confidant, each wanting him to choose who he would live with in the summer. It was exhausting, and so was this class.

His least favourite student, Eileen (actually least favourite sounds like there was favouring to be had; Carter actually despised her) was sitting in the corner, sullen. As Carter began to explain the main concept from the reading, she picked up a magazine and casually began leafing through it. His blood began to boil. He had put up with her antics all term since she had been annoyed to find herself in his seminar after wanting to be in the professor's section. She, and a few of her buddies, had deliberately signed up for the prof's seminar but, at the last minute, the timetable was switched around. Not his fault but he was annoyed at the prof for even telling the students ahead of time when he was planning to teach and then mucking it up. Couldn't he have talked to Carter first and arranged the course schedule in advance?

The students filed out and he asked Eileen to wait behind. Using a professional but authoritative tone of voice, he made sure she understood that rudeness was not going to be tolerated. *"Do that again and you won't be receiving any participation grade for this class."* What had happened that made him so intolerant? Last term he would have taken her aside, told her that her behaviour felt disruptive to him and that perhaps she did not intend it to be, that he understood her disappointment that she was in this seminar rather than the prof's, and that he was available if she needed additional assistance. But this term he was tired of second guessing and what felt like mollicoddling.

Eileen appeared to get the point and filed out. *Sure, go complain to the prof,* he thought. *See where that gets you.* The prof was missing. Missing in action. Carter had emailed him three times in the last week, to no avail. The lecture was in a few hours and no one had seen him for days.

Carter began the trek to the TA office to do some marking. He was tired of preparing classes that did not seem to be in any way related to the lecture. He had given up asking if there was a plan for the class. Every week he emailed and asked what the main points might be. He then prepared the seminar. When he went to class though, the lecture seemed to be about something altogether different. What was that all about? The prof told him one thing and then did another.

*Two weeks to go. Maybe I should just quit. No one seems happy with what I am doing anyway.*

*Carter, can you do the lecture today?* It was the department chair, standing outside the TA office. *He's still missing. I also need you to write the final test for the course. I checked the outline and it's next week. We can't assume he is coming back.*

*What? Shit, Carter thought. What do I do now? Ummmm, okay, no problem. Okay. Think. What is on the course outline? But he removed that section 3 weeks ago. Then he ended up covering it in lecture last week. Did he say that he was removing that piece? Jesus, he never does what he says he is going to! He's all over the place. Last week he also taught material from the course to his seminar only and then chewed me out in lecture. Evidently, my students were not up to speed. Okay, calm down. The test is next week, so maybe I should just do a review of what's been covered so far.*

Carter closed the door and began to prepare. He knew the review was going to be helpful, but how the students would respond to his presence in the lecture hall, given that some of them seemed unhappy with him in the seminar, would be interesting. Maybe they would walk out. *What the hell, I'll tell them to go ahead.*

Two hours later Carter assumed his position at the front of the lecture hall. The students looked at him in surprise. He took a deep breath. *Okay so he's not here tonight. If you want, I'll give you a review of some of the important topics we've studied to date. If you feel like leaving, you are welcome to do so.*

No one left. Carter felt his confidence growing.

The following day Carter was in the TA office, reviewing the participation grades in his seminars. He thought about Eileen. She had seemed less annoying this morning. She had even volunteered a comment during discussion.

His cell phone rang and he saw his father's name appear. He hesitated but then picked up. *Hey Dad, what's up?* Twenty minutes later Carter hung up the phone and sighed. Things were getting worse. His dad was angry; his mother was refusing to talk to the real estate agent and the house wasn't going to sell anytime soon. His dad wanted Carter to tell his mother that she needed to sign the papers, or else the lawyers were going to ramp it up. They could lose a lot of money if she didn't start talking about terms. As he was about to hang up, he told Carter, *"I just signed for a two bedroom place. I assume you'll be staying with me this summer."*

Carter took a deep breath. *Back to the test.* He had been at every lecture and even though he didn't know what the professor had taught in his own seminar, he could at least assess them based on the lecture material. He really had no other choice. The chair had asked him to do this, and he was professional. But this is it, Carter thought, no more being a doormat for this department.

Ten days later the course was almost over and the students had written their final test. When Carter had stepped in, some students were upset and went to the chair. He told them Carter was saving the course. Most students just carried on. Some stopped by and thanked him for his work. But when the professor walked into the TA office 2 weeks later Carter wasn't sure what would transpire. He was feeling a lot better about his own role in the course, but he was still angry.

*Sorry about that,* the prof said contritely. What? Carter looked at him, waiting for an explanation. *I was messed up. Personal reasons. My wife and I were splitting. Looks like I fell off the rails for a while and you got the worse of it. Thanks for picking up the pieces.*

Carter began to laugh. This man had never shared anything with him. Had changed material without telling him. Had belittled him in front of the students. More than that, he had always seemed invincible. Popular with the students. Funny. Intelligent. But he had screwed up, not Carter. And now he was apologizing to him. And it felt good.

*Sorry I don't mean to laugh....I am just relieved. I thought it was me. I thought you thought I couldn't teach.*

When the prof left the office, Carter finished entering grades from the test and reviewed his seminar participation marks. Eileen hadn't done so badly after all. *I guess she felt hung out to dry just as much as I did*, Carter thought. He cleared his desk and grabbed his knapsack. *End of term.*

He then picked up the phone and called his father, and then his mother. *I want to be clear*, he said to both of them. *I am here for you whenever you want to call me and talk to me, or talk about you. But I don't want to be in the middle anymore. Oh, and by the way, I won't be coming to stay with you this summer. I have plans.*

## **CHAPTER FOUR: STORIES OF [IN]EXPERIENCE**

The following chapter details the stories recounted by my participants of their experiences in teaching in higher education and, perhaps more importantly, what they learned as a result of both their experience and their inexperience. We meet each of the participants individually as they describe both the positive and negative critical incidents that impacted their understanding of themselves, teaching, and the academy. Literature that extends or comments on some of the issues they discuss is also included in an effort to contextualize their experiences. They are, of course, the protagonists of their own stories and, in true authorial fashion, have assigned a title to each of their incidents. But storying, by virtue of its need for both author and reader, teller and listener, is a collaborative endeavour, and my own role in the writing and restorying process is also discussed.

### **Writing as Inquiry**

In describing their struggle to develop storytelling approaches, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) note that the act of merely listening and recording participant stories is not only unsatisfying but also impossible:

We learned that we too needed to tell our stories. Scribes we were not; story tellers and story lovers we were. And in our story telling, the stories of our participants merged with our own to create new stories, ones that we have labeled collaborative stories. The thing finally written on paper (or perhaps on film, tape or canvas), the research paper or book, is a collaborative document; a mutually constructed story created out of the lives of both researcher and participant. (p.

As I transcribed the recordings of my participants' critical incidents, I found myself thinking about similar teaching and learning experiences I had had in my own university career and, in this regard, the act of transcribing and writing was a catalyst for reflection and understanding. Many qualitative researchers cite the ways in which the act of writing actually becomes the heart and soul of the inquiry, as opposed to simply writing up a report on predetermined findings (Banks, 2008; Baldwin, 2005; Butler Kisber, 2002; Ellis & Bochner, 2004; Richardson, 1998). Writing my participants' stories allowed me to hear shared lexis, creating connections to other stories and memories, and jumpstarting the creative writing process. "I Could Teach a Monkey To Do That" was created when a participant shared a story of how she had been humiliated by a supervisor during a practicum experience, and, consequently, had learned how not to teach. "My Professor", a story of my own mixed attempts to decipher ethical norms, kept insisting I give it voice while I was listening to a participant describe his fury at the favouritism he witnessed when he believed a faculty member and a TA were likely sleeping together. "June Atkinson", a memoir of a professor who had shown me the importance of compassion in teaching and learning, was triggered by the story of a participant who had talked about reaching out to a seriously struggling student.

In this sense, the acts of transcription and description became a dialectical process in which the creative act of writing became my personal response to the participants' experiences. This act of creative writing allowed me a deeper reflection, exploring resonances of feelings, emotion, and action. Dunlop (1999) writes, "[t]he creative act of writing/research can be elaborated using the Ricoeurian notion of action as meaningful text – therefore, the process of writing itself becomes an act of inquiry" (p. 5).



Although my participants' reported that critical incidents can be depicted in numerous ways, I am concentrating on the events' "emotional, moral and aesthetic qualities", what Connelly and Clandinin (1990) refer to as "burrowing":

We focus on the event's emotional, moral and esthetic qualities; we then ask why the event is associated with these feelings and what their origins might be. We imagine this to be somewhat like Schafer's (1981) narrative therapy. This way of approaching the event is aimed at reconstructing a story of the event from the point of view of the person at the time the event occurred. (p. 12)

Although the third person narrative voice is used in the depictions, the reader must be cognizant of the narrator/researcher as participant in these stories. The questions I posed in our discussions about teaching and learning and the themes and issues highlighted are filtered through my own understandings and experiences: in this way, they are "mutually constructed stor[ies] created out of the lives of both researcher and participant (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 12).

### **Jenna**

Jenna is a mature graduate student finishing the first year of her Master's degree. She has spent a number of years in the work force in a professional capacity as a nurse and health provider. Although somewhat intimidated by the complexities of the academic enterprise, she has returned to school to test herself and to further her career aspirations. She is thoughtful, reflective, and encouraging during our talks, listening attentively to questions and posing questions in return.

She discusses entering her graduate degree with some trepidation: her own undergraduate experience had been a challenge and, as a mature learner, she had found

the university to be somewhat confusing in its expectations and demands. In fact, she reports how a recent review of her undergraduate marks triggered an epiphany when she came to understand that she had missed all her seminars in one course. The course had been a summer course, taken at that time to ease the transition from one institution to another. New to the university and unable to comprehend the coding system on the scheduling chart that would have indicated a seminar component, she simply attended lectures and handed in all her assignments. In recollection, she feels sympathy for the person who would have been her TA:

It [the fact that there were seminars] just went right past me, obviously. So I laugh at that because I am thinking there's the seminar that the TA would have been sitting in thinking, there's that [name]! I'm marking all her essays that I am handing in to the professor and she doesn't show up to the classes and still passes the course. (p. 6)

Jenna reports this with humour, recognizing that although she was responsible for missing the seminar and losing her participation grades, more could be done by the institution to prepare new students for their experiences as either undergraduates or graduate students, particularly when entering the academy at off-peak times. Her relationship with her supervisor is positive, whom she describes as “not a dictator” after referencing the dictatorial professors she had had as an undergraduate. He supervises both her teaching and her graduate work and she is immensely pleased that he treats her as a colleague and a friend.

### **Positive Critical Incident: “The Frantic Learner”**

Jenna’s positive critical incident is an account of her decision to reach out to an undergraduate student in her seminar who is at serious risk. (See the TA Tale “I Could Teach a Monkey to Do That”). Jenna’s humiliating experience during an undergraduate practicum at another university has shaped her thinking about what makes an effective teacher. Her supervisor had been patronizing, intimidating, and unsupportive, and had threatened to fail her. Jenna’s own struggles at that time came from insecurity fuelling stress: “There were times when I just felt 99% close to quitting and giving up” (p. 8). Thus, when she finds herself in a position to counsel a student who is struggling, her recollection of her own experiences motivates her to connect with the student. Her title “The Frantic Learner” is a moniker which could easily apply to her as much as to the student in her seminar. Jenna’s student is at risk of withdrawing from the course: Jenna has been notified by the professor that the student has been hospitalized due to stress and there are no expectations that she will be able to return to the course. After some reflection, Jenna makes a decision to contact the student, expressing concern for her health and her confidence in the student’s ability to be academically productive. The result is that the student responds to this small act of kindness and returns to the class. For Jenna, this act is symbolically significant. She has been able to provide the care to a struggling student that, ultimately, makes a difference to that student’s outcome.

The student’s acknowledgement of Jenna’s act of kindness is important, as is the fact that she goes on in academia by applying to graduate school. Jenna is unsure of what the parameters are around her TA responsibilities. Sending a personal email could well be a violation of her employee role:

At first I questioned my actions and seriously hesitated to follow up with the student. After all, there is a fine line between being in the authoritarian role of teaching, having the power of allocating marks, and being in the nurturing role of mentor, struggling to be accepted as an approachable leader. I wasn't certain if etiquette in teaching would approve of my conduct. I, therefore, entrusted my actions to gut instinct. My past experience, coupled with the fact that essentially I was a peer of this student, motivated me to support this student in a more personal way. (p. 24)

The outcome of her decision is personally reaffirming. Acts of kindness are justified, not only in terms of one human being to another but also in terms of fostering potential in learners. This is, for Jenna, why teachers teach: "I have been reminded how much a student can be motivated to continue to learn by simply providing encouragement, and by genuinely caring for their emotional health and not just their academic output" (p. 25).

The autobiographical nature of this incident is not lost on her either. She knows that in providing care to her undergraduate student she is nurturing herself, the student within her who was not supported during her own time of crisis: "It was that experience in my background that motivated me to at least connect with her by e-mail" (p. 8). Palmer (1998) wrote that we teach who we are. For Jenna, not only do we teach who we are, but we are how we teach.

### **Negative Critical Incident: "Feeling Little"**

Jenna's negative incident describes how she was at a loss when facilitating a seminar at the end of her first semester as a TA. The students were passive and unengaged in the course material. Jenna struggled to stimulate discussion but felt that the

students were “staring right through [her]” and only attending class to get a participation mark. To make matters worse, these students were close to finishing their program. It is the last seminar of the last course in their program and instead of celebrating and engaging with their learning, they stared at her “like mummies.” Jenna attributes her challenges to insufficient knowledge of content:

How would I face them next week or have any authority in marking their assignments if they found out how ignorantly inadequate I truly was? I reasoned with myself in that I felt unprepared regarding the overall content of the course and I was learning the content only 2-3 weeks before they were. (p. 23)

However, knowing even more course material would not change the students’ level of engagement. Pedagogical knowledge would assist Jenna in establishing ways for the students to interact with the content and provide a helpful review. In this case, the students’ resistance may be attributable to a number of factors. They may simply have had difficulties focusing given that it was the end of term, a scenario experienced by many veteran instructors. That Jenna identified this as a critical incident is more telling of her feelings of insecurity around teaching and that she does not see herself as sufficiently experienced: “My only conclusion was this was a result of my inexperience” (p. 23). The lack of student response to her efforts fostered feelings of inadequacy and impostership, a theme that occurs throughout this inquiry.

### **Shelby**

Shelby came to the university as a mature student looking for a more fulfilling intellectual life than had been afforded by her work providing administrative support. She enjoys learning and the academic environment allows her to develop herself personally.

In her fourth year she applied for a position as an undergraduate TA and was surprised by how much she enjoyed it: “I find that as a TA I learn a lot about myself. I learn a lot about the material” (p. 1). She is now in her fourth year as a TA, assuming responsibilities for courses that are not assigned to graduate students. Shelby sees her role as a liaison between the students and the professor.

Shelby believes her age makes a difference in her interactions with students in her seminars and attributes this to her success as a TA. She found that her own experience with TAs as an undergraduate student was not very productive, and therefore some of her motivation to do well comes from wanting to make a difference to the students in her charge in ways that she herself had not experienced as a student. She identifies herself as the students’ mom, looking out for their wellbeing and assisting them in their learning. But she also states she was motivated by wanting to impart knowledge and clarify concepts for the students. In other words she was motivated by watching the light bulb go on and the positive feedback she received when people told her they had understood something for the first time.

**Positive Critical Incident: “Students engaged”**

In this positive incident Shelby reported how she introduced a pedagogical strategy into her seminar to better engage the students in thinking about the course issues. Although the students appeared interested in course issues, their task of writing questions about seminar readings felt mechanistic, so Shelby asked students instead to come to seminar prepared with questions about the material they did not understand. She made efforts to make the course content personally relevant and to help them make connections between the course content and the lecture material.

Shelby reported that the students were highly engaged, still discussing the seminar issues as they were leaving the room:

I had them. It was amazing. And we were learning together. It was reciprocal. It was a process. I can't teach if you don't want to learn. So that was my best because I felt so engaged and I felt I was accomplishing what I was being paid to do. (p. 9)

In this respect, Shelby felt as if she had successfully created a learning community, in which students took responsibility for their learning. Although Shelby feels some qualms about not consulting with the course professor about the changes she made to the seminar format, she feels the ends justified the means:

I was hesitant [to tell him] because the students in his seminar were having real problems relating to the material. I thought if he wasn't changing his format a little to help his students, he might not be so willing to allow me to change mine to help mine. (p. 12)

Shelby is committed to being professional: "I have never undermined a professor...I am not there to do that. I didn't intentionally hide it from him; I just didn't go seeking his approval" (p. 12). Moreover, with very little accountability in place in terms of the professor's supervision of TAs, Shelby feels that what happens in her classroom is her responsibility: "It's my class and if it is not working for me, I have to change it a little bit...and that's the other thing...there's not a real relationship between professors and TAs" (p. 13). Although Shelby has worked with a number of professors, she has yet to feel sufficiently connected to one that would allow her to feel comfortable discussing

making changes to pedagogical approaches. Instead, she focuses on her students and ways to establish community within the class.

### **Negative Critical Incident: “Students Unengaged”**

Like Jenna, Shelby is haunted by the students who fail to respond to her efforts. Shelby’s negative critical incident describes her instructional efforts in a second seminar for the same course. This class is taught on the same day with the same material as the class that she identified in her positive incident. In this seminar, however, her efforts to improve the students’ engagement fall completely flat. Despite using the same pedagogical strategies she employed in her successful seminar, the students appear lifeless and unengaged. Shelby is flummoxed as to how one seminar can be so vastly different from another when the teaching and learning conditions are all the same. As a result, she begins to question her own role in the teaching and learning process:

So [I am] the same, the subject material is the same, the assignment is the same, but it is different, so then you come to the conclusion...which is the real me? You see the quandary? Which one is the real me? (p. 16)

Shelby’s positive and negative incidents are bookends of one another, denoting how powerful a seminar can be when adopting a certain pedagogical strategy and, conversely, how uninspiring another seminar can be, even though the strategy, the instructor, and the course content are the same. The notion that students themselves contribute to the teaching and learning environment in a very powerful way to either make or break the success of the class seems surprising to Shelby and causes her considerable reflection and growth as a teacher. The understanding that a pedagogical toolbox works differently from one instructional context to another may develop with experience but it is not often that



instructors can test their tools with two classes that are quite opposite in their responses to instruction.

As Shelby talked about her two critical incidents, a seminar class that was very engaged and a seminar class that was not, she realized she had possibly undermined her “worst” seminar by expecting them to interact in the same way as her most engaged seminar: “I was trying to get these ones - there – which now thinking back was problematic. I shouldn’t be trying to get them there but where they need to be ...and that’s my biggest mistake...right there, right there” (p. 21). Once she had had time to reflect on her two contrasting critical incidents, Shelby was able to articulate what might have gone wrong. Her epiphany during our discussions underscores how the inquiry process can assist with prompting reflection: “just talking to you today I have learned tons about what I was doing wrong and what I was doing right. If I had this seminar tomorrow I would try something totally different” (p. 22). As the one conducting the interview, I was cognizant of asking questions that prompted clarification and reflection rather than give pedagogical advice. Nonetheless, it was gratifying that our shared dialogue and our exploration of the contexts and constraints of this incident precipitated some new understandings.

Shelby’s description of these incidents also reveals her struggle with confidence and the sense of impostership that haunts Jenna. She describes how she felt out of her depth when first asked to TA: “I have never TA’d before and I was having a seminar on a theorist I had never taken, so I was thinking, someone is going to blow my cover” (p. 3). Although over years of teaching Shelby had TA’d for 10 different professors, and was

clearly experienced, she never quite got over the feeling she was an imposter in the academy:

These are my two fears: My first fear is that somebody is going to find out that I am really a lousy TA and my other fear is that with 50 minutes I am not going to be able to fill it. I am going to run out of everything to say or do on the topic except tap dance on the desk. (p. 16)

For Shelby, watching the disconnect between her two seminars allows her to recognize that “it is not as much about me as I think it is” (p. 23). Knowing this allows her to move away from the teacher-controlled, subject-centred role to someone who is more in tune with the students. When asked what she had learned from her two incidents, she stated:

I think that I am a little more open to people’s shortcomings, idiosyncrasies. I’m not so dogmatic. I think I am easier on myself. I’d say that it has grown me as a person because I have had to live with the worst and the best...having the worst of it keeps me trying, keeps me learning, keeps me engaged in the whole process. (p. 23)

### **David**

David is a Master’s student in his second year, and, like Jenna and Shelby, he is also a mature student who has returned to school following at least a decade spent in the workplace. His background is blue collar and he has risen through the ranks to become part of the managerial team. Before returning to school, he had a large number of employees reporting to him in a manufacturing setting that is traditional and highly hierarchal in nature. He came back to university with an idealistic mindset about the democratic values he expected to find thriving in a place of higher learning.

David reported that he was excited to return to school and excited about the opportunity to improve his life and thinking skills through coursework and through the TA experience. He said he began his studies with an attitude of respect for the institution of learning and for those who are more highly educated than he. He has strong sense of self-identity and values clear communication and clearly stated policies and procedures. His understanding of his role as a TA is to be a “facilitator, a mentor, and a working colleague” (p. 9).

Although David would not have chosen to TA in his first year, he is assigned to teach four seminars as part of his full-time graduate fellowship in his first semester when the normal workload for a graduate student would be two seminars. Although his supervisor had initially assigned him two sections of a course, she subsequently advises him that, as part of his financial award for being a graduate student, he must assume responsibility for a third seminar offered in another course within the department. The professor responsible for that course, however, states that he requires a TA for two sections and, being naïve about workload allocations, David agrees. He now has four seminars, two for each of two courses.

As he reports it, the professor had thought TAing her course would assist with David’s thesis work. Not surprisingly, David spends much of his time during the Fall semester preparing for his instructional responsibilities, which subsequently begins to compromise his graduate work and his relationship with his supervisor: “I was having a little bit of difficulty with some of the extra lab work and to gain knowledge of that specific course area, it was suggested I take on doing that course again and also looking

at the [other] course as well” (p. 6). When he believes he will be assigned the same workload for the Winter semester, he decides to change programs and supervisors:

One of the reasons I left was because of having to do four TAs and maybe having the idea that I would have to do four again...it never was contractual but the idea was out there, that I would have to do that again. (p. 6)

Despite his workload challenges, David’s positive critical incident happened in his first semester as a TA, as he juggled multiple responsibilities.

### **Positive Critical Incident: “Respectful”**

David’s positive experience revolved around assisting two students in his classes who came to him for additional help. These students were atypical, being older and more intrinsically motivated than some of the other younger students:

They came to me and said they really enjoyed my teaching style and they really wanted to learn a little more about the project on the side and see if I would be willing to come half an hour before and half an hour after each seminar so they could gain a little bit more knowledge and ask a few more questions that maybe weren’t applicable in that setting and that everyone else maybe wouldn’t benefit from. (p. 1)

The students recognized that David was going above and beyond for them and verbally thanked him after each class. This incident stayed with him because of the positive feedback he received about his work from both the students and the professor. At the end of the weekly TA meeting, the professor took David aside and commented that the students had reported being appreciative of the extra time he took with them. In addition, they also performed very well in the course. In this incident, David felt he had

contributed to the students' success, was respected as a teacher, and was valued by the institution:

They actually excelled in the course and at the end of the semester they got me a nice little present and thanked me for providing that little extra help along the way. And it was really encouraging from the professor too who said these people spoke really highly of you as a TA. And, it was an enlightening experience for me and being valued as an employee...as well as a mentor in that position. (p. 1)

The theme of being valued by the faculty, students, and administration of the university emerged a number of times throughout our discussions as well as in my discussions with other TAs. In this incident, the relationship forged between TA and students was one of mutual respect and trust, and his relationship with the professor was one of support and encouragement. In writing about his positive incident, David underscores how important this is to him: "The premise of mutual respect in the classroom or work environment is a value that I still hold dear to this day" (p. 29).

#### **Negative Critical Incident: "Embarrassment"**

Unfortunately, David's negative incident was one that considerably compromised his values of mutual respect and eventually caused him to leave the university. In a mirror opposite of what had been so personally rewarding to him in first term, David's negative incident details a perceived lack of respect for himself, for institutional policies, and for the academic enterprise. As he pointed out, "I expected so much more from an institution of higher learning" (p. 30).

After three successful semesters of TAing, David was told by his thesis supervisor that he would, the following semester, TA a specific course being taught by that

supervisor. The course was directly related to his research interests so it would be helpful to him in developing his proposal and thesis. He was told to submit an official application through the department. After a few weeks, however, his TA appointment was different from the one he had expected. When he asked his supervisor for an explanation of the procedures followed in determining TA appointments, he was told “that is the decision I have made” (p. 13). When the semester began, David learned that the person who received the coveted appointment was perceived to be in a position of privilege in that s/he was allegedly involved in a personal relationship with a colleague of the supervisor. The last straw came when David and another graduate student were advised to audit the very course he had applied to TA, as it would be helpful in preparing for his thesis. To complicate matters, the course was being held at a time when David was TAing, and, subsequently, he missed half of the audited course in order to fulfill his assigned TA responsibilities.

Following this incident, David launched a series of complaints within the department, the faculty and the university. In discussions with the Chair, he indicated he would be willing to pursue a grievance with the TA union but the Chair suggested they could try to work things out. David believes the Chair spoke with the supervisor and his colleague but David did not receive any communication regarding an outcome. As he reports it, matters simply deteriorated: “Things were getting more difficult for me as a student to be in a successful environment so anytime I said something it was getting worse rather than better....taking on this fight was a no-win situation for me” (p. 13).

David’s experiences identify a number of challenges in supervising and supporting TAs such as the need to feel valued by one’s academic community, the sense

of not belonging or being unsuited for the institution (imposter phenomenon), the need to see accountability enacted by the supervisor, program, and/or department, and, of course, the breakdown in the supervisory/graduate student relationship as a result of all of the above stated tensions.

David's positive critical incident focused on the relationships that developed as a result of mentoring and acting as a resource to the students in his care. His negative incident was a breakdown of relationship with those who were in a supervisory and mentorship role. His disappointment is primarily built on not being able to receive the same respect, consideration, and communication that he is careful to model for others. His own personal belief system about teaching and learning, the one he exercises in the classroom, is at odds with what he observes in the practices of some members of his department. Moreover, his own work experience has taught him that one must be accountable for decisions that impact others. Not only is this respectful practice but it is also required in order to avoid litigious action.

In the university setting, however, the collegial model for supervision potentially breaks down when processes and espoused rules or policies are not enforced. It is more difficult for faculty to champion the cause of a graduate student over the decisions of a colleague: The graduate student eventually moves on but tenured members of the department do not. David recognizes that colleagues within the department were reluctant to intervene in the supervisor/student relationship:

Many people didn't want to comment obviously because they would be conflicting with another colleague but it's hard to see what would have been done differently because we were dealing with a situation that wasn't really rational...I

think that people were just trying to keep a perceived anonymity or a perceived professionalism amongst a small number of highly prestigious positions...who am I to question whether it is morally correct or contractually correct...what do I know...I am just a graduate student, and actually that came up in conversation a number of times – you are only a graduate student, you don't have the right to question, and you probably don't have the knowledge or experience in life to make those types of decisions....and I did have a background in dealing with employees standards acts or dealing with harassment situations. (pp. 19-20)

Although David received sympathy from those he consulted within his program, a recommendation to take specific action regarding the TA appointment only came from outside of the faculty. At this point, David's graduate work was seriously compromised in a deteriorating supervisory relationship, and he felt "harassed and belittled." His efforts to use appropriate administrative channels to point out the issues went unheeded and he wondered whether his initial switch of programs after his first semester of graduate school had undermined his credibility. Over this time, David's sense of self-respect and dignity began to erode:

I really questioned myself in the whole process. I really thought during that time, that 2- to 3-year period, I really questioned whether I was doing things right or whether I was just being stubborn with my morals and values in the whole process...it was a terrible, terrible last year...just for self-worth. (p. 16)

The supervisor/graduate student relationship is one of power. As David notes, making the decision to go against a supervisor can become problematic in light of future aspirations:



The supervisor holds a lot of power over you and so do the faculty because you know they have to sign off on your future scholarships and they know if you transition to the work world, you may need to have a reference....and I think that was the most difficult aspect for me is, you know, what do I do now? If I don't try to make peace with things or don't go on, am I going to get another job or have I just done a career time bomb? (p. 21)

When the perception exists that faculty supervisors hold the power card, the existence of policies to guide supervisory practice becomes a moot point in light of the relationship dynamics. David perceived that his relationship with his supervisor became hostile, a game to be won or lost: "100 % was authoritative and demeaning on purpose because I questioned the system..." (p. 22).

Related to the isolation of university teaching, and also to the TAs' desire to make a difference to the students in their care, is the belief that teaching is an ethical endeavour. The act of teaching is a commitment to do no harm to students, to be responsible to be in the world with a sense of integrity. D'Andrea and Gosling (2005) make the point that ethical beliefs are a fundamental part of teacher identity and that professionalism is the acting out of one's ethical commitments not only to the discipline but to the students themselves. "Teaching is at heart an ethical activity" (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005, p. 30). When David leaves the institution because it does not fit with his value system, he is acting on his own sense of ethical beliefs about right and wrong. His sense of identity as both a person in the world and as a teacher is being compromised.

For many students, it is easier to remove themselves from conflict than it is to challenge authority. David was able to voice his concerns, largely as a result of his

maturity, his experience in a supervisory background in a unionized environment, and his strong personal sense of what constitutes ethical behaviour. Even for David, however, the murky waters of academe proved to be too onerous to navigate. Although his final thesis draft had been signed off, he withdrew from his program and the university. David has now successfully completed a graduate degree in another institution.

### **Joelle**

Joelle is undertaking her second Master's degree in a Humanities-based discipline. Like Jenna, David, and Shelby, she is also a mature student who has returned to school for personal development, having left a career job in the business sector. She has just completed her second year of graduate studies and has TA'd for a number of courses with different professors. She identifies her role as "teacher", someone who helps connect course material to "how it relates to their lives today" (p. 21). Although she previously identified herself as a graduate student first and secondly a TA, she noted that those roles had recently switched and she now identifies herself as a TA first. She had planned to apply for doctoral studies but has decided to take some time off as a student to focus on teaching: "I'd like to explore the teaching side without being a grad student" (p. 21). (Note: Some departments continue to hire "professional TAs", people who have graduated or who hold degrees in the discipline). Joelle has taken a number of professional development workshops in teaching, including a course in education at another institution.

### **Positive Critical Incident: "Good Cop, Bad Cop"**

Joelle TA'd for two different professors in a full year course, one of whom was outstanding and one of whom had serious challenges communicating his thoughts and

ideas to the class. The first professor taught through the Fall term and was highly structured and organized. He communicated the course material to the TAs in the class, provided them with the lecture slides ahead of seminar, and shared with them his plans for the course. As Joelle notes,

It got so that I saw the direction he was going in and I could anticipate what was coming and what he wanted them to get out of the course and he was clear about his goals and he was modeling them. (p. 12)

Not only was the instructor an outstanding teacher, the students in her seminar were clearly self-motivated and committed to learning. In Joelle's experience, it is the best teaching and learning experience she has had: "Great professor, great students, great seminar" (p. 12).

In the Winter semester, however, the professors changed and the teaching style varied drastically. The new professor, a tenured faculty member, overloaded the students with information, digressed from the course material, and tested the students on information that was not covered: "He was all over the place" (p. 12). Joelle was left scrambling to understand which course material was the most relevant. She consulted with the other TA who was equally confused as to material for which the students would be held accountable. In the meantime, the students in her seminar were beginning to revolt: "I went to the seminar and all the students looked at me and said 'what the hell did he say?'" (p. 13). They were confused about what he was teaching and frustrated that they could not understand the main areas to study. Although Joelle attempted to consult with the professor about what the students were experiencing, his teaching style remained convoluted.

After a number of weeks with this professor, Joelle began to understand what he was trying to teach and decided to take matters into her own hands:

I thought I have to change my tactics so I told them, you come prepared with questions, tell me what part of the reading or slide you didn't get, what concept you didn't get...so we spent half an hour going over the lecture which I hate doing but if we got it out of the way quickly we could go back to our discussion.  
(p. 13)

Following her intervention, Joelle received a number of accolades from her students, which were even more keenly felt because she knew from the Fall term that they were motivated and bright learners. Throughout this, she made every effort to remain professional:

I am in that position where I can't laugh, I can't gripe and I can't criticize and I can't do any of those things but I have to find a way to say 'yes you are right we need to discuss those things.' (p. 13)

Her ongoing efforts to assist the students interpret the meaning of course material appear to foster a commitment amongst the students to help each other. In this way, Joelle created a learning community in her seminar borne out of mutual need: "They also helped each other a lot...We all knew what the goal was and we all worked toward it" (p. 34). The course ended successfully for them and, although the students informed the department that the course was problematic, they also made it clear that Joelle had helped their learning considerably. She was ecstatic when she heard from the Fall term professor that she "rocked the evaluations" (p. 14).

Although this could have been a negative critical incident in Joelle's teaching, it becomes a transformative experience for her. As a TA, Joelle is needed to translate the challenges created by the professor into successes for her students. Through this process, her sense of purpose and teaching self develops: She realizes she is not only competent as a TA, but that she can translate difficult concepts in such a way that is meaningful and helpful to the students who, in fact, tell her that she "taught the course." She realizes that, as an instructor, she probably has more pedagogical expertise than the professor and, although she knows less about the discipline, she knows more about pedagogy. Her understanding of the complexities of teaching also developed: "I thought it would be about 90% that [knowledge of course content], and 10% all this other stuff. It's not. It's ...20% of what you understand. All the rest is course management" (p. 25). This self-awareness of her pedagogical competence allows Joelle the confidence to investigate and successfully secure a teaching opportunity at another institution and to further develop her instructional expertise.

#### **Negative Critical Incident: "Course Management Issues"**

Following her success with this course, Joelle was asked to TA for a professor she held in considerable esteem. There were two seminars for this course: She assumed responsibility for one and he for the other. As the term began, she found herself in an awkward position with a small group of students in her class who had become resistant to her facilitation. These students had originally asked the professor which seminar he was going to lead so they could register for his. The professor was popular amongst students, known to be interesting with a quirky sense of humour. He chose a seminar time, informed this small group of students, and they signed up for his seminar. However, he

had not checked with Joelle as to her own class schedule, which conflicted with the seminar time he had allocated to her, and, hence, the seminars were switched. The students were annoyed right from the first week of class and their request to the professor to change seminars was refused. Although Joelle felt their petulance from the beginning of the course, she tried not to take it personally. The rest of the students were responsive to her instruction.

As the term progressed, the professor appeared to become increasingly disorganized in his lecturing. He did not lecture according to the sequence of topics stated in the course outline but jumped chapters, skimmed over stated topics, and covered additional material and concepts that were not delineated in the outline. Joelle stated. "I don't think there was a lesson plan. I don't think there was a plan in place. I think he was really winging it" (p. 9). The professor's style is to teach very much in the moment and, although Joelle attended the lecture and attempted to modify her own lesson plans based on the changes, she became increasingly frustrated. When she contacted him to ask what his plans were for lecture so she could prepare her seminar, his responses were hit and miss. To make matters worse, it soon became apparent that he was running his seminar like a third lecture, covering material he missed in the structured lecture hour. As Joelle reported:

He did the seminar after mine, and there were times when I thought, wait a minute, what happened to the information in between? You taught that in your seminar? You can't be doing that, it sounds like they are asking questions, you are answering them but my students [in my seminar] are not getting that information and then, at lecture, you start asking questions and I think what the hell? Cause

that was not what you told me to do in seminar. That is not what you told me we were doing. (p. 4)

The professor's lack of communication with Joelle and his absent-mindedness regarding his course management seriously undermined Joelle's authority and status in the course. One day, when it became apparent that the students in her seminar could not answer a question in lecture, he publically humiliated her by stating incredulously, "What are you doing in seminar?" (p. 23). Joelle was shocked at how disrespectful he had become: "I felt really humiliated and, after a couple of other off-hand comments, I thought, are you really this mean? How come I didn't see this side of you before?" (p. 23). Joelle answered indirectly, doing her best to maintain her professionalism: "I felt that it would have been disrespectful to point out that he had not covered the material in lecture and that I am not supposed to be teaching the course – that's his job" (p. 31). When one of the resistant students met with him following this incident, he announced to Joelle that he would be coming to observe her seminar the following week. The threatened observation felt punitive rather than helpful: Joelle knew that the resistant students would turn into model students in his presence and then revert to being sullen after he had left. Joelle resented that he "put them in the middle" (p. 8). At the last minute, however, he cancelled the observation due to a meeting, and Joelle was again left to face students who clearly expected the professor to show up to that seminar.

Joelle was close to quitting her TA contract. The professor's lack of communication with her and his inability to remember what he had covered with which group of students was infuriating, but it was not typical behaviour for him, given his reputation as an excellent teacher. Although she had a healthy relationship with most of

the students in her seminar, the action of this small group of resistant students who appeared to have the ear of the professor combined with his unpredictable behaviour seriously undermined her confidence:

It was really shocking to me that it was coming apart at the seams and I couldn't figure out what was going on and that is when I thought it was me. I am the problem here. I am not getting it, it is something I am not doing...and I thought maybe you are great at [teaching] grad courses but when it comes to TAing for you I don't want to do it again. (p. 20)

Joelle's status in the course and her sense of self-identity were abruptly turned around, however, when the professor went missing for a few days and Joelle was called on to assume responsibility for the course. He did not appear at lecture: The students, fidgeting in their seats, looked to Joelle for an explanation. She had none but, in the spur of the moment, she stated she would provide a review to any student who wished to stay in class. To her surprise, all the students remained. Following the lecture, the department chair approached her to ask Joelle to step in. The professor had experienced a personal crisis and was completely unavailable and out of communication. She was asked to design, deliver, and mark the quiz scheduled for the following week.

Joelle assumed responsibility for the course, set the quiz, and shepherded the students through the last few weeks of the course. Being invited to take over the course in a crisis situation was hugely reaffirming for her, and boosted her confidence considerably. Since she had laboured under the assumption that the professor was beginning to dislike her, she was reassured to discover that his behaviour could be



attributed to reasons other than her lack of competence, and that she was needed to help with the course in ways she could not have imagined.

Both Joelle's negative and positive incidents help her to develop a sense of identity as a teacher. Although her confidence was undermined at different points in each experience, both serve to reinforce for her that she can "trust her instincts" (p. 32) as a teacher. The differences in the two incidents stem from the feelings that are aroused in her as a result of the experience. In the positive incident, she knows the challenges belong to the instructor, not her. In the negative incident, she feels humiliated and embarrassed by the words and actions of the professor who publicly questions her competence and then entirely vindicated by the outcome of the course and her own hand in ensuring its success. It is the relationship with the professor that was simultaneously a source of hurt and a source of pride. When he apologized to her after the crisis and confided in her as to his own vulnerabilities and personal stress that had caused him to disappear, Joelle was finally able to articulate how she had been feeling:

We talked for an hour one day and I said okay well this explains a lot... like you used to answer emails the same day and then it became 3 days and by the time I got it, it was too late to do anything...the frustration at never finding you in your office...so I get it now. (p. 2)

It would seem Joelle can forgive the lack of communication and the course management issues once she can attribute his behaviour to his own stress, not to anything she has done: "It was a relief actually to know it wasn't him; he's not psycho and he's not mean" (p. 3). Although Joelle had reported this as a negative critical incident while she was experiencing it, the positive outcome in the last few weeks of the course left her elated:

“Actually it was good for me because it taught me something about myself: You can do this” (p. 3). Her developing confidence was further bolstered when the professor offered her another contract.

### **Sondra**

Sondra is an enthusiastic, reflective, and hard-working woman who has completed the second year of her master’s degree. She began teaching in her third year as an undergraduate student and, consequently, has 4 years’ experience as a lab demonstrator, a seminar leader, and a course coordinator. She has been well mentored by a few outstanding educators in her department and is clearly committed to teaching and to helping students. She has attended a number of instructional development events, through both her department and through the central teaching support unit.

#### **Positive Critical Incident: “Student Learning Change”**

Sondra had TA’d the same course twice and, as a result, her comfort level with the content area had increased with experience. In her second year as a TA, she was also offered the course coordinator position providing her with the opportunity to supervise and mentor new TAs. She was excited about being able to work with novice TAs and to “potentially make a good course even better and more student-centred” (p. 26). Sondra took the year to learn from “the veteran instructor, the TAs, and the students in the class and got a feel for how the course could continue to enhance the student experience” (p. 26). The following year, she was again given the course coordinator position but learned that a new faculty member had been assigned to teach the course. The new professor had just graduated from doctoral studies and had not taught before. In this case, Sondra was clearly more experienced than the person to whom she reported, not only in terms of her

familiarity with the course material but also in terms of the pedagogical practices associated with the delivery of the course as well as the cultural norms of the department and the institution as a whole.

Sondra experienced some initial trepidation around working with a brand new instructor:

I thought to myself, this could really go one of two ways – either the course will be a complete disaster if we are not on the same page or it could be fantastic; the two of us could work together to make the changes that were needed to make the course even better. (p. 24)

Sondra acknowledges that it was essentially the luck of the draw, and that her experience with the new instructor could have been challenging. Instead, she found herself in the role of mentor to the new faculty member teaching the course. As someone who was organizing the details of the course as well as acting as a front-line representative with the students, Sondra used this opportunity to try new pedagogical approaches. Having had a positive mentoring relationship with her first instructor, she visited that person to vet her ideas and then proposed them to the new faculty member who remained supportive throughout the course. Sondra worked hard to establish clear lines of communication between the instructor, the TAs, and the students, which resulted in a team-based approach to the course:

As course coordinator, I requested weekly TA meetings that included not only course related discussion, but also brief in-services delivered by a different TA every week. These meetings were supported by the new lecturer and well-received by the new TAs. I was able to develop new materials, and order new

equipment, including putting together budgets and requests to the department on my own. It was nice to know that I had the freedom and support of the professor and she trusted my decisions for the course. (p. 25)

Sondra titled her positive critical incident “Student Learning Change” because she felt she made a significant difference to the students in terms of how effectively they learned. She implemented a formative feedback process and “discussed with the students how feedback can be helpful in the development of the course” (p. 25). Having been successful in assisting both students and the professor, Sondra felt her work was valued.

Sondra’s years as a TA combined with a reflective stance and exemplary mentorship from faculty members in the department resulted in a demeanour that characterized her as experienced and professional. She performed her role as if she were a “junior colleague” (Sprague & Nyquist, 1989) and she was ready to assume full responsibility for course development and delivery. No longer worried about her own performance as a TA, she turned her attention to the goal of improving student learning. She looked after course administration with confidence and was happily willing to supervise and mentor novice TAs. She felt largely responsible for the success of the course.

### **Negative Critical Incident: “Blocking Change to Course Design and Implementation”**

Interestingly, Sondra’s confidence and self-efficacy in her role as a TA was simultaneously being undermined by her experiences in another course (Course B) in which she served as a TA and course coordinator for her graduate supervisor. Her negative critical incident detailed her frustrations in attempting to “improve student

learning” in a course delivered by her graduate supervisor. Sondra notes with some irony that her “positive and negative critical incidents are almost bookends of each other.”

When Sondra assumed instructional responsibilities for course B, she was reasonably confident that she would be able to introduce strategies for improving student learning similar to those being implemented in course A. In fact, she eagerly anticipated working “to improve” the course, given that it was being taught by someone she already knew:

As this was a professor I already had a close relationship with, I thought that maybe the experience could be even better, as the rapport and trust was already there and she had seen me be successful in the development of other courses. (p. 15)

Given that the professor was also Sondra’s thesis supervisor, Sondra was convinced that all would proceed smoothly. “I thought my relationship with her would be even better because I was also her graduate student” (p. 15).

Much to Sondra’s surprise, the professor was resistant to the changes Sondra proposed. Although Sondra received a number of complaints from the students, and attempted to summarize and communicate those concerns to the professor, the professor ignored the communications and chalked it up to laziness in the students, contrary to Sondra’s own sense that ineffective delivery was compromising the course. “I suggested possibly creating a formative feedback tool at the midpoint of the semester. This idea was completely shot down” (p. 22). Sondra’s frustration increased over the term as did that of her students; yet, little changed. What became most disengaging for her was that the students’ feedback, which Sondra valued as a source of information regarding course

improvement, was persistently ignored; yet, she could not intervene: “As much as I had to listen to student concerns, there was little I could do for them. I needed to stay professional” (p. 22). Sondra’s maturity and commitment to being a professional allowed her to assume a significant leadership role in one course (course A) while simultaneously being frustrated and disempowered in another (course B). Her negative experience led Sondra to begin to doubt herself as an instructor: “I second guessed my ability to teach and handle this type of situation” (p. 22).

Although Sondra was clearly the most experienced TA in the group of participants, she too received mixed messages around her role as both graduate student and as TA. In one instance (Course A), her responsibilities were clearly delineated and supported by the instructor; in Course B, her position as graduate student muddled the waters in her relationship with the course and she was cast into the role of apprentice rather than colleague: “I was her graduate student and didn’t want this experience to influence any of the other work that I was doing on my thesis” (p. 23). The privileging of the role of graduate student over TA is not lost on TAs who want to spend time doing a good job in the classroom but who are told to focus on research efforts instead. Graduate students who are socialized into the academy often learn that the reward system is geared to research over teaching, a lesson that Sondra had learned early on:

when I started teaching at university I thought that teaching would be recognized as least as much as research...I figured you would see the same devotion to teaching as you did to research and I have learned that is absolutely not true. (p. 17)

Sondra's frustration at not being able to initiate changes in the instructional situation was further increased when the professor asked her to babysit her children at her house:

In one sense, I was being completely blocked off and in another sense I was being pulled in to do personal things as well, so it was just a little bit odd I think in that sense. I wasn't sure how to take her from one role to another role. (p. 16)

Thus, in one semester, Sondra experienced a multiplicity of role and purposes as both TA and course coordinator. Sondra identified herself as a "colleague" on course A, empowered to make changes that result in increased student learning and mentoring novice TAs in innovative pedagogical practices; in course B she was relegated to the "helper" role, clearly an apprentice to the professor/thesis supervisor, and was further disempowered by being asked to fulfill a gendered and subservient role. In the interests of maintaining a relationship with her supervisor, Sondra babysat the children. Working with different professors whose moral landscape and orientation to TA supervision dramatically differs fosters feelings of confusion in TAs and fuels the imposter phenomenon.

A number of TAs, in addition to Sondra, identified power, or a lack of power, as being problematic in their relationships with faculty and students. This next TA Tale explores the theme of power and privilege a little further as it recounts the mixed emotions experienced by an undergraduate student TA at the hands of a senior professor. It is, in fact, my own story, one that I had not thought about for many years until I began this research. The act of transcribing these TA critical incidents, both David's and Sondra's, triggered memories of a time when I had basked in the attention of a scholar,

only to discover the attention was misunderstood. The themes of how power can be used to exploit, to flatter, to coerce, and to betray is not restricted to the academy, but the academy rarely speaks of it. This tale, my tale, occurred over thirty years ago: such transgressions are less explicit today, but the tensions created by an abuse of power and privilege remain.



***TA Tale: My Professor***

***(On Power and Privilege)***

When I was an undergraduate TA, I was hit on by my professor. Well, not my professor – he wasn't mine really, in any sense of the word. I didn't even take a course with him. He was in the faculty though, the Faculty of Humanities, and he found me, loitering in the halls of academe, desperately wanting to be recognized as someone with promise. I was in my fourth year. I don't know how I came to know him or him me, except that perhaps he had stopped by the games room where I worked some evenings. Perhaps we started chatting about the games, about life, and about what he did at the university.

He was impressive as scholars go. He had written numerous books (they were all lined up in various editions on his bookshelf as proof) and he was making the rounds of lectures, a big name in academia. He was a large man with huge hands and a huge nose. In his late 50s, perhaps older, though from my vantage point in higher education, anything over 30 seemed old and wise. His skin was blotchy, reddened in patches, which I now realize was probably the effects of alcohol. I remember his skin, and his smell.

How did I come to be in his office? He had invited me, somewhere along our chance conversations, to visit him. He thought I had promise. He wanted to show me the latest book he was working on. Really? Did he want my opinion? Did he want to know what I thought of this turn of phrase or that metaphor, that image? My imagination soared. I was being invited to partake of a scholarly conversation. An intellectual debate. I had opinions, and he wanted them.

My first visit was uneventful. What year was I in? What were my interests? What was my background? Did I have a boyfriend? He spoke a little about his work, an in depth study of a Jewish poet, and the fact that he was on his eighth book. I had never heard of him. I still haven't. He must have sensed my stupidity and become bored, because our time together was cut short. He had a meeting to go to, he said, a faculty meeting in which others would drone on and on about trivial matters, preventing him from accomplishing important work. I felt pity for him. A great scholar, a writer, an intellectual, forced to walk among mere mortals. He had spent 15 minutes with me and, so far, I had failed to impress.

A week later, I saw him talking in the hallway, a giant of a man, towering over his colleague. My professor was gesticulating, his large hands slicing through the air as he warmed to his argument, his voice a deep rumble. His physical stature was criticism incarnate. No one could measure up. It was palpable, and those of us walking by stopped our own conversations in order not to disturb his.

Then he saw me. He stopped talking, turned to me and put his giant hand on my arm. "Come to my office this week. Come on Thursday." He resumed talking to his colleague. My own friends were clearly surprised that I had the attention of the senior scholar. I obviously had promise. No one was more surprised than me. Perhaps I hadn't sounded as dimwitted as I feared I had.

On Thursday I went to his office in the afternoon. He seemed surprised to see me but also pleased. He invited me in and closed the door. He wheeled around in his enormous office chair. I sat on the small couch looking up at him like a child at Santa,

expectant but tinged with fear. What would we talk about? Dostoyevsky? Tolstoy? Discussion techniques in small classes? And then it happened. His gigantic paw came out and caressed the back of my head. He pulled me towards him. I could smell a mixture of alcohol and aftershave lotion. It was a full wet kiss that lasted about 5 seconds. It seemed like an eternity.

What is it about me that makes excuses for other people's bad behaviour? I was confused by what happened. What was that? Was that a cultural thing? A goodbye kiss, an eastern European ritual known to those more worldly than me? I now know that part of my confusion came from the audacity of this happening amongst the books, in the middle of the afternoon, in the central hallway of the department of a respected university. If he had invited me off campus, I might have had suspicions. But campus offices were surely the breeding grounds of important work, giving birth to new ideas, pregnant with possibilities.

A slow learner, I visited again. It had been a misunderstanding. I wanted him to respect me, my thoughts, my opinions. We could discuss great works, unforgettable characters, the questions that haunt all of humankind, the answers to humanity's woes. This time I took a book. I hadn't been there more than a few minutes when he stood up and pulled me to my feet. The kiss was longer than the first and he was strong. I couldn't pull back. One giant hand stayed on the back of my head, holding me in place, the other roved, down and over my breasts and then between my legs. I could no longer fool myself that perhaps he had wanted to be my mentor. No discourse, only intercourse. No father figure to guide my intellectual growth. No Santa.

When I pushed him away he didn't seem surprised or offended. He laughed. He then reached out and tweaked the skin under my neck. "You have a double chin," he said mockingly. Why was he reminding me of my own inadequacies? Was he telling me "you can't refuse me, you are not so beautiful yourself?" I politely excused myself. Not only was I intellectually wanting, but I was naïve and ugly as well.

I did nothing. There was nothing to be done. Who would believe me? Even more poignant, who would care? No one had ever talked to me about this. Perhaps it happened to the TAs all the time.

It wasn't over. A month later he was the guest lecturer in one of my courses. He was introduced as "the great so-and-so" who had written prolifically and was one of Canada's leading scholars. The 200 or so students in the lecture hall were all suitably impressed. Pens were poised. They hung on every word.

As he finished the lecture he walked up the centre aisle, followed by the faculty member who had invited him, enjoying the attention of the students who were clearly excited to be in close proximity to such an intellectual heavy weight. I watched him approach my seat, three tablets in from the aisle. My heart began to race. Would he see me?

Our eyes met. I decided to keep my head up, my gaze steady. I had done nothing wrong. I expected him to drop his eyes, ignore me, to look away in embarrassment and regret. I expected him to feel remorse. Instead, he abruptly stopped on the steps and looked directly at me. The faculty member behind him fell silent, being ignored. I could feel myself going red as he gazed at me, along with what felt like every student in the lecture hall. He slowly smiled. "So you are in this class?" he said, his voice booming throughout the lecture hall. "Very good. Come and see me, Thursday."

The faculty member escorting my professor looked at me hard. He raised his eyebrows. What was I supposed to do? Yell out loud? Scream at him in front of my classmates? Expose him? Others were looking at me, wondering why I had attracted the notice of the great scholar. Perhaps some were envious. Perhaps some may have suspected. Perhaps some thought I was indeed special. I knew I wasn't. I wasn't particularly smart, and I wasn't even pretty. But in that moment in front of my peers, I had been singled out for attention. "Okay," I whispered. In that moment, he was *my* professor. Perhaps, that was enough.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: THEMES, PLOTS, AND CHARACTERS**

Stories lived and stories told interweave to create a narrative canvas. In my conversations with my TA participants, we attempted to explore the feelings evoked by the critical teaching incidents they identified and what they may have learned in the process about teaching, about themselves as teachers, and about the academy. The inquiry process itself has also fostered my own reflections about teaching, resulting in an effort to recreate the themes and feelings of the critical incidents into works of creative fiction. What follows here is a summary and analysis of the themes and issues identified through the inquiry as being salient to the experiences of the 5 TAs who shared their thinking with me.

The major themes identified are: (a) role ambiguity, (b) lack of preparation for roles and responsibilities, (c) mentorship and socialization, (d) communication challenges, (e) ethical dilemmas, power and privilege, (f) impostership, (g) feedback and evaluation, and (h) relationship. Each one is discussed here with respect to how they were identified in the critical incidents. Readers may also recognize these themes in the TA Tales.

### **Role Ambiguity**

The TAs in this inquiry were engaged and motivated individuals who took their roles and responsibilities seriously. Yet, defining their roles was challenging. They were asked to identify their role in the academy as if they were explaining it to someone outside of academe. The language used by the TAs themselves indicates the diversity of interpretations of the TA position: descriptors used included “mentor and facilitator,” “a working colleague,” “a supplement to lecture material,” “a resource,” “a teacher,” “a

support for the professor and the students,” and “an assignment [it’s just an assignment that everyone takes on].” For one participant, receiving a TAship was simply a financial award given as a result of undertaking graduate studies; others saw themselves as assuming a more proactive and independent role in the teaching of course content.

In each of the positive incidents reported, the TAs were unsure of their role but chose a course of action based on listening to their intuition. David tutored students after class; Joelle assumed responsibility for conducting a review; and Sondra independently introduced a formative feedback process. Jenna did not know whether she should follow her instincts and contact her student who was in distress, and although she was concerned she could get into trouble, she chose to listen to her instincts. The internal voice that prompted her was one of a fellow human to another; a compassion for someone who was struggling:

As an undergraduate, there were times when I just felt 99% close to quitting and giving up...and I felt it was that experience in my background that motivated me to at least connect with her by email and hopefully just give her that one boost for that next step to gather her mental capacities. (p. 8)

In three of the negative incidents, the TAs are unsure of their role with respect to how much content they should teach: Jenna, Shelby, and Joelle all grapple with the tension between effectively facilitating a discussion and assuming a more direct instructional role. Jenna attributes her challenges to not knowing enough course content. In this respect, she sees herself as a mini-professor, needing to be responsible for imparting information that will help with the review of the exam. Shelby recognizes that her role is to facilitate learning and happily introduces an active learning exercise in one

class, only to see it dismally fail in another. In this case, she resorts to lecturing. Joelle also wrestles with the fine line between assisting in the course and assuming autonomous responsibility for it. In her case, the lack of clear role delineation triggers an emotional roller coaster which is made even more confusing by the professor's threat to observe her class. The negative incident subsequently morphs into a positive teaching and learning encounter when she is asked to design, deliver, and assess the quiz for the course. She recognizes, however, that it is her maturity and length of teaching experience that had allowed this to be a positive experience, not only in her own eyes but in those of the professor as well: "He came in and said, you know, if it had been someone else I would have been in trouble. But I was mature enough to say, well, whatever was going on with you, it is the students that matter" (p. 6).

In the reported negative incidents, the TAs become confused by the mixed messages they receive from the professors with whom they work. In Sondra's case, she is applauded by one professor who welcomes her input into course decisions and chastised by another who sees it as unnecessary and unsolicited. Sondra is torn between a sense of duty to the students who are clearly confused by the instructional style of the professor, and to the professor who is also her graduate supervisor. Although she makes efforts to share the feedback the students had given her about the challenges of the course, she is compromised by her position as graduate student, and dependent on the supervisor for successful completion of her work.

David's role ambiguity stems from the mixed messages he receives from various members of his department with respect to his work as a TA and as a graduate student. He is initially told he will teach one course that will help him with his research area and

is then subsequently assigned another after what appears to him to be a backroom deal between colleagues. Consulting the chair is unhelpful and he is left to TA a course that has no connection to his research area while feeling jaded about the hiring process. David attributes his resistance to being bullied by the department as stemming from being a mature learner:

I think the whole process of not coming in as a timid student – [but as] an older student – an adult learner with some life experience – I didn't take well to crossing the line when some of those guidelines were set...they were breaking contractual agreements. I spoke up and that can lead to problems within graduate studies. (p. 7)

The need for clearly delineated roles and responsibilities becomes increasingly apparent when TAs are supervised by the same faculty member for both their graduate work and their instructional work. In challenging the power structures of the academy with respect to both his teaching appointment and his graduate work, David develops a sense of personal agency, which Brookfield (2005) has defined as characteristic of self-directed learning.

While the literature on TA preparation suggests that TAs often receive mixed messages about their responsibilities (Nyquist et al, 1989; Prieto & Myers, 2001; Staton & Darling, 1998), the maturity level of each of the TAs in this inquiry may have contributed to their decision making about their roles. After all, they are participating in an inquiry about teaching largely because they have been reflective about themselves as teachers and have stories to share. As practitioners, they hold beliefs and assumptions about teaching that may or may not resonate with their experience in the academy. This is

certainly true in David's case when he chooses to leave the academy because it does not fit with his value system. Brookfield (2010) refers to this as "practical theorizing":

Practical theorizing has its origins in practitioners' attempts to grapple with the dilemmas, tensions and contradictions of their work. Actions educators take in these situations often appear instinctual. Yet, on reflection, these apparently instinctive reactions can be understood to be embedded in assumptions, readings and interpretations that practitioners have evolved over time to make sense of their practice. (para. 16)

Brookfield (2010) suggests that theories of practice are created from two sources: readings on formal theory that help people name their practice and testing out experiences with those of their colleagues through conversation. In this respect, the act of engaging in an inquiry on teaching, or being members of a peer group devoted to exploring practice, can help TAs generate practical theory.

### **Lack of Preparation**

When asked about their level of preparation for the TA role, all indicated they had been mostly unprepared for TA work, and the task of stepping into the classroom to TA the first seminar or lab was largely trial by fire. As Jenna said:

[t]he only experience I had was knowing how tutorials ran ...I knew the classroom I had to be at. I had a list of students. And I knew what the assignment was from the professor. He said, 'just get them to talk.' (p. 6)

In this instance, the professor served as the graduate supervisor as well as the course professor, and the TA lauded her supervisor's mentorship of the research process. For the TA role, the professor implicitly expressed confidence in her ability to teach by stating



“just get them to talk”; however, at the same time, his lack of concern for the TA’s instructional preparation undermines the value of the TA role.

Shelby recalled how unprepared she was in terms of both instructional expertise and content knowledge: “Oh, the first year was horrible...I was having seminars on a theorist I had never taken so I was thinking someone is going to blow my cover...it was like the blind leading the blind ” (p. 3). This lack of preparation for instructional responsibilities is not surprising, given that many TAs are allocated their TAships only a few days before the semester begins. A start of term orientation assists in initiating novice TAs to existing resources but, given that such orientations are generally centralized, they are largely designed to offer basic resources. Only one TA commented on attending a departmental orientation that discussed pedagogical challenges.

### **Mentorship and Socialization**

Mentorship was identified as a theme as a result of participants’ responses to questions concerning their preparation for their TA employment (based on the assumption that course professors or graduate supervisors may assist in preparing their TAs for their instructional responsibilities), their description of the roles and relationships that impacted each of the critical incidents in their experience, and, lastly, direct identification of mentors in response to the question “Who mentors you in this work?” No specific definition of mentorship was provided to the participants in these discussions and their interpretations and use of the concept were broadly defined.

The TAs identified mentors as those fulfilling the roles of “resource person,” “advisor,” “sounding board,” “role model,” and someone who provided “emotional support and encouragement.” These descriptions were similar to those identified by

Zelditch (1990) who described five mentor roles that faculty members fulfill: advisors, supporters, masters, sponsors, and academic role models. Interestingly, each of these roles was also identified by the TAs themselves in describing the roles they fulfill for students.

The participants' diverse use of the concept of who constitutes a mentor in their work appears to be supported by studies in which mentorship is broadly defined: "mentorship is a composition of influential relationships" (McGinn & Frake, 2006, p. 3). Mentors need not be academics. Each participant in the TA study made reference to a nonacademic mentor who had influenced his/her teaching, such as family members, friends and previous colleagues, or peers. The TAs' descriptions of the relationships they engaged in were, at times, highly charged and, not surprisingly, the emotional nature of such relationships means that there is a potential for either significant attachment or significant hurt. McGinn and Frake noted that "mentoring is an emotional investment which can have both positive and negative consequences for students and mentors" (p. 5).

In response to the question "Who mentors you in this work?" 3 participants mentioned faculty members, although only one was a current course supervisor and actively working with the TA. Sondra had had the good fortune of working early on with excellent role models in terms of teaching: "the first two positions I held were for two faculty members who I had a great respect for their teaching...they provided templates, and suggestions and really [acted] as sounding boards" (p. 8).

One participant who identified the course supervisor as a mentor discussed the importance of feeling like part of the team: "he is a phenomenal teacher...a good mentor for me...he's approachable and he says I want you to make this course better" (p. 4). The

professor's willingness to have the TA work to improve the course validated her as a member of the instructional team. Other participants also underscored the need to feel validated in the teaching of the course and their role in providing important feedback to the professor on how the course was unfolding.

The participants also identified other individuals who had influenced their lives in acting as mentors, primarily previous professors, peers (both graduate students and fellow TAs), a friend who taught elementary school, and family members. Joelle discussed the ways in which another TA in the course was able to fulfill a support role with respect to frustrations around lack of communication: "There was another TA in the office and I would go in and say, oh, he did it again and we used each other as a sounding board" (p. 11). Shelby worked closely with another mature TA in the department, even though they did not teach the same course. The fellowship created through a cohort of TAs, who can potentially empathize with each other's challenges, is emotionally safer than seeking advice from a professor, particularly when s/he supervises the student's graduate work (Daloz, 1986; Keith-Spiegel & Whitley, 2001; Staton & Darling, 1998; Zachary, 2000). As Shelby pointed out:

People don't really feel comfortable going back to the professor cause no one wants to admit that they don't really know what they are doing and nobody wants to admit that when they close that door they are overwhelmed by that experience. And they all are. (p. 27)

Being an experienced TA can also become an obstacle to receiving mentorship within the department. As Shelby noted, establishing seniority within the department also means that you are expected not to need mentoring: "now I have the reputation because I have

been there, it would never occur to anyone I would need it now. I am old hat, right?” (p. 7). The notion that effective socialization into the norms of the department or university requires a formal mentoring relationship that is hierarchal (by virtue of senior or experienced faculty members showing the ropes to novice members) is probably the largest impediment to fostering a collaborative community dedicated to developing teaching practice. Having departmental “experts” or “teaching award winners” assuming the mentorship role can set up an implicit hierarchy that can be detrimental to the mentorship relationship. As Shelby noted:

When you come in and you are a professional I figure you really know what you are talking about and you know what you are doing so I don’t think you are on the same level as me... I don’t think I can reach your standard. [B]ut you put a colleague in front of me, then I think she has done that, then I can do that. (p. 26)

Although novice TAs need orienting to the services and policies of the organization, as well as the resources required to efficiently do their jobs, they also need mentors who can engage in honest meaningful dialogue about their own trials and tribulations in teaching. Many TAs might still feel more comfortable discussing their challenges with peers, but faculty members supervising TAs can do a great deal to foster this kind of supportive mentoring relationship by adopting a team-based approach to a course. In this respect, all members of the team can share their challenges in ways that benefit the entire group, students included.

Utilizing a developmental framework for TA work in combination with a better understanding of the complexity of the skills and competencies required in each TA appointment (Austin, 2002; Sprague & Nyquist, 1989) would allow those supervising and

supporting TAs to establish more effective mentoring relationships and resources. The types of mentoring relationships needed by TAs may vary according to the instructional experience of the TA. Novice TAs may see themselves as needing more pedagogical or content expertise, and, as such, require advice and more resource-oriented support from faculty. On the other hand, experienced TAs may require mentorship that is collegial and team-based as suggested by Sondra's comfort level with mentoring other TAs who were part of the course. Sprague and Nyquist identified the TA journey as a developmental path from senior learner to novice TA to junior colleague. This framework can help in thinking about the diversity of support needs of TAs but, ultimately, faculty members need to recognize that each TA brings a different level of expertise and reflection to the course.

In addition, faculty members who supervise the work of TAs in their courses require support and mentorship themselves. Faculty members find themselves managing teams of individuals as well as course-related issues, administration, budget constraints and allocation of resources; yet, few receive any formal preparation for these roles (Nyquist & Wulff, 1996). As a result, course supervisors may be surprised by the time required to look after these kinds of course management issues. Working effectively with TAs to prepare them for their instructional responsibilities can save time in the long run so that communication challenges between students, TAs, and professors do not derail the course.

### **Communication Challenges**

Clear communication was also a key theme identified by these participants as crucial to the success of their TA experience. The complex interrelationships of TAs with

both students and faculty members means that TAs can potentially be “blamed” by both parties in the event of a miscommunication, particularly with respect to issues of assessment and evaluation. This is certainly evident in Joelle’s challenges with the professor who does not communicate with her about lecture and seminar content and who forgets what he has told which class. In this example, the consequences of poor faculty/TA communication begin almost immediately. The students’ annoyance at being in a seminar not taught by the professor (as a result of the professor’s miscommunication) means the TA must deal with their resistance and petulance. When she does not cover the same material as the professor (because he switches content), the students complain. The professor’s lack of organization and memory of what he has taught is challenging enough but, when he responds to the student complaints by announcing that he will observe her seminar, the professor significantly undermines her authority and further humiliates her by publicly questioning what she is doing.

Like students, TAs need to feel supported by the professor with whom they work and to feel that they are making meaningful contributions to the course. TAs who are undermined by the professor are likely to contribute less and bide their time until the course finishes. Professors who further undermine TA authority by reversing grades or contradicting what TAs have told their students are in particular danger of losing the TA’s trust and willingness to go the extra mile.

Communication between professors and TAs is also essential for ensuring consistency across seminars and sections of a course. Consistency across seminars works toward ensuring fairness in marking, leading to greater consistency in understanding and evaluating student performance. When professors do not provide opportunities for the

teaching team to come together to discuss common challenges and issues, the TAs themselves may opt to share strategies and common understandings of how the course is unfolding. This is less than ideal, however, because some TAs may choose to go solo, and, as a result, the students in some classes may be disadvantaged or advantaged. As Shelby noted:

It frustrates me that there is so little continuity between seminars and there is often no attempt to coordinate seminar instruction and marking between TAs. I have spent countless hours regrading assignments so that my overall average is consistent with other TAs. Some professors provide no marking key and it is really up to the TA's discretion. (p. 5)

Communication, clear marking guidelines, opportunities for discussion and visible support for the TAs who support the course are all essential to course management success.

### **Ethical Dilemmas: Power and Privilege**

Although faculty members were identified by TAs as potential mentors, they were also identified as obstacles in the TA experience, especially those who assumed the dual role of course supervisor (supervising the work of the TA) as well as graduate supervisor (supervising the thesis). In two instances, the faculty members involved in the course were cited as the reason for the TA not obtaining desired teaching contracts:

I was supposed to be offered the actual sessional instructor position [for a course I had TA'd] and my graduate supervisor was asked about it and said absolutely not...[the reason being] that I had too much to do with my thesis

work...unfortunately it was shot down without it even being discussed with me...and I would have been very interested in that. (p. 3)

In this example, Sondra was performing the role of a senior TA in the course, providing guidance and support and serving as a resource for the other TAs in terms of getting materials. In this respect, she would have been able to move into the sessional role fairly easily. However, she was also acting as senior TA for the graduate supervisor's course. Assuming the sessional position would have meant leaving the senior TA position that she fulfilled for her graduate supervisor. In this incident, the graduate supervisor exercised a decision which personally benefitted the supervisor in terms of retaining her own graduate student for TA work rather than consult with the TA as to her own interests in developing teaching expertise. Moreover, Sondra felt she had spent a considerable amount of time putting out fires in the course because of her supervisor's lack of teaching skill; having her own course may well have involved less work, and would have been considerably more rewarding for her, both personally and pedagogically.

David's story of how a TA appointment had been awarded and then subsequently given to a 'friend' is described as a breach of contract but is really a story about ethical responsibility and professionalism: "I was probably the only proper person for that position the way it was posted but it was given to a colleague's friend...it was very discomfiting to know people felt they were beyond rules or protocol" (p. 14). In this case, the TA felt that not only would he have benefitted academically from TAing the course but recognized that the hiring procedures had been violated as a result of backroom deals which were tainted by suspicions of ethical irresponsibility. Such ethical dilemmas underscore the power differential between TAs and course instructors and significantly



compromises the professor/TA relationship. The longitudinal study conducted by Nyquist et al. (1999) on the graduate student experience found that many graduate students identified their supervisor as one of the obstacles in their graduate student journeys, rather than someone who provided a support or safety net.

Ethical dilemmas are created in the professor /TA relationship when either party abuses his or her power in carrying out supervisory or instructional responsibilities (Keith-Spiegel & Whitley, 2001). The faculty member who asks the TA to babysit his or her children, protesting that the student can simply refuse if uncomfortable, appears to be unreflective about the ways this can be perceived as a coercive request. TAs, too, can abuse power. In my own Master's degree, I was privy to another TA who ran out of time for marking essays and subsequently assigned the same grade earned on the first term's set of papers. TAs can also abuse power by undermining faculty members in their communications with students and by insinuating that the instructors for whom they work are poor organizers, communicators, or teachers. The transitory nature of TA work and the lack of training and formal evaluation processes means that some TAs may choose to focus on their studies over their instructional responsibilities, at the expense of undergraduate student learning.

Nonetheless, the majority of power lies with the faculty members who have long enjoyed a fair amount of autonomy and freedom in their decision-making in academe. Many supervise TAs as they themselves were supervised when they were graduate students, working under an apprenticeship model of graduate education (Austin, 2002; Denicolo, 2004; Staton & Darling, 1998). Hiring policies and contracts that outline roles

and responsibilities can help both parties understand the nature of the employment contract.

Graduate supervisors who supervise the work of the graduate students and who also supervise them in their TA role are potentially in a conflict of interest. It is in the interests of the graduate supervisor to ensure that the student completes graduate work on time and teaching responsibilities can take away from time spent on research.

Conversely, a graduate supervisor who does not directly supervise the TA appointment may not like his or her graduate student undertaking certain teaching responsibilities within the department or engaging in other kinds of activity (e.g., professional development in teaching) in the event that it detracts from the research responsibilities at hand. This was the case with Sondra who found that her supervisor was less responsive to her pedagogical interests than her research project. This tension has the potential to translate into a departmental poker game where TA contracts are traded and bartered according to the personal and professional needs of the faculty members. The needs or desires of the graduate students/TAs may not even enter into the debate. As such, it is important that faculty members be oriented to their responsibilities as both graduate supervisors and course supervisors and be made aware of the ethical implications of their actions when supervising students. In addition, centralized resources need to be established where graduate students/TAs can challenge or question departmental or faculty members' decisions without entering into a grievous situation where the potential for increased hostility and abuse exists.

### **Impostership**

What became apparent in my discussions with these TAs was that their reported negative critical incidents all contributed to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, while positive incidents assisted with feelings of self-efficacy and identity. Feelings of being “imposters” in academe were named by 4 of the 5 participants. David discussed how TA training sessions helped him overcome feeling “like someone you are not” (p. 24); Jenna saw herself as a “pleaser” with a “fear of evaluation” (p. 15); Joelle commented on how “the course was coming apart at the seams and I thought it was me” (p. 20); and Shelby articulated, “I always feel that somebody is going to find me out and I really don’t know as much as I think I do. The other thing that is challenging for me is that I am a perfectionist” (p. 3). These descriptions are in keeping with the characteristics identified by the literature on the imposter phenomenon, namely: (a) a fear of being discovered as not smart, (b) anxiety about performance, (c) high motivation to achieve, and (d) a tendency towards perfectionism (Brems, Baldwin, Davis, & Namyniuk, 1994; Imes & Clance, 1984; Langford & Clance, 1993; Turman, 2001; Zorn, 2005).

In one study, Imes and Clance (1984) reported on a graduate student who was overwhelmed by the process of writing her dissertation proposal. She had difficulties completing the work because she was convinced that every sentence had to be perfect, every concept thoroughly investigated. This strive for perfectionism is, in fact, what prevents those who suffer from the Imposter Phenomenon to move ahead in academia, in that they are immobilized by feeling that the work they produce is not quite good enough. Feedback that would suggest their work is proficient is met with suspicion, with positive

comments being attributed to other reasons such as the personality traits of the person giving feedback or a fear of offending the individual (Imes & Clance, 1984).

The connection between the need for feedback and feelings of impostership is salient. The TAs in this inquiry reported that they were unsure of how well they were performing as TAs and the only data that afforded them a source of information about their competence came from students. This lack of feedback on teaching fans the flames of feelings of impostership because teaching work is then carried out in secret, without any public input. The sense of impostership also creates a fear of evaluation so TAs are unlikely to seek opportunities for feedback independently. As Jenna stated, “I think I must be to some degree a pleaser. It’s interesting how in this environment ... being evaluated is very important to me...though the fear of evaluation is probably greater so that I’d rather not be evaluated” (p. 15). The tension created by the simultaneous need for positive reinforcement mingling with the fear of evaluation merely exacerbates feelings of inadequacy and incompetence. As Brookfield (2006) points out, actively soliciting feedback feels like a risky endeavour:

Following this book’s admonition constantly to examine how students experience our classrooms also heightens considerably the chances of our feeling like imposters. Asking our students what they think of us carries with it the risk that they will tell us what we already think but have hidden from others - that we’re incompetent. (p. 94)

According to the University of Waterloo’s (2010) website for graduate students, the impact of the Imposter Phenomenon on graduate students can negatively affect the quality of instruction:

[IP sufferers are] less accessible to students, unable to motivate students, not comfortable acting as a role model or mentor to students [and] less likely to be open to questions from students. As researchers, [they] conduct less research, [and are] less willing to present at conferences or publish. As future faculty members, [they are] unwilling to attend departmental functions and events, are reluctant to serve on departmental committees, and avoid socializing with peers and faculty members. (para. 4)

Although feelings of incompetence are likely to occur with all members of the institution at some point or another, it is imperative that TAs are assisted in recognizing symptoms and are taught ways in which to manage IP if they are to reach their potential. It is also imperative that faculty members supervising TAs and graduate students acknowledge the ways in which feelings of impostership can disempower an already marginalized group.

According to Brookfield (1991), one way to defuse these feelings of impostership is for faculty and students to identify the phenomenon openly and how it makes them feel:

You can decrease the intensity with which students experience the syndrome by acknowledging how you experience it yourself as a teacher. Teachers who have credibility in students' eyes can do a great deal to relieve those who suffer from the imposter syndrome by talking about their own occasional feelings of inadequacy as teachers. (p. 58)

In this inquiry, the research process itself appears to have assisted with recognizing feelings of impostership:

What I have learned about myself – it is that feeling of inferiority that comes over me ...that when you really look at it, it might not be something from the perspective of anyone else in that room, it's just me, and that is helpful.

(Jenna, p. 17)

Similarly, Shelby shares that she has learned a great deal through both her TA experiences and through talking about her teaching:

This has been very helpful for me because I have actually done a lot of thinking out loud...I am a little more open to people's shortcomings, idiosyncrasies. I'm not so dogmatic. I think I am easier on myself. I'd say that it has grown me as a person. (p. 23)

As Brookfield (1991) has pointed out, acknowledging feelings of inadequacy and impostership, and talking about this phenomenon within the academy, can significantly contribute to establishing a greater sense of community.

### **Feedback and Evaluation**

A systematic evaluation/feedback system that is structured not on disciplinary actions but on developing teaching effectiveness is essential for TAs suffering from feelings of impostership but is, nonetheless, needed by all TAs. Although it was expected that the TAs in this inquiry would report needing more extensive feedback on their teaching, I did not expect that they would have no feedback whatsoever. None received a formal evaluation of their TA work from their professors, nor did they receive student feedback, unless it was solicited themselves. The following discussion focuses on the distinction between faculty evaluation of TA performance (as might be required for human resource purposes in order to undertake disciplinary action) and the feedback need

to foster instructional development. Two potential sources of feedback on teaching come from both faculty and students.

### **Faculty Feedback**

The lack of faculty feedback on teaching effectiveness is problematic in each of these reported critical incidents but is not atypical. Some institutions implement faculty and/or peer-based observations as a source of instructional development. In my study, however, observation, or rather the threat of observation, was implemented only after the professor felt there was a problem to be solved. Although in many institutions formal mechanisms exist for capturing student comments on TA performance, they often come too late and/or are simply disseminated to the TA after the grades are in. Discussions about ways in which the student data can be interpreted and thematized are rarely systemic.

There are a number of reasons why faculty members may resist evaluating TAs as they carry out their instructional responsibilities. First and foremost, professors may operate under the assumption of ‘if it is not broken, why fix it?’ The need to provide critical feedback is seen as a matter of necessity only when things are not progressing according to plan or when students complain about TA performance. Secondly, when a TAship is treated as a financial award for graduate studies, the evaluation of instructional performance takes a back seat to thesis supervision. The aim is to have the student graduate, not secure employment as an instructor. In this respect, even providing TAs with student feedback from the course is treated differently than faculty members who require data from students on their teaching to assist with their promotion and tenure applications. From the supervising faculty member’s perspective, a TA is a temporary

help or a temporary problem. A problematic TA is fairly easy to get rid of at the end of the course in that s/he either graduates from the university or is assigned another course. As a result, faculty are not as invested in providing feedback to TAs in ways that might assist with instructional development.

### **Student Feedback**

Students play a fundamental role in teaching TAs how to teach both implicitly and explicitly. All participants commented on the strength of the relationships formed with students, both individuals and entire classes, and that they learned (about teaching) from students. Treating students as partners in the teaching/learning enterprise can yield considerable benefits. For example, Sondra recognizes that the students can and should have a voice in the instructional process. She implements a formative feedback process independently of her course supervisor in order to learn how to do things differently. As she says,

students felt included in the development of the course: They knew that their input was shaping their classroom experience...they [are] a terrific resource – they know how to learn...they have that metacognition so why not have that given to me as a resource? (p. 23)

In the absence of feedback from the professor, Jenna also implemented a midterm formative feedback process. These TAs appeared to value student input into their teaching development, despite fears of being criticized.

The feedback and encouragement received from students also allowed the TAs in the inquiry to gain a sense of self-efficacy and purpose. As Shelby stated:



When I have a student who emails me and says thank you – when I have one who says I am taking this as a minor because you were my TA...nobody cares about that but me...but I get choked up...I made a difference. (p. 22)

Jenna's feedback from the struggling student who returns to school is a positive validation that her decision to reach out to her had been a good one. David also seeks feedback about his teaching efficacy and gets it in the form of a gift from the mature students in his class. The TAs' sense of making a difference to their students was predominant throughout the critical incidents described. The encouragement received from students was what kept these TAs in their roles. This sense of purpose for TAs is connected to the following discussion on the need to build relationships in academia. For many, TAs and faculty alike, teaching becomes the vehicle through which to establish relationship, community, and connection.

### **Establishing Relationship**

An important and unexpected theme identified in the conversations with TAs was their joy when they successfully forged relationships as part of their TA role and, conversely, the loneliness and self-doubt they experienced when relationships with either professors or students did not work. This sense of isolation is not specific to TAs but rather experienced by many who work in academe. Engaging in an academic career is an intensely personal endeavor (hooks, 2003; Mallard, 2002; Palmer, 1998). Often, however, "the isolation and emotional sterility of faculty life can be dangerous – even toxic" (Kraft, 2002, p. 204). Although teaching can be a noisy, busy endeavour, it can also be lonely for many who teach behind closed doors, reluctant to discuss what occurs in their classrooms: "Despite the fact that teaching occurs in a public forum where we are

constantly surrounded by students and others, many teachers describe feeling painfully isolated and emotionally alone in their work” (Intrator, 2002, p. 202).

The inherently competitive nature of the academy fosters individualism and an unwillingness to share insights or failings with others. For graduate student TAs, this tendency is exacerbated by the fact that they are being evaluated by the very people to whom they might otherwise look for mentorship or advice. And although TAs may find community through social venues supported and promoted by Graduate Studies or their departments, few departments appear to offer structured opportunities for TAs to talk about their teaching responsibilities in ways that can assist in grappling with feelings of loneliness or isolation.

Faculty themselves do not always recognize the need for establishing community with TAs. They themselves have not customarily been trained or mentored as supervisors/managers. Many have been socialized as competitive beings. They are encouraged to compete for research grants that earn them prestige through the rewards systems of the institution. In many disciplines, they are also rewarded for solo publications over collaborative ventures; moreover, many work on research projects in areas of specialty little understood by their nondisciplinary colleagues and often only partially understood by departmental colleagues. Their teaching is rarely observed by peers, administrators, or members of the public unless they require documentation for the purposes of promotion and/or tenure. Faculty seldom team teach, or engage in collaborative activities around instructional innovation. Those who do are applauded but generally not rewarded for taking the time or the initiative to come to a common understanding of what effective teaching looks like or feels like in practice. Similarly,

departmental efforts for reform, such as revising the curriculum, are generally considered service work. Like teaching, service is lauded but not seriously rewarded.

The undervaluation of teaching in higher education has been well documented, despite the rhetoric that surrounds efforts to establish a balance between a teaching and research (Cuban, 1999; D'Andrea, 1996; D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005; Park, 1996; Pocklington & Tupper, 2002; Smith, 1991). Although there have been numerous initiatives to promote the scholarship of teaching and learning on many campuses, many university committees continue to privilege discipline-based research publications as evidence of scholarship over publications in the teaching of the discipline. As a result, many new faculty are advised to concentrate on establishing a research record rather than focus on teaching. Such an institutional culture serves to shape these same attitudes in graduate students and TAs (Austin, 2002; D'Andrea, 1996). As D'Andrea (1996) points out, "the key impediment to the success of TA training is most likely linked to the overall status of teaching versus research activities in universities...the most difficult [problem] to change is the value placed on teaching itself" (p. 161).

TAs being socialized into the academy watch as new faculty attempt to balance their professional lives between research, teaching, and service. They may observe, however, that while new faculty may be given release time from both teaching and service to establish a research program, seldom are they released from research responsibilities to learn to teach or to develop a service agenda. If faculty members are lucky, they may be mentored by a sympathetic and responsible Chair. In many cases, however, Chairs are also struggling to balance their own professional lives and, in turn, may not have a clue as to how to make changes to a long embedded culture of isolation.

Even senior administrators who recognize these challenges must work diligently to overcome systemic resistance:

What I've come to believe after eight years as a college president – and much reading in the literature on leadership and organizational change – is that the leader's most crucial and most exhausting challenge is to maintain his or her own connections (to self and to others and to the purpose of the work), to resist relentless pressure from the system to be driven into isolation. (Walsh, 2002, p. 273)

The isolation of the academy is not lost on the TAs who work alongside faculty. They note that many may look to the private sector or to international connections for the sense of community and scholarship that evades them on their own turf.

For the TAs in this inquiry, they all expressed feeling isolated at different parts of their journey. They also stated that their loneliness is exacerbated by the fact that few outside of academia fully understand the TA role. Family members are more likely to understand that their loved one is a graduate student, and that the teaching role is just “an automatic assignment that everyone gets” (Jenna, p. 1). When teaching is characterized in this manner, it undermines its value and the TAs' sense of identity. Moreover, TAs, such as Shelby and Joelle who have completed their degrees but continue to TA in the department, neither have the benefit of a student peer cohort, nor are they fully fledged or socialized members of the department. Like sessional instructors, they can easily be marginalized in the department by virtue of their temporary status.

The need for relationship in one's professional setting is, of course, an overarching theme that can subsume all of the other themes discussed in this chapter.

Role ambiguity, a lack of preparation for responsibilities, the need for mentorship and socialization, communication challenges, ethical dilemmas, feelings of impostership, and the desire for feedback are all signifiers of an absence or dearth of community supports. Like the graduate students in Nyquist et al.'s (1999) study who drew pictures of their academic journeys as one of isolation and hardship, the TAs in this study simply want to be part of a community that not only employs them but also supports and validates their efforts to make a difference.

## *TA Tale: Tales from the Trenches*

### *(On Pedagogical Learning)*

So, you are a new TA? Well, congratulations!! You are in for an interesting time. I know you are scared. That's part of the experience. Especially in your first few weeks. Just be yourself. I know, I know, that's harder than it sounds. Especially when they are either not saying anything or challenging what you say. But you'll get the hang of it. What have I learned? Hmm, that's a good question.

I have great words of wisdom to share. (And if you believe that, you are not cut out for a life in academe, my friend). You know, I used to think that when I walked into a classroom all I needed was to know the material: 90% was about the topic, 10% all this other stuff. Funny, eh? Yes, I can see you smiling at me. Certainly by the time I had been in university 5 or 6 years, you think I would have learned that students don't really want to hear what I am saying. They think they do, bless their souls. They listen attentively on week one, somewhat on week two, and by week three the concerns of dating and jobs and parents and children and other assignments in other courses occupies their brains. In fact, it is very hard for me to occupy my own brain during class. I have my own dating (ah I see you are smiling again), my children, my parents, my studies (let's not forgot those!), all of the responsibilities of a university student to seduce me away from the job at hand. Sometimes, it's a challenge to choose between my own work and preparing for class. But I have learned to balance the ball a bit better. Like a seal. An academic seal. What, that's not funny? You know, at one time I would arrive in seminar with a well-crafted lesson plan. I still do in fact. They are really important. But I have learned to modify on the spot, and – dare I say it – to throw it away on occasion.

I have learned that it is less about me and more about them. That's a hard lesson, let me tell you, especially for me. Isn't it always about me? In my first year, one day I prepared for 5 hours for seminar. I knew everything. I had some great questions formulated and I had read the articles a number of times. But my students weren't prepared for the class or for me being so zealous. Many of them hadn't read the readings and I was left lecturing while their eyes glazed over. Who could blame them? Lots about me that day, but I don't think they learned anything. I've learned not to take it personally. That's a lesson unto itself....be personal, but don't take it personally. Teach who you are. That's from Parker Palmer (1998) in the *Courage to Teach*. You should read it.

But, you know, when you are a grad student, it's easy to think they are like us. I have had to learn to keep them awake for the most part. I once took a workshop on active learning and I went in the next few seminars and had something different going on every 10 minutes. That soon became exhausting. But over time I began to see that it was my responsibility to orchestrate different activities or ways of getting at the material for the different learners. That goes well now. They all respond. Everyone participates, even the shy ones because I build in opportunities for that to happen. Stephen Brookfield in *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* (2005) said that he thought facilitating discussion was like jamming for music and that providing everyone had an instrument, music would happen. Well, he found out that really, really bad music can happen. Some of us can't even play. We've all had classes like that. He says you need to really put a lot of thought

and planning into facilitating a discussion; it's got to be front-end loaded and then it can unfold. Nobody sees that though. They think it just happens, naturally.

So what else? It's all pretty basic really and yet it's amazing how long it takes to figure this out. *If we ever do*. It's a work in progress. It's organic. Teaching is about being human and talking with humans and that's not something you can predict, though you can prepare. I have learned that being a TA requires an ability to manage a course, and manage people, not always be a subject expert. Can anyone be an expert these days? Knowledge changes so fast. Going to workshops about teaching can help. Talking to others about what goes on in your class can help. About what you don't know. We are all in this together.

I know I do not know everything, but I have also learned I am not an imposter. Have you heard of that? I used to think that any day they would find me out and throw me out. Turns out I'm not alone in thinking that.

I also now know that a kind word, a smile, or an email to check in on a struggling student can make all the difference in the world to that student. Sounds corny, doesn't it? But it's true. And I guess when you really think about it, it's pretty straightforward. It's about respect. It's about caring. It's about professionalism. It's about preparation. And it's about them, not me. So now I try to talk less, and listen more. And that, my friend, seems to work, most days.

## **CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE STORIES**

The purpose of this inquiry was to explore positive and negative critical incidents in teaching as described by 5 TAs in the university context. The inquiry was also a methodological exploration of arts-based scholarship and the ways in which creative fiction, drawn from the participant narratives and from the researcher's reflections, might evoke in readers some of the insights and challenges experienced by TAs in their everyday practice.

The issues that were identified as concerns for these TAs were: (a) role ambiguity when they were hired, (b) a lack of preparation for their roles, (c) the need for better mentorship, including mentorship for those who supervise TAs, (d) communication challenges between faculty members and TAs, (e) the abuse of power and privilege in their relationships, (f) a sense of impostership in the work they do, (g) the absence of helpful feedback and evaluation, and (h) the ways in which establishing relationship with both faculty and students is important to a sense of individual purpose. Also of interest in this inquiry is a discussion of how the apprenticeship model of graduate education has given rise to many of the challenges cited above. With the increasing corporatization of higher education, the primary socialization model for TAs and graduate students may well shift from one of academic apprenticeship to one of institutional employee potentially giving rise to a different set of challenges.

This final chapter discusses the implications of a changing university environment with respect to TA roles and responsibilities and, in addition, details a number of recommendations directed to the academy for improving the practice and development of TAs. I then offer some reflections on how an inquiry devoted to storying and restorying



might make a methodological contribution to our understanding of TA issues, including some suggestions for future stories that need to be told. The chapter ends with a final autobiographical tale that underscores a major theme in this inquiry around the importance of care, compassion, and relationship in teaching.

### **Unionization and the Changing Academy**

Although a discussion on the increasing corporatization of the academy and a rise in graduate student unionization appears to be at odds with a discussion on compassion and relationship, the two need to be reconciled if those who work in the academy are going to thrive. In terms of TAs, the trend in North American higher education towards the increasing unionization of TAs suggests that TAs feel a need to be protected in their relationships with the institution and may well impact how graduate students fulfill their TA roles and responsibilities in the coming years. A recent development in the issue of unionization in American higher education, namely the U.S. Labour Board's decision to again revisit whether TAs at New York University have the right to unionize (Jaschik, 2010) is interesting given that any precedent set by New York University, a private university, could pave the way for significant changes for TAs across the United States. Although Canadian universities are more familiar with the presence of graduate student unions on campus, such a trend could still impact higher education in North America as a whole, putting greater emphasis on the role of the TA as an employee rather than as a student.

What is clear is that the old model of a graduate student apprentice for faculty is no longer viable in the contemporary university. As employees of institutions, TAs have the same access to rights, benefits, and job security as other employees. According to

Rhoades and Rhoads (2002) in their survey of graduate student web sites across the United States, graduate students increasingly see themselves as a marginalized group mobilized by poor working conditions:

The Georgia Graduate Forum (GGF) Web site quotes a graduate student employee at Georgia: “We are lured in with the apprenticeship myth to do work no one else wants to do and paid as poorly as possible for doing the job that the university hires professors to perform and that taxpayers believe professors should do” ([http:// www.uga.edu/~ggf/ggfbro98.html#ggf](http://www.uga.edu/~ggf/ggfbro98.html#ggf) ). This rejection of an apprenticeship model may also be partly a matter of recognizing that students lack a guarantee of entry into the profession. (p. 176)

The corporatization of the university and rising competition for resources are likely to fuel motivations for TA unions to form in the United States and to strengthen in Canada (Rhoads & Rhoades, 2005). Rhoads and Rhoades (2005) make an excellent argument for the way in which the contemporary North American university has become increasingly privatized, globalized, and business oriented. Kompf (2005) also argues that as a result of technology and fiscal constraint, the academy has moved towards “corporatization and the merchandising of both knowledge and the learning process” (pp. 125-126). In light of this focus on corporatization, graduate students are potentially doubly exploited as both consumers of education and employees of the institution they serve:

If we think of graduate students in the context of large, privatizing, globalizing universities, we can see that they are dually situated in a complex, post-industrial knowledge enterprise. They are at one and the same time consumers and employees; they pay for high quality educational services, while delivering

educational services for the same enterprise which maximizes its revenues and productivity by managing human resources in such a way as to enhance the ability of faculty to generate knowledge (and its products) by exploiting the abilities of its own graduate customers. (Rhoads & Rhoades, 2005, pp. 251-252)

In light of these changes in higher education, the less than optimal employment opportunities of graduate students and the fiscal constraints they experience, TAs may well ask the institution in which they are employed to be more accountable in its allocation of teaching assignments and in ensuring equitable wages and working conditions. In this study, David chose to leave his program based on what he perceived to be a lack of accountability, exacerbated by poor communication and a hostile working environment. His story reminds us that, increasingly, institutions need to ensure that procedures for hiring are transparent and based on criteria, such as disciplinary and pedagogical experience, seniority, and wage equity, rather than as part of a financial award for entering into graduate school.

### **Recommendations for Supporting and Developing TAs**

In light of the challenges described in both the literature and by the TAs in this study, the following section details ways in which the academy can better support and develop TAs so that they feel they are integral and valued members of the academy. The TAs in this inquiry identified four ways to provide support: (a) mentoring, (b) establishing community, (c) documenting and celebrating TA work, and (d) valuing teaching.

## **Mentoring**

If TAs are to be integrated into the fabric of university life, then mentoring needs to be implemented both formally and informally. Mentoring fosters socialization into the academy; it creates community and a sense of belonging. As Lovitts (2004) noted in his study of attrition amongst PhD students, an estimated 50% of students leave academe because of the isolation and lack of preparation for graduate work. Fostering opportunities for students to be adequately prepared for their responsibilities, to connect with each other, and to be integrated within their departments will assist in reducing attrition (Lovitts, 2004).

As TAs acquire experience and are involved in more and more opportunities for teaching and learning, the need for multiple mentors whose roles are facilitative rather than authoritarian becomes more apparent. Zachary (2000) identifies a number of paradigmatic shifts that occur as learners mature and begin to be governed by adult learning principles. These shifts echo Sprague and Nyquist's (1989) concept of developmental stages of the TA's journey from senior learner to novice TA to junior colleague. As TAs develop in their level of experience and expertise, they require different kinds of mentoring relationships, moving from those that are authoritarian and expert driven to facilitative and process-based, ultimately leading to a greater focus on critical reflection and application. Participants in this inquiry were less inclined to name supervisors, departmental personnel or resource personnel as mentors and more likely to name as mentors those who walked alongside them, providing support and encouragement in their journeys.

### **Establish Community and Supports**

The creation of a TA peer group within a course, department, faculty, or university to share information and resources can go a long way to minimizing TAs' sense of isolation. Informal meetings, lunches, or gatherings can help create community and are more likely to be a source of support for TAs with respect to ways to proceed with problematic situations than are formal mechanisms.

Moreover, when the responsibility for the support of TAs is shared by the department, there is less likelihood of misrepresentation of information. Resources are made available to all TAs, not only to those who have the good fortune of working with faculty who are communicative. Writing about their teaching experiences by participating in educational research studies also fosters community amongst TAs. In fact, participants noted that engaging in discussion as part of the research process was one of the few times they were able to talk about what was happening in their classrooms. In each case, the participants identified that they had learned something about themselves, their students, or the academy by writing about and discussing their teaching experiences. Huberman (1993) in *The Lives of Teachers* noted that the teachers who participated in his longitudinal study stated that their ongoing participation had been motivated by the opportunity to engage in dialogue about teaching. This opportunity rarely occurred during the course of their busy lives as teachers as staffrooms became places to complain rather than explore (Huberman, 1993). Although teaching is an experience shared by many, talking about one's teaching in any sustained and supported manner does not appear to be common practice.

## **Document and Celebrate TA Work**

The creation of a teaching dossier or portfolio to document reflection and growth related to teaching as well as opportunities to share the portfolio with others for the purposes of constructive feedback can also significantly assist TAs to develop competence and confidence in their skills. While a resume of teaching responsibilities is important for hiring decisions, so, too, is a statement of educational philosophy and a reflective analysis of how students learn in context. Universities that are able to give hiring consideration to TAs who have engaged in some form of teaching development send the message that teaching is valued.

The creation of course portfolios can also assist TAs to feel that they are part of a team-based approach to course development and delivery. The course portfolio can document what previous TAs and instructors have observed, tried, and assessed. Novice TAs become privy to instructional and assessment practices in a way that can teach them about course design, student learning, and feedback. Publically sharing this documentation, including course feedback from students, establishes a scholarly approach to pedagogy that fosters an appreciation of the inquiry process as well as reaffirming the value of teaching within the institution.

## **Value Teaching**

Lastly, the TAs in this inquiry reported that they received many mixed messages about the value of teaching in the institution from those in authority. While teaching is important to some faculty members, others see it as something that gets in the way of the real work at hand. Talking about the mixed messages of the academy, and both the stated and implicit reward systems of the discipline, can assist TAs to understand better the

culture of higher education and how the requirement for teaching, research, and service plays out in different departments, disciplines, and institutions. Talking about the expectations placed on faculty members can essentially help TAs and others new to the academy to feel less confused when making their own decisions around how to spend time and energy negotiating the different demands of research and teaching. Since many TAs and graduate students express surprise at the research versus teaching tension in many institutions (Nyquist et al., 1999), opportunities to discuss how universities work can help significantly in educating TAs about the social and cultural norms of higher education, and how to change them.

In addition, providing opportunities for TAs to tell their stories of experience, and opportunities for faculty and academic administrators to hear and respond to them also help to reaffirm the value of teaching and the work carried out by TAs. Taking the time to listen to others as they recount their stories says “You are important to us and your story matters.” “Narratability means that events and lives are affirmed as being worth telling and thus worth living. Being narratable implies value, and attributes reality” (Frank, p. 5).

### **Future Stories**

Learning about the lived experience of the 5 TAs in this inquiry allows us a glimpse into 5 lives in context. It also, as Cole and Knowles (2001) have stated, allows us a glimpse into the community they inhabit, however brief. Future stories of and about TAs might explore the experiences of different demographic segments of this group based on gender, age, race, class, or discipline, amongst others. A more detailed examination of institutional contexts would provide useful information since the TA demographic varies greatly from institution to institution. In addition, it might also be

insightful to inquire into the ways in which the lived experience of TAs is similar to or different from the lived experience of sessional instructors whose role in the academy is also temporal, transitory, and largely undervalued.

In writing this dissertation, I have become increasingly aware of the inherent tension between my intent to describe the critical incidents reported by the TAs and my desire to reshape those incidents into stories that evoke the feelings of the incidents and cause resonance for readers. That desire stems from the belief that all experience is recreated and given new life in the telling, that our memory of events changes over time and contexts, and that any story is negotiated and understood differently by each reader who comes to the text.

Both storying and restorying TA experiences in higher education provide ways to restore and reaffirm the value of this important demographic. As more and more teaching is carried out by TAs, it becomes increasingly important to understand their experiences and to recognize and celebrate their contributions to teaching and learning in the academy. Future literature on the TA experience will, of course, still need empirical measures of role identity, effectiveness, and the impact of training programs. However, we also need more stories: faculty stories of their lives as TAs, student stories of how they learned from TAs and, above all, more TA stories of their experience. Only by hearing their own voices in the scholarship will TAs come to believe that their work is valued by the academy.

The purpose of stories, Randall (1995) tells us, is both to instruct and delight. A story delights in its potential to elicit catharsis from its readers; it delights when it allows us to see unexpected possibilities and by drawing us into community or into a group of



characters. It delights when it confirms our unformed thoughts and questions and makes us feel less alone in our journeys. A story instructs when it passes on information, when it tells us how to do things, when it conveys values, when it provides us with role models and choices, when it contextualizes our personal conflicts, and when it helps us make decisions by letting us face characters with similar conflicts and dilemmas (Randall, 1995, p. 99). Whether it is through the analysis of the narratives shared by the TAs or through the imaginative and fictional TA Tales, stories have the capacity to entice us into knowledge. For new TAs, this work may provide a catalyst for reflective practice; for those who support TAs, it may provide a vehicle to explore ethical dilemmas and issues in TA development. Or, the stories may simply be read. If they should trigger a recollection, a resonance, or a glimpse into the complexity and constraints of the TA experience, they will have served their purpose. I hope they both instruct and delight.

*TA Tale: June Atkinson*

*(On Mentorship)*

Henry Brooks Adams once said, “A teacher affects eternity. He never knows where his influence stops.”

It took 25 years for me to fully realize how influential June Atkinson had been. I met Professor Atkinson in my first week of graduate school in a course called “Psychoanalytical Interpretations of Image and Imagery.” I didn’t want to take it. It sounded, well, ...hard.

On the first day of the class, we all sat around the seminar table, trying hard to look and sound intelligent. As we were now in graduate school, we were convinced our professors would be the best and the brightest. Professor Atkinson was definitely the brightest, sporting long colourful skirts, fuschia blouses, shoulder length red hair, and golden earrings that swayed in a mesmerizing pendulum. Her lipstick was bright red, and it didn’t always stay within the lines. It was the 70s and possibly she was in the height of fashion, but I suspect she had been wearing the same style for quite some time. She was in direct contrast to most of my female professors who wore suit-like numbers with shoulder pads. June, on the other hand, was like a gypsy with soft edges.

She suited her name and when she asked us to call her June rather than Professor Atkinson, we thought we had entered the big leagues. Then, one day, she told us she was a mother, a single mother, and a parent of three teenage children - surely this explained why she didn’t have time to straighten the lipstick. This was astonishing news to almost all of us, as we had little sense of our professors as people, with lives outside of the university, let alone the time – or the inclination – to engage in childbirth or parenting. We thought the burden of raising families was the responsibility of the wives of faculty, not the faculty themselves.

June also told us she was working part time on her PhD. She wasn’t a real faculty member, “just a sessional.” In fact, she had been a TA in the department the year before. This was even more astonishing. It meant she was a student, like us, but, of course, at a very advanced age. Life-long learning was a relatively new idea and mature students were considered slightly suspect. I remember a discussion with my peers where we wondered if June’s student status in this other area of her life meant she was somehow less qualified to teach. But after a few weeks with her, we no longer doubted her credentials. Her warmth and her openness won us over.

June’s approach to teaching was in direct contrast to that of my thesis supervisor at the time who, on the whole, seemed to be slightly annoyed with the demands of graduate students. I recall little of our conversations. She was always busy, had almost no time for me, and provided sporadic guidance. When we did meet in her office, she lectured for 10 minutes and frequently checked her watch. I soon stopped scheduling appointments but I don’t think she noticed.

Then, after almost 4 months into graduate work, my personal life fell apart and it became clear I would have to drop at least two of my four courses. I had never dropped a course before, believing that it was a sign of personal weakness not to finish what I had started. I am the kind of person who will read a book I absolutely detest, and read it to the

very last page, searching for one redemptive phrase, simply because I had committed to it. Such tenacity is clearly misguided, although it can be advantageous in marriage.

It did not take long to make a decision about which of my courses I would drop. My father always said: "Don't study the subject; study the teacher. The teacher makes the difference." I needed to drop two courses. And so I chose to drop the professor who had invested the least in me – and the professor who had invested the most. I'll never forget the day I went in to talk to both of them about my struggles. I saw my supervisor, a quick 5 minute meeting in which I told her I couldn't continue the thesis course for personal reasons. She didn't ask me what they were or if she could help. She simply stated: "Well, it's too bad that the time we have spent on this has been wasted." She was right, of course. I had wasted time, hers and mine. I had read over 30 novels in excited anticipation of writing that thesis and to this day I have never picked up those texts again.

June's response was different. She listened attentively to my story. She expressed empathy. She told me that in her own experience time had been a great healer. She said she had confidence in my ability to complete her course, and that she was prepared to give me the time I needed to finish successfully.

Despite this support, I dropped the course. I had come to love June's class and I did not want to be only half present, physically or intellectually. I dropped her course because she believed in me and I did not want to disappoint her.

Why do some teachers have more faith in us than we do in ourselves? Whether TAs, sessionals, or faculty, we know the ones who care. The following September I picked up June's course again. I was excited and I was scared.

June wholeheartedly welcomed my return to her class, her earrings swaying and her lipstick still askew. As I had read some of the material the previous year, she asked me if I was willing to mentor others in the class. That simple act of faith in my abilities was the beginning of my teaching career. I began as a peer mentor, then became a TA.

The following months were the best in my academic life. Our class discussions were funny, insightful, and joyous. June encouraged us to make connections between the texts and our personal lives, to explore the resonances and allusions that spoke to us as individuals. For the first time, we felt we were constructing knowledge, rather than receiving it.

In turn, she shared with us her own thoughts on how theoretical constructs played out in her daily life and actions and she invited us to examine our own choices, to question our behaviour, and, above all, to be reflective. Soon our academic posturing and pseudo intellectual discourse was replaced with authentic conversation. Until then, we had been cavalier about our use of course terminology, secretly thinking hermeneutic referred to a type of power drill, and the collective unconscious denoted a communal drinking binge. But June brought psychoanalytic theory to life: we incorporated our newly found understanding into every conversation we had, and we chatted about Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud as if they were eccentric relatives who had just turned up at the family reunion. To outsiders, we must have seemed insufferable.

I recognize now that June was fostering inquiry learning, though certainly no one would have called it that at the time. Together we identified what we needed to know, located the resources we required, and learned as a group. June shared her own dreams and fears and, in this simple act of dialogue, we knew we were important to her, as individual human beings, as colleagues, and as friends.

When June fell in love and married that spring, she invited her graduate class to her home to meet her new partner. When she completed her PhD that fall, we celebrated with her. Her success was ours and ours hers. But, when she died the following winter, our newly found discourse failed us. We did not know what to say or how to grieve. So, we moved on with our busy lives, to adventures and travels, to marriage and families. It was only when a number of years had gone by that I came to realize how much June had taught me, not only about literature but also about life. That a few kind words can go a long way to building self-esteem. As a student sat in my office convinced she needed to drop out of my course, it was June I thought of - and June after whom I modeled my response. When a few years ago I decided to pursue a PhD with a full-time job and a family still at home, it was, in part, because June had shown me how it could be done.

She also taught me that time does heal wounds and that, if I choose, I can let down my hair a little, wear some dangling earrings and celebrate my life, my teaching, and my learning - with joy, with compassion, and a little red lipstick.

For me, and the class of 1979, June Atkinson continues to affect eternity. She will never know where her influence stops.

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## Appendix A

### Critical Incident Questionnaire

1) Think back to an experience during your time as a TA in which you felt the LEAST engaged as a TA. Perhaps you felt you were not being successful or you felt like quitting. Describe the incident in detail. What happened? Describe who was involved and what they did to contribute to the impact of this experience? If applicable, describe the ways the incident or experience contributed to your understanding of ....

- a) yourself
- b) teaching and learning
- c) the institution

2) Think back to an experience during your time as a TA in which you felt the MOST engaged. This experience represented a “high” for you or you felt you had accomplished a significant achievement. Describe the incident or experience in detail. What happened? Describe who was involved and what they did to contribute to the impact of this experience. If applicable, describe the ways the incident contributed to your understanding of ....

- d) yourself
- e) teaching and learning
- f) the institution

For both of the above, please feel free to write as much as you like. When referring to people, please use titles rather than names. However, rest assured that all information that might identify you or these experiences will be removed or masked and that both confidentiality and anonymity in this study are guaranteed.

## Appendix B

### Interview Questions

1. As you know, I am interested in your life as a TA. Tell me a little bit about yourself....
2. Why did you become a TA? What made you think you were suitable?
3. How do you define yourself to others outside the institution, who know little about it (ie your grandmother? (examples -. student teacher, peer helper, university employee, academic apprentice....)
4. How would you define your role as a TA?
5. How prepared were you for the TA experience?
6. Who mentors you in this work?
7. Your first task was to complete a critical incident questionnaire that outlines an experience that most engaged you in your work as a TA. You wrote about.....Can you tell me a little more about that experience.
8. As indicated on the graphical chart you completed, you engaged in a number of roles and relationships during that experience. What relationship(s) had the most impact on you and why.
9. You also wrote about another incident that least engaged you in your TA experience. Tell me about that experience. What relationships impacted you the most in that experience?
10. What do you think you have learned from the both these incidents and your TA experience in general. What will you take with you into other teaching/learning situations?
11. How do you think you have been changed by this experience?
12. What has surprised you the most about being a TA?
13. What do you think your students have learned from you?
14. What has the institution gained from employing you?

15. Besides the ISW, what learning opportunities have you undertaken to learn about being a TA? In retrospect, what kind of support or training do you think would have helped you the most?
16. What advice would you have for other TAs coming into the academy?

## Appendix C

### Graphical Representation

You are being asked to complete two mind maps that graphically capture the roles and relationships that impacted the critical experiences you identified in the critical incident questionnaire. Mind maps (Buzan, 1991), also known as concept maps, spider diagrams, idea webs, etc are a way to capture ideas, thoughts and connections in graphical form. The main features of a mind map include a central idea or image, with main themes or ideas branching out from the central idea. Associated ideas or connections can then branch out from the main themes. Connections can be made between branches to show associations.

This task requests that you complete one graphical representation for each of your critical incidents. Try to use the exercise as a trigger or brainstorming opportunity to identify all the roles and relationships engaged in during the experience. Feel free to use symbols, pictures or graphical representations to depict the experience or to make connections.

If you would like to use software to assist with this process, a free 30 day trial is downloadable from <http://www.imindmap.com/download/>

For more information, see Buzan, T. (1991). *The mind map book*. New York: Penguin

## Appendix D

## Research Ethics Board Clearance Letter



**Brock  
University**

Office of Research Services

Research Ethics Office

St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada L2S 3A1

T: 905-688-5550, Ext. 3035/4876 F: 905-688-0748

[www.brocku.ca](http://www.brocku.ca)

DATE: July 13, 2007

FROM: Michelle McGinn, Chair  
Research Ethics Board (REB)

TO: Michael Kompf, Education  
Jill GROSE

FILE: 06-327 GROSE

TITLE: TA Tales: Restorying the lived experience of University Tas

*Michelle K. M'C*

The Brock University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above research proposal.

**DECISION:** Accepted as clarified. Please submit a revised copy of the consent form.

This project has received ethics clearance for the period of July 13, 2007 to May 3, 2008 subject to full REB ratification at the Research Ethics Board's next scheduled meeting. The clearance period may be extended upon request. ***The study may now proceed.***

Please note that the Research Ethics Board (REB) requires that you adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and cleared by the REB. During the course of research no deviations from, or changes to, the protocol, recruitment, or consent form may be initiated without prior written clearance from the REB. The Board must provide clearance for any modifications before they can be implemented. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to <http://www.brocku.ca/researchservices/forms> to complete the appropriate form **Revision or Modification to an Ongoing Application.**

Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants and the continuation of the protocol.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored. A Final Report is required for all projects upon completion of the project. Researchers with projects lasting more than one year are required to submit a Continuing Review Report annually. The Office of Research Services will contact you when this form **Continuing Review/Final Report** is required.

Please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence.

MM/bb



## Appendix E

### Dissertation Defence Presentation

The title of my dissertation is TA Tales: [Re]storying the Teaching and Learning Experiences of University Teaching Assistants. I have a handout here to help you follow along with my story today. Surrounding this title are the titles of the 6 short stories and one poem that appear between the 6 chapters.

The other side is a word cloud of the dissertation using Wordle, web-based software that creates an image based on word frequencies in the document. This image represents 250 of the most commonly used words in my thesis.

But first I'd like to begin with a story. This is an excerpt from the opening TA tale in the dissertation entitled "I could teach a monkey to do that." The TA in this story is contemplating whether she should personally reach out to a student who has been hospitalized due to stress. This prompts her to reflect on her own stressful time as an undergraduate student when she had challenges during a placement.

*I was placed at the hospital to do a practicum. Doctor White was my supervisor. Mid 40s, she was powerful, assertive, and always in a hurry. I do not know if she had a family. If she did, she never told me, neither did she care about mine. She was a no nonsense woman who had little time for patients and almost no time for me.*

*In my third week in the practicum, Dr. White barked an order at me, one I didn't understand. Perhaps I didn't hear it or perhaps on some deeper, hidden level, I chose not to hear it. I am not a stupid person but I am a defeated person in the face of aggression, anger, and intimidation. Power intimidates me. Knowledge intimidates me, even when I question the veracity of what knowledge is. All I remember from that day was staring down at the bed sheets, and the ringing in my ears. And then her words:*

*I could teach a monkey to do that.*

*I continued to stare at the sheets, the fabric stark and white and clean. In one corner there was a small tear, the threads pulled back to expose a hole in the making, a flaw in the otherwise flawless cover. Like me, it would be gone tomorrow. And, at that point, under the revered supervision of the great Dr. White, my life began to unravel.*

This story is based on a true experience shared with me by one of the participants in this inquiry who recalled the emotions that fostered her belief in treating all students with care and respect. It does not read exactly as it was told to me. It has been restoried

into what I have called a TA Tale, whose purpose is to invite readers to resonate with the themes and emotions of the incident. It is a story of relationship, and the satisfaction that comes with knowing you have made a difference to another human being. I began my dissertation with this story because relationship was the predominant theme at the heart of many of the narratives I heard from these TAs.

William Randall tells us that the purpose of stories is to instruct and delight. Indeed Alexander Pope told us something of that sort in 18<sup>th</sup> century and before him Horace in the *Ars Poetica* (18BC) who described the purpose of the poet as “*prodesse et delectare*,” to instruct and delight.

To instruct and delight. That was my purpose in writing this thesis.

This inquiry had its roots in my professional role in the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Educational Technologies, working with faculty and TAs to assist in them with their teaching skills. Year after year I hear stories from TAs, stories of pivotal moments when they realize they love to teach, stories of students who thrive under their tutelage and others who stubbornly haven’t, stories of supervisors who ignore them, and stories of supervisors who mentor them as friends and colleagues. Stories of delight.

What fuelled this study was a curiosity of how I could capture some of the joys and tensions of what Connelly and Clandinin refer to as “personal practical knowledge” in a way that might assist those new to TA work. I wanted to know what incidents potentially shape the TA experience, both positively and negatively, and what the TAs learn from these incidents, about themselves, and about the academy.

At the same time, I had wanted to make this research accessible to every day readers in a way that still retained the spirit and feeling of what the TAs shared with me. I wanted to explore how their narratives of trial and triumph could be restoried so as to both instruct and delight.

Researchers are always taught to declare their biases and assumptions up front. I do not see them so much as biases, but simply as a way of being in the world. That context, my context, is important here. I learn through stories, and growing up, I learned how to be in the world through literature. My three brothers did not read fiction, so curling up with a novel or short stories was my way of escaping into imagination, into what I thought was a girl’s way of knowing. But matters of the heart seemed always to be secondary to matters of the head: I was taught that reason was greater than emotion, that sense trumped sensibility; and that science was more truthful than art.

When I chose to study literature as a master’s student, it was a way to bring my heart’s understanding into a cognitive world.

Fast forward thirty odd years and into a professional role in the university in which I am privileged to hear what Connelly and Clandinin call the “secret, sacred and cover stories” of teaching. That I could embark on a research project that not only allowed me to gather

stories, but also to play with ways to represent or re-present them using an arts informed methodology was astounding to me. I can still remember the moment, seven years ago when I began the program, and our instructor Connie Russell began discussing the argument between Elliot Eisner and Howard Gardner on whether a dissertation could be in the form of a novel. It was in that moment that this story began.

I turned to Eliot Eisner for the conceptual framework for this inquiry. Eisner's articulation of what he calls "educational connoisseurship" and "educational criticism" essentially gave me permission to acknowledge and build upon my professional understandings and identity. Educational connoisseurship is, according to Eisner (1991), "the means through which we come to know the complexities, nuances and subtleties of aspects of the world in which we have a special interest" (p. 68). Like a connoisseur of wine, an educational connoisseur can use his or her senses to perceive and intuit situations beyond mere description. For example, a connoisseur can tell the difference between a smirk and a smile, even when both are described using the same words. Despite its connotations of elitism, connoisseurship is not about being an expert but it is about experience.

Educational criticism is an effort to illuminate what others might not see. Eisner aligns educational criticism with literary criticism, and argues that the purpose of this kind of criticism is not to critique or find fault, but rather to use language to persuade readers to see a new perspective or to resonate with a theme that had previously been hidden. The primary tool of the educational critic is expressive language such as metaphor, allusion, and imagery, and critics use this language to move readers emotionally. With educational connoisseurship and educational criticism, I had found my purpose: To instruct and delight.

I began exploring articles and books on arts based qualitative research in an effort to frame what I already knew to be a personal, practical way of knowing. At many times, particularly after a long day of reading journal articles, I would seriously doubt that I could marry in one study what appeared to be opposing worldviews. On one hand, the literature on TA development was calling for more empirical studies on TA preparation and instructional efficacy; nowhere was there a call for stories of experience. On the other hand, I was reading wonderful examples of creative arts-informed studies in different educational arenas. The schism between head and heart threatened to undermine the work I was doing and I frequently changed my mind about how to proceed. Like Jane Austen who hid her novel writing under a doily when people came to visit, I struggled to find the courage of my methodological convictions.

I called Chapter Three "The Methodological Muse", because writing it gave me the foundation I desperately needed to grapple with issues of ethics, credibility, and methods. Reading Eliot Eisner, Laurel Richardson, Tom Barone, Lynn Butler Kisber, Lorri Neilsen and Cole and Knowles established a way forward, a way to engage with the research thorough an arts informed methodology that felt authentic and heartfelt. Four years ago my research proposal was to create "portraits" of the TA experience; the word "portraits"

subsequently changed to “vignettes”, which was modified to “storied vignettes” and finally to the TA Tales as short stories of fiction.

The evocations of the words “tales” and “fiction” may be problematic for some, conjuring images of make-believe and fantasy. Yet, as Lorri Neilsen (2002) writes, “the shift in educational inquiry marked by alternative forms of representation, including the literary arts is a shift as much ontological as it is epistemological. Fiction is knowledge.” (p. 208).

This is what I did.

I solicited participation from a larger group of TAs who had completed an Instructional Skills Workshop over the past few years. I accepted the first 5 who volunteered, dubbing them my cast of characters. All were people of honesty and courage. They were vulnerable in telling their stories, witnessed by the tears that were shed by some as they recounted particularly poignant moments of learning. Four women and one man, different disciplines, different life stages, different experiences.

Using Stephen Brookfield’s critical incident questionnaire, I asked my cast of characters to identify one positive and one negative incident in their teaching lives, incidents that were crucial to what they learned about themselves and about the academy. I asked them to mind map these incidents, prepare written narratives of each and then meet with me for an in-depth interview. My participants offered made for TV movie titles for each incident such as *The Frantic Learner*, *Embarrassed*, and, my personal favourite, *Good cop/bad cop*. These stories of experience and inexperience are testament to the care and compassion these individuals felt when engaging in this work.

The incidents the TAs chose to report, along with other stories they shared during our time together, were grouped into 8 general areas of discussion in the dissertation: role ambiguity, lack of preparation for instructional roles, mentorship and socialization, communication challenges between TAs and supervising professors, power and privilege, impostership, the need for feedback and evaluation of competence and, above all, the need to establish relationship, whether it be with students, peers or with professors.

It soon became apparent to me that my participants were struggling with the same issues in both their positive incidents and in their negative ones. Like flip sides of the same coin, each story emanated from the same emotional place. The TA who identified feeling humiliated and embarrassed by his supervisor narrated the way in which he had been shown respect and appreciation by students. The TA who introduced new strategies to a course was rewarded when her students became highly engaged and, conversely, devastated when another seminar group couldn’t be bothered with anything she tried. Teaching is like parenting; you figure it out with one child only to have another who is impervious to your expertise.

All 5 TAs reported that they did not feel adequately prepared for their instructional responsibilities, that they rarely received feedback on their performance, and that communication between professors and TAs was often problematic. Almost all identified

feelings of impostership, the sense that one day someone would point a flashlight in their eyes and say, oops, who let you in to the academy?

All expressed feeling isolated at different parts of their journey. They also stated that their loneliness was exacerbated by the fact that few outside of academia fully understand the TA role or their emotional investment in it.

The need for relationship in one's professional setting is, of course, an overarching theme that can subsume all of the other themes identified in this work, and it signifies a dearth of community supports. Like the graduate students in Nyquist et al.'s (1999) study who drew pictures of their academic journeys as one of isolation and hardship, the TAs in this study simply wanted to be part of a community that not only employed them but also supported and validated their efforts to simply make a difference.

The TA stories reported on in the dissertation and the TA tales that appear between the chapters are meant to complement one another. The TA tales allowed me to play with creative ways to suggest rather than state the issues identified.

I would like to share with you another excerpt from one of the TA Tales called The Model in the Mirror:

*I am a model. No, not the kind that appears strutting the runway and being the envy of every 14-year-old semi-anorexic teenager.*

*No, I am a nude model for a first year visual arts course. It pays well, at least per hour, and supplements my work as a TA at the university. It's easy. I stand around, naked.*

*It's funny how no one ever told me how to do this. I simply saw an ad on the hallway wall. Model wanted for first year drawing course. No experience necessary. Of course, you had to be a student at the university. I guess they didn't want some semiprofessional coming in off the streets to model and demand professional wages for a job that a student could do with no training.*

*"Will you teach me how to do this?" I asked the instructor.*

*"Don't worry," he said. "Just stand there and act natural. Just get them to draw."*

One of my participants, who had never experienced a seminar before, was told by the professor "Just get them to talk".

The opening line of this tale begins with the words "I am a model" to suggest metaphorically the ways in which TAs act as role models for those they teach. As the narrator poses for the students, she reflects on her lack of formal training for this role, and how she has learned to see herself through her students' eyes, and through the work that they produce. This tale attempts to prompt readers to reflect on the connections between both roles in terms of the lack of training and preparation, role ambiguity, vulnerability and the need for feedback.

Lorri Neilsen writes:

Story and narrative--whether nonfiction or fiction, as if we could locate that border--are liminal spaces that do not call for an answer in the same way our conventional notions of knowledge seek an answer. Fiction asks many things: it challenges, extends, enlightens, and stretches us. It teaches us, guides us. Fiction does not enter into the realm of truth claims or accept burdens of proof in the same way as do our conventionally academic exercises around research. (p. 209)

The TA tales in this dissertation were not meant to provide answers. Their purpose was simply to engage the heart and provide a space to reflect, to wonder, to feel and in doing so possibly to know more.

Of course, stories of the TA experience do not end here with this dissertation. We still have much to learn about what it means to be a TA in the academy. There are many other stories that need to be told: how do faculty members feel about their own experiences as TAs and how does that inform them in their supervisory role? What about the stories of TAs from different disciplines, TAs of colour, TAs from other countries, other institutions? How do stories of experience change as we mature or move from master's work to doctoral work? Above all, how does writing about 5 TAs and their experiences now change anything at all about the experiences of future TAs?

I believe that reading and writing stories of TA experience can potentially inform others in a variety of ways. Their main purpose would be to prompt discussion and reflection about ways we can shift from a culture of apprenticeship to one of mentorship.

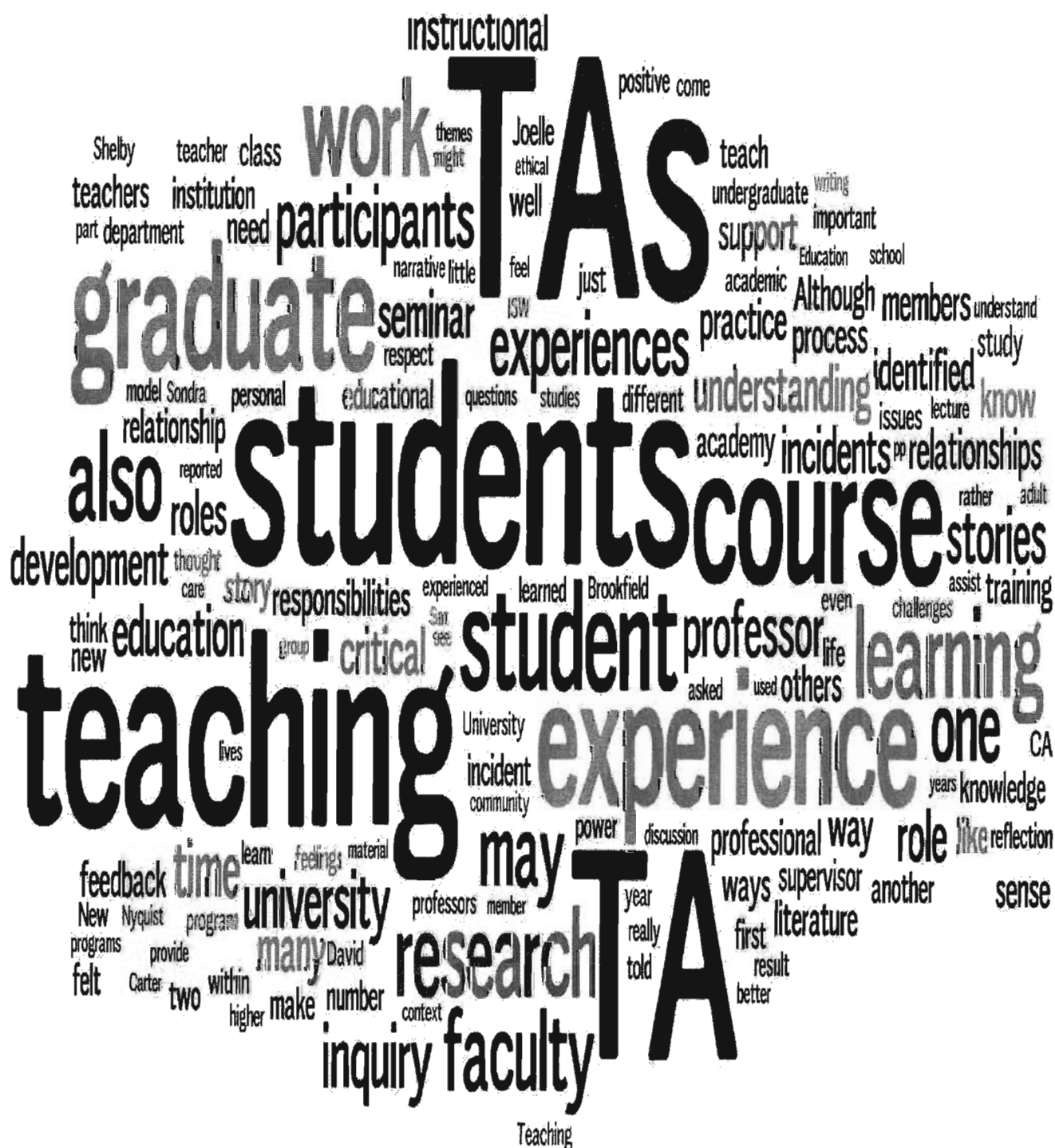
In addition, however, I believe that reading and writing about this marginalized demographic may make a contribution to the TAs' own sense of vocation, of purpose, an institutional affirmation that they are indeed making a difference in the work they do. A.W. Frank said that "To story is to assign value. Narratability means that events and lives are affirmed as being worth telling and thus worth living. Being narratable implies value, and attributes reality" (2002, p. 5).

I like words. I like that the word "restorying" can, with simply removing a would-be vowel, become the word restoring. Can restorying the TA experience help restore that experience, give it greater value and merit in the academy than it currently enjoys? Can giving voice to these incidents allow both those within and outside of the academy a sharper understanding of the complexities and constraints of being a TA in a rapidly changing post secondary environment?

At the very least, I hope that reading stories and restories of TA experience will not only be enjoyable but also informative in helpful and heartfelt ways. I hope they will both instruct and delight.

Oh, and whatever happened to that student who had been told, "I could teach a monkey to do that"? Her story ends this way:

*I ended up finishing my practicum with a different supervisor. And, now as a mature graduate student and as a TA, I use that experience to guide my behaviour. I do know that I have never belittled, intimidated, or humiliated a student. I have tried to live my life according to the principles I learned in my profession, a caring profession. For me, teaching is a caring profession. As a TA, it is that care that sustains me, my care for them and others for me. For what it is worth, I know I could teach a monkey to do that.*





## Appendix G

### Mind Map of the Dissertation

