

Classroom Climate TA Training

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Prepared by Indigenous Initiatives, CTLT



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Our Approach to TA Training

Supporting TAs is particularly important when it comes to teaching and learning about Indigenous histories and contemporary contexts. For more than ten years, the CTLT Indigenous Initiatives team has been developing an approach to TA training that supports students' engagement with Indigenous content in the classroom. TAs need to develop a complex set of skills that allows them to deliver course content, leading class discussions, and grading student work. Through our TA training, we aim to support them by bridging existing knowledge gaps and facilitating difficult conversations about Indigenous topics with care and responsibility.

Our approach to TA training build on the [What I Learned in Class Today](#) project and Hanae Tsukada's and Amy Perreault's article [Complicating How Classroom Climate Works: Advancing the Framework](#). We understand classroom climate as "the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical environments in which our students learn" (Ambrose et al, 2010, p. 170)¹. We centre our TA training approach in classroom climate considering that the classroom is embedded in the social and institutional contexts; that the social position of instructors matter in classroom climate; and that reciprocity and witnessing are the ultimate goals in students' learning. These three considerations have allowed us to design our TA training sessions around three main topics:

Where Our Teaching and Learning Take Place

Situating where our teaching and learning take place in a core piece of our TA training programming. Our facilitators start the TA training sessions by acknowledging their positionalities on xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) lands in which UBC is situated. Acknowledging Indigenous host nations' territories is a practice for honouring their knowledge, rights, and ongoing presence.

In our TA training workshops, we invite TAs to be grounded in understanding the long presence and histories of Musqueam people as well as their own historical, social, and physical locations.² Through the process of engaging with land acknowledgements, TAs become aware of how their social positions in relation to teaching about Indigenous perspectives can have an impact on classroom climate. Once they have a grounded understanding of their location and acknowledge their positionality, they can then begin to understand ways that they are responsible for creating learning environments that are sensitive to the social and institutional contexts that inform classroom climate.

Classroom Climate and Supporting Indigenous and non-Indigenous Students

Tsukada and Perreault's expanded classroom climate framework identifies practices of reciprocity and witnessing as contributing to a responsible approach to learning.³ This approach frames learning as not only meaningful for the student but also for wider society. Teaching should extend beyond the classroom by reciprocating "the knowledge generated in their classrooms with communities, transcending the walls of the classroom and the university"

¹ Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M. C., & Norman, M. K. (2010). *How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

² "Inclusive Teaching/Land Acknowledgements in Teaching and Learning," 2020, https://ctlit-inclusiveteaching.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2019/08/land-acknowledgement-wiki-resource_v2.pdf.

³ Tsukada and Perreault, "Complicating How Classroom Climate Works: Advancing the Framework," Nov 2016, https://www.kpu.ca/sites/default/files/Transformative%20Dialogues/TD.9.2.2_Tsukada%26Perreault_Advancing_the_Framework.pdf

(Tsukada & Perreault, 2016, p. 12). The act of sharing knowledge and not hoarding knowledge comes directly from teachings shared by Musqueam Elder, Larry Grant. In the educational resource, [Power of a Name](#), Grant shares the transformation story of həmləsəh, and through this story TAs are able to further understand the concept of reciprocity. The acts of witnessing and reciprocating what is learned in the classroom holds instructors, TAs, and students accountable to share that knowledge beyond their courses for the wellbeing of the communities around them.

Navigating Difficult Conversations and Socially Contentious Topics

We use of case studies in TA Training through a participatory and capacity building approach. TAs reflect on common issues that arise in the classroom and learn from each other. They do this work in small and larger groups by contextualizing and unpacking controversial topics. Case studies help us to co-create strategies to navigate Indigenous content with care and respect in the classroom.

The [What I Learned in Class Today](#) project provides case scenarios and stories for TAs to discuss the challenges of having difficult conversations about socially contentious topics. The case studies are built from real student's experiences when Indigenous topics are discussed in the classroom. Students' stories include experiences of microaggressions, tokenization, and conflicting worldviews, among others. By bringing students' stories into our programming, we seek to raise awareness about the need to have these difficult conversations at UBC and learn from it.

Key Insights & Impactful Practices

Our TA Training approach supports TAs through the following practices:

Collaboration

Collaboration with a number of units across UBC, faculty members, TA coordinators, and students has allowed our team to bring in, exchange, and circulate resources that enrich TAs' teaching and learning about Indigenous content. Our goal is to build TA capacity by sharing educational resources and fostering new collaborations based on the work and resources that already exist. For example, we regularly feature the [Delta Animation](#) video when introducing land acknowledgements to illustrate the changing political and geographical landscape surrounding Greater Vancouver. This video is one of the many rich educational resources found in the [Musqueam Teaching Kit](#): *xʷməθkʷəy̓əm: qʷi:íqʷəíʔə kʷəθə snəwəyət ct – Musqueam: giving information about our teachings*, which was developed in collaboration between Musqueam and the Museum of Anthropology. In a similar vein, our work is guided by relationships and the expertise shared within the CTLT Indigenous Initiatives Classroom Climate Faculty Advisory.

Bridging Indigenous knowledges into the classroom

Many students and instructors have referred to feeling unprepared to engage in critical, meaningful, and productive conversations about Indigenous histories and content. This challenge becomes accentuated by the fact that discussions around Indigenous topics can be emotionally difficult specially when misrepresentations of Indigenous people or damaging remarks arise. Classroom Climate TA Training draws attention to the need to bridge knowledge

gaps about Indigenous histories and contemporary realities, while also encouraging connections between disciplinary knowledges and Indigenous knowledges and perspectives.

Modelling as a pedagogical strategy

Modelling as an instructional strategy seeks to show in practice what a culturally sensitive classroom climate looks like. We use our TA training sessions to show TAs a number of pedagogical strategies they may use in their own teaching. For example, we start off each session by doing a land acknowledgement that recognizes our positionality on Musqueam lands. We also illustrate how our own positionality and social and institutional contexts shape the design of the TA training. We look for ways to give examples of forms of reciprocity beyond students' learning in the classroom.

Learning from real life scenarios

We understand learning as a reciprocal process in which students also contribute to instructors' learning. Students' experiences have long informed our approach since the start of the *WILICT* project through the sharing of narrative examples and stories, and the development and use of case studies. Case scenarios help TAs to learn from real and relevant situations, share their own experiences, and learn from each other. Bringing case scenarios based on situations that happened in actual classrooms within their field, they can relate to allows TAs, facilitators and instructors to engage in a more reciprocal, respectful and meaningful manner.

Value of peer-based learning

While TAs value learning from instructors and more experienced facilitators, they also find it valuable to learn from their peers who are having the same experiences. When TAs are supported by peers, their learning is more authentic, and they are able to share about the vulnerabilities when their supervisors are not there. A peer-based learning model offers the opportunity for senior TAs to become facilitators and deepen their engagement with classroom climate through modeling and application.

Systemic change through teaching and learning

Through our training we seek to build a new way of teaching and engagement with Indigenous histories and content within UBC and beyond. TAs are in the early stages of their career and they will be likely teaching in different capacities in the future. Our curriculum and pedagogical approach aim to ultimately encourage them to continue to practice ways of reciprocity in which they share and expand what they have learned through their careers.