Postgraduates who teach: a forgotten tribe? Not here!

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Abstract

The recent NUS Survey on postgraduates involved in teaching noted that 4 out of 5 respondents said they had received some form of induction training prior to them starting to teach (2013: 24). Around three quarters of these postgraduates found the training to be either useful or very useful; and so postgraduate teachers are not necessarily a ‘forgotten tribe’. However, what have been the lessons learned for the support of new teachers as a result of the inclusion of this ‘tribe’ within the broader academy? This case study of practice identifies the approach taken at one Scottish north-east institution and the establishment of a two-module credit bearing development programme for postgraduate tutors and demonstrators. It reflects the voices of two members of the module team, a previous external examiner, and a previous participant.

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This triangulation of views provides the context for an examination of issues concerning the creation of spaces for engagement; the concept of an optimum intervention period for initial professional development as university teachers; and the challenges of delivery of such programmes.

**Keywords:** postgraduate, tutors, proto-academics, constructive alignment, discipline, engagement

**Context**

The University of St Andrews has over 750 doctoral postgraduate students, most of whom will engage with teaching at some point during their degree studies. Every School within the University employs postgraduate tutors and/or demonstrators, although the availability of teaching opportunities varies between subjects. In many of the science Schools the expectation is that every doctoral student will have the opportunity to act as a lab demonstrator or tutor if they wish. In the Arts Schools, the number of postgraduates who would like to teach often exceeds the number of teaching places available. As such, students might only have the chance to teach for one or two semesters of their degree. In most cases postgraduate tutors and demonstrators are running tutorials or assisting with labs at the sub-honours level.

The University provides two levels of development opportunity for postgraduates who teach. The first consists of a mandatory training programme, tailored by Faculty, which comprises two, four-hour workshops (one on tutoring/demonstrating skills and pastoral care issues, the other on assessment and academic misconduct). In addition, there are two optional Higher Education Academy-accredited, Master’s-level modules, which were designed specifically with this cohort in mind:

- Introduction to University Teaching 1: Supporting Student Learning (ID5101)
- Introduction to University Teaching 2: Curriculum Design and Assessment (ID5102)

The aim of this case study is to consider several perspectives, provided by members of the module team, the previous External Examiner, and a graduate of the programme,
on how these two modules enhance the learning and teaching experience of postgraduate teachers.

**Development of the Programme**

_I always enjoy reading the students’ reflective essays and module proposals. All of them have a passion for teaching (they wouldn’t bother to sign up for the modules otherwise), but many of them reflect deeply on how they can improve, and demonstrate great imagination in their approach._ (Module co-ordinator)

St Andrews was one of the first Scottish universities to provide training workshops for postgraduate tutors (beginning in the early 1990s), delivered originally by an academic member of staff. These workshops were optional initially, but by 1995 the University had made it a requirement that all postgraduate tutors receive training before being allowed to teach. The current module leader assumed responsibility for these workshops in 2002, and would periodically be asked by participants whether the workshops were accredited in any way (which they weren’t at that point). The students were hoping for some sort of portable qualification which would have meaning in their later career. Thoughts triggered by the November 2005 SEDA conference led to the decision to develop taught Master’s level modules to supplement the mandatory workshops, so that postgraduate students could leave the University with a qualification that would enhance their CV. While a genuine interest in teaching is an often quoted as a reason for engagement with teaching development opportunities of this nature, employability skills also tend to be a significant factor (NUS, 2013; Knottenbelt, Hounsell & Kreber, 2009). 70% of respondents to the NUS survey indicated employability as the prime motivating factor behind their engagement with teaching development opportunities (NUS, 2013: 7).

By academic year 2009-10 the module proposals were ready for submission for approval. Having reviewed what other Scottish universities were doing with postgraduate certificates for new academic staff, where there was typically a 20-credit, introductory module, it was decided to offer two, 10-credit Master’s level modules. It was anticipated that having two smaller modules would make the workload more manageable for busy postgraduate tutors, and would allow greater flexibility to fit into
their schedules for their limited time at university, particularly for those students who spend time away on fieldwork.

The aim with ID5101 (Introduction to University Teaching 1: Supporting Student Learning) was to develop a module with immediate relevance for postgraduate tutors, addressing the higher education context (past and present), learning theories, equality and diversity, internationalisation, effective lecturing and technology-enhanced learning. The second module, ID5102 (Introduction to University Teaching 2: Curriculum Design and Assessment), has less direct application for postgraduate tutors, who aren’t usually involved in the design of teaching or assessment, but it provides a head start on these important issues for those who plan to pursue a career in academia. ID5102 also covers recent developments in the higher education context, constructive alignment, learning outcomes, and assessment for learning versus assessment of learning. The overall aim of both modules is to provide:

- a framework for development that allows the participants to engage with their learning in relation to their practice;
- the conditions to support the development of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998);
- a space and environment for engagement in which the postgraduate tutors, as proto-academics, can develop their own identity as ‘novice academic practitioners’ (Knottenbelt et al, 2009).

Both modules were designed around Biggs’ (1996) original exposition and Biggs and Tang’s (2007) later development of the principle of constructive alignment. A key aim and associated intended learning outcome of each module is to develop the participants as reflective practitioners (Schon, 1983). As such, participants must be engaged in teaching before they can enrol on either module in order to facilitate experiential learning and reflection on practice. Each module engages participants in a range of activities designed to help them reflect on and apply the concepts they are learning in a meaningful way in the context of their own discipline. For example, in ID5101 they have to select and read a critical incident analysis from Sheward and Renshaw (2011) and reflect on why they chose that incident and how they might respond (or have
responded) in a similar situation. In ID5102 they must critique a module on which they have taught, focussing on the intended learning outcomes and whether the module is constructively aligned.

**Spaces for Engagement**

The pedagogical model employed here aims to encapsulate and promote an approach that integrates both theory and practice, without fore-grounding one or the other. Models that are either predominantly grounded in theory or in experience can be viewed as having systemic weaknesses in their approach, being open to criticism as either irrelevant to the individual’s disciplinary context or simply a ‘tips for teachers’ approach, respectively (Chadha et al, n.d.). An appropriate pedagogical model is particularly important in the case of postgraduate tutors who will have very little, if any, direct teaching experience when they first engage with the modules, and similarly, limited experience of the associated literature.

Each module usually has a cohort of about a dozen participants. Enrolment is capped at 15 in order to manage the workload for the module co-ordinator, but also to ensure a high level of interactivity and discussion amongst participants with a view to developing a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Knottenbelt, et al (2009: 44) note the indisputable ‘social value’ that development opportunities had for all of the participants engaged in their study who mentioned ‘training’. And as one ID5102 student wrote:

> To be part of a group where different passions blended into shared concerns gave me a combined sense of belongingness and awareness. I felt part of an academic community – a group of people determined to reflect on their role, on the value and the purpose of what we do, both towards themselves and in the face of broader social phenomena.

The summative assessments for the modules comprise reflective written assignments and the development of a new module proposal, and are underpinned throughout by learning opportunities. In keeping with Biggs’ and Tang’s (2007) view that the teaching methods should develop the skills that will be assessed, and with Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick’s (2006) emphasis on the importance of feedback, the module participants have plenty of opportunities to practice the skill of reflective writing and receive formative
feedback before they are summatively assessed. In ID5101 they are required to keep a reflective log, and this is submitted mid-semester so they can receive feedback on the reflexivity expressed in their writing. In ID5102, keeping the log is optional, and they can choose to submit a log entry for feedback. In both modules, participants must submit a draft version of each summative assignment, on which they receive extensive formative feedback. In ID5102, participants must also give an oral presentation on their module proposal, and they receive feedback from their peers. Consideration is given, when marking the final summative assessments, of how well participants have done in responding to the feedback that they’ve received. Opportunities for peer discussion, personal reflection, shared learning and engagement with the tutors are also provided through the virtual learning environment which supports the modules, thus not only facilitating a further space for engagement but also modelling good practice in learning and teaching using the tools which the postgraduate tutors themselves will be expected to use with their students.

**Development of Postgraduate Tutors as Proto-Academics**

Both modules have proven very popular since their introduction in 2010, and the level of engagement, depth of reflection and overall quality of the work produced by the participants has been impressive, and in the view of the previous external examiner, comparable with that of academic staff engaged with postgraduate certificate programmes in teaching in higher education. Both modules have had a 100% pass rate every year with one exception. The proportion of participants whose work is deemed outstanding usually ranges from 25-50%. Participants have come from all but 3 of the 18 Schools in the University, with certain Schools (eg Philosophical, Anthropological & Film Studies) being very strongly represented. Feedback on the modules is overwhelmingly positive which suggests that previous participants from the high attendance Schools are passing on positive reports to newer tutors. It could also be a reflection of a greater willingness in some Schools to support the concept of initial professional development for postgraduate tutors and/or a greater affinity with the ethos of reflective and experiential learning. It should be noted that a full postgraduate certificate in teaching in higher education for new academic staff is not available in-
house, therefore the ethos and rationale behind this programmes for postgraduate tutors may be alien to a number of staff at the institution.

The success of this approach has led to speculation as to whether teaching development opportunities are more effective as interventions at this proto-academic stage of career development rather than as continuing professional development (CPD) at a later stage. There are a number of reasons behind this proposition. Levels of engagement amongst the postgraduate participants are consistently high. They are enthusiastic and imaginative, and keen to learn about and try out new approaches to teaching. As postgraduate tutors they are in a liminal state; acting as teachers but still students themselves, not yet having crossed the threshold into the role of junior lecturer (Land, Meyer & Baillie, 2010). Some individuals reflect on this explicitly, as evidenced by this quote from an ID510 participant's final reflective essay:

_While I assumed the role of a ‘teacher’ for SA1002, my role as a ‘student’ for ID5102 involved a reflective practice that pushed me to assume these roles simultaneously and, therefore, establish a relationship between my teaching and my learning._

This contrasts with the dissonance which can be experienced by junior academics around ‘the extent to which practices promoted on [development programmes] are suited for introduction into practice within departmental settings’, given that the junior academics are already embedded in the cultures and practices of their discipline (Kahn, 2008). The disciplinary cultures that exert such a strong influence on new academics, eager to fit into their respective ‘tribe’ (Becher & Trowler, 2001) have not yet had the opportunity to inculcate postgraduate tutors/demonstrators into the ‘proper’ way of being and doing things, as perceived by the particular discipline. Postgraduate tutors may also feel more confident in challenging some of these ontological perspectives at this stage in their career, where it is their studies that are of primary importance to their relationship with their disciplinary colleagues, compared with junior academics, whose need to conform relates directly to their need to comply with the expectations and targets incumbent on the probationary lecturer. During their time on ID5101 and ID5102, this is evidenced by participants’ use of feedback from being observed by a peer and their own reflections on how specific interventions worked in practice in the classroom, often with feedback from their own students.
The postgraduate tutors are also researchers, first and foremost, and their keen interest in engaging with the literature of learning and teaching in higher education is clear. Again, this is not always the case with junior academics – at least initially – whose disciplinary language takes precedence over what they may be encouraged by their disciplinary peers to see as ‘jargon’ in the literature of learning and teaching. Many of the participants read not only the set articles, but more broadly, and use these sources to inform both their practice and their assignments. This can be contrasted by the views uncovered by the EPGC (Effects of Postgraduate Certificates) project (2006-7) where one of the key findings was that participants felt that learning to teach in higher education was informed primarily by ‘simply doing the job’ and by informal as opposed to formal means (Warnes, 2008: 4).

**Opportunities and Challenges**

At the approval stage, the University was flexible enough to allow the teaching enhancement unit (first SALTIRE, now CAPOD) to retain responsibility for the modules, rather than requiring them to be ‘owned’ by an academic department. As St Andrews has no School of Education, that would have been a singularly artificial arrangement. The Pro Dean Curriculum acts as the Head of School, and all of the University’s standard academic quality procedures are followed. This has the benefit of allowing CAPOD complete control over the modules, but has created some challenges as the modules don’t fit neatly within the normal academic model.

**Enrolment Records**

One of the biggest challenges has been to ensure that students enrolled on the modules are correctly recorded in the central student record system (SITS). The University has an Advising Database which is used by Academic Advisers in Schools to record and check the module choices of students; this system then automatically updates SITS. Modules ID5101/02 cannot be counted towards a degree programme (they are for professional development only), and as such they do not sit within the Academic Advising Database; participants must apply directly to the module co-
ordinator. This means that the usual mechanism for updating SITS isn’t available for these modules.

The student lists in the University’s virtual learning environments - Moodle and an in-house system called Module Management System (MMS) - are updated from SITS, so if a student is not shown as enrolled on a module in SITS, he/she will be removed from Moodle and MMS. This can be manually over-ridden by a module co-ordinator, but as MMS is used to report final grades to Registry, it is essential that SITS and MMS records agree with each other by the end of semester. However, CAPOD is restricted in the changes that they can make to the system directly, which has led to difficulty when SITS has not been updated promptly. The module co-ordinator has to check the status of students in MMS regularly and allow a large window of time to allow any changes that may need to be made to SITS before the end of semester. A further challenge arises when staff enrol on the modules, as they do not already have a student ID number.

CAPOD is often overlooked when emails are sent to Schools informing them of changes to teaching and assessment policy, training in the University’s module management software, and other such updates. This has meant that CAPOD must take a much more proactive approach in order to clarify procedures and ensure that things work more smoothly in future.

**Recording Module Grades**

Modules ID5101 and ID5102 are both graded as either Pass or Fail. In the four years that the modules have been offered, only two participants (both on ID5102) have failed. Both were offered the opportunity to re-sit by reworking and resubmitting the assignment that they had failed on. One student did so and was subsequently awarded a Pass. Under normal circumstances the Student Record system will display both the original grade on a module, and the grade awarded on re-sit. However, for modules ID5101/02 the system records either Pass or Fail and thus far it is has not proved possible to get the system to display the original Fail followed by the Pass on re-sit.

The decision was made to grade the modules simply Pass-Fail because the module co-ordinator did not feel able to make discriminatory judgements using the full range of the
University’s 20-point reporting scale. This approach also follows that commonly taken across the sector for similar programmes. Such an approach raises the challenge, however, of how to properly acknowledge student work that is truly exceptional from that which is ‘simply’ pass-worthy. Unfortunately the University’s record systems do not allow for a Merit-Pass-Fail option, which would provide official recognition of distinctive work on the transcript. Instead, both markers make a point of noting in written feedback when work is of particularly good quality, and a standard phrase is used (‘This is an outstanding piece of work’) when the markers agree that an assignment is worthy of distinction. The significance of this phrase is explained in the module handbook.

**Module Development and the Second Marking Process**

As students from all disciplines were to have access to modules ID5101/02, and the delivery needed to be relevant to all disciplines, the modules were categorised as interdisciplinary. This meant that they had to be approved by all three Faculty Business Committees (FBC): Arts & Divinity, Science, and Medicine. The first real disappointment in the development of the modules came at this point. Written into the module proposals was the requirement that all of the written work be second-marked by someone within the participant’s School, thereby supplying an in-depth disciplinary perspective that centrally-delivered teacher development programmes such as these are sometimes criticised for lacking (e.g. Prosser et al, 2006: 4; Hanbury, Prosser & Rickinson, 2008: 480). It was suggested that this could be done by the co-ordinator of the module on which the student was teaching, or the student’s supervisor or academic mentor.

One FBC immediately ruled out the possibility of using the academic mentor – they felt introducing an element of assessment might damage the mentoring relationship. The concern for the FBCs then became one of marking workloads, despite the fact that this approach would not have any significant impact on an individual academic’s workload. It was felt that the agreement of every Head of School would be required, stating that they would include the ID5101/02 marking in their School’s workload allocation model. Unsurprisingly, universal agreement proved unattainable, therefore the modules were approved instead with the stipulation that all work would be second marked, but without
stating by whom. The first cohort enrolled on ID5101 in semester two of AY2009-10. At that point a second member was enlisted to the module team from the Careers Centre (who also delivers a module in the School of Management), who offered to act as second marker for the reflective essays. ID5102 was introduced in AY2010-11 – each year an academic has agreed to second mark all of the module proposals, without local recognition for this activity. Thus the challenge for the module co-ordinator is to find a willing academic every year.

The first lecture of module ID5102 is on Curriculum Design and Assessment, and it includes a guest lecturer giving a one-hour presentation on a case study of innovative module design. Every year the module co-ordinator approaches an academic to ask if he/she would be willing to present such a case study. (There is no shortage of interesting modules across the University to showcase.) After getting agreement to do the case study, the guest lecturer is then asked whether they would be willing to help out further by second-marking the module proposals. Thus far, they have always agreed, but that may not always be the case.

Gradually the module co-ordinator is building up a 'pool' of academics who are familiar with the modules, and who might be willing to help out with marking. (In fact, one academic, upon learning about the modules, immediately volunteered to help with marking as she thought it sounded so interesting.) Although there is a clear argument for having a second-marker within each School, thereby providing a detailed disciplinary perspective to the feedback, there is also an advantage to having a single second marker for all assignments, which provides consistency of approach. A mid-way point might be to have one or two markers for each Faculty, thereby reducing the workload for individual volunteers, increasing somewhat the discipline perspective of the feedback, but maintaining a consistency of approach.

The previous external examiner took an active role in the development of the modules. Suggestions for changes from the module team were discussed at every module board, with the external examiner giving advice on how such changes might work in practice, based on her extensive experience in the sector. The external examiner also suggested enhancements, such as adding a section on ‘Feedforward’ to the standard
feedback pro-forma, thereby ensuring that all markers explicitly provide advice on how participants can develop their teaching performance in future.

A Personal View

The final word on the significance of these modules should go to the participants, so here a graduate of both modules offers his perspective. The value of engaging with colleagues who teach in different disciplines is mentioned in many of the students' reflective essays, and goes some way to refute the suggestion that subject-specific teacher training is the best approach.

Nearing the end of my PhD I became more interested in higher education teaching and so attended the courses run by CAPOD to improve my teaching practice. As a biologist I initially found the techniques used a little alienating. The pedagogic terminology and practice seemed at first insubstantial and simplistic, although it was clearly useful to learn which bodies and policies were responsible for shaping the current organisation of higher education in the UK. From the start of the course, it was interesting to meet and talk with postgraduate teachers from very different disciplines and compare our experiences. I quickly discovered that we shared many of the same challenges and difficulties engaging and encouraging students.

As the course progressed we were asked to reflect on our teaching through the use of a reflective log and final reflective essay. Although I was sceptical of recording anecdotes from my day when I had other work to get done, I ultimately found this to be a useful exercise. It made me stop and take the time to think about what went well and where there was room for improvement. As a consequence I approached my teaching preparation in a more structured manner. It also encouraged me to connect the abstract ideas I had been struggling with in the pedagogic literature with solid examples from my own practice. Techniques like this helped to prepare me for and learn from my subsequent post as a teaching fellow.

In higher education we are lucky to have the freedom to teach however we see fit, cover the topics that we find fascinating ourselves and experiment with a wide range of techniques. This non-dictatorial approach really excels when backed up by a solid framework of training that helps us to develop as educators.
Conclusion

Postgraduate students who teach are not a ‘forgotten’, but rather comprise a ‘distinctive’ tribe. Unable to fit neatly into the proscribed and delineated category of ‘student’ or ‘teacher’ they inhabit a space that is rich with opportunity and potential. In reading the reflective essays for these modules, a number of things are striking: the feelings expressed by the tutors of being ‘thrown in at the deep end’ when asked to teach for the first time; the need for some validation of their teaching practice as being useful and worthwhile; their open and honest appraisal of their teaching and its impact on their students; and the importance of reflection in developing their own ability to critically evaluate their teaching practice. The culture of skills development or training as an integral part of the doctoral journey has been reinforced through the Roberts’ agenda (Roberts, 2002) and subsequent developments, meaning that receptivity to the concept of development opportunities for postgraduates is positive, despite the lack of a larger context of a postgraduate certificate in teaching in higher education programme within which to situate this practice.

Findings have consistently stressed the importance of belonging to a community of practice; the value of an enabling environment; and the benefits of a peer group which demonstrates appropriate recognition and reward for engagement with teaching (Schalkwyk, van Cilliers, Adendorff, Cattell & Herman, 2013: 143). And while the space in which the proto-academic may potentially develop might be measured in years of doctoral study, the optimum period for intervention may in itself be quite limited. Perceptions of self-identity as teachers and ideas associated with this evolving identity develop quickly in response to increasing experience, as evidenced by student work on these modules and also by studies such as those carried out by Knottenbelt et al (2009: 10). The journey of development as a reflective practitioner appears fundamental to this process. A number of participants commented on how they saw little point at the beginning of the module in keeping a log, but by the end of their studies, their reflective log and reflecting on these reflections in their assignment had not only changed their view of the importance of reflection for personal development, but enabled them to gain deep insight into how they could improve their teaching for the benefit of their students. Many of the participants on the modules have indicated that they will continue to use the tools learnt in the modules – reflection, peer observation, discussing teaching with
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colleagues and reading on the subject - to inform their teaching as their experience continues. And thus this particular tribe develops and grows. It is our contention that the framework provided by modules and programmes of study for postgraduate tutors, such as ID5I01 and ID5I02, is key to the support of this development.

References


