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CREATING TEACHING CHAMPIONS: TAKING THE GRADUATE TEACHING EXPERIENCE OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

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Introduction

Teaching and learning (T&L) is considered an essential skill for graduate students (Rose, 2012). University T&L centres offer a range of workshops, seminars, and certificates, which allow students to engage with peers who are interested and enthusiastic about T&L and gain support for and confidence in their own teaching (Hughes, 2006). Still, there can be little opportunity for students to engage in more informal T&L dialogue within or outside of their department (Leger & Young, 2014)**.** Through informal student feedback, the Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT) at Dalhousie University identified this gap in graduate student T&L development, and created the Dalhousie CLT Champions in 2013.

The Champions Program

The Champions have two goals: to increase awareness of Dalhousie's Certificate in University Teaching and Learning (CUTL) and to enable graduate students to engage in a community of practice outside their CUTL experience (on "communities of practice," see: Wenger, 1998). The CLT wanted to encourage CUTL students and graduates to engage their department in T&L development and spread information about CLT activities. To date, the Champions have delivered departmental presentations on the CUTL to incoming and existing students during fall orientations; integrated CLT information booths into graduate student society events and in-house conferences; and have worked together to develop a short video on the CUTL that highlights the certificate components, benefits of the CUTL, and their own experiences with the program. The Champions act as an interface between various communities at Dalhousie and the CLT, and contribute to the dissemination of information about the CLT and its events. The second goal of the group is to allow the Champions to extend their own engagement with T&L through ongoing study of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) and to create a community of peer mentorship and support for graduate student teachers.

The Champions have attracted a group of passionate graduate students from various disciplines (e.g., psychology, engineering) who meet monthly to discuss and plan CLT activities and ways to leverage the CUTL program in order to serve the larger Dalhousie community. The group also includes a "journal club" that provides a venue for the Champions to engage in critical and reflective dialogue around SoTL and its application in contemporary academic climates.

Individual Assessment

Students in the Champions program have shared how they have developed and grown through the group. Champions reported that the group allowed for continual teaching education and a renewed commitment to developing and practicing their T&L knowledge and skills. Many graduate students find that their time and energy is dominated by degree-related research activities, and this group is a way for students to meet and discuss teaching with their peers. Marcel says of his experience:

> The group has been a reminder of the commitment to continue to be mindful about how I am teaching, and receive support from other graduate students. . . . It's nice to actually talk about becoming better teachers instead of always becoming just better researchers.

The group consists of students who have a range of experience in university teaching, which has allowed members to become a source of mentorship for those who are teaching for the first time. Giovana shares:

> The Champions are great for professional development. As an international student, I did not have practice being a TA. . . . I share my expectations and frustrations with students from different fields, and get insights on activities I want to develop in my course.

Similarly, Marissa described the group as a source of support in the process of developing her identity as a teacher:

> I am new to teaching, and at first I couldn't imagine feeling prepared enough to be educating students who are a few years younger than me. This group has allowed me to speak freely about my concerns and thoughts around teaching, and I feel more prepared. . . . I know that what I have learned in this group about teaching across disciplines will follow me throughout my career.

The Champions have provided strong social support for students to share their experiences. Raghav discusses how the group has provided continual professional development for his teaching:

> My first experience with the CLT was at a Sessional Instructor Development workshop. . . . I had no university teaching prior to that. What struck me was how the workshop was aimed at learning through practice; an aspect I have grown to respect. I think this is what binds the Champions together. Each meeting makes me more aware of the present needs of instructors and students, and available solutions. As an aspiring academic, I owe it to my future students to think from their perspective about how they want to be taught.

> Lastly, a variety of students are currently applying what they have learned from the Champions within their own department. Nayha and Colin have worked to develop teaching support and opportunities for students within their faculty, as Nayha reports:

The group has been a means to maintaining an ongoing dialogue about teaching. . . . I have become more aware and interested in teaching scholarship, and committed to helping students. . . . The Champions provided an avenue for discussion about graduate student teaching, and we are currently in the process of formalizing new initiatives and the Champions have been instrumental to that.

Conclusions

Graduate students can be both contributors to, and beneficiaries of, improvements to T&L. Being involved in T&L at universities helps students appreciate their responsibilities as educators. The CLT Champions is a way for a group of interdisciplinary graduate students to improve their T&L knowledge and skills by engaging with peers and with SoTL. The group has increased the Champions' confidence in teaching, has been a source of peer mentorship, and has helped graduate students to develop as teachers. Moreover, the Champions have become a student voice for the CLT and have been leaders in their departments for promoting T&L initiatives and encouraging graduate students to participate in professional development opportunities associated with teaching. Other T&L centres may wish to consider integrating similar graduate-led communities of practice for students as a means of generating discourse and engagement around T&L with graduate students, and providing support beyond centre-based events, programs, and courses.

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Author Biographies

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