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2014

### Scholarship from the Self: A Reason Among Many for Why Meditation Can Benefit Graduate Students

Nayha Acharya

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# Centre for Learning and Teaching **focus** on university teaching and learning



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Graduate Student Edition 2014  
**Note From the Director**

In today's frenetic world, we often find ourselves pulled in many competing directions at once. Both as students and as teachers we serve others best by taking care of ourselves first. This edition of *Focus* explores a range of approaches to guide your own personal and professional development as graduate students.



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## **Taking Time to Learn: Reflection, Contemplation and Understanding Ourselves**



Jill McSweeney,  
*Graduate Teaching  
Associate*

Graduate school is a period of development from a student to a professional. The steady inertia of work can make it seem impossible to slow down and take time for one's self without neglecting academic goals. However, incorporating introspective and reflective time into your daily routine can allow you to explore how your personal and professional selves compliment one another and create a strong and cohesive identity. This approach may be just what we need to successfully conquer the challenges of graduate school.

Our professional identity is often linked to our discipline or research interests. My research focus is the use of nature as a therapeutic tool. I have spent my PhD learning about how time in nature restores your mental capacities, reduces stress, improves mood, and creates a spiritual bond between you and the surrounding world. The healing and restorative properties of nature are vast, but only work if you take time away from your busy life to go outside. 'Taking time' is the root of my research which asks: How can a busy and fast moving society slow down and connect with the world in a way that is restorative and reflective?

It is often difficult for graduate students to take time to think about and develop a personal identity, as our focus is centered on the process of trying on and tailoring professional identities. We can find ourselves being carried away by the demands of teaching, researching, and volunteering, and becoming encompassed in figuring out who we are professionally, while setting aside our personal self. During a presentation on nature, mindfulness and teaching for the Contemplative Practice and Mindfulness in Our Teaching community of practice at Dalhousie University, I realized that I was not practicing anything that I was researching. As I stood there presenting to a group of faculty whose professional identities were intertwined with their

individual and personal selves, I knew that the key to my professional growth was to foster my own personal identity, and that practicing what I was researching was essential to this development.

I began by taking a mindfulness class, which was the first time I committed to practicing meditation daily and with structure. I remember giving up three times during the first five minutes. The simple act of sitting still and being clear of thought was foreign to me, and I spent my time dwelling on the things I should have been doing rather than actually practicing mindfulness. But, like any graduate student, I was determined to excel and ace the exam (45 minutes of meditation) at the end of the 8-week course.

Over the weeks I began noticing that the more I pursued meditation as an objective that could be graded (which I wanted an A+ in!), the further I traveled from the goals of the entire process. I decided that I needed to approach the experience with a different mindset: I needed to take time to explore the process of mindfulness rather than focusing on an end goal. Once I realized the importance of the journey, I began seeing my graduate school experience differently. It is easy to get caught up in focusing on graduation, rather than stepping back and enjoying the time spent learning and exploring the different opportunities open to us as graduate students. As I slowed down and began incorporating mindfulness into my daily routine, I noticed that I was able to cope with the ever-increasing demands of my degree, and approach my work with calmness, clarity, and confidence. I slowly noticed that my personal self, aided by mindfulness, was helping my professional self that was often stressed and overwhelmed.

In addition to mindfulness, I pursued painting as a way to relax. As I explored my own creativity, this became a time of freedom and reflection; and I soon realized

my own ability to see the potential of a blank canvas. The process of painting has helped me to foster my innovation, and I can see areas within my own work that I can integrate creativity, such as incorporating a personal narrative into my dissertation, or using creative writing to reflect on my teaching experiences. More importantly, I have been able to translate my own research on nature exposure to the canvas, and produce non-academic work that makes me proud. The painting below (Figure 1) hangs over my desk at home and reminds me to learn from my own PhD



Figure 1: Inspired from a peaceful and restorative natural landscape

research, and to take a moment to grow as an individual so I can continue to grow as a professional.

The experience of bridging my research and my personal development has been extremely insightful for me. Taking time away from the demands of graduate school to pursue my academic interests in a way that was personal, creative, and reflective allowed me to see

extraordinary changes in my work, my learning, and most importantly - myself. I have begun to develop goals that take the larger picture into account. I no longer look at graduate school as solely a means to a degree or a way to become a professional. Instead, I see it as an experience that helps me prepare my entire self for life after graduate school.

This graduate student edition of *Focus* is about slowing down and giving yourself time to explore yourself and your journey through graduate school. It begins with an article by Janice Allen, which focuses on the benefits of reflective writing for students, particularly in the sciences. The article touches on three key reasons why science graduate students should consider reflective practices. First, students and supervisors may define a student's role in the research process, and evaluate a student's learning. Second, reflection can foster deeper learning for students. Lastly, reflection

can encourage and help students to set and meet their academic goals.

Then, for the first time in an issue of *TA Focus*, a creative piece is presented on finding and remembering hidden treasures within one's self. Marissa Ley writes about the journey and learning that takes place during higher education. This piece not only describes reflection, but an example of the use of creative and reflective writing during graduate school.

Nayha Acharya then presents a wonderful commentary on meditation and mindfulness. Her article outlines the engagement of contemplative practices for students, and the value of such practices during a graduate degree. Nayha, much like Janice, emphasizes the benefits of such practices to scholarship and learning, but also in understanding your inner self during this journey.

By merging concepts of creativity and reflection, Renee LeBlanc writes about her experience exploring

painting breaks from her academic work. The article outlines the interconnectedness of academic and non-academic work, and demonstrates how taking time to be creative can be restorative, encourage confidence, and helpful to reimagining research and teaching.

Lastly, Krystal Soucy concludes the issue with an article on the impact of stress in the highly competitive world of graduate school. Krystal's article focuses on a common theme that runs throughout this issue. The environment of higher education can be overwhelming, stressful, and at times, detrimental to students well-being. Krystal's article provides a variety of resources to help guide students in areas of time management, journaling, exercise, meditation, and campus workshops.

I hope you enjoy this issue of *TA Focus*, and gain inspiration and motivation in your own pursuit of reflective and contemplative practices to support your academic work and personal development, and explore how they enhance one another.

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## In Perspective: The Value of Reflective Writing for Graduate Students in the Sciences



*Janice Allen, Department of Earth Sciences*

The practice of reflection, particularly reflective writing, offers many potential benefits to graduate students in the sciences. Reflection encourages independence, organization, and foresight – useful, if not necessary, qualities of a successful graduate student and aspiring researcher.

While these qualities are encouraged in graduate programs in the sciences, reflective writing plays a relatively minor role in the formal curriculum of most programs. The power of reflective writing to promote effective learning from personal experience, integration of knowledge from various sources, and an understanding of one's beliefs and aspirations in the context of an academic or professional environment has been noted in other disciplines, including the health sciences (e.g., Mann et al., 2009; Moon and Fowler, 2008). Reflection, particularly in writing,

should receive more attention in research-based graduate programs in the sciences.

Graduate school, in research-based programs, is typically seen as a training stage in the career of a researcher, when students learn what it means to conduct research in their field. Graduate programs occupy a space between undergraduate study, which focuses primarily on the accumulation of fundamental knowledge (though there is some push for change, this is still largely the case in the sciences), and employment as a researcher. If students continue to a junior faculty position, they will be expected to fund, manage, and conduct an independent research program. One of the primary goals of graduate school is to foster independence, and to encourage students to develop a deeper understanding of their learning and research processes. This goal is particularly well-suited to the use of reflective writing practices.

It has been noted (e.g. Bowman and Addyman, 2014) that reflective writing has many definitions in academic circles. These definitions can be based from writing entirely on personal experience to composition

tied directly to the literature. The rigidity of the writing style also varies from encompassing writing that adheres to a defined cycle of reflection to taking a more loosely organized approach. For the purpose of this article, I will use reflective writing to mean individual writing, drawing from personal experience, with specific ties to past events and to hopes or goals for the future.

First, reflective writing may provide a means for students and their supervisors to both foster and, to some degree, measure the development of independence. Apart from a course in research methodology, where students may be encouraged to reflect on the research process, how to assign value to knowledge generated, and how to effectively communicate research results, reflective writing is not a requirement of most graduate programs in the sciences. Demonstrating independence in one's work is typically a necessity for graduation, yet evaluation of this requirement seems somewhat vague. What level of independence is acceptable? How is independence demonstrated and measured? If graduate students engaged in regular reflective writing, targeting the progression of their work and their own role in managing their research, supervisors and committee members would have an additional tool to evaluate a student's progress towards independent research.

Second, adding a requirement for reflective writing may serve a number of useful purposes for the student. Participating in regular reflective writing on their studies will likely encourage graduate students to engage more deeply with their own learning process. Reflective writing can help students to develop a better understanding of their preferred learning styles, and their strengths and weaknesses as a student and researcher. In this way, reflective writing can help students to optimize their learning experience. A similar argument can be made for a graduate student's research process, that frequent reflective writing would lend itself to developing a fuller understanding of how research is conducted and knowledge is generated in their field. Through reflective writing the student will also generate a record of their learning process, which they can use to demonstrate their progressive development of ownership of their own work. This might also serve as a source of encouragement for students as they move through their program, being

able to refer to their writing to see progress they've made thus far.

Perhaps the most valuable use of reflective writing for graduate students is to set goals for their program, and to assess their progress towards these goals. This argument can be applied to research-related targets, such as applications for scholarships or submission of papers. Reflective writing may be particularly helpful in identifying and tracking goals not directly related to research, but that the student feels are an important part of their graduate student experience (perhaps to improve employment prospects upon graduation). These goals could include teaching experience, demonstrated communication skills, and professional networking. Engaging thoughtfully in defining goals can be very powerful; not only is the final product, a defined set of goals, valuable, but the process of exploring what ambitions are most important to the individual student will almost certainly be illuminating. With many graduate supervisors placing a strong emphasis on research, it can be challenging for graduate students to navigate their degree in a way that sets them up to accomplish their own professional and personal goals.

The practice of thoughtful reflection, particularly in writing, promises potential benefits for both students and supervisors. In addition to cultivating a deeper understanding of the process of research in one's field, reflective writing could also create a record of the student's progression towards independence in their work, providing a resource for evaluation of this degree requirement. Regular practice of reflective writing would also serve to develop and focus a student's priorities throughout their degree. More emphasis should be placed on the benefits of reflective writing in graduate programs in the sciences, particularly in the early stages of a degree.

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- Mann, K., Gordon, J., and MacLeod, A. 2009. Reflection and reflective practice in health professions education: a systematic review. *Advances in Health Sciences Education*, 14(4): 595-621.
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# Creative Student Reflection

*Marissa Ley, Faculty of Health and Human Performance*

## Make a Treasure Map

**At a place of higher education, where you learn how to seek and create knowledge, it is easy to adopt the perspectives of those around you. You are trained from a young age to look outside yourself for information, and to learn from books, mentors, and peers. But what about the experiences you've had that have shaped who you are? These experiences form the way you understand the world, which is unique to you, and is truly a precious treasure to polish and share.**

**Life can get busy and you can forget to reflect - to write, to think, and to discuss your experiences. Research teaches us, if you don't write something down it's like it never happened; and this is also true for your own accomplishments and growth. The purpose of graduate school is to learn how to contribute new knowledge to the world, and to develop yourself personally and professionally; but how can you reflect on how far you've come if you have left no markers to help outline your journey? It is important to document research findings so that you, or others, can use this knowledge in the future. But one day, someone will want to know what you were experiencing and thinking when your job was to learn about your field and find yourself.**

**Will you be able to share your perspectives and thought processes or will your personal treasure be lost?**



*Teaching and Learning  
Journal Club*

The journal club was created in order to form an interdisciplinary community of students and faculty interested in the topic of “teaching and learning” at Dalhousie. The purpose of the journal club is to share literature from a broad array of disciplines related to the topic. The literature discusses a range of theoretical, methodological, and/or original research from multiple disciplines, and will be discussed and debated during meetings.

*For more information visit [www.learningandteaching.dal.ca](http://www.learningandteaching.dal.ca)*

# Scholarship From the Self: A Reason Among Many that Meditation can Benefit Graduate Students



Nayha Acharya,  
Schulich School of Law

Graduate student life is generally awesome, but it's a whirlwind. There are ideas to develop, papers to edit, students to assist, milestones to celebrate, CVs to build, money to make, and futures to think about. Tangled up in all of this, it can seem impossible or even irresponsible to stop, breathe, and reflect on what we are doing and why. Gradually, though, I have been letting myself believe that for either aspiring or actual scholars, it can be a bit reckless not to take reflective pauses. Below I offer my thoughts on a fairly recently popularized method of pausing called mindfulness meditation, and its potential impact for graduate students in our scholarly pursuits.

## What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a philosophical concept and technique taught by The Buddha more than 2000 years ago. It is the practice of purposeful, nonjudgmental consciousness – a pure awareness of your thoughts, sensations, and emotions, in the here and now. It is common for meditators to start off by learning to pull their awareness to their own breathing. Sometimes, the technique involves learning to notice thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations, but without getting caught up in them.

Sooner or later, the practitioner learns to watch the mind and notice how transient its thoughts are, and it becomes easier to detach from the mind's ego. In turn, that eases the suffering that comes with getting overtaken by our emotions. A propensity for dispassionately observing the mind arms the mindfulness practitioner with the tools to gain a better understanding of his or her true Self. And as self-awareness deepens, the person progresses towards absolute Awareness, which some people term 'enlightenment.'<sup>1</sup>

1 This description is derived from my review of Leonard L. Riskin, "The Contemplative Lawyer: On the Potential Contributions of Mindfulness Meditation to Law Students, Lawyers and their Clients" (2002) Harvard Negotiation Law Review 1; Richard Reuben, "Bringing Mindfulness into the Classroom: A Personal Journey" (2012) Journal of Legal Education 674; and Scot Rogers and Jan Jacobowitz, *Mindfulness and Professional Responsibility: A Guide for Integrating Mindfulness into Law School Curriculum*, (2012, Mindful Living Press: Miami Beach, Florida).

## What does it have to do with Graduate Studies?

I learned about mindfulness very recently, when I came across discussions among law professors that mindfulness techniques should be taught in law schools. I found myself agreeing with them because I could imagine how learning mindfulness could have been helpful during law school and my years of law practice. Many of the benefits that are canvassed by proponents of teaching mindfulness in law school are universal; such as increased concentration, better ability to cope with anxiety, or an improved capacity for solving problems with awareness rather than through emotive reaction. These side effects of mindfulness meditation are obviously constructive skills for graduate students, as they would be for any professional. My reflection, though, is on how the loftier goal of gaining deeper self-understanding is significant for graduate students as aspiring scholars hoping to make meaningful contributions to their fields.

It's difficult to make a blanket statement about what constitutes great scholarship, but it is probably universal that the best scholarship will contain the most compelling ideas. Such ideas are the product of engaging questions and passionate inquiries. They are appealing because they are fresh, exciting and original – challenging assumptions and habitual forms of thinking. In my mind, the richest actualization of the goal of offering captivating ideas is facilitated by, if not contingent on, self-awareness.

Presenting exciting ideas requires *the scholar's own* genuine engagement; and it takes honest self-awareness to know what actually engages us, what really strikes our passion. The pressures of building an academic career can easily distract a person from maintaining an awareness of his or her own true passions. We can and will undertake many projects for a variety of reasons other than genuine engagement and interest. For instance we take on a certain project because of the prospect of a publication, to improve our job or funding prospects, or that someone important has requested that we do it. Of course, my point is not that those reasons for doing things are invalid, or that true engagement is necessarily

incompatible with doing things for those reasons. Most people do things for various reasons, and such work might even be pretty interesting. However my point is that when we do work that is not really engaging us, it is naturally less likely to have the most exciting outcome. Furthermore whatever the outcome, it will not be actualizing our self-potential because it does not originate in the self at all.

Self-awareness can be fostered by the practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness techniques can help us courageously detach from the whirlwind of graduate school pressures and observe when we are authentically engaged. This may enable us to reconnect with our own genuine passions. In doing this, I think we open the door to ensuring that at least some, or better yet, most of what we do is sincerely engaging to us. That sets the stage for contributing our best ideas – those that truly originate from our passion.

Once engaged in a topic, proficiency in mindfulness can help prepare a scholar to make exciting academic contributions. Through mindfulness techniques, a practitioner learns to come to the core of their own thoughts and emotions by peeling away habitual reactions and uncovering layers of conventions that

tend to drive thought patterns. In parallel, the engaged, meditative scholar becomes able, with detached passion, to unwrap the layers of conventional thinking, revealing the deepest underlying assumptions that tend to dictate the thinking in a particular field. Thereby, the scholar paves the road for posing new beginnings or novel endorsements of the old.

The concept of mindfulness captured my attention because of its potential benefits to my scholarship. But perhaps the most important lesson I have learned so far is that being open to experiencing the indwelling Self and allowing its expression is the privilege and pleasure of scholarship. Despite some of its pressures, graduate school probably provides the best space to undertake the exercise of observing one's own passions, and pursuing them to the extent that is practicable, doing so can build the foundations for a largely passion-driven career. So, I close by offering the thought that while deeper self-understanding can make us better scholars, the experience of graduate school and the process of scholarship itself can also enliven our self-understanding by giving us space to uncover what engages us, what ignites our passion, and why.

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## BE A CHAMPION

Ms. Jill ScSweeney, Graduate Teaching Associate,  
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## Creative Breaks = Productive Efforts



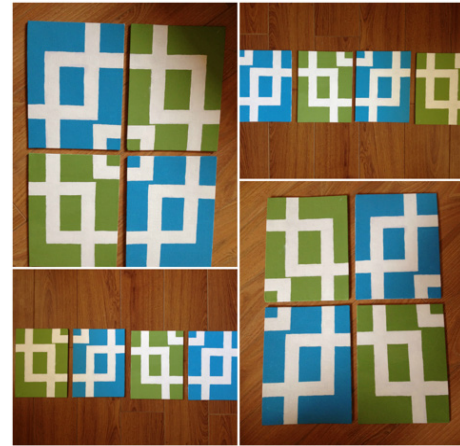
*Renée LeBlanc, School of Health and Human Performance*

I have learned that even though you might not feel creative, you usually are. Perhaps you have not taken the time to see where creativity can take you or perhaps you just assume you are not creative, but I strongly believe that you would surprise yourself and discover that you are in fact creative. I never thought creativity was my strong

suit; however, graduate school has been a new journey, and with new experiences come new challenges. Until this year, I had never resorted to using art to help unwind after a long week or take a break to help regain focus; but I have noticed three distinct benefits from integrating creative breaks into my work routine. First, it helped shut my brain off, which rejuvenated my interest and focus. Second, I ended up with some really neat pieces of art about which I am proud. Not only have I gained great original apartment décor, I have also gained confidence because I know I did it! Third, it helped me work through problems from different perspectives. In fact, I noticed that being creative got my mind thinking in different ways and coming up with new and novel solutions.

One of the reasons I turned to art and creative expression in the first place was because of its ability to help me completely separate from my work and its associated stress. After a long week of papers, presentations and research (which we all know too well!), I decided to entertain myself by painting small canvasses (Figure 1). I knew right away that whatever I did would have to be simple and not require a lot of skill, so I went with a design of lines that I could easily make using tape. I quickly realized that I was working more efficiently on my studies so that I could earn painting time, and that even after 5-10 minutes of painting, I was able to start working on my research with a fresh mind. Sometimes my breaks were longer than planned, but that was okay because I always ended in a good mood and wanting to work.

After showing my painting to several friends and family members, we realized that the canvasses could be displayed in several different ways. With this realiza-



*(Figure 1) See the extent of my creativity and artistic abilities!*

tion, came yet another benefit to my schoolwork; during this time, I was also working on designing a course for the Certificate in University Teaching and Learning. Surprisingly, my artwork started a discussion with other classmates and it became a reflection piece. For instance, although I had created them to fit together into a square, one of my friends thought it would look good with the canvasses in another order. Similarly, the canvasses could be put all in a line or in pairs. While it is not surprising that other people have different perspectives, it was surprising how applicable this was to teaching and learning. I have always had certain beliefs about teaching and learning, and have come to learn that those beliefs are fairly unique to myself and my own experiences. The different ways in which the canvasses could be brought together helped me understand the different ways in which educators can teach the same content, and how students can learn it very differently.

Painting not only put me in a good mood and showed me a variety of perspectives, but it also gave me confidence through producing something about which I was proud. When I finished my canvasses, I was really pleased about how they turned out and was eager to attempt other creative projects. This boost in confidence due to discovering my creative and artistic abilities was not limited to just art projects. I felt more encouraged to try other things that intimidated me, which was a lot of things in graduate school, as I was new to conducting independent research. What started off as a chance painting to entertain myself, ended up being a confidence boost in both my artistic and scholarly work.



*(Figure 2) This is a painting I drew out and painted myself - something I would have never thought possible before*

Not only did I have a great piece of artwork - I also had a very happy boyfriend who loved the piece!

This is one example of how being creative helped me gain perspective. I have found that regardless of how “creative” or not I find my artwork, there are many benefits to painting while doing scholarly work. For instance, by taking short breaks to paint I am able to shut off my brain and focus on the painting rather than dwell on work. This has been so helpful for starting up fresh again once my break is over. All in all, painting

canvases has helped me reflect on the way I tackle research and work assignments, and is an effective way for me to take time for myself, and still be productive at getting tasks done. I would encourage you all to consider painting something, you can even use tape and make some lines just like I did! I think you will find that by focusing on the painting for ten minutes at a time, you will focus more clearly on the task at hand afterwards. The paintings might even help you gain a new perspective on whatever you are working on!



## Allies at Dalhousie

### *Creating safe spaces*

The **Allies at Dalhousie** exist to support students, staff, and faculty of the **Rainbow community** by encouraging the University to welcome and respect its diversity. The term “Rainbow” is used as an inclusive term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, two-spirited, and intersexed persons.

Allies does work with students, staff, and faculty to provide programs, services, training, support, referral, and resources on Rainbow issues. We are registered with the Youth Project.

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## Criteria

Both nominators and evaluators should consider the following list of criteria. Please note that these two areas of criteria are weighted equally. Recognizing that graduate student instructors play different roles and work in disciplines with different demands, nominees should:

1. Provide exceptional student learning experiences that are reflected through effective teaching practices, demonstrated in the following ways:
  - having a comprehensive knowledge of subject
  - being consistently prepared for class/TA duties
  - showing enthusiasm for the subject and encourage student interest and participation
  - setting high standards and motivate students to attain them
  - communicating effectively
  - using technology appropriately for online, blended, and face-to-face contexts
  - being available to students outside class hours, whether in-person or online
  - providing constructive feedback on student work
  - working in a collegial manner with students, faculty supervisors and other teaching assistants
2. Demonstrate a commitment to their own professional development in teaching by:
  - participating in, and/or contributing to, workshops, conferences, and seminars on teaching or other concerns of graduate student teachers
  - developing solutions to graduate student teaching dilemmas (e.g., time management, classroom interaction, motivating students)
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# 2014 President's Graduate Teaching Assistant Award Recipients



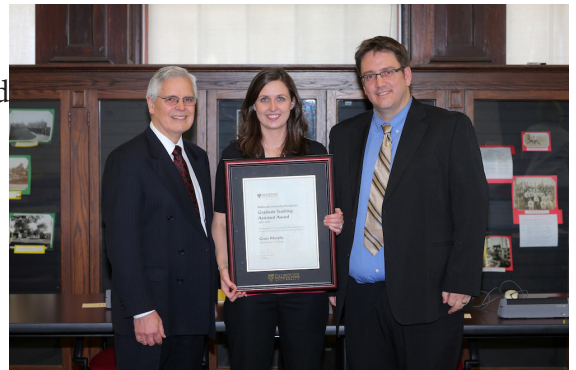
## ***Josh Goreham, School of Health and Human Performance, Division of Kinesiology***

Joshua Goreham is a master's student in the School of Health and Human Performance in the Division of Kinesiology. He has held six Teaching Assistantships over the last two years for introductory and advanced biomechanics and anatomy courses. Faculty, laboratory instructors, and students alike find Joshua to be enthusiastic and helpful as he actively seeks innovative approaches to support students' learning. Joshua is currently working on his Certificate in University Teaching and Learning, and as well as

engaging in his own professional development of teaching also supports the professional development of his fellow TAs. As a senior TA in biomechanics he is not only responsible for setting up the labs to ensure that they run smoothly, but also teaches the first lab of the day so that he can invite the other lab TAs to sit in so they may fully understand how they can effectively approach the lab to ensure students finish successfully. He has also participated as a speaker in the Dalhousie summer Supernova and Mini-University programs.

## ***Grace Murphy, PhD candidate, Department of Biology***

Grace Murphy is a PhD candidate in Biology and has been a TA in the department since 2008, teaching in 15 courses across first, second and third year. She has supervised more than 20 student volunteers on research projects and co-supervised six honours students, as well as a number of students in the new "Experiential Learning Course in Biology." She has also participated as a speaker in the Mini-University Program as a marine biology instructor. Grace is both a mentor to new teaching assistants and well known and highly respected in her department for her mentoring of undergraduate students. She is approachable and supportive while encouraging students to learn independently. She is currently working towards the completion of the Certificate in University Teaching and Learning. Grace was the 2013 recipient of the Department of Biology Teaching Assistant Award and in 2012 received the L'Oreal Mentoring Scholarship for Science in Canada.



## ***Alana Westwood, PhD student, Department of Biology***



Alana Westwood is a PhD student in the Department for Biology. Since 2008 she has been a TA in 10 courses including the field course "GIS in Ecology." In addition, she has been a TA for "Ethics in Science", a course designed to meet a writing requirement course for undergraduate science students in the Dalhousie Integrated Science Program. She has also been a Senior Tutor for several years in the Writing Centre. Alana has had the opportunity to bring together her experience in the Writing Centre with her TA work in a philosophy course by proposing a writing assignment for Ethics in Science that included a blog writing competition that is wildly popular with students. Alana has been instrumental in supporting the

teaching development of her fellow tutors in the Writing Centre, and won an award for being the most engaged tutor at the Writing Centre. She is currently completing the requirements for the College Reading and Learning Association's ITTPC International Tutor Certification.

# Stress and Coping in Academia



*Krystal Soucy, MSc  
Department of Kinesiology*

In academia, busy schedules and pressing deadlines create the potential for elevated stress levels. Stress may be designated as eustress (i.e., positive) or distress (i.e., negative). Eustress is experienced when an individual perceives a given situation to be positive, and feels as though he/she has adequate resources to cope with the situation (Nelson & Simmons, 2003). Conversely, distress occurs when an individual appraises a specific event as negative, and feels as though he/she does not have sufficient resources to overcome the harm or threat associated with the event.

Exposure to both positive stress (e.g., engagement, outstanding personal achievement, receiving a scholarship/grant) and negative stress (e.g., being fired from a job, a break-up with significant other, death of a loved one) has been demonstrated to elicit a variety of physical and psychological symptoms. Physical symptoms may include muscle tension, increased heart rate, and fatigue (Smith, Ptacek, & Patterson, 2000). Psychological symptoms may include attention disruption and difficulty concentrating (Kerr & Fowler, 1988). In particular, these psychological stress symptoms may be problematic in academia as they have the potential to reduce one's productivity (Halkos & Bousinakis, 2010), and may lead to missed deadlines, the piling up of work, and fewer publications.

Stressors specific to graduate students have been identified as financial pressures, academic pressures, time constraints, lack of program or family support, role conflict, and living environment (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007). The effects of chronic stress are much more pronounced than acute stress, and subjecting oneself to high levels of stress for an extended period of time can lead to burnout (Huang & Lin, 2010). Burnout within academia is characterized by emotional exhaustion, a loss of interest in one's research/depersonalization, and a feeling of reduced academic achievement (Schaufeli, Martinez, Pinto, Salanova, & Baker, 2002). Graduate students suffering from burnout are at increased risk for dropping out of their program prior to degree completion (Dyrbye et al., 2011).

When working in a high-stress academic environment (whether it be exposure to positive stress, negative

stress, or both), it is important to be mindful of your thoughts and feelings as both types of stress produce symptoms that can be harmful to your health. It is important for you to be able to recognize changes in your mood and behavior, so that you can seek out appropriate resources in the event that you begin to feel overwhelmed. During this time of economic uncertainty, it can seem like a constant inner struggle to determine how much you can or should take on with regards to volunteer work and extracurricular activities, as it is typical to want to do everything you can to improve your chances for employment beyond graduation. For some, the idea of taking time for yourself can be daunting, as it means you are (momentarily) taking time away from advancing your studies and research. Therefore, it may seem difficult to convince yourself that taking a step back to focus on yourself will actually be beneficial for your work and mental health in the long-term.

Fortunately, coping resources can aid in decreasing or eliminating stress symptoms. Through being mindful of your thoughts and feelings you can recognize stress symptoms, and make efforts to reduce their harmful effects. Ideally, you should be proactive in your approach to combat stress by incorporating some coping strategies into your daily/weekly routine. Some strategies may include time management, journaling, exercise, meditation, and workshops.

## Time management

There are a variety of applications and programs that are available to help you manage your time. To figure out where you might be losing valuable time, programs such as Rescue Time (<https://www.rescuetime.com>) or Toggl (<https://www.toggl.com>) can be used to track your time spent on tasks. Recognizing where and how your time is being lost throughout the day can make you more mindful of how you spend your time. You may also create a separate user account on your computer specifically for academic use, using the parental controls to block websites that you knowingly use as a source of procrastination. Additionally, using a planner to schedule all of your daily activities can help you better manage your time, and help you remain focused and productive. Some people may prefer to use a pen-and-paper planner, whereas others may opt to use the calendar on their computer and/or mobile device. A

planner can help you gain a feeling of control over your busy schedule, and can provide you with an opportunity to ensure adequate time is allotted for sleep, exercise, and hobbies.

## Journaling

Keeping a journal can act as a release for your thoughts and feelings experienced throughout the day, and can help you to clear your head. Additionally, journaling may make you more aware of how you feel, as your journal can be used to reflect back and acknowledge the origin of potential stress symptoms so that steps can be taken to minimize or eliminate the stressor(s).

## Exercise

Engaging in regular physical activity has numerous physical/physiological and psychological benefits. Physical/physiological benefits include weight control and a reduced risk for chronic disease (Magoc, Tomaka, & Thompson, 2012). Psychological benefits of physical activity consist of increased self-esteem, improved mood, and reduced stress, anxiety, and depression (O'Connor, Herring, & Carvalho, 2010). Be sure to include a variety of activities in your exercise regime to keep things fun and interesting, and to keep yourself motivated. Some options may include going to the gym, yoga classes, group fitness classes, joining an intramural team at Dalhousie or a local running club.

## Relaxation techniques

Relaxation is described as a state of mental and physiological rest (Mizrahi et al., 2012), and meditation and guided imagery are two types of relaxation techniques used to reduce stress and anxiety. When practicing meditation, it is recommended to concentrate exclusively on your breathing, such as counting your breaths. Maintaining a focus on your breathing will help to clear any intruding thoughts from your mind. For those interested, there is a free app available for both Android and iPhone users called "Breathe2Relax". It allows you to rate your stress level before and after participating in a deep breathing exercise, and tracks your results so you can observe changes in your stress level over time. Guided imagery involves listening to a script that is read aloud (it may be pre-recorded or read in person) to guide the individual through a calming scenario. There is a free app for iPhone users called "Stop, Breathe, & Think", which allows you to 'check in' mentally, physically, and emotionally. The application then

analyzes your results to suggest specific pre-recorded scripts for your current state.

## Workshops/support groups

There are a variety of workshops and support groups offered on-campus for Dalhousie students that are designed to address common personal and academic stressors. A list of these workshops and support groups, as well as schedules and registration information, can be found on the Dalhousie Counseling Services website (<http://dal.ca/counselling>). These workshops and support groups can provide a sense of community, and comfort in knowing that you are not alone (i.e., that there are other students also dealing with similar struggles).

However, in cases of severe stress (e.g., chronic stress), it is advisable to consult a professional psychologist. Chronic stress can be defeating, and may be provoked by a range of underlying causes. A psychologist can help get to the core of your stress, and can make it manageable for you to overcome.

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# Teaching and Learning

# Conference Travel Grants

The Centre for Learning and Teaching offers grants up to \$750.00 each to assist with the cost of travelling or conference registration for a limited number of instructors and graduate students each year to present at a teaching and learning conference.

**Deadline to submit: Tuesday, September 30, 2014**

Visit [www.learningandteaching.dal.ca](http://www.learningandteaching.dal.ca) for more information

## Dalhousie Co-Curricular Record

Dalhousie's Co-Curricular Record (CCR) is an official document from Dalhousie that will recognize your accomplishments and the experiential learning that occurs outside of the classroom, including campus-life and community engagement, volunteer and service leadership, and awards for exemplary contributions.

There are many benefits from having a CCR. It is a great way of tracking your "out-of-class" accomplishments during your time at Dalhousie/King's University that are not fully reflected on your academic transcript. This can give you an edge over other graduates and helps set you apart from the competition because it provides potential employers and graduate and/or professional schools with a university-recognized document of your involvement outside of the classroom.

### Some other benefits for the CCR are:

- It acknowledges the value of your achievements.
- It serves as a reflection tool.
- It is helpful when applying for jobs, post-graduate programs.

### Interested in learning more about the Co-Curricular Record?

#### Contact

**Chris Glover**, Associate Director,  
Career & Leadership Development Centre  
[chris.glover@dal.ca](mailto:chris.glover@dal.ca) | (902) 494 8022

**Co-Curricular Record  
Student Team**  
[ccr@dal.ca](mailto:ccr@dal.ca)

#### Visit

**The Career & Leadership Development Centre**  
4th floor of the Student Union Building

**The Co-Curricular Record Website**  
<http://dal.ca/ccr>

# 2014 Fall Term Discussion Group Series



Facilitated by

**Jill Marie McSweeney, IDPhD Student  
Graduate Teaching Associate  
Centre for Learning and Teaching**

## ***The Use of Art in Academia***

***September 30, 2014***

Art is often used as a form of expression, a way of conveying one's own understanding and experiences of their internal and external world. Paintings, poetry, dance, and song are a few ways that art can be used to highlight social issues, provide opportunities for change in thought, or spark a person to re-examine what they see. The use of art as a form of assessment is largely absent in classrooms, but offers a means of representing and presenting students' learning processes and outcomes. This discussion will focus on the integration of fine arts into classrooms and curriculums, and provide examples of how this collaboration can produce exciting and meaningful learning.

## ***Thoughtful Teaching- Uncovering your Identity as an Educator***

***October 29, 2014***

At the end of class you shut down your computer, collect assignments, and head back to your office to work on the lecture for the next class. This routine can become automated and absent of purpose and enthusiasm, and can leave your teaching deflated. But what would happen if you took time after class to think about what happened and how your students reacted? A thoughtful teacher uses personal reflection to understand their role in the classroom and their connection with students to enhance and grow in their teaching. This discussion will focus on the use of reflection and self-assessment as an educator to understand your purpose and goals in the classroom.

## ***Thinking Beyond the Ivory Tower***

***November 26, 2014***

The signposts after graduate school are often directed down the road of 'Tenured Faculty Ave,' and you often feel others' expectations pushing you to pursue a career inside academia. But what if that's not for you? How do you cope with making the choice to not pursue a faculty position after graduate school? And how do you prepare yourself to become a candidate for non-academic positions? This discussion will explore how graduate school can prepare you for work in non-academic careers, and how to overcome the stigma of leaving the 'ivory tower' behind.

**All sessions run from 1:30 to 3:00 pm in the Killam Library, Room B400**

*To register for these events and other CLT workshops, visit: [www.learningandteaching.dal.ca](http://www.learningandteaching.dal.ca)*



Centre for Learning and Teaching



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Go to [www.learningandteaching.dal.ca](http://www.learningandteaching.dal.ca) for more information or call CLT at 494-6641.

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