

# Preparing Graduate Students to Teach in Higher Education



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Graduate students and post-doctoral fellows come to Dalhousie to be immersed in their discipline of study and to engage in exciting research opportunities, aspiring to go on to become researchers in academe and beyond. Yet, many of our students arrive at the university unaware of the broader scope of the careers they aspire to and graduate curricula have only recently begun to incorporate formal professional development programming. Higher education researchers have argued that graduate students need a better socialization to academic careers and professional life. (Trower et al., 2001; Gaff, 2002; Austin, 2002 and 2006; Wulff et al., 2004). One area of preparation that is often overlooked is students' preparation for teaching. Lack of formal teacher training and opportunities for teaching practice are significant factors in the attrition rates amongst junior faculty. As a result, over the last ten years, universities across North America have attempted to address this lack of teacher preparation by establishing various programs that attempt, to varying extents and levels, to prepare doctoral students for teaching roles. The majority of Canadian universities with graduate programs now have formally

recognized courses or certificate programs in teaching and learning.

Four years ago, in an effort make such an opportunity available to Dalhousie graduate students and post-doctoral fellows, the Centre for Learning and Teaching initiated the Certificate Program in University Teaching and Learning (CUTL), supported by the Faculty of Graduate Studies. The goal of this voluntary program is to provide a complementary and interconnected series of programming opportunities for graduate students and post-docs that invites them:

- to connect theory and practice in higher education through a graduate course or learning project and through teaching practice
- to practice reflective thinking about their teaching, receive collegial feedback, and engage in on-going professional development of their teaching
- to articulate their philosophy and approaches to teaching in their discipline via the creation of a teaching dossier

While students may engage in any of these activities, those who choose to complete all aspects of the program obtain a notation upon their transcript formally recognizing their efforts to prepare for their future careers.

As part of the Centre for Learning and Teaching's efforts to ensure that the program meets our own and students' expectations, we established an ethics-approved research study entitled, "Developing Teaching Scholars: The Impact of a Certificate in

University Teaching and Learning Program on Graduate Students' Beliefs, Concepts, and Practice of Teaching and Learning." Our goal in this project was to investigate whether or not the CUTL program would encourage participants to re-conceptualize their ideas about teaching and learning in a more sophisticated way. We were curious to learn whether students in the program would make a shift in their ideas and beliefs about teaching from a teacher-centered, information-transmission approach to teaching and learning, to learning-centered approaches where learners construct and take ownership over knowledge learned and change their perspectives or world-views. To study the possibility of change over time in students' thinking and approaches, we asked registrants in the program to complete entrance and exit surveys and to participate in a follow-up interview 18-months after graduating.

This project is still on going, but early results are highly encouraging of the program's efforts to attain these goals. When they enter the program, students are very focused on the value of gaining another credential to place in their CV. As one participant said, "[I]t will eliminate one more red flag" on the way to career success. They are also cognizant of the fact that they have limited teaching experience and realize that gaining some skills would undoubtedly be useful to them in the job search and in subsequent teaching. At this stage of entry to the program the majority of participants who

completed the entrance survey expressed their understanding of teaching and learning in the context of delivering knowledge and expecting the students to understand and engage critically with the material.

By the time participants exit the program, their perception of the value of the program has become internalized. They recognize that the process of engaging with each aspect of the program enables them to explore many aspects of teaching and learning but also to enjoy teaching and feel passionate about playing a role in student learning. Although external recognition is still important, they are less concerned about others' perceptions about their Certificate program completion. At the end of the program they also focus on the meaningful gains they have made personally and as teachers:

"It provided me with a great background in the literature on teaching and learning, student learning styles, etc., which I had not been previously exposed to."

"I learned a lot about myself as well as teaching and feel better prepared to get up in front of the room in general and to take the reins of my own class more specifically."

"The course focused on fundamental concepts and we practiced techniques such as group work in the classroom—giving me an opportunity to see how these techniques can work."

"It was very important to me—and I found it very informative—to study aspects of both learning AND teaching. Being a successful teacher is dependent on successful student learning; therefore both

areas must be addressed and understood by instructors."

"The CUTL program provided me with the words to express my [learning-focused teaching] perspectives, and from there engage and reflect further on my philosophies."

In contrast to their perspectives at the outset of the program, graduates from the program articulate a much deeper and more complex understanding of their own teaching and its relationship to student learning. For example, one participant upon exiting the program defined effective teaching as, "Facilitating a participatory, interdisciplinary, and reflective environment where students can engage in learning, integrate new ideas with previous knowledge and experience, apply new concepts to different contexts, and direct their passion ... towards achieving positive change." Similarly, when asked to define effective learning, the responses were equally thoughtful and grounded in the participants' changed perspective. For example, one student wrote that effective learning is, "Being engaged in material, taking ownership of process, being open-minded about new ideas and concepts, and taking an active role in integrating the material into their own experience." For participants exiting the program, teaching and learning, and teacher training, are no longer items on a 'to do' check list, but experiences through which they and their students will both grow as learners. They have learned that there are many different ways to teach and learn successfully, that reflecting on what has worked and what has not is a valuable approach to their on-

going teaching experience, and that effective teaching is a "dynamic process."

The immediate benefits of the Certificate program to the individual participant teachers, their current and future students, Dalhousie, and the institutions in which they will pursue their career, are clear. As our project is now beginning to follow up with participants 18 months after completing the program, the long-term and broader ramifications are becoming apparent. For example, as students begin the job search process, they have found that articulating their ideas about teaching with others and via their teaching dossiers enables them to talk about their teaching in interview settings with greater depth and ease: "I had an interview ... last week, and I feel I was able to answer teaching questions confidently (and they seemed impressed!) thanks to the training I received in the certificate program."

Equally, the program enables participants to accomplish the demands of teaching as a junior faculty member when they obtain an academic position: "I had to design that [Masters level] program from scratch in three weeks ... but I had that background with the course that had been offered, so I knew every step of the process I needed to do to put that course together ... it went superbly well ... if it hadn't been for that course, there is no way I would have been able to do that..." Another participant explained, "I think that probably one of the most challenging aspects of a beginning professor is the teaching load ... As you know, in the graduate program,

there is no prior [teacher] training. So to have the CUTL program really helps that transition, and it's not as big of a shock when you arrive ... you have at least some experience with it."

Graduates have come to understand too that teaching is inevitably about life-long learning and they engage in discussion, research, and innovations in teaching with others in their new institutions. In sum, graduates of the program feel confident and positive about their teaching and students' learning experiences in their classes, and so do their institutions. One graduate from the program let us know: "After one semester of teaching the Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning ... has nominated me for a teaching award. I am very pleased! I think

that the value of the certificate program to my development as a teacher is clearly demonstrated by this outcome." While not all graduates from the program will win teaching awards, participants do all generally leave the program with new-found confidence in themselves as teachers and with a strong interest in developing students as learners, that can only serve them well as they move forward in their careers.

### References

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- Basic teaching workshops
- An annual series of professional development opportunities
- A course in university teaching and learning (CNLT 5000—Learning and Teaching in Higher Education)
- Opportunities to reflect on and synthesize learning about teaching
- Formal recognition of efforts to develop teaching

CLT also offers a range of professional development opportunities in which all graduate students may participate without being enrolled in the full Certificate. Go to [www.learningandteaching.dal.ca/cutl.html](http://www.learningandteaching.dal.ca/cutl.html) for more information or call CLT at 494-1622.