

## CHAPTER EIGHT:

# Training

### 8.1. Introduction

Throughout this report, we have recommended improvements to training procedures. We have seen that there is a concentration of overwork in the first year, and much of this kind of overwork might be prevented with better training in teaching technique. We have seen that there is widespread ignorance of the collective agreement, and of the kind of protection that does exist against overwork. Many teaching assistants know little about the collective agreement and their rights: those, for instance, who say that the job description is "a joke" without realizing that they have the ability to make it into something different. On the administrative side, there are at least some department officials who seem to be under the impression that the union is called the "Graduate Assistants' Association," whereas the union changed that name in 1980. Finally, it is harmful both to employer/employee relations and to efficient administration that the grievance procedure is widely regarded as a kind of monster, to be used reluctantly and as a last resort. An important contributing factor here is in the reluctance of department administrators even to mention that a grievance procedure exists: we know of more than one who simply ask TAs to see administrators if there is any problem, implying that the grievance procedure is unacceptable to them. Some administrators seem to be just unaware of the situation. Department TA coordinators and supervisors, then, need training in the collective agreement and in ways and means for effective administration; teaching assistants and student lecturers need training in teaching technique; and teaching assistants need to know more about their own rights, and the procedures available to them.

### 8.2. Training in TA Rights for TAs

Bargaining unit members are themselves often unclear as to their role in relation to the employer and to the students. They need to know what their rights are within the collective agreement, and what the job description can potentially mean to them. Most TAs are aware of the Union, and know that some kind of recourse exists through the collective agreement, though many are confused about specific mechanisms. Clearly, it is primarily the responsibility of the Union to supply them with this information. At the same time, it is reasonable that the employer should accord access to the resources required to do this efficiently. **We recommend that this university adopt the practice of others in holding an annual information session for TAs, including presentations on the administration of the collective agreement by representatives of both Union and Management.** Bargaining unit members should be paid for this time, as is currently specified in the collective agreement.

### 8.3. Training in Teaching Technique for TAs

A large number of new teaching assistants come to the job with no previous training or experience in teaching. It is clear from TA interviews that this training is important to teaching assistants. Many TAs in departments which have no training program complained of its lack, and some TAs have gone to outside programs on their own initiative.<sup>24</sup> In departments where there are newly-established programs, the TAs have welcomed them, though often with criticisms. A few TAs speak rather harshly of their department's training program: One Division IV TA called the program in the department a "scam," while among TAs in one particular Division I department, there is a feeling that there is no responsiveness to the real needs of TAs.

The Administration has made a start in dealing with this problem by founding the Teaching Development Service, and in creating a TA training manual, "Tips for TAs." (Having received criticism from various quarters in the University since it was introduced, it is hoped that the TDS will produce a much improved version later this year.) It is also useful that teaching resources are being located at Roberts Library. Yet it appears that the TDS has not the budget to do its job properly. Further, there is such variation between departments and between classes within departments, that much of the work of training cannot easily be done centrally. Departments will always need to read the University manual critically, as no manual can meet the needs of all departments. Leading a discussion group is clearly different from demonstrating a lab, which is different again from correcting papers. Even these categories do not properly describe the variety of real situations: a lab in chemistry is quite distinct from one in physiology or computer science.

Recognizing these variables, **we recommend that all departments hold training sessions for TAs annually, adapted to the needs of their own discipline.** This training session would allow the department administration to clarify for bargaining unit members what its quality standards are, and what standard of work the department believes it is paying for. If the department pays for only twenty minutes per paper, does that mean that no comments are expected? Is there a reason why comments are not required? Are checklists to be used to speed up marking? Do these checklists already exist, or does the supervisor have to work them out with TAs? It may happen that time standards for marking are set by an experienced professor according to his or her own rate of work. Does the professor know techniques that make this possible while maintaining a good standard of feedback to the students? With discussion groups, there may be more and less efficient ways of preparing for a tutorial. Further remarks on training, including the role of TAs in training their peers, and also on the accessibility of resources for teaching, are to be found in the discussions of preparation in Chapter Seven.

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<sup>24</sup> A Division III T.A. co-ordinator asserts that the TAs in his department have no interest in training, citing an optional training session which attracted only one TA. Yet this is the same department where two TAs took the trouble to attend sessions in Computer Science, and one other complained of a lack of training.

## 8.5. Health and Safety Issues

One aspect of TA training which is of particular importance to science departments is Health and Safety. Teaching assistants working in laboratory situations shoulder a considerable degree of responsibility for students working under their supervision. It is not clear to the committee to what extent teaching assistants have a legal responsibility but there is no doubt that they have a moral responsibility. Consequently it is essential that adequate training in health and safety matters be arranged by the department. The exact nature of this training will necessarily depend on the particular department concerned but some features (e.g. fires, chemical poisoning, radiation hazards, the WHMIS system, and general first aid) have wide applicability. **Recommendation: That departments arrange suitable training in Health and Safety aspects for teaching assistants employed in laboratory supervision, and that teaching assistants be paid for the time spent at such training sessions.**