

Scarborough UofT Psychology students used as cheap labour

Toronto – CUPE Local 3902, the Union that represents nearly 6,000 teaching assistants and sessionals at all three campuses of the University of Toronto, has filed a grievance today against an introductory Psychology course at the UofT’s Scarborough campus for using an internet-based system of peer grading.

The course, Introduction to Psychology, Part I (PSY A01), which has an enrolment of 1,500 students this fall, is requiring undergraduates to evaluate and grade each other through an online program called “peerScholar.” Because marking and grading is paid employment at UofT, and therefore covered by the Collective Agreement for teaching assistants, CUPE 3902 asserts that all students engaged in peer grading are therefore members of the CUPE 3902 TA bargaining unit and must be paid for their grading work according to the wage rates that have been negotiated between the Union and the UofT.

“These students are being forced to work for free to compensate for the failure to hire enough trained and qualified teaching assistants to evaluate them,” states Anil Varughese, CUPE 3902 Chair. “This is being couched as a learning exercise, but in fact it is primarily a money-saving manoeuvre that undermines both the employment opportunities of graduate student teaching assistants and the quality of the undergraduate experience.”

According to the instructor for the course, Professor Steve Joordens, the introduction of peerScholar is meant to address the fact that the only form of testing normally used in introductory Psychology courses is multiple choice rather than critical thinking or writing assignments. However, on an online “Evaluation Discussion” of peerScholar, Professor Joordens also states:

“I will be completely honest. The original reason for seriously considering a peer-to-peer evaluation process was financial. We cannot afford to pay a large team of TAs to mark written answers for large classes. Moreover, it would take them so long to do the marking that it also just wouldn’t be practical. Peer-to-peer evaluation, when combined with great internet programming, is fast and cheap.” (source: <http://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/~psya01/peerScholar/pseval.html>)

“The argument about ‘quality’ has long been used to justify increasing tuition fees,” states Jesse Greener, Canadian Federation of Students. “But these students didn’t pay the rising fees for this course to be evaluated by each other rather than by a qualified TA, much less to be used as cheap marking labour.”

Other concerns over quality are raised by the fact that due to the enormous enrolment, only one-third of students currently enrolled in PSY A01 are able to physically attend lectures, while the other two-thirds must watch taped broadcasts from home.

CUPE Local 3902 is waiting for a response to the grievance, filed with UofT Human Resources.

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