

From the President

Donald French
NABT President-2012

Be an NABT Greeter

“Welcome or welcome back” is my usual salutation in my letter at the beginning of the fall semester to the 25 (now 32) graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) who will be joining me in teaching introductory biology. Thinking about this August issue reaching you after our traditional two-month hiatus conjured up that greeting in my mind, along with the letter that I send and what it means. It is the beginning of a new academic year and with it the excitement of trying out new ideas and guiding new teachers.

The next line in my memo is always “I hope you have had an enjoyable and/or productive break,” and I offer you the same sentiment. Like you, my GTAs have spent their summers in a variety of ways. New GTAs may have recently graduated with B.S. degrees and may have completed an internship working long hours for the experience (and maybe a little income) or may have been working to pay off loans or to avoid taking them on in graduate school, or they may have recently completed M.S. degrees and may be finishing up some research or writing a manuscript, or perhaps they are transitioning to the university from jobs or volunteer service. The returning GTAs have almost all been working on their research, hopefully with financial support. If they have taught before, most have taught other classes; only a few veterans return to me who have taught my course and can serve as role models and guides. Regardless of what they have done, they share some common bonds among themselves, with me, and hopefully with you, for they will be teachers and will need and welcome help from their colleagues.

My GTAs are novices, with many teaching for the first time, and in that welcoming memo, I begin my efforts to provide them with support. My time is short – I meet them for the first time in mid-August and our classes begin a week later. My objectives are many – to keep everyone safe, to ensure that they have the scientific and pedagogical content knowledge they need, to motivate, to help them develop teaching and research skills, and perhaps to inspire them to consider teaching as their careers.

Some of the instruction I have to provide deals with mandated compliance and safety: MSDS and laboratory safety, animal care and use, FERPA, discrimination issues, rules of student conduct, academic integrity, and responsible conduct of research. For these topics, my memo points to online materials that inform and certify, but during my orientation sessions, I try to instill in them an understanding of the importance of what they should learn from these materials – that students are entitled to a safe and supportive learning environment, that everyone (including the GTAs) benefits from creating and maintaining one, and that doing so is not as easy as one thinks. The bulk of their pre-semester orientation and our weekly meetings are about the pedagogy and biology. We discuss and

practice inquiry techniques, providing feedback, calibrating assessments, using rubrics, facilitating collaboration, peer review, classroom management, laboratory procedures, data analysis, and the use and troubleshooting of a range of laboratory equipment. I ask them to read articles, provide examples of how they would handle situations, and compare their evaluations of students’ reports. We review the biology that many have not studied in a while or maybe ever, depending on their disciplines. Indeed, I sometimes inadvertently refer to our meetings as “class,” and as in a good class, I learn from them every semester as they develop skills and suggest modifications to procedures, or another way to get students thinking about a concept, or an experimental design, or how to manage a student group.

My interaction with new teachers is not limited to GTAs. New faculty members face similar teaching challenges. They face different ones as well – developing assessments (formative and summative), developing curriculum, selecting textbooks and creating media and lessons, to name a few, are new challenges to many. Even experienced faculty can become new teachers – when they are asked to teach a course that is new to them or as they become dissatisfied with the outcomes of their classes (however good they might be) and want to venture in new directions (even if they are not sure what those may be).

As members of NABT we don’t all supervise GTAs or deal with faculty at a research university. Perhaps you have the chance to befriend or mentor a first-year secondary school teacher, maybe one who is alternatively certified. Perhaps you work with long-term substitutes at a high school or the ever-increasing population of adjunct instructors at a community college. Perhaps you are one. Regardless of who you are, if you are reading this, we share the aspiration to provide the best possible biology education, a desire to collaborate with fellow biology teachers, and a host of NABT resources.

Look over and share our position statements. These represent NABT’s official stand on issues related to biology education and the policies that affect it. They are there to help guide educators in teaching and, in turn, to help administrators, parents, and policy makers make informed decisions that support our goals for high-quality biology education. Read *ABT* with your classes and colleagues in mind. Feature and general articles provide in-depth discussions of pedagogy and refreshers on biology topics; Research on Learning and Inquiry & Investigation provide insight into research-based teaching; and How-To-Do-It and Quick Fix articles can solve a recurrent problem or jump start a new lesson. Every issue also has opinions and reviews from regular and guest editors that inform or

spark interest. As a journal focused on practitioners, *ABT* is written to be used, not just referenced. It should be shared and discussed. For each article, think of nearby colleagues who might use it and let them know. Between issues and conferences, consider our Facebook presence as a place to share thoughts, questions, and comments with even more distant colleagues. You will find resources identified by the volunteers who manage the site, but also by members like you. I am confident that the authors of *ABT* articles would be delighted to hear about your uses of their ideas and see them shared with others. I know I would, and I am sure those new (and veteran) teachers

will enjoy the support you would offer them from afar. So, welcome or welcome back to another enjoyable and productive year and to support from – and your support of – your colleagues at NABT.

Donald P. French

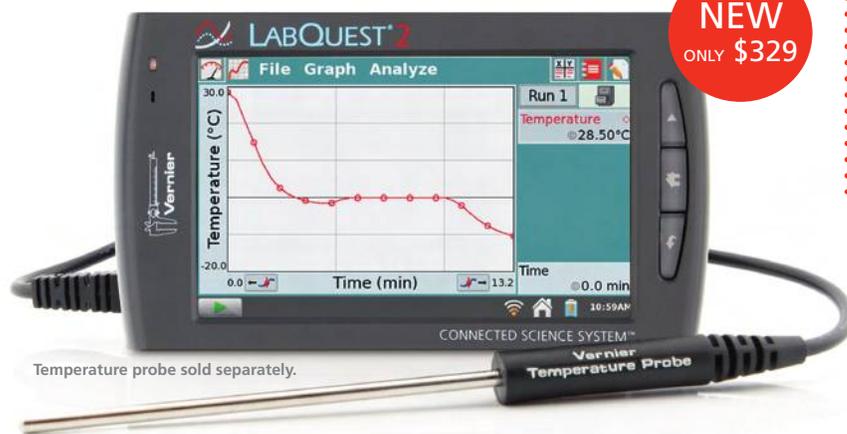
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