EOS-SEI-sponsored pizza lunch for TA's, March 28th 2011
INSPIRE tutoring model, and how it can help TAs improve their work in different settings.

12 Gradss, + Josh, Erin, Francis

The purpose of today's gathering was to identify correspondences between what expert tutors (those teaching one on one) and what teaching assistants (and other "teachers") do.   As a starting point we referred to the 2-pg outline at
http://www.eos.ubc.ca/research/cwsei/resources/INSPIRE-Guidelines.pdf.

Primary topics that were discussed:
1. The role of "Socratic" behavior, that is, teaching by asking questions.
    a. This is particularly relevant because many TAs work in labs or office hours.
    b. It was recognized as being more and more difficult as the teaching setting scales up from 1-on-1 to teaching small groups (2, 3, or 4) to working with classes of 15, 20, or more.
    c. Socratic teaching is particularly effective because "learning" (that is changes to long term memory and the ability to relate and correlate information) happens when the brain is trying to figure something out, and is outputting information. Learning (changing the brain) does not happen during input – that's just a first step.
    d. Of course teaching by asking questions is sometimes not efficient or perhaps possible. But for tutoring (i.e. helping students practice, problem solve, or study) it is an integral part of the teaching job.
2. Challenges of working with "difficult" individuals, such as older students returning to school after working.
    a. One corresponding "INSPIRE" guidelines is "highly supportive of students". The point is to take time to build a rapport with the individual, including identifying where the student's context and background abilities in a friendly "peer to peer" way.
    b. Many aspects on the second page of the INSPIRE guidelines are also relevant.
3. Handling of student errors was also mentioned. One point here is that it is useful to allow a student to progress down a pathway towards an error so that they can (a) discover the error and the sequence that lead to it by themselves, and (b) have the opportunity to deconstruct the "erroneous" pathway, thus gaining a more mature understanding of the concepts, skills, decision making sequence, problem solving techniques or whatever. Simply telling students how, or stopping them too soon, may result in less effective learning. Of course, this all depends on having time to allow it all to happen.
4. Final word of advice – spin through the INSPIRE guidelines sheet. It contains plenty of relevant wisdom, and if you are interested, the original 1997 reference is identified at the top of the guidelines.

Suggestions for subsequent meetings included
1. Tips for marking, grading and providing feedback on written work.
2. Bring your "challenging situations" in for discussion and advice.
3. Guidelines for managing groups and group learning. This was recognized as probably more useful in early September.

My understanding (correct me if I'm wrong) was that there is particular interest in #2, and that some of the "challenging situations" that folks might bring may include aspects of marking and feedback. One reason #2 is probably the best choice is that now (end of school) is the time these challenging situations are fresh in your mind.

I recommend we should plan to collect advice generated in this session to include in a kind of FAQ sheet, or something like that. We could collect examples at the beginning, break up into groups to discuss one or more aspects, then reconvene 1/2hr later to outline ideas to everyone.

Of course comments, questions or suggestions are welcome. I will look forward to seeing as many folks as possible March 28th.

Thanks for your interest everyone, FJ.