

Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion  
Graduate Program Teaching Initiative Summative Conference, April 2012

McMaster University, Department of Religious Studies  
Teaching Preparation in our Doctoral Program

Prepared by: James A. Benn, Chair

March 23, 2012

- There is little explicit formal training in how to teach for our graduate students. The majority of the training is implicit and takes the form of modelling of undergraduate teaching by graduate instructors and lecturers.
- The vast majority of our PhD students serve as TAs (Teaching Assistants) for four years or more. As TAs they are responsible for running tutorial sections of larger lecture courses, marking, holding office hours, and giving occasional guest lectures.
- As TAs in our department, doctoral students receive regular feedback from their students in the form of TA evaluations (this is not common to all TAs at McMaster).
- They are able to prepare for the job market and subsequent evaluation processes because they begin to make teaching dossiers while still in graduate school. W
- The TA experience in our department provides excellent implicit modelling of how to create assignments, tests, course outlines, etc.
- The fact that our department is essentially a graduate training unit in Religious Studies, that has few undergraduate majors, but teaches large numbers of students in other Faculties prepares students well for the reality of most academic institutions in Canada.
- Many of our TAs take a course offered by Centre for Leadership in Learning (CLL), Education 750: Principles and Practices of University Teaching

General Description

“This credit course in university teaching has been offered for many years with excellent results. The focus is on assisting participants in honing essential pedagogical and practical teaching skills. This includes sessions on curriculum design, teaching strategies (ex. Inquiry, and problem-based learning), assessment strategies, developing a teaching dossier, and strategies for research on teaching and learning. The modules will be highly interactive and provide resources, activities and feedback. A number of teaching and

learning experts will participate as guest speakers. The main evaluation requirements are design and presentation of your own course materials and short literature reviews.”

- At the beginning of every year, the University runs a “Graduate Student Day” which includes workshops run by CLL aimed primarily at those new to the TA experience. <http://cll.mcmaster.ca/programs/graduatestudentday/>
- Our departmental culture is very supportive of graduate student TAs. All graduate students have offices in our building and much information and support for the TA experience is shared among our students. The Graduate Student Association of Religious Studies (GSARS) runs a program of professional development workshops.

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Summary of Findings from Teaching Initiative Work

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We designed a closed Workshop around topics that we thought would be helpful for our alumni in their own careers and that would generate discussion around issues of interest to us. Overall, we found the design of the Workshop to be highly effective in achieving our aims, and in creating a pleasant and creative synergy within the group. There is nothing major we would have changed with the benefit of hindsight. We obtained substantial answers to our framing questions that we could not have arrived at by other means; our alumni were a joy to spend time with; and meaningful discussion flowed easily and naturally throughout the weekend.

We learned from the Workshop that we currently do relatively well in preparing graduate students for undergraduate teaching, but that our methodology is mostly implicit and not explicit. Our faculty members serve as excellent models of undergraduate teaching, but that modelling is nowhere discussed within the department. TAs are the testing and proving ground for effective undergraduate teaching, but the department presumes this to be self-evident. Our departmental culture as a whole is supportive of undergraduate teaching, but we do not consciously acknowledge that fact.

Our alumni clearly identified for us three particular areas of their McMaster experience that had particularly prepared them for the realities of teaching religion: first, their academic training in research within their own disciplinary areas; second, their years of TA experience, in running tutorials, marking, and giving guest lectures; third, in the faculty members of the Department they found models of very effective teaching that they could readily adapt to their own needs.

As a consequence of this Workshop, we will strive to make more intelligent use of the University's resources in fostering the training of graduate students as undergraduate teachers and we will apply for additional funding to hold a departmental retreat next year that will allow us to take the insights from this workshop into the larger community of faculty and graduate students.