

## Teaching Reflections Spring 2014

Well, all things considered, a very good term.

For the first time since arriving, I started to feel like I was settling in to the department and to UVic.

The department seems to be in a pretty good place right now. There is stability and everyone appears to be pulling in the same direction. Yes, some tensions exist, but, not nearly as bad as I have experienced elsewhere.

Over the Spring term I also started to feel that I had a much better grasp of managing the logistics of the larger classes as well as gained more confidence over our tutorial structure. However, in February, after the first midterms were handed back, I knew there was more to do.

When I arrived at UVic the practice had been that TAs did not grade the tests of their own tutorial students for possible conflicts of interest, something I found odd because there did not appear to be any concern over grading tutorial assignments. In any event, after having around 50 students appeal their grades to Edward, I knew something had to be done. In consultation with the TAs I did away with the practice of TAs not grading their own tutorial students' exams. Personally, I am not concerned about bias or conflicts of interests between TAs and students because I reserve the right to change any TA score anyway (and, given the way I approach my responsibilities, I was spot-checking the vast majority of the exams myself anyway). I also wanted to confront the "TA Lottery" perception head-on.

Having "crunched the numbers" based on scores across TAs, I was able to confirm that while there was certainly variation between TA scores, they were not at the level to raise concern. Yes, some TAs scores were lower than others, but in no case was the variation greater than 5%. Given the fact that human beings were grading written work I was, and am, comfortable with that variation.

After making the adjustments to how midterms would be graded I also agreed, in keeping with my career-long practice of transparency, to circulate the grading rubrics to all students along with their exam questions. I then left it to the students and the TAs to define their own approaches and how best to get full marks on all the key components on the rubric.

If you look at my Course Experience scores this term you will see that the students scored me pretty high on instructor characteristics but far lower on how their learning was assessed. I believe the students comments/scores were an accurate reflection of our class. Having such a significant change to the assessment practice mid-way through the course should have made my scores fall. I should also note that the Course Experience Survey occurred the day after I announced the changes to the class – and I am sure this exacerbated the perception that the assessment measures needed work. Point taken, they did.

I am confident that the changes we made this term are in the long term interests of not only the students in the classes but for the TAs as well. I believe the TAs deserve, and in my experience, have earned, being treated like the professionals they are.

All in all, a very, very good term.

In my last “reflections” I noted a few things I would do this term, for my own piece of mind, let’s see how I did.

“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.

**IMPLEMENTED**

- Continue providing a number of sample answers that we all grade independently and then discuss the grade we assigned.

**IMPLEMENTED**

- 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..

**IMPLEMENTED**

- Have a colleague from the Learning and Teaching Centre offer a mandatory session for the TAs on grading essay answers.

**Made the invitation in January 2014 but when they saw the level of preparation/support materials we were already providing, staff at LTC said there was not much more they would recommend we do.**

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.

### **IMPLEMENTED**

#### 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.)

**IMPLEMENTED – but to be perfectly honest, I did not do enough to stay in touch with the Advocates in the classes during the term. I think I just got too busy. I will try harder to make them a more meaningful component of the course next term.”**

So, Spring 2014 was a great term. I can’t wait to see how much smoother next year is going to be with me having more experience....