Lead TA: A Peer Graduate Student Teacher Training Program

with Melissa Jacquart

August 2, 2014
American Association for Philosophy Teachers

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Thank you!

- The conference organizers,
- AAPT,
- APA,
- Western's Philosophy Department, and
- My fellow Lead TAs and Teaching Support Centre.

Teacher Training

Agree or Disagree:

There is a problem: graduate programs lack teacher training for graduate teaching assistants.

Poll:

As a graduate student, did you receive any training on teaching?

Grad Student Training

What sort of training do you think graduate students should receive before teaching for the first time?

What did you wish someone told you about teaching as a graduate student?

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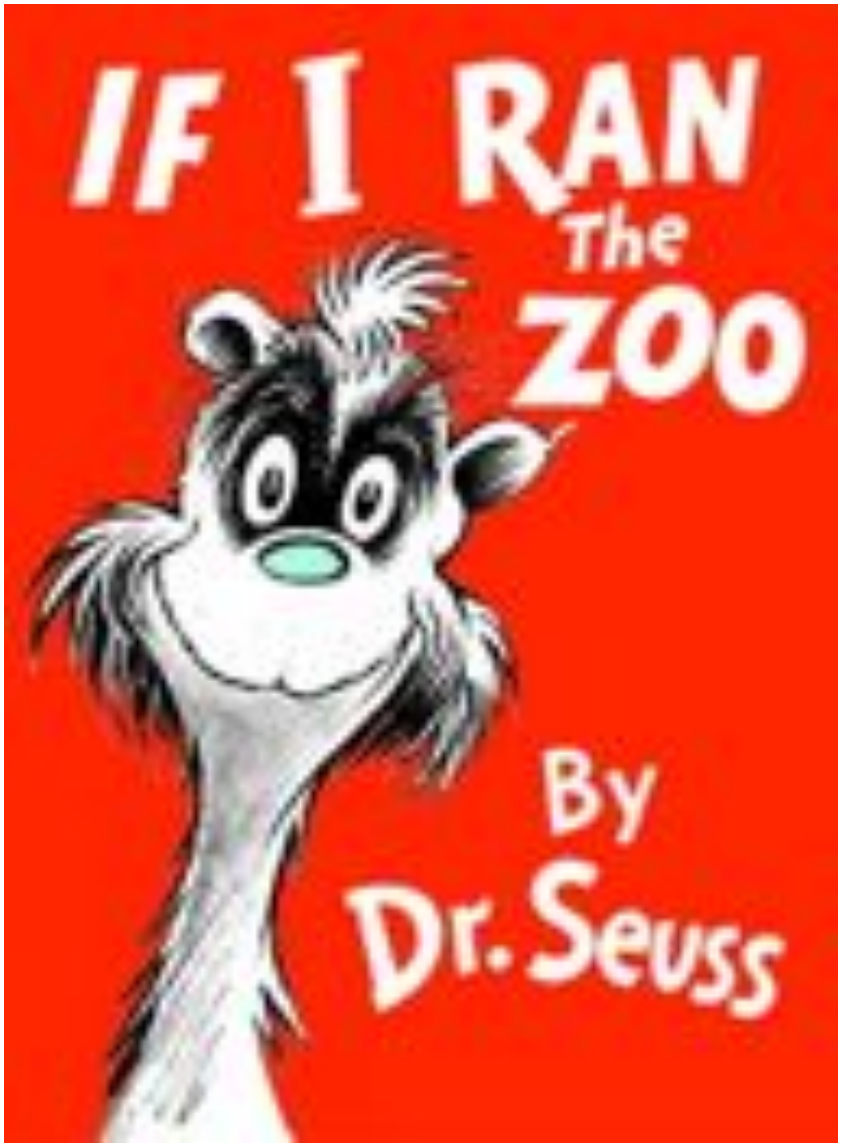

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Agenda

- Overview of the Lead TA Program
- Philosophy Lead TA Activities
- Reception
- Discussion of Challenges and Benefits

History of Establishment

- Lobbied for by the Teaching Support Centre, and, most importantly, negotiated for by our TA Union.

- University agreed to a 2013-2014 pilot year.
  - ***(And is continuing!)***

The Pitch

"The Lead Graduate Teaching Assistant (LGTA) role is a professional development opportunity for graduate students to apply their interest, teaching experience, and training beyond traditional TA duties. LGTAs serve as mentors, instructors, and liaisons for TAs in their home department.

During their term as a LGTA, their responsibilities include designing and facilitating discipline-specific teaching development workshops for new TAs; developing templates and web resources to facilitate grading; developing and promoting curriculum innovation within their department; hosting monthly discussion groups; and providing peer consultation and feedback to TAs throughout the year."

- Western Call for Applications

Pilot Year

- 8 TAs, at least one in each participating Faculty.
  - Half paid by SGPS, half department.
- Competitively Selected.
- Trained through Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW) program.
- Supervised by our Teaching Support Centre, and graduate chair.

Benefits of Peer Training

- A peer (can be) less intimidating than an instructor,
  - And it can be difficult to take issues to an instructor,
  - LGTA required confidentiality.

- Generates (teaching) community among grad students.

- Intermediary between TAs and Department.

Lead TA Approach

- Heavy emphasis on learner-centered teaching and active learning activities
- Structure teacher training such that it promotes an inclusive discipline
- Get TAs prioritizing creating safe, comfortable environments for discussion

Goals as Philosophy Lead TA

Facilitate TAs in...

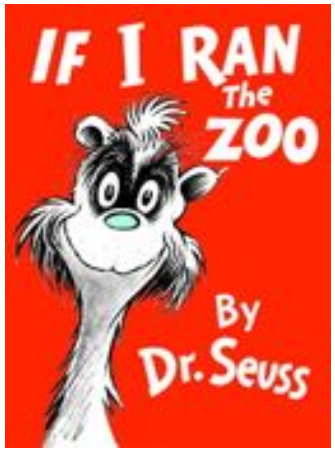
- Recognizing students have different needs and experiences in the classroom.
- Adapting themselves to various classroom experiences.
- Apply active learning activities in their classroom (and even better, create their own activities!)
- Find their own teaching persona.
- Assess and be reflective of their own teaching behaviors
  - Particularly for prioritizing creating safe, comfortable environments for discussion.

Philosophy Lead TA Approach

- Emphasis on *peer*
  - Group discussion vs information dissemination,
  - Learning from each other.

- Emphasis on inclusion,
- As well as learner-centered teaching through…
  - Demonstrate effectiveness in workshops,
  - "Group" resource development,
  - "Meta-moments", and
  - (in a pinch) appeal to workload and/or vanity.

What to do at the Zoo?



Initial Survey

- ~ Same survey sent to TAs and Instructors
  - 37 TA replies (46 TAs total)
  - 11 Full/Limited Duties Instructors replies (~40 total)

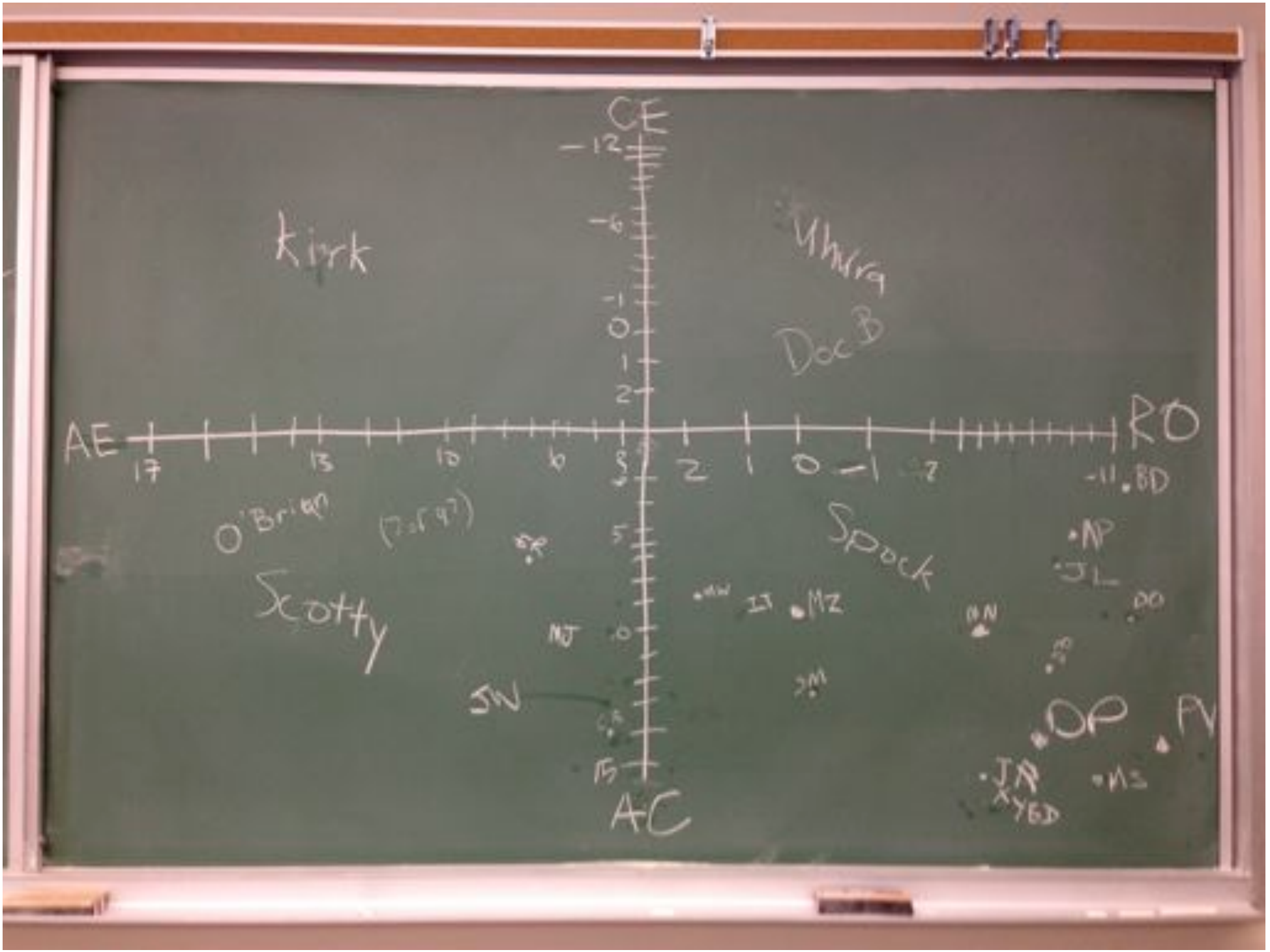
- Based on results, designed most desired workshops and resources

1. Workshops

Fall Semester

- Crash Course: TA'ing in the Philosophy Department at Western (*46 TAs; Mandatory*)
  - Rules of being a unionized TA, grading policies at Western, University teaching resources, anonymous grading, effective first day of class activity, and professionalism in action.

- Leading Effective and Inclusive Tutorials (*17 TAs*)
  - Lesson Planning (BOPPPS), Kolb Learning Styles, Philosophy Active Learning Activities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1. Workshops

Fall Semester

- Effective Grading Practices and Strategies (*16 TAs*)
  - Grading "Dot"mocracy, Assigning the assignment, Best grading practices and rubrics, Giving effective feedback, and Returning assignments.

- Focus Group on Designing Tutorial Activities (*8 TAs*)
  - Exploring the Scientific Method through board games, Privilege Walk for Rawls

1. Workshops

Winter Semester

- Navigating Sensitive Topics in the Classroom (*42 TAs, Mandatory*)
  - Guest Speaker from Western's Mental Health Centre, Discussing Controversial Topics, and Triggers.

- Designing a Philosophy Course and Syllabus (*13 TAs*)
  - Learning outcomes, Backwards Course Design, and Q&A with faculty member

1. Workshops

Winter Semester

- Exploring the Digital Humanities (*15 TAs*)
  - Digital humanities theory, tools to use in philosophy classrooms, and Q&A with faculty and PhilPapers.org

- Preparing a Philosophy Teaching Portfolio (*19 TAs*)
  - Joint Effort with Graduate Placement Director, overview of components of a teaching dossier, viewing of sample philosophy dossiers, and open Q&A

2. Peer Observations

Opportunity for graduate students (tutorial or guest lecture) to be observed in their personal teaching environment and to receive feedback on both their instruction methods and classroom dynamics.

- Pre-observation questionnaire,
- Received verbal feedback after tutorial/lecture,
- as well as written feedback which could be used in teaching portfolio.

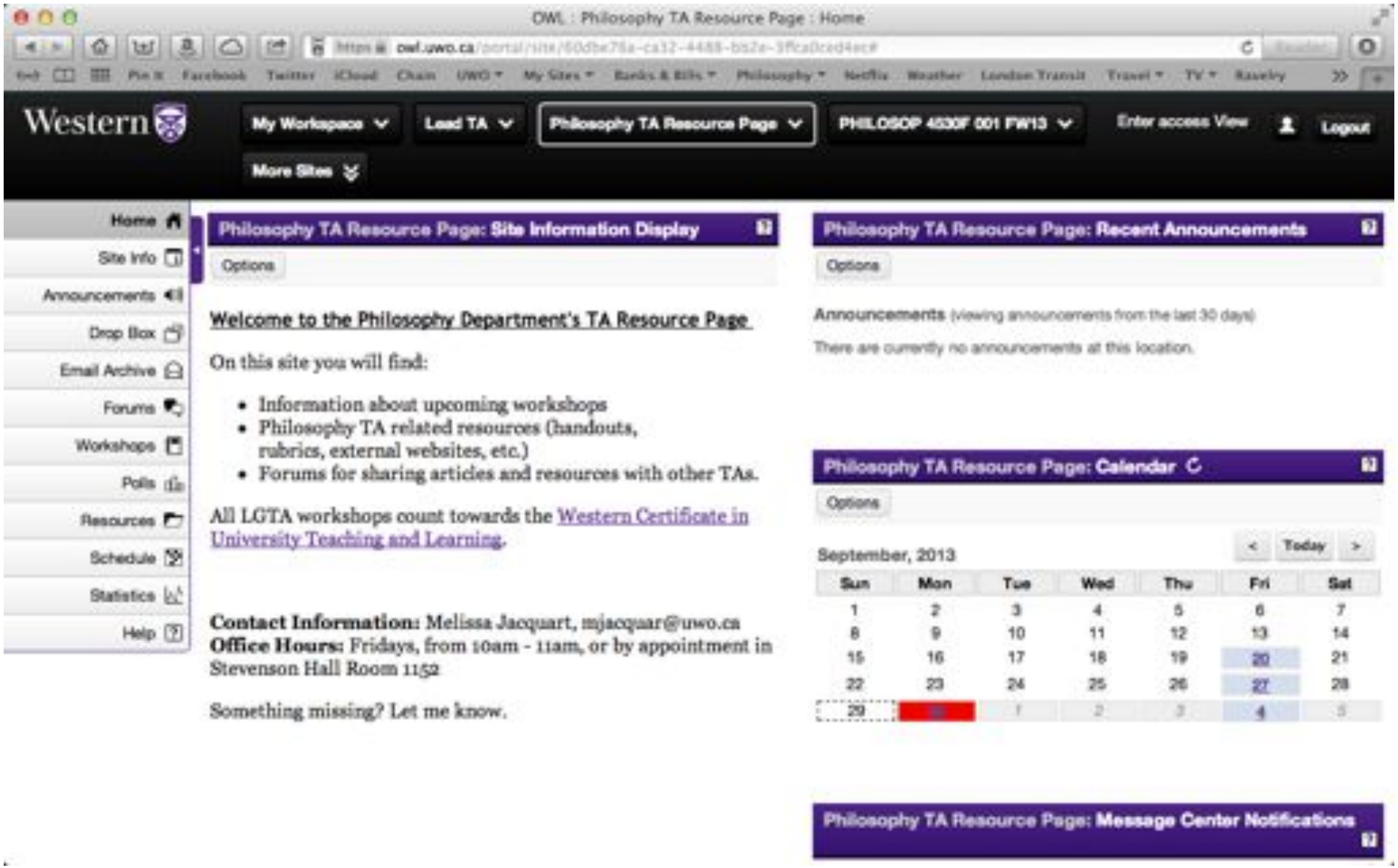
3. TA Consultations & Office Hours

Hours dedicated to serving as a consultant for tutorial lesson plans, tutorial activities, marking consultation, etc.

4. Additional Resource to Instructors

- Start of Term Checklist for Instructors
- How-to Handout on Anonymous grading in OWL

5. Legacy Project: OWL site



5. Legacy Project: additional resources

www.melissajacquart.com

Other ideas for Lead TA activities

- Establishment of Peer Grad Student Mentor Program
- Handbook for New TAs
- Online Training Modules
- Other discipline-specific workshops
- Inspired future group course design reading group

Feedback

Not useful		Moderately Useful		Extremely Useful
1	2	3	4	5

Workshop	**Score (Mean ± Standard Deviation)**
Leading Effective and Inclusive Tutorials	4.25 ± 0.58
Effective Grading Practices and Strategies	4.5 ± 0.52
Navigating Sensitive Topics in the Classroom	3.62 ± 1.06
Designing a Philosophy Course and Syllabus	4.6 ± 0.70
Exploring the Digital Humanities	4.2 ± 0.75
Preparing a Philosophy Teaching Portfolio	4.7 ± 0.47

Feedback

"… After incorporating some of Melissa's suggestions into my teaching (especially to use more "active learning", and to pose questions in a more inviting manner), I had a student email me (who is not normally very engaged) and tell me how much he enjoyed the change in my teaching style (he did not know that Melissa had made this suggestion) because it got the class talking and it was more engaging. I asked several students after this whether they preferred a lecture style or a participation style tutorial, and all told me they preferred the more active style of learning (that Melissa had suggested).

This was also very beneficial to me because it took a lot of the strain off of me to come up with lecture material for the hour long tutorials since much more time was devoted to just leading and listening to group discussions. I think it helped the students absorb the material."

Peer Benefits

"I'm glad this program exits. I would was VERY anxious about having to be a TA this year because I had never taught and felt I did not know enough and because my TA assignment was quite teaching intensive (that is, actually leading open ended tutorials rather than marking). The workshops and Peer Observations feedback made me feel empowered and gave a point of reference regarding my concerns. It also meant that in case I was really lost, I could go to Melissa for help (without having to lose face in front of the instructor) or even if I had trouble with the demands of the instructor."

Implementation Advice

- Transparency in Lead TA Selection

- Caution with Mandatory Training

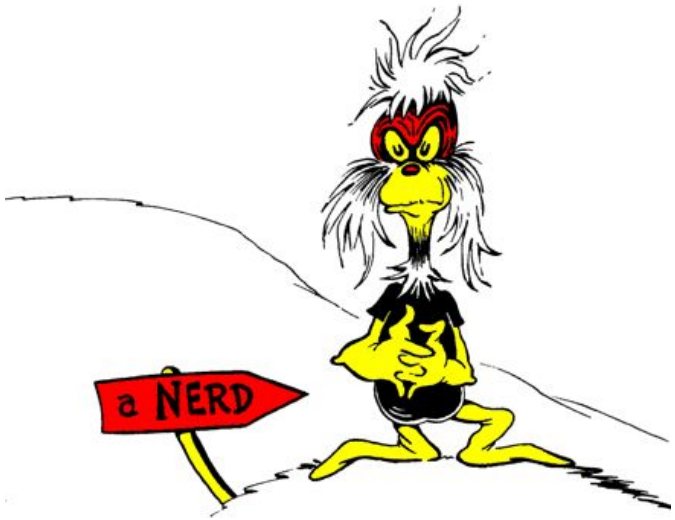
- Need Effective Training of Lead TAs
  - Instructional Skills Workshops
  - AAPT/APA Teaching & Learning Seminar?

- Resources
  - University Teaching Support Centre program
  - Other Lead TAs
  - $$

How about a trip to the Zoo?

What questions or concerns still remain?

Ideas for other types of training?



Questions?

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Thanks!