

## **The Undergraduate Teaching Assistant: Scholarship in the Classroom**

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*This essay casts the role of the Undergraduate Teaching Assistant (UTA) within a Kantian sense of imagination—the not yet pushed off of the actual and the tangible (Kant, 1781/1963). The UTA accesses a temporal glimpse into a professional scholar/teacher vocation through experience in a lived context that unites teaching and scholarship. The role of the UTA offers what Martin Buber (1965/1988) called “imagining the real” (p. 60), a moment of creative ingenuity that begins with the doing of concrete tasks within the profession.*

*Keywords: undergraduate, undergraduate teaching assistant, mentorship, communication, undergraduate research, and communication education*

Thomas J. Socha (1998) conceptualized the Undergraduate Teaching Assistant (UTA) as a mentor-mentee relationship, designed to shape a student professionally and personally: “UTA programs represent an untapped, potentially effective means to help socialize the field's best and brightest undergraduates into the communication professoriate” (p. 82). Being introduced as a UTA to the communication professoriate can provide an important part of an education for any student. A glimpse into a profession permits the student to walk alongside the professor, gaining insight into a future vocation. Egerton (1979) stressed the insights of Wilbert J. McKeachie, the then-president of the American Psychological Association, who commended programs at Cornell and Dartmouth for their UTAs, citing the specific training and the supervision that the UTA received (p. 61). By framing the role of the UTA within a guiding program that explicitly states appropriate and inappropriate responsibilities of the student within the role, the UTA experience both benefits the TA and enhances the collegiate classroom. These advantages are the focus of this essay.

This essay examines the UTA in five sections: (1) a scholarly and professional explication of the UTA; (2) an analysis of the UTA within the communication classroom; (3) an examination of the UTA as an instance of preparing future faculty; (4) the concrete experiences of one of the authors; and (5) future implications for the field of communication tied to the inseparability of scholarship and teaching. This essay serves an additional function of envisioning the UTA role in the Department of Communication & Rhetorical Studies at Duquesne University as we align the UTA with the larger research initiative of the department. Content-oriented teaching begins with scholarship that comes to life in classroom engagement.

### **Undergraduate Teaching Assistant: Research and Professional Explication**

Appropriate professional questions regarding the UTA emerged in initial scholarship on the Undergraduate Teaching Assistant. Are UTAs utilized to conserve monetary

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resources? Are there educational standards for UTA utilization? Fremouw, Millard, and Donahoe (1979) posed these initial questions, which continue to shape the discussion forty years later. Their concern was threefold: (1) lack of information regarding the benefits tied to the UTA; (2) potential eroding of education standards for other undergraduate students; and (3) use of the UTA as an alternative source of cheap labor. The assertion about “cheap alternative sources of labor” was widely voiced (p. 30). Acknowledging this concern, this essay examines the benefits of such a role.

In addition to the question of resources, there is a query about impact on the UTA’s fellow students. Filz and Gurung (2013) conducted a study on the experience of the UTA, examining characteristics and advantages of the UTA experience. The authors discovered that student perception of the UTA either enlarged or diminished the classroom possibilities. Filz and Gurung (2013) suggest that the following characteristics are essential in a UTA: (1) approachability; (2) confidence; (3) enthusiasm; (4) effectiveness as a communicator; (5) flexibility and open-mindedness; (6) good listening skills; (7) positive attitude; (8) knowledge of course material; (9) professional demeanor; (10) respectfulness; and (11) responsiveness and preparedness (p. 49). These representative traits provide a framework of responsiveness, responsibility, care, and enthusiasm that are vital for the success of the UTA’s impact on other students in the classroom.

Perhaps due to this concern of placing an undergraduate student in a teaching role akin to “preparing future faculty,” and although the UTA, according to Mendenhall and Burr (1983), is effective for pedagogical purposes with small groups of students, professors appear to have reservations in giving the UTA more responsibilities in a teaching role (p. 184). By examining concrete experience reported by the UTA, Mendenhall and Burr discovered that UTAs grew personally and professionally from the experience. The UTAs utilized material that they had learned in coursework and developed personal and professional skills such as facilitating group discussion, enhancing leadership abilities in others, administrative skills and mentoring/counseling expertise (p. 185). Such learning follows when clearly defined roles and responsibilities enhance the experience for all concerned.

For instance, in the academic year 2011—2012, the State University of New York (SUNY) Faculty Senate introduced a “Guide for Undergraduate Teaching Assistantships.” According to the SUNY Faculty Senate (2012), the teaching experience can lead to “better understanding of the teaching and learning process, deeper appreciation of the subject matter, pre-professional training, improvement of writing and presentation skills, development of leadership and self-confidence, and better time management skills” (p. 2). Mentorship and engagement are important points of contact between the UTA and the faculty member. Furthermore, ongoing assessment is required in order to ensure learning for both the UTA and the other students enrolled in the course. Assessment within a UTA program also requires discernment to make sure that the experience is demonstrably beneficial to students enrolled in the course. The SUNY Faculty Senate highlighted the benefits of a student functioning in the role of mentor, giving a peer direct access. Such availability can “lead to increased engagement through greater time spent in out-of-class learning activities facilitated by the TA” (p. 2). Peer mentoring provides the students in the course an opportunity to engage academic material with individuals closer to their own life experiences.

At the University of Pittsburgh in the Dietrich School of Arts & Sciences, the guidelines for the teaching experience address both appropriate UTA teaching-related activities, such as facilitating regular discussions and assisting the instructor, and

inappropriate UTA teaching-related activities, such as grading papers or quizzes, giving final grades, or consistently lecturing to the students in the course (University of Pittsburgh, 2013). Additionally, a UTA must have an appropriate grade point average and have completed the course (University of Pittsburgh, 2013).

As the UTA responsibility is examined throughout academe, both appropriate roles and inappropriate roles require exploration. For example, appropriate roles include activities such as delivering lectures and presentations, holding office hours and tutoring sessions, and assisting the instructor to enhance the classroom through dialogue with students (Seiler, 1983; Seiler & Fuss-Reineck, 1986; Socha, 1998; SUNY University Faculty Senate, 2012; University of Pittsburgh, 2013). This result, however, can be dampened by inappropriate roles, such as lecturing too frequently, not being properly prepared, and being asked to assign grades for papers, presentations, and exams (Seiler, 1983; Socha 1998, SUNY University Faculty Senate, 2012; University of Pittsburgh, 2013). Supervision and training of the UTA must be structured and publicly professional in order to maintain credibility for UTA use and to enhance student learning.

Having an immediate person, someone close to the student experience, to consult with is of equal importance to the faculty member. John Egerton (1979) details a course taught by George Christian Jernstedt, a psychology professor who had taught at Dartmouth College since 1967. Jernstedt's course, "Psychology 22: Learning," utilized the UTA as a way to connect to the undergraduate students in the course (Egerton, 1979, p. 58). The goal of connecting with the students was vital and was accomplished via dialogue with one another, the other students, and the faculty mentor.

### **The Undergraduate Teaching Assistant in the Communication Classroom**

A number of communication professors have contributed to this conversation about appropriate UTA activity in the classroom. Socha (1998) examined the benefits of a UTA within the communication classroom, and as past president of the Southern States Communication Association (2010 through 2011) and candidate for the second vice president of the National Communication Association, he articulated why the use of UTAs in the classroom is extremely beneficial. He explained, "They [the students] were provided additional points of view about the course, interacted with top communication students, were introduced to topics in UTA lectures that might not have been otherwise covered, and had a knowledgeable peer to talk with about the course" (1998, p. 81). Furthermore, UTAs are socialized into higher education as faculty members shape the teaching capabilities of those students. Socha explicated the advantages of undergraduate leadership engaged with a faculty member and students within the class. The UTA's education is given priority as a direct byproduct of meeting with a seasoned faculty member. The UTA is invited into a standard-bearer role. Socha wrote, "Students should benefit by exposure to top-rated students who might serve as role models" (p. 77). UTAs engage in educational performativity that guides students in the course with content and example.

Socha (1998) cited Baisinger, Peterson, and Spillman (1984), who articulated further outlines advantages to UTAs, faculty members, university departments, and students in the communication course. Baisinger et al. characterized the "primary benefit to the department" of the UTA as permitting the department to respect university requirements and policies while structuring an opportunity for professional and vocational development of a student (p. 62). Furthermore, the authors cited that the UTAs "have much empathy for their charges" (p. 62). Other benefits included an enriched understanding of the field of

communication. The authors also found that students who took the course felt more comfortable asking their peers for assistance, contributing to a positive classroom learning environment.

Socha (1998) also cited Pruett (1979), who explained the development of a program taking place during the academic year 1974–1975. Pruett addressed a resource issue of limited staff by pursuing a “little red schoolhouse” model that placed students within a collaborative teaching role. They openly admitted some of the concerns listed related to resources and additional staff. Due to the fact that the Department of Communication had just been formed, securing additional staff was unlikely, making the UTA program pragmatically essential (Pruett, 1979, p. 31). The program was extremely successful, with only one of eight accepted UTAs proving to be “ineffective” (Pruett, 1979, p. 32). Furthermore, Pruett pointed out that UTAs found a wide array of learning from this pre-professional opportunity. Pruett stated:

For example, it has given them [the UTAs] a greater appreciation of what it means to be a teacher and made them better students. It has provided the opportunity of working closely with a faculty member. It has given them a position, which offers responsibility. It has allowed for the development of personal skills. [...] it has provided experiences which have made them strong candidates for receiving graduate teaching assistantships (p. 32).

Pruett viewed the experience as central to a number of students who decided to pursue an academic career.

Seiler (1983) addressed the Personalized System of Instruction (PSI), grounding the UTA’s position within the classroom as holistically advantageous to both the UTA and the students. His work, which originally appeared in basic psychology courses, became an important facet of communication education. Seiler framed a PSI with five separate characteristics: “(a) mastery learning, (b) self-pacing, (c) a stress on the written word, (d) instructor assistants, and (e) the use of lectures to motivate rather than to supply essential information” (1983, p. 16). Seiler explained that the instructor assistants were typically proctors or tutors, most of them undergraduate students who had successfully completed the course (p. 16). Seiler noted that within the basic speech communication course (i.e. public speaking), the five elements characterizing the PSI are already present. Moreover, Seiler recommended that only high-performing undergraduate students who had already taken the course be considered as instructors. Within the high-enrollment basic speech communication course with high enrollment, instruction is divided between graduate teaching assistants and professors, permitting the UTA an opportunity to learn from mentors, who supervise a variety of pedagogical techniques, presentations, group activities, and lectures involving students from diverse backgrounds.

Seiler expanded the PSI within the basic speech communication course with co-author Fuss-Reineck. Seiler and Fuss-Reineck (1986) noted student appreciation for personal access to professors, proctors, and assistants, which propelled student performance. The authors also explained that new instructor assistants, a term used by the authors referring to teaching assistants, are given manuals and training sessions in an effort to prepare them for the classroom. Students are vetted as academically competent and must have already been successful in the course for which they will serve as instructor assistant. As Galvin (1999) states, “issues of sensitivity to students, a scholar’s curiosity, academic ethics and values, publication directions, and personal boundaries may be explored over time between mentor

and student, a relationship that enhances both parties” (p. 251). This professional relationship is mutually beneficial and enhances the experiences of all.

Situated within this scholarly and professional explication of the role of the UTA is the ongoing importance of the student witnessing what it means to be a teacher in a professional walk alongside the professor. The student engages the material at a deeper level while enhancing pedagogical techniques that improve communication skills. Furthermore, the faculty member is given additional support—support that is close to the student experience. We now move to explication of the UTA as an apprenticeship model tied to scholarship, framed from the vantage point of our own local academic home, Duquesne University.

### **Preparing Future Faculty: A Scholar/Teacher Apprenticeship Model**

The Department of Communication & Rhetorical Studies at Duquesne University enacts an apprenticeship model that engages faculty and students at the graduate level. The Department embraces the UTA experience aligned with a research commitment. The graduate level apprenticeship model is a model for our UTA program, which offers a temporal glimpse into the profession and into graduate study.

At the M.A. graduate level, students on assistantship function as research assistants, assisting faculty while learning practices that enhance their own scholarship. One-half of each Ph.D. assistantship is also devoted to work as a research assistant, with the other half dedicated to work as a teaching assistant. Through this apprenticeship model, students are given opportunities to understand the vital importance of scholarship in the vocation of teaching. This apprenticeship model privileges scholarship and research as the path to teaching in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century recognition of information and interpretive diversity.

Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) requires faculty and students on assistantship to attend colloquia consisting of scholarship offered by invited faculty and fellow doctoral students. Additionally, PFF includes *hesed* (must be done for the good of the community, but cannot be demanded) dinners, which provide doctoral students an opportunity to receive instruction and information on departmental activities, professional deadlines, and university-wide initiatives. The graduate directors, chair, and invited faculty discuss various aspects of the profession at each meeting, followed by a meal together. This *hesed* dinner takes place approximately twice a semester. Furthermore, weekly meetings for teaching assistants are held to enhance students’ communication education motivation, knowledge, and skills. The meetings are led by two graduate students who assist the chair in the direction of two classes—Public Speaking, which serves as a course option for one element of the the university core curriculum, and Business and Professional Communication, a required course for students in the business school. The discussion also centers on a selected scholar whose work assists knowledge in philosophy of communication. All give presentations on this scholar’s material, which requires use of and explanation of pedagogy. Importantly, the focus is first on ideas with openness to a variety of pedagogical styles.

Additionally, the Department of Communication & Rhetorical Studies at Duquesne University holds a PFF orientation for all graduate students (both M.A. and Ph.D.) during the entire week prior to the start of the fall semester and for one day preceding the start of the spring semester. This initiative is coordinated by co-directors of the graduate program, who involve faculty and the chair in lectures/discussions on topics such as rhetoric and philosophy of communication scholarship, scholarship as learning, professional development void of shortcuts, teaching as vocation, learning while studying for

comprehensive exams, professional discipline in dissertation work, and the importance of service to one's local academic home, the profession, and the community. The PFF initiative permits students to learn about professional obligations and expectations and to give them an opportunity to learn about teaching and scholarship as a vocational commitment.

Finally, PFF meetings take place each Friday afternoon throughout the duration of the semester, again with a focus first on ideas, followed by an examination of TA preparation for upcoming teaching obligations. This zero-credit course uses scholarly literature and books that students present as part of pedagogical practice with the objective of enhancing their understanding of a scholar/teacher vocation. Meetings are also held for graduate teaching assistant instructors teaching their own sections of basic courses such as Public Speaking, Business and Professional Communication, Exploring Interpersonal Communication, and Exploring Intercultural Communication. The meetings tender an occasion to meet with a faculty member to ensure teaching success. Activities engaged throughout PFF (the week-long initiative, as well as Friday afternoon meetings) socialize graduate students into the virtues, attitudes, behaviors, and communicative patterns central to a scholar/teacher commitment.

Graduate school socialization is an important step toward professional engagement at a college or university, with the “graduate teaching assistantship... [serving as]... the best preparation for the future faculty role [...]” (Darling, 1999, p. 50). The goal is to integrate such socialization with the UTA experience. As Staton (1999) states, such socialization begins the road to professional attitude and value assimilation. The experiences of one of the co-authors in the UTA role reflect the findings of professional assimilation and vocational welcome. Our UTA program will adapt some of the insights from the graduate program on PFF with the goal of inviting an increasingly seamless connection between graduate and undergraduate education.

In recognition of Duquesne University's scholarly expectations,<sup>3</sup> the provost encourages a similar commitment tied to undergraduate education. Provost Timothy Austin (personal communication, October 2, 2013) emphasized our participation in the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR) and noted the introduction of an enhanced membership, which coincides with our research objectives at the University. This scholarly initiative united with teaching yields a scholar/teacher model of higher education as the defining characteristic of the Duquesne experience.

#### Scholar/Teacher Implications<sup>4</sup>

As a former UTA at Duquesne University, I offer a personal example of my experience. I began my familiarity with graduate study as I served as an undergraduate teaching assistant for Ronald C. Arnett in an undergraduate course. The program is known for its work in communication ethics,<sup>5</sup> the course for which I engaged the UTA role and that serves as the cornerstone of the Department of Communication & Rhetorical Studies.

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<sup>3</sup> In 2010, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching moved Duquesne University forward in the Carnegie Classifications to a Research University (High Research Activity). For more information, visit <http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org>

<sup>4</sup> This section is written by author Sarah Flinko, who served as a UTA for Ronald C. Arnett. Ronald C. Arnett served as a UTA for Paul Keller in an interpersonal communication Course. Paul Keller was a highly respected and “much sought-after expert in conflict resolution and interpersonal communication” (In memoriam., 2003, p. 24). He co-authored one of the “first books on interpersonal communication” (In memoriam., 2003, p. 24).

<sup>5</sup> Duquesne University hosts the biennial National Communication Ethics Conference. Furthermore, many of the works that have come from the department are scholarly explications of communication ethics. See, for

Communication Ethics is a senior-level, writing-intensive course focused on theoretical and philosophical engagement of communication ethics through the lens of the historical periods (antiquity, medieval, renaissance, modernity, and post-modernity). Arnett, Fritz, and Bell (2009) consider the necessity of attending to the good of each period, which the authors describe as “a central value or set of values manifested in communicative practices that we seek to protect and promote in our discourse together” (p. 2). Students are called to employ ethical questions that define a given moment in a writing-intensive course that engages ideas in philosophy of communication ethics, novels connected to each time period, and discussion of the importance of contending perspectives on communication ethics.

I was introduced to the UTA role after concluding the communication ethics course in the spring of my junior year. Ronald C. Arnett and his doctoral teaching assistants inquired about my interest in serving as a UTA for Communication Ethics in the spring semester of my senior year. I accepted, knowing that I was considering graduate study. Additionally, I recognized the opportunity of an apprenticeship model and was excited to begin the experience.

After I had accepted the responsibility connected to the role of the UTA within Communication Ethics, preparation for the course began. Immediately after the conclusion of the course at the end of the spring semester, I joined a group of undergraduate and Ph.D. students, who met to discuss what had and had not been successful within the classroom in the previous semester. We examined the course framework, studied the structure of quizzes and papers, and reviewed the pedagogical techniques employed. My role in planning the course began with input and voice; I offered my opinion as an undergraduate student. The materials for this particular class shift yearly, and preparation each year is led by conversation about scholarship in communication ethics, an element of professional training for the doctoral teaching assistants. Seiler (1983) recommends that UTAs be trained by graduate students, who serve in the role of supervisor within the classroom (p. 18). This orientation was reflective of my UTA experience. Graduate students supervised the work that I did, prior to my bringing anything into the classroom, while giving me the opportunity to grow and to be creative pedagogically.

The course carried the mark of the instructor, whose scholarship formed the foundation of the course, which was designed to engage communication ethics in a philosophical and theoretical manner.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the historical periods (antiquity, medieval, renaissance, modernity, and post-modernity) were studied and examined as guiding epochs that announced differing goods associated with them. Novels reflecting these goods were assigned to each period. The final paper was aimed at identifying the key metaphors in each moment, situated within literary selections. For example, from antiquity, the students read Homer’s *Iliad*. This work exemplified this classical era through an examination of the protection of the polis. The medieval era was represented by Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. The good of this moment was the church, which is evidenced within the novel through the characters’ dedication to the church. Machiavelli’s *The Prince* was the selection from the renaissance. The church with dispute is the good of this novel, which is clearly evident in

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example, Arnett, R.C., Fritz, J. M. H., & Bell, L.M. (2009). *Communication ethics literacy: Dialogue and difference*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

<sup>6</sup> *Communication Ethics Literacy: Dialogue and Difference*, written by Ronald C. Arnett, Janie M. Harden Fritz, and Leeanne M. Bell; *Ethical Communication: Moral Stances in Human Dialogue*, edited by Clifford G. Christians and John C. Merrill; and *Dialogic Confessions: Bonhoeffer’s Rhetoric of Responsibility*, written by Ronald C. Arnett.

this work, as the novel advocates personal power than maintains influence outside the role of the church. *The Sun Also Rises*, by Hemingway, represented modernity. The focus of the novel is upon the individual, a major metaphor situated within this time period. Finally, *The Alchemist*, by Coelho, represented a postmodern attentiveness to difference. This metaphor was present throughout the book, as characters were forced to overcome cultural differences in various contexts.

UTAs in the Communication Ethics course are provided opportunities to give content-driven presentations to the students. UTAs give presentations on books connected to historical moments. As a UTA, I presented *The Sun Also Rises* as part of my scholarship in the classroom as a UTA. Throughout my presentation, I was called to examine the book, analyze the historical moment and the given situation rhetorically, and offer helpful metaphors that pointed to the specific good of that particular historical moment. I was also called upon to provide advice and to tutor students by explaining assignments, offering suggestions on papers, and listing resources on Blackboard for the students. However, I did not participate in any grading, nor did I ever see grading take place.

As an undergraduate teaching assistant, my encounter with the material in the course varied from my experience as a student enrolled in the course. Based on several experiments with UTAs in the classroom, Fremouw, Millard, and Donahoe (1979) found that the TAs “displayed greater knowledge of information....” (p. 32). This observation resonates with my own experiences as a UTA.

As a student in the course, the material often required careful and thoughtful consideration in order to grasp the implications for communication ethics in practice. This inquiry provided the framework for me to flourish in my UTA experience. Engaging the content as a UTA opened my eyes to a variety of theoretical interpretations. I found that the encounter with the course a second time—and, eventually, a third time—informed my understanding of communication ethics significantly. Baisinger, Peterson, and Spillman (1984) found a similar engagement by the UTAs within their courses. The authors wrote that the UTAs indicated that they understood communication in a deeper fashion after serving in the role of the UTA. The experience teaches the UTA to engage the material differently and to move those skills into other academic settings.

The syllabus in our particular course on communication ethics clearly defined the expectations of the students, teaching assistants, and the professor. The course purpose, within the syllabus, was articulated as follows:

This course follows the Department of Communication and Rhetorical Studies’ mission of “Walking the Humanities into the Marketplace” and “The Ethical Difference.” Our task is to invite students to ideas or, as Robert Hutchins stated, to the “civilization of dialogue.” Civilized dialogue emerges from the dialectic of freedom and restraint. To paraphrase Martin Buber: I love freedom. With freedom, I rejoice with my right hand and with my left hand, I restrain the action of the right. Communication ethics rests in the juncture between restraint and freedom.

As a UTA, I was instrumental in the selection of the novels. In fact, the UTAs were asked to bring two novels exemplifying each historical period, from which we then selected the novels for the class as a group. The syllabus listed books that the professor would be lecturing from and those that were recommended reading. Students were evaluated on five key components: (a) interpretive essays, including a midterm historical event essay and a final



humanities case study essay, (b) exams, (c) quizzes, (d) reading of all assigned materials, and (e) attendance. All evaluation involved the professor and the doctoral assistants.

Socha (1998) elucidates the need for clearly defined roles of the UTA, diversity in the assistants selected, the importance of formal instruction as well as *supervised* experiences in which the faculty works in a “mentor” role, and finally, a healthy respect for the student’s overall capabilities (pp. 77–78). His call for clearly defined roles aligns with my experience as a UTA within the Communication Ethics course. The most important elements of the UTA, looking back on my experience, were fourfold: (1) having already taken the class; (2) being intimately involved in the construction of the course for the next time; (3) offering presentations in the class; and 4) offering advice on the papers. These components are reflective of what Socha (1998) outlined in his article—clearly defined roles and values associated with the UTA shape the quality of the experience of all involved in the activity of learning. The UTA experience, then, became a learning occurrence that generalized to other classes and other parts of my life. This learning was similar to what I experienced when enrolled in the course, only enhanced as a UTA. As a tutor, and during my office hours, my ability to explicate material in a clear and concise manner was due to the scholarship engaged in the class, which further enhanced my education.

All UTAs engage pedagogical scholarship, beginning with preparation for the course and later UTA work in the course. As previously explicated, I presented two novels in each of my two years as a UTA and offered a humanities case study essay as an example for the class. I grounded the novels within their respective historical moments, considered the metaphors that emerged, and explored the implications of the novel within a communication ethics framework. All UTAs within the course were required to give similar presentations. Engaging the material in this manner permitted content to drive the UTAs’ discussion of ideas. The research initiative required in the UTA role provided a temporal glimpse into a vocational commitment of not only teaching, but of scholarship and service as well.

The Department of Communication & Rhetorical Studies is both congruent and an outlier in the research on UTAs. The goal is to move the graduate PFF into undergraduate education, providing a structured experience consistent with a scholar/teacher model, further exemplifying the scholar/teacher model throughout all three programs (B.A., M.A., and Ph.D.).

### **Implications and Future Considerations**

The Undergraduate Teaching Assistant gains a temporal glimpse of a profession and what a vocational commitment to the task might entail. This perspective assumes that “total understanding of the other [and a vocation] is impossible” (Arnett, 1981, p. 210). However, it is possible to imagine the real by temporarily stepping into the role, learning alongside a faculty member who embodies the life of an academic.

UTAs, through imagining the real, are given the opportunity to “learn much about what it means to be a teacher” (Baisinger, Peterson, and Spillman, 1984, p. 62). This opportunity to engage some of the practices of a vocation of serving students through education becomes a unique and defining facet of one’s connection to and with higher education. Fingerson and Culley (2001) frame the heart of the experience: [The UTA] is offered “[...] an opportunity [...] to take on roles, responsibilities, and authority that are rarely provided to most undergraduates. This can benefit students choosing to pursue work in graduate school, as well as give them an experience that can be used in their future careers” (p. 301). This glimpse into a possible future is a form of dialogic education (Arnett,

1992) in action. The notion of dialogue plays a fundamental role in this discussion, with communication between and among students and faculty opening space for new insights. Through discussing ideas and experiences, a holistic image emerges of the experiences of the UTA and the enhanced education that a UTA will receive.

Implementing a program to enhance the experiences of both the UTA and the faculty involved in the mentoring of the UTA is a “first step in higher education socialization” (Socha, 1998, p. 81). The classroom provides a setting for higher education socialization. In fact, Galvin (1999) contends that classrooms are *the* places where higher education socialization is most prevalent, casting light on a discipline and an entire school of thought. Furthermore, “teachers serve as gatekeepers to a world that represents their field as well as the values, assumptions and types of intellectual life that characterize their discipline” (Galvin, 1999, p. 251). Galvin explains that a faculty member and a student may form a mentor-mentee relationship, in which the student is immersed into academe, invited into the vocation of the communication professoriate. This guide to academe provides the UTA with an opportunity to grow and to flourish as a potential professional with a vocational commitment to communication education.

Communication education is goal-oriented, according to Sprague (1999). She points to four distinct goals in higher education: transmitting cultural knowledge, acquiring increased intellectual capacities, developing career skills, and reshaping the values of society (pp. 16–17). Sprague writes, “A stronger statement of our field’s role in the liberal arts positions communication as the central process by which a culture develops and survives” (p. 19). Without understanding the importance of communication’s role in shaping culture and the imperative of the field’s central role in higher education, cultural and historical implications of the field are lost and cannot be passed down to future generations of academic practitioners.

A dialogic communication education in action offers a unique advantage to the UTA, transforming the student professionally and personally. Furthermore, engaging the UTA within the classroom can improve the quality of education that everyone receives—the UTA, the students, and the faculty member. Egerton (1979) offers a quote from Jernstedt, the professor whose course is highlighted within Egerton’s essay. Jernstedt stated, “Undergraduates [...] are the greatest untapped potential we have for the improvement of education” (p. 60). To improve education requires continual assessment of educational experiences that provide input from a larger segment of the classroom population and invite one into a momentary understanding of a vocation seeking to serve others.

Situated within this understanding of what a vocation tied to higher education means, the Department of Communication & Rhetorical Studies at Duquesne University intends to create a document titled, “Preparing Future Faculty: Undergraduate Teaching Assistants and Scholarly Engagement.” This document will be similar to that one that guides the graduate program and will outline the roles, responsibilities, and duties of the Undergraduate Teaching Assistant. This pedagogical task is grounded in a hermeneutic engagement of Buber’s (1965/1988) “imagining the real” (p. 60). Our commitment is to imagine the practices with the potential to yield an Undergraduate Teaching Assistant experience offering a glimpse of the reality of teaching of a scholar/teacher vocation. Such an education needs to uplift content, pedagogical skills, and human hearts. Together, students in the classroom, students offering content enhancement in the classroom, and teachers assist one another in learning and practicing creative remembrance—education and the people within the classroom matter.

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