Suggestions for TA training and responsibilities in online courses

The Skylight team has put together the following suggestions and considerations for Science departments and instructors. These suggestions are based on the experiences of Science summer instructors, TA feedback via surveys and discussions, consultations with TA training leads in Science and CTLT, and UBC and external resources.

TA concerns and requests about supporting online courses

Science TAs who supported the emergency transition to remote teaching expressed concerns about supporting online courses. Their main concerns are summarized below.

- TAs would like more clarity around their roles and expectations in online courses.
- TAs would like information on how departments, programs, and instructors will provide clear and frequent communication, with respect to the changing landscape of their TA responsibilities.
- TAs desire more training on effective strategies for teaching and engaging students in online environments, especially for synchronous sessions (e.g. tutorials and/or online labs).
- There was a desire for additional training to address students technical questions related to learning technology tools, (e.g. Canvas, Zoom, Collaborate Ultra, Canvas quizzes).
- TAs noted that students were reaching out more about their personal concerns/issues (e.g. stress, anxiety, counseling, advising). The TAs did not feel fully equipped or supported to manage student needs.
- TAs were concerned about how to manage their own personal health and wellbeing in the time of this pandemic.
- TAs mentioned that the shift to remote teaching and learning required more time than in face-to-face settings, resulting in a workload that exceeded available TA hours.
- TAs found it difficult to balance their research, teaching, and personal responsibilities, and would like some guidance in how best to manage their time.
- TAs mentioned that not having access to or funding for proper electronic equipment or reliable internet made facilitating synchronous sessions and problem-solving more difficult (i.e. not having a tablet to ease problem solving with students, connectivity issues when using Zoom and/or Collaborate).

Suggestions for TA training and support

The following section addresses the concerns of TAs and offers suggestions for how departments and course instructors can best support TAs in their roles and responsibilities.

General suggestions

- Acknowledge their current situation and set up an open and empathetic environment for everyone involved (e.g. TAs, course instructors, students).
- Provide and/or suggest TA training and workshops that highlight the skills and tools TAs will need to be successful in their roles and responsibilities online. The CTLT May Online TA Institute wiki is a useful resource for gaining insight into what resources would be useful for TAs and highlights the current experiences and concerns of TAs.
- Consider how senior and/or experienced TAs could provide mentorship and leadership in online courses and training (e.g. facilitate weekly meetings; lead/facilitate training sessions for new TAs).
- For individual courses, organize weekly meetings and/or communication with TAs to address their questions/concerns and to build community among the group. Departments and/or programs could check-in with TAs (via surveys or group discussions) 1-2 times during the term to gain a better understanding of the overarching needs and successes of TAs.

- Have measures in place for TAs to document the number of hours they spend on particular tasks. These should be reviewed regularly by course instructors and/or TA leads so that adjustments to workload can be made accordingly.
- Share a contingency plan with TAs and students about what to do if there are technological and/or connectivity issues in synchronous classroom or exam settings.
- Consider how your department and/or program will support TAs who experience technology and connectivity issues.

TA involvement with grading and assessment
- Provide training on new online grading platforms and procedures that TAs will be required to use (i.e. how to use Crowdmark, Gradescope; process for marking exams online)
- Inform TAs of the procedures and messaging related to academic integrity and cheating.
- Consider how TAs might help with building online assessments in Canvas or other platforms used for assessment (e.g. WeBWork, Crowdmark, Gradescope, Canvas quizzes and assignments).
- Keep track of TA hours and tasks. TAs mentioned that grading examinations online can take longer than in face-to-face grading settings, given that getting clarification on particular issues or questions is not immediate.

TA involvement with lectures, tutorials, and labs
- Provide TAs with strategies for supporting student engagement and learning in both synchronous and asynchronous learning environments, and on how to use online tools (i.e. Collaborate, Piazza, Zoom) within these environments.
- Consider having a TA monitor the online chat in synchronous lectures. The TA can respond to students in real time and share questions needing more attention with the instructor.
- It is beneficial to assign TAs to monitor and respond to student questions in discussion forums. TAs would need training and guidance on how best to approach this responsibility.
- TAs could be hired to support the transition and development of course material on Canvas (e.g. creating and/or uploading instructional videos, pre-readings, asynchronous activities, case studies). This can ease instructor workload and give TAs an opportunity to engage more deeply with course content and development.

Resources
- Reach out to Ashley Welsh (ashley.welsh@ubc.ca) and Manuel Dias (manuel.dias@ubc.ca) with questions and/or concerns related to TA Training in the Faculty of Science. You can also touch base with your departmental Science Education Specialists for additional support and discussion.
- TAs are members of CUPE 2278 and policies around their roles can be found in the CUPE collective agreement with the following new changes beginning September 1, 2020. CUPE 2278 developed a "quick guide" that provides a concise, plain language overview of the collective agreement for your reference.
- The Skylight Learning Technology website contains information and guides related to UBC learning technologies that are useful for instructors and TAs.
- See the CTLT Online Teaching Program Module, "The role of teaching assistants in the online classroom" for additional information
- The CTLT May Online TA Institute wiki offers presentations and resources about TA training, experiences, and expectations from the May 2020 TA institute.