Practice and Evidence of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education
Vol. 8, No. 2, SEDA/PESTLHE Special Issue September 2013, pp. 104-111

Supporting the Postgraduate Demonstrator: Embedding development opportunities into the day job

Rebecca McCready*
School of Medical Sciences Education Development
Newcastle University
Rebecca.McCready@ncl.ac.uk

Sue Vecsey
School of Medical Sciences Education Development
Newcastle University
Sue.Vecsey@ncl.ac.uk

Abstract

Postgraduate student demonstrators in the School of School of Medical Sciences Education Development at Newcastle University are far from a forgotten tribe. As an essential part of the teaching team providing academic IT skills to undergraduate and postgraduate students in the Faculty of Medical Sciences, the Learning and Teaching Advisor and Teaching Support Officer rely upon our postgraduate demonstrators to deliver high quality teaching to thousands of students each year. In recognition of this important role, we have developed a range of support and development opportunities for demonstrators over the last few years. From a comprehensive recruitment and training programme, to end of term reflective accounts that direct future professional development opportunities, plus support in completing a masters-level teaching qualification, our demonstrators receive continuous support and development opportunities whilst in our employ. We believe that investing in our postgraduate demonstrators is mutually beneficial, as we both have much to gain from each other's perspective and contribution (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004). Ultimately, this benefits the students, and we may be wise to recognise the important contribution that postgraduate

* Corresponding Author

ISSN 1750-8428 (online) www.pestlhe.org.uk

students can make to the teaching and learning landscape, in our endless quest in search of improving league table results.

Keywords: Postgraduate students, Continuous Professional Development, Training, Support, Teaching Assistants, Demonstrators.

Introduction

Postgraduate students would be forgiven for thinking they were a forgotten tribe. A study conducted at Newcastle University in 2011 identified that between 2008 and 2011 Postgraduate Research students were much less satisfied than other Russell Group HEI's in the areas of teaching experience and the existence of teaching opportunities (Richter, 2011). When it comes to supporting students in their teaching, however, Newcastle fairs slightly better than the Russell Group average, although the teaching experiences of Postgraduate students seem not to have improved much as claims made at a London conference in May 2012 suggest: students think they are increasingly being used as *'slave labour'* (Couvee, 2012); but when postgraduate research students apply to become IT demonstrators in the School of Medical Sciences Education Development (SMSED) at Newcastle University, they will discover that we offer a wide range of teaching, support and professional development opportunities.

All postgraduate research students who teach at Newcastle University must satisfactorily complete formal pedagogic training before they begin to teach. If they apply to become IT Demonstrators for SMSED, then this training is provided by the Learning and Teaching Advisor (LTA) and Teaching Support Officer (TSO) from SMSED, which consists of a half-day workshop discussing the principles and practices of teaching. They learn how to prepare to teach, about their responsibilities, essential core teaching skills, how to give effective feedback and how to reflect on their experiences as teachers.

In addition, students are encouraged to attend the University's Introduction to Teaching and Learning in Higher Education course which extends the School's training. Students are well supported by the School staff in helping them obtain this qualification if they

choose this route whilst studying for their postgraduate qualification. The School recognises the important contribution that IT Demonstrators can make in the teaching arena and many are encouraged to get involved in leading sessions, in assessing 106students and making suggestions for improvement to the tutorial content. The LTA and TSO appreciate that well trained and supported demonstrators create an enhanced learning and teaching experience in the classroom (Komarraju, 2008), greater loyalty, mutually beneficial feedback and healthy collaboration (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004).

Training and Support

Postgraduate students employed as IT Demonstrators in SMSED are supported through a varied and comprehensive path of training and personal development. An annual comprehensive recruitment and training process covering technical and pedagogic competencies, on-going classroom support and guidance, and termly reflections to guide further development opportunities, all aim to develop better teachers, deliver a higher standard of teaching, and demonstrate and foster loyalty from both the postgraduate students and the staff working with them.

At annual recruitment starting in May, students are invited to apply to the post of IT Demonstrator by completing an application form that gathers essential Human Resources information and attitudes towards the post – “Please write a short paragraph about what you hope to get out of the role” – and complete two IT skills courses that reflect the type of training that they will be supporting. From this, we can assess general IT skills competencies, understand some of the motivations driving the student’s application, and provide feedback on their IT skills to support their personal development relevant to their PhD.

Suitable students are invited to a training session in mid-September, and are requested to complete two further IT skills courses in advance of this. Both parties benefit: students learn new skills and build up a broader picture of the range of work they will be teaching, whilst we can further judge their skills aptitudes. The training session is the final and compulsory point of recruitment and provides an interactive four-hour

opportunity for students to learn about the role, key skills required to fulfil it successfully and the level and range of our expectations. It integrates several opportunities to enhance teaching and technical skills, plus a range of vicarious experiences, personal accounts and exchange of opinions to enhance and contextualise learning (Komarraju, 2008).

The training session begins with whole-class introductions and a gentle ice breaker to invite the cohort to meet each other and exchange views on motivations for the role. Returning demonstrators can pass on their reflections and experiences about the role, and a friendly, cooperative and participative atmosphere is created. Students are then divided into groups of three or four and invited to discuss the roles and responsibilities of an IT Demonstrator. Ideas are fed back after a short period of group discussion, and then a general discussion allows us to set our expectations for behaviours, attributes and attitudes. This is extremely important, as it allows us to articulate feedback against a common understanding, and encourage continual professional development (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004).

A presentation on core teaching skills, including listening, questioning, explaining and summarising is followed by two scripted scenarios. Students are divided into groups of four, and two students adopt the role of student and demonstrator, whilst the other two observe, then swap to play out the second scenario. These short scripted pieces explore elements of good and bad listening, questioning, explaining and summarising technique, and invite the students to actively think about and discuss what works well or could be improved in each scenario. Whole group discussion allows for the issues and practices to be examined in more detail, and linked to the relevance of the post (David M. Shannon, Twale, & Moore, 1998).

The training session moves from the seminar room to the computer cluster for the second part, which poses a series of technical puzzles for them to solve. Working in pairs, taking it in turns to be the student or the demonstrator, applicants must work together to solve the puzzles which reflect common problems asked in the classroom. These modelled scenarios enhance their problem solving, IT and teaching skills, builds confidence (David M. Shannon, et al., 1998), and allows us to better judge their competency and provide feedback to the students on their skills and teaching

techniques. The session concludes with details about reflection, continuing professional development opportunities and essential administrative notes.
Approximately 10 new demonstrators are successfully recruited annually to SMSED, to join a returning demonstrator population of between 6 and 10. Usually, 100% of applications are successful, perhaps due in part to the quantity of information about the role provided to potential applicants, which may encourage students to self-select. Some current demonstrators also recruit colleagues in their own School, and therefore may also self-select the most able teachers and IT users. All demonstrators are supported throughout the academic year with clear pre-class contexts, and post-session feedback where appropriate, which can highlight exemplary practices and areas for improvement (David M. Shannon, et al., 1998).

Demonstrators may also choose to complete the University's Introduction to Teaching and Learning in Higher Education course, which comprises of two parts and is delivered by the Staff Development Unit. Completion of both offers 20 credits at Masters level plus evidence to support an application to the Higher Education Academy for Associate Fellow status. We actively encourage and support our demonstrators in completing this course by providing sufficient teaching hours, offering support in the completion of research and coursework, and the provision of other teaching-related opportunities from which they can learn (Komarraju, 2008).

At the end of the first term of teaching in December, demonstrators are invited to complete a personal reflection of their term's teaching. A proforma detailing the sessions that they have completed and the amount they have earned, plus five reflective questions covering areas of strength and weakness, teaching interests and their personal development priorities, is emailed to them individually. We expect our demonstrators to complete this sincerely and thoughtfully, as the benefits from the exercise are mutual. Through this, we encourage our demonstrators to take a longer-term view of the teaching experience they are gaining, to understand how it will be of help to them in the future, and to identify short-term actions and goals which will enable them to make the most of their experience (David M. Shannon, et al., 1998). We expect them to use these reflections to improve their teaching practice, both with us and in other roles that they may undertake, and reward them for doing so by paying them for

an hour of work on completion of the reflective document, and by responding where possible to their personal development aspirations. Where students identify a cohort, specialism or subject that interests them more, for instance postgraduates, Biomedical Sciences students or presentation skills, we try as far as possible to schedule teaching in to match their preferences.

Students may also identify other experiences through their reflective account that they would like to attain, for instance curriculum development, assessment and feedback on assessment, or research. We carefully review the responses and identify opportunities to suggest to them. Whilst some requests are difficult to accommodate, we offer every student at least one relevant development opportunity each year. For instance, we have involved demonstrators in facilitating formative presentations; co-delivering teaching; scoping and writing new courses or new materials for existing courses; and evaluating software and training videos. We benefit greatly by supporting our students with such a varied range of activities and responses. We believe our demonstrators are better teachers, more experienced IT users and have a high interest in enhancing the student experience (Thomas P. Hogan, John C. Norcross, Cannon, & Karpiak, 2007). Student satisfaction in our classes is high and feedback on our demonstrators is overwhelmingly positive.

Student Reflections

With so much emphasis placed on the valuable contribution that these IT Demonstrators make, it is not surprising to find that many of them are extremely satisfied with their teaching experiences. As one student put it,

> *Working as a demonstrator is a great chance to improve my IT skills and learn many techniques which will be useful to my project,*

whilst another student commented,

> *I like the diversity of skills I have learnt through demonstrating and the tutorials gave me significant insight into how to present and edit my own work in my PhD*

In reflecting on their strengths and weaknesses, demonstrators claim that their knowledge of some of the more common software programs such as Word and Excel has improved. They see that demonstrating is a chance to improve these skills and the spin-off for them is that they have learned many techniques and skills which they later find useful when writing up their own projects and theses. We are also able to benefit from this, by receiving informed and considered feedback on our teaching materials, enabling us to constantly improve, enhance and refine.

Most of our demonstrators are international students and consequently English is not their first language. In evaluating their own performance as teachers they see language as a barrier to their success, and are sometimes concerned that they will not be understood.

However, some state that having had the experience of demonstrating, their language and communication skills have improved significantly, benefitting them and the students. The challenges that they face, such as learning the skills to be taught, finding venues and managing their time effectively, are seen as being of less importance to those initial challenges of having to deal with a diverse range of students, teaching on the more complex courses, the fear of not being understood and showing a lack of confidence in the classroom.

Financial reward is of great significance to some demonstrators, but the benefit in terms of gaining valuable teaching experience seems to far outweigh any monetary value gained (Richter, 2011). Many demonstrators express a desire to assess students' work or to help in the development of future courses.

Conclusion

Far from being a forgotten tribe, our postgraduate students are an essential and core part of our teaching and development. Investing in postgraduate student teachers/demonstrators provides rewards for them, us and our students. Postgraduate students have much to offer and lots to gain from a varied and supported development

environment, and this mutually beneficial arrangement should be encouraged, developed and expanded further. Their recent, mature and often reflective experience of undergraduate study can contribute much to the development of curricula and support systems, and their input may help us to further enhance the student experience and drive up that most elusive of all targets, the National Student Survey scores.

References

Couvee, K. (2012). Postgraduate students are being used as 'slave labour'. The Independent. Retrieved 9/5/2013, 2013, from http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/postgraduate-students-are-being-used-as-slave-labour-7791509.html

Gibbs, G., & Coffey, M. (2004). The impact of training of university teachers on their teaching skills, their approach to teaching and the approach to learning of their students. *Active Learning in Higher Education, 5*(1), 87-100.

Komarraju, M. (2008). A Social-Cognitive Approach to Training Teaching Assistants. *Teaching of Psychology, 35*, 327–334.

Shannon, D. M., Twale, D. J., & Moore, M. S. (1998). TA teaching effectiveness: The impact of training and teaching experience. *Journal of Higher Education*, 440-466.

Richter, P. (2011). *A Study of Newcastle University PGR students who teach* (Report): Newcastle University.

Hogan, T. P., Norcross, J. C., Cannon, J. T., & Karpiak, C. P. (2007). Working with and training undergraduates as teaching assistants. *Teaching of Psychology*, *34*(3), 187-190.