

## Teaching Reflections Fall 2014

Wow, the last 6 months have been brutal.

I came to UVic in July and immediately started preparing for my Fall classes. I knew that I was going to have to confront 3 main concerns I had: 1. That given various conversations with colleagues at UVic that the tutorial structure needed work, 2. That I might have lost my ability to teach large classes, and 3. That I would be overwhelmed by the simple “managerial” functions associated with almost 600 students and 11 graduate student TAs.

### 1) Tutorial Redesign

As soon as I arrived and started thinking about the 3 and 1 format at UVic (i.e., 3 hours lecture, 1 hour tutorial) I knew that I wanted to provide more focus to the tutorial assignments as well as do everything I could to move away from multiple-choice examinations.

With the help of Edwin and Edward, we redesigned the tutorial assignments to become more focused on helping students gain experience doing research and writing. We designed 3 assignments that would have students define an area of sociological interest, choose and defend a methodology by which to gather data, and finally, prepare a 5 page report on their research over the term (each assignment would build on the previous one and were worth 5%, 5% and 10% respectively). While we experienced some “growing pains” with the assignments, we are confident that we can provide both students and TAs with more support and clarity in the Spring term.

Also, I was convinced that we had a great opportunity to leverage the passion, experience and creativity of our incoming graduate TAs. While we gave them 4 set topics every TA had to cover during the term (start of term ice-breakers, 2 midterm preparations and ongoing support/explanation for the 3 tutorial assignments), TAs were able to use the remaining sessions doing whatever they felt would support the students as well as inspire their sociological imaginations.

All in all, I could not be happier with the changes we have made. Attendance remained strong across virtually all tutorials even though they were not required. This was a great testimonial to the conviction and dedication of the TAs and the students.

#### Lessons Learned:

1. I needed to provide more clarity to TAs and the students that content in the tutorials was never intended to mirror what I was doing in lectures. While there should be some thematic overlap they should not be seen as just another vehicle to engage with lecture material. I will make sure to give students, and TAs, much deeper explanation about why the tutorials are the way they are and what they are supposed to achieve.
2. While some TAs were invigorated by the freedom to do what they wanted in the tutorials, there were a few that did not really engage with the reasons behind the tutorial re-design nor enjoy being a proactive and vibrant resources for their students. I will make sure to be more diligent in my monitoring of TA student responsiveness and will be more proactive in making changes as soon as they are needed.

## **2) Teaching Large Classes**

I was worried that since I had not taught large classes since I was in grad school (about 15 years ago); I was worried whether or not I had lost my ability to connect with such a large group of students. (NOTE: Intro classes at MRU were capped at 37 while at UVic my classes this term were 280, 240 and 90.)

However, within 5 minutes of my first lecture I knew that the size of the class doesn't matter – if the teacher is prepared and passionate about the material, the students will respond. Not only was I blessed with great students this term (and I mean this sincerely), I found that my lecturing style was well-suited to making even large lecture-based classes feel small and comfortable. While I do not mean to suggest that my lectures worked for every student, I do believe that the majority enjoyed my lectures and felt comfortable speaking up (as confirmed by various comments on my course evaluations – both formal and those on TooFast).

## **3) Course “management”**

I was right to be worried with the amount of time and effort it would take to stay on top of 11 TAs, responding to almost 600 students who sent e-mails and often just wanted to “chat” and having to track 10 online chapter assignment scores, 1 Learn for Change Assignment, 3 tutorial assignments, 2 midterms and a final that were based on essay questions. I have to admit that in December I thought I was going to lose my mind trying to sort out everyone's scores (this was hampered by the fact that some students registered in MySocLab using only their initials or used a different name from the one they were registered in the course under, as well as students registering in one section but attending another and completing assignments in the one they were NOT registered in, etc., etc., etc.). It was a Gong Show. However, while we still had to track down 6-10 student submissions and process some grade change forms, this was only about 1% of scores and I guess not too bad in the big scheme of things.

Things I could not have predicted, but, that I have to address next term:

### **1. Grading inconsistency between TAs**

I was aware that grading was inconsistent between TAs (even though I provided a grading key, sat with them and graded with them for at least 2 hours after each exam and responded to all questions I received) I need to appreciate that for many this was the first time they had ever graded essay answers.

Next term I will:

- Implement a grading “buddy” scheme to ensure that each TA has a peer who is responsible for checking their grading before they are submitted to me.
- Continue providing a number of sample answers that we all grade independently and then discuss the grade we assigned.

- Make the “grading parties” mandatory for the first 2 hours so that all TAs have the benefit of asking me for clarity, benefitting from hearing how other TAs would grade a difficult answer, etc..
- Have a colleague from the Learning and Teaching Centre offer a mandatory session for the TAs on grading essay answers.

## 2. Implement a standard grade appeal process

Last term we had students challenging their grades weeks after the exams were returned. While I absolutely support a student’s right to get the grade they truly deserve, having a long drawn out process takes too much time from the TA and me.

Next term I will:

- Implement a one week grade appeal process that ensures students are serious and have a clear idea on what they feel needs to be looked at.

## 3. Not hearing about concerns early enough

While I heard some student “grumbling” over the term I am not convinced that students knew they could approach me when they had concerns about the course or the tutorials. While I “think” I am approachable I have to realize that I need to provide mechanisms for students to give feedback when and where they feel it is necessary.

Next term I will:

- Continue to use TooFAST to give every student the ability to tell me things about the course anonymously but I will also implement volunteer “Student Advocate” positions in each of my classes to approach me if they hear of any student issues/concerns. (And, I should add that the TAs have in place something like this in that Edwin/Edward are the obvious people to approach if there is a concern for them.)

Finally, I have to say how proud I am in everything we have been able to achieve this term. Yes, we need to make adjustments, but, we have many inspiring TAs connecting with students in ways I can’t in a large lecture theatre, we have students doing research and writing reports in their first year, our exams require students to write and, through Learn for Change, we donated around 5,000 books to students in Developing countries. What a great start ...