Catching academic staff at the start : professional development for university tutors

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Not all university tutors become academics but a large number of academics have been tutors during their time as graduate students. Whilst it may sometimes be difficult to get new academic appointees to attend teaching skills development courses, tutors will often readily attend them. Indeed, their employment sometimes depends on this. This paper briefly reviews the current status of professional training for university tutors (sometimes called graduate teaching assistants) as a context for describing a Tutor Training Programme and Certificate instituted at the University of Auckland four years ago. Issues to be discussed include the operation of the Programme, the response from tutors and the findings of a survey that explored how tutors and their departments perceived the Programme. The on-going challenge is convincing not tutors of the efficacy of a training programme, but some of the 'decision makers' within their respective departments.

Introduction

I suggest in this paper that graduate teaching assistants (GTAs)[1] embarking on their first teaching at university will often readily participate in programmes which expose them to basic teaching skills. Since many permanent academic staff have their first taste of teaching as a GTA, catching academics at the start of their career when they may be enthusiastic and willing to embrace issues of pedagody, is a good investment for them, the university and the students they teach. It might also convince them of the value of on-going professional development. Indeed, any reluctance is not likely to come from the GTAs themselves but from their senior colleagues who may not encourage them or even inform them of the opportunities that might prevail for professional development.

Background

The provision of teaching skill development for graduate teaching assistants has been taking place in American Universities since the mid 1960s. At this time there was a significant increase in GTAs as a result of the expansion of higher education (D'Andrea,1997). However, in their comprehensive survey of American universities, Lambert and Tice (1993) noted that 83% of all the centralised TA-Training programmes were ten years old or less. Three-fifths of orientation and year-round programmes had been established in the last one to four years.

More recently there has been another significant expansion of GTA numbers in many American and United Kingdom universities. A report in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 1994 (cited in Luddeke 1997) highlighted the fact that the number of part-time academic staff in traditional universities has risen by more than 160% since 1981. Gibbs (cited in Lueddeke, 1997) emphasised that nearly 40% of faculty in the USA are part-time, on short-term contracts and are responsible for the majority of teaching. Nyquist (1991) estimated that TAs account for between one-quarter to one-third of

[1] At the University of Auckland GTAs are generally referred to as 'tutors' and the term will be assumed to be synonymous with GTAs throughout the paper. There are others who work in the science area but have a slightly different function, for example, lab demonstrators. Other terms that are used internationally are: TA for Teaching Assistant, TF for Teaching Fellow, PGTA or PG for Postgraduate Teaching Assistant, VL for Visiting Lecturer and Part-time Lecturer.

undergraduate instruction in many institutions. According to Gibbs, full-time and tenured faculty spend a much larger proportion of their time undertaking research or managing the army of part-timers than they do teaching. Sharff and Lessinger (1994) note that 'non-tenure track' faculty, the majority of whom are part-time, account for about half of all faculty appointments in American higher education.

This expansion has followed elsewhere but the professional development of GTAs outside of the United States has not, until relatively recently received serious consideration. Vaneeta-Marie D'Andrea (1997) maintains that the training of GTAs in the UK, for example, is for the most part in its infancy.[2] Griffiths (cited in Lueddeke, 1997: 143) noted that most academic staff development in the UK is still geared toward full-time staff with only half of the institutions reporting that they had programme offerings exclusively for GTAs. The somewhat modest number of GTA training programmes in the UK contrasts with the rapid development in the United States. In a national survey of American teaching assistant training programmes and practices Lambert and Tice (1993) found that 71% of responding institutions had programmes in place. They sought information from 393 institutions and 207 responded (74%). In 46% of the institutions, training was mandatory.

This growing 'army' of GTAs is having a significant impact on the ethos surrounding the professional development of university teachers. D'Andrea (1997) maintains that part of the drive to professionally develop GTAs has come as a result of the large numbers of GTAs who have been employed to meet the expanding numbers of students in higher education. There is growing concern about the professional and economic status of these new academics. One issue is the undervaluing of GTAs. Another is their exploitation (Sharff, 1992). The Association of American Colleges Report (cited in Davids, 1994) claimed that the position of teaching assistant is now a device for exploiting graduate students in order to relieve senior faculty from teaching undergraduates. In some institutions there is also a gender imbalance with women making up a disproportionate percentage of part-timers and the more lowly paid.[3]

Changes in funding of universities was also seen by D'Andrea as another reason for the increase in the numbers of GTAs employed to teach in universities. The higher fees being paid by many students, and demands for accountability by university authorities, have produced expectations of better teaching. This may also be driving the expansion of GTA training.

The irony of this situation is not lost on academic staff developers. As a larger number of undergraduate students are being exposed to ever increasing numbers of part-time academics and postgraduate teaching assistants, there is a belated concern about the quality of educational experience that they might be receiving. As a result there has been recognition that these teachers might need to be trained!

> This would seem to be a laudable concern but in the context of academia it is an interesting contradiction. Preparation of university teachers prior to the shift in the responsibility for teaching to GTAs was virtually a non issue. Unlike other professional fields of study, eg,

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[2] This is a general observation, and there are exceptions where individual universities have well established GTA training.

[3] At the University of Auckland, NZ, for example, a 1997 *Equal opportunities Review* revealed that 47% of women worked part-time compared with 28% of men and that 73% of women were employed as GTAs, assistant lecturers, tutors, senior tutors and lecturers, whereas only 42% of men are employed at these levels.

> medicine or law, university teaching has not required any professional development other than graduate study in a substantive field. (D'Andrea, 1997 : 51)

D'Andrea's conclusion stresses the anomalous aspects of this situation and the long overdue consideration of the need for preparation for all those who teach in universities, funding constraints or no funding constraints.

The need for competent teaching at GTA level

The increase in the number of GTAs and part-time staff teaching in higher education inevitably exposes a large number of students to their teaching. This is particularly so for first year students, many of whom are relatively vulnerable. Indeed, a comprehensive Australian survey revealed that 30% of first year students were negative enough during the first semester to seriously consider deferring (McInnes et al., 1995). Less than half the students thought that the staff were "good at explaining things" (p10) and only 53% thought that academic staff were enthusiastic about the subjects that they were teaching. Although lectures were an obvious target for criticism, McInnes and his associates observed that the importance of small group teaching in the first year often remains underestimated:

> Tutorials and practical classes in first year subjects are frequently staffed by inexperienced part-time teachers with little preparation for their role - often working within a structure of minimal support. Students expressed concern with the variation in the quality and attitudes of their tutors. Some were very happy with their tutors and believed their tutorials to be useful, others were less happy, having a sense of injustice about the 'lottery' of tutor quality (McInnes, 1995 : 57).

Others have made similar observations. Davis (1993) suggests that the impact of the first experiences of students in tertiary institutions is often overlooked, and that good experiences of teaching and learning in the early stages of a degree programme can have positive and lasting effects upon the student's approach to learning.

The vulnerability of first year students is even greater for students from minority groups, particularly ethnic minorities. Like other universities in New Zealand, the University of Victoria in Wellington relies heavily on its pool of postgraduate students for its appointment of tutors. Kidman (1995) has pointed out that many of these students become enthusiastic and motivated tutors with a high level of commitment to their teaching. She also noted that most newly appointed tutors are not experienced classroom teachers and are sometimes given very little preparation or training for classroom situations. Kidman was particularly interested how Maori students perceived their teachers. Unsurprisingly small group or tutorial situations were a greatly preferred style of teaching, but some staff though, were seen as remote and unapproachable and created distance between them and the students. Also the discourses which allow academics within a discipline to speak to one another tend to conceal the life stories or identities of the speakers.

> Maori students who have come to the University seeking new understandings or who wish to combine their own cultural knowledge with academic meanings sometimes find that the patterns of academic discourse inhibits them from finding the words for their own lived experiences (Kidman 1995: 2).

Raising issues such as these and helping tutors to understand cultural differences and the expectations of ethnic minorities would help to obviate these situations. Kidman also observed that some student-tutors (and some lecturing staff) initially perceive their role as one of information transmission. This may not be appropriate for the variety of

learning styles and the cultural diversity that are extant in the universities of the 1990's. This problem of 'information injection' has been noted by Nyquist et al., who point out:

> Learning strategies that worked for professors when they were undergraduates may no longer be sufficient for current undergraduates attempting to acquire the increasingly complex knowledge of a discipline in the short span of four or five years. GTAs will need to be able to teach students the most efficient ways of approaching the tasks of learning (1991: 9).

The growth of non-traditional university student populations with differing cultural backgrounds, educational expectations and learning styles is yet another reason why GTAs require professional training and a knowledge of pedagogy. As I will show below, given the chance to gain pedagogical skills, GTAs will enthusiastically enter training programmes, particularly if the senior staff in departments and faculty encourage and support them, and if they are paid to attend.

Tutors in the changing university climate

In the changing milieu of late twentieth century university culture, where class size and student/teacher ratios have increased, it is perhaps more important than it has ever been that undergraduates students are exposed to good teaching/learning experiences. For most students, the first real human interaction with teaching staff is likely to be with a tutor, particularly if that role involves running tutorials with small groups of students. The same is true of science students, where they are most likely to have early personal contact with their lab demonstrator. The quality of these interactions can be influenced by the kind of preparation for teaching that the tutor has experienced.

Some universities are signalling that teaching is as important as research, and mission statements reflect this trend. This could be a genuine concern about the learning experience of students, but it may also have a lot to do with retention. The University of Auckland, for example, in *The University of Auckland 2001: Mission Goals and Strategies* (University of Auckland, 1995b) is concerned with the quality of teaching and learning and has, as one of its first objectives to "create an environment throughout the University in which teaching of international quality, informed by research and, where appropriate, by professional practice, is accepted as a primary academic responsibility". Continued support for professional development through its Centre for Professional Development (CPD) and the recent joining of *Universitas 21* hopefully indicates that the University is serious and that the Mission Statement is not just rhetoric. The acceptance by the University in 1995, of a more comprehensive training scheme for the training and development of tutors by the CPD can be seen as part of the drive for excellence in teaching. The purpose of the next section of this paper is to review the Tutor Training Development scheme at the University of Auckland in the context of professional support by CPD, and the University's Mission Statement.

Training of tutors at the University of Auckland

Training of tutors began at the University of Auckland in the early 1980's when the sole staff developer (John Jones), working out of The Higher Education Research Office (HERO), responded to requests from a few departments within the University. He offered an introduction to small group teaching over a couple of days. Earlier, in the 1970's, tutors came in small numbers to general workshops for new staff. In the early 1990's, the office expanded, and specific training programmes were offered for tutors and lab demonstrators both in the office and in departments. Relatively small numbers attended. In 1993 a soft policy was developed that tutors should normally be entitled to

several hours paid training as part of their overall workload. Training programmes were put on in support of this policy. In 1996 HERO, was renamed The Centre for Professional Development (CPD).

Tutor's and Demonstrators' Programme

Since 1995, tutors and demonstrators have been targeted in a more systematic way. This has been accomplished by several means:

- The appointment of two staff at CPD specifically charged with developing a tutor development programme.

- The institution of a Tutor Training Certificate.

To obtain the Tutor Training Certificate (TTC), tutors are required to complete 15 hours of training, and to have a formal assessment done of their teaching. The training consists of an initial nine hour basic training session (usually three, three-hour workshops), which focuses on generic small group teaching skills. These workshops may consist of tutors from an inter-disciplinary mix or, where requested by departments a course may designed specifically for a particular subject area. In addition to the basic training tutors are required to choose two further three hour modules which they can complete at any time in their employment period. In 1998, the following three-hour modules were offered:

- Marking essays and assignments
- Teaching your students library skills
- Critical thinking
- Planning tutorials
- Working with Asian students
- Reviewing you tutoring
- Helping students prepare for exams
- Integrative grammar (for language tutors)
- Teaching effectively one-to-one
- Putting together a teaching portfolio
- Lecturing skills for tutors
- Integrating disabled students into your tutorials
- Conflict and control issues in tutorials
- How students learn
- Feedback on your teaching
- Using office hours effectively
- Teaching portfolios
- Diversity in the classroom

The third requirement for the Certificate is that the tutor must carry out a Formative Feedback Process with their students. Since 1998 a Demonstrator Training Certificate has been added to the programme.

A survey of tutors at The University of Auckland

In 1997 a survey was designed by one of the programme staff (Barrington, 1997) to clarify how the Tutor's Programme was being received by tutors and the wider

University community after two years of operation. Specifically the purpose of the survey was to:

- Gain information about tutors' perceptions of their departments' support for tutors and tutor training.

- Find out what degree of knowledge and support existed for the recently introduced Tutor Training Certificate

- To get evaluative feedback from those who had completed the Certificate.

Out of 900 questionnaires posted out there were 349 respondents with 50 departments (out of 73 across the campus) being represented. In addition, 17 tutors and lab demonstrators across a wide range of subject disciplines were individually interviewed about their teaching experiences. The taped interviews generally took 30-45 minutes. They were questioned about their expectations regarding tutoring and demonstrating; why they chose to do it; what sort of support they got from their department; difficulties they encountered and whether or not they enjoyed the experience of tutoring.

The findings were salutary. One was that encouragement to train *greatly varied* across departments and faculties within the University. Only 41% of the 349 respondents felt that they were encouraged to do tutor training - in either their own department *or* at CPD. About 40% of respondents did not know that the University was offering a Tutor Training Certificate. The interviews then revealed some of the reasons for the dearth of knowledge. Many were *not told* of opportunities by colleagues in their department and, in some instances, training was not thought to be necessary. Typical of the comments by tutors in departments which did not encourage training were:

> The lecturers didn't tell us anything about tutor training. I didn't know that CPD existed.

> As far as I know there is no overall policy in our department about tutor training.

The problem is not unique to the University of Auckland. At the University of Bradford, in England, for example, a survey confirmed that in the view of the majority of respondents, many departments had not identified tutor training as a priority for development and resource support (Mellors et al, cited in Lueddeke, 1997)

In the University of Auckland Survey, some tutors, on the other hand, thought that not only were they *encouraged* to train, but that it was mandatory. Some tutor coordinators in departments had their own subject-oriented training workshops, either run by themselves or by a facilitator from CPD. In these situations there was a strong directive for tutors to attend. Indeed, some departments have a long commitment to the training of their tutors, providing them with guidebooks and other resources for tutoring in their particular department.

Another finding was that tutors who had been trained, either in their own department, or who had completed the Tutor Training Certificate felt that it did, indeed make quite a difference to their ability to tutor and to their fulfilment in their teaching:

> Our department takes teaching very seriously. When I started tutoring I loved it - terrified for the first couple of sessions, naturally. But I went to a full course of instruction at CPD and it was really helpful. We learnt things like small group techniques.

Despite extensive publicity around the campus and identifying tutor coordinators, in most departments, the survey revealed that respondents' knowledge about their teaching training opportunities was uneven.

Reasons for uneven response by departments to training of tutors

Without further research it is not possible to know precisely why some departments do not support the idea of professional development for tutors but it could be that the two models spoken of by Leo Davids (1994) might be operating at the University of Auckland. 'Model A' views GTAs as future professors whose instructional skills must be developed. The model consists of systematic training in which GTA's are considered as colleagues, receive meaningful guidance from course directors and get meaningful feedback. On the other hand, 'Model B' follows a cost-efficiency rationale in which GTAs are selected on the minimum of qualifications of availability and past experience; they are given guidance in only administrative matters, but not pedagogy and are seen as a form of cost-saving, semi-skilled labour. For instance, the tutor at Auckland who commented, "There was not training at all in our department I did it by instinct", was coming from a department that probably operated on 'Model B'.

Lambert et al draw attention to the variability in GTA training that may exist at any university because:

> …each academic department has a unique culture, with traditions that must be respected; at most institutions this means interacting with well over fifty departments on GTA issues (1993: 13).

The authors suggest that this poses a dilemma for centrally based GTA-development programmes, because to be effective they require a broad base of campus support:

> Faculties and departments need to understand and support the goals of the programme, for they bear primary responsibility for ensuring the quality of the overall graduate experience, hire and assign GTA's and ultimately serve as primary mentors for graduate students (1993:13)

The coordinators of the Tutor's and Demonstrator's Programme at Auckland were conscious of this problem and have attempted to make departments more aware of the programme and, as well, to provide for the different ethos' which might exist. It was already known, for example, that some departments see their subject as 'different' and prefer their tutors trained as a group *in* the particular department. This has been done, and whilst occasionally the department provides its own staff member to do the training, usually a CPD staff member tailors a programme specifically geared to the needs of the tutors/lab demonstrators in that subject area. In 1999, for example, tutor or demonstrator development workshops have been done for Geography, Economics, Management Science & Information Systems, Law, History, English, Psychology, Anthropology, Biological Sciences, Statistics and Computer science.

Concerns about the location of GTA training programmes were also found to be an issue in the United States (Lambert & Tice, 1993). They found that three fifths of TA programmes are based in a central university office.

In reviewing tutor development at the University following the Tutor Survey, I and the coordinator of the Programme (Barbara Grant) have sought to make knowledge of the programme more widely known throughout the University. The initial recommendations of the survey for CPD were to:

- Publicise courses and the Tutor Training Certificate more extensively.
- Provide more training courses and at more varied times.
- Provide a booklet which outlines the roles, rights and responsibilities of tutors.
- Establish more advanced courses for experienced tutors.

As a result the following actions were taken:

- Tutor coordinators have been identified in all departments and an email list generated.
- Some training courses have been offered in the early evening.
- An annual forum has been run for tutors, so that issues and concerns can be raised/or a special topic is addressed (in 1998 'Diversity in the Classroom' was the issue).
- A tutor handbook has been written (in press).
- A newsletter is sent to all Heads of Departments on up-coming courses.
- A wider range of publications have been used to publicise the Programme.
- Some special groups have been targeted, such as Maori tutors (Kaitautoko Project).

Certainly this year (1999) has seen workshops filling up very quickly and 41 departments have students represented in the Tutor/Demonstrator Programme . Also, a few departments are now making it mandatory for their tutors to join the Programme. The receipt of the Tutor Training Certificate at the end of the training is also proving to be popular. It appears to act as a focus and a stimulation to complete all parts for the training. Some tutors start to get agitated toward the end of Semester Two if they have not completed all the requirements for the Certificate. The ceremony (wine and cheese) at the end of Semester Two to present the Certificates is well attended. D'Andrea (1997) observes that in some universities in the United States, such as UC-Davis in California, the 'tangible recognition' and the presentation of a certificate indicating completion of training is an important part of the GTA training programme.

Is the culture changing?

The Tutor & Demonstrator Training Programme at the University of Auckland has shown that, given the opportunity, beginning teachers are very quick to accept a chance to learn teaching skills to help them with tutoring or lab demonstrating. One of the reasons is survival. Tutors are not slow to see that small group teaching is quite demanding, and as students themselves they are conscious that undergraduates who are paying more than $3,000 (1999) a year for their full-time study will want their 'pound of flesh'. But there are other reasons, and some of them surfaced at the interviews for the Tutor Survey. Prominent among them was the enjoyment and fulfilment that teaching gave the tutors:

> I love tutoring. I love the student contact and feel that I get on well with my students, so there is a social thing there as well. I think that I am a professional and the students are getting a lot from us.

> I enjoyed the relationship with my students. I love teaching. I look forward to going to my classes. I love imparting knowledge (of languages).

> I enjoyed reacting with people who wanted to learn things or who came because there were things they didn't understand, and you were able somehow to help them. And then the excitement of when they come back and say they have enjoyed the year.

There were also positive reactions to the Tutor & Demonstrator Training Programme itself:

> I liked meeting other tutors and feeling less alone.
>
> Well organised workshops with friendly and flexible coordinators.
>
> Good facilitators and their pedagogical style was a very good model and incentive for me.
>
> I liked the acknowledgment by CPD that tutors play an important role in student learning.

This enthusiasm for teaching by GTAs and their commitment to learning teaching skills has been noted at other universities. In her study at Lancaster University, Kath Smart (1994: 11) said that she was struck by how concerned postgraduates were about their teaching and how much work they put into it. She went on to observe:

> I found them extremely interested in talking about their work, and ways in which it could be improved. There was considerable enthusiasm for training courses, and many suggestions about what they should cover .(1994:11)

The enthusiasm of GTAs might suggest that teaching is coming to be perceived as an important activity, and perhaps the traditional culture which sees teaching as simply an adjunct to research is changing. As a result of their teaching experience as tutors some of them said that they were now seriously considering university teaching as a possible career.

Catching academics at the start of their career

The issue of academics being exposed to pedagogical skills to equip them for teaching at a university appears still to be a contentious one. I recently interviewed the recipients of the 1995 and 1996 Distinguished Teaching Awards at the University of Auckland and on the question of training of lecturers for teaching, there were divided opinions. There were those who were convinced that training was essential. Typical of that view was a law lecturer, who said:

> It should be compulsory to get trained. There is no question in my mind about that. The best lecturer that I had in Harvard Law School was a trained high school teacher (Barrington 1999: 24)

In contrast there were others who thought that gaining a PhD and showing enthusiasm and knowledge of one's subject plus the experience of teaching was sufficient. Indeed, some believe that the best way to learn to teach is to do it.

The ambivalence in the minds of some senior academics over the issue of training for academics could well go to the heart of the issue of why there is not full support for the Tutor & Demonstrator Training Programme at the University of Auckland. If research is seen to be the central, and most important activity for an academic, then it is unlikely that decision-makers will recommend that their tutors be trained.

Teaching induction programmes for new lecturers at the University of Auckland are currently quite well attended, but on-going professional development of teaching staff is not an imperative for most staff (judging by the numbers who attend workshops and

forums). Yet the growing attendance of GTAs on the Tutor & Demonstrator Programme, has demonstrated that given the chance, beginning teachers will commit themselves to complete a teaching skills programme. In discussing in discussing TA programmes in the United States Janet Donald suggests that providing training programmes for these people indicates to them that teaching and learning are central to the university community and that although the research thesis is a central goal, their campus life was expanded to include a broader sense of scholarship as part of their experience (1997: 144). Providing training opportunities for GTAs then, is not only likely to be benefiting students but it may well be setting in train a commitment to ongoing professional development in this next generation of academics.

Earlier in the paper, reference was made to the variability in response by departments to the Tutor Training & Demonstrator Programme. Since the 1997 Survey, awareness of the availability of tutor and lab demonstrator training has been heightened and tutors and demonstrators are becoming more conscious that there are opportunities for them to be trained and they can gain a Certificate. It may now be becoming harder for ‘resistant’ HODs to ignore demands by their tutors and demonstrators to attend.

Further research

A number of questions are raised and further research suggests itself in these areas:

- Does the quality of the learning experience for students differ between tutorials/labs that are led by trained versus untrained GTAs?
- Why do some departments support training of their GTAs and others not?
- How can poorly performing departments be brought on board – should training of GTAs be mandatory?
- Has the tutor training programme helped to shift the culture toward a higher value on teaching?

Conclusions

The number of GTAs has grown considerably in universities around the world. Since so many students are exposed to the teaching of this group of academics, providing them with opportunities to learn teaching skills is, in my view, an imperative in universities, particularly those who have become committed to improving the learning experience for students. At the University of Auckland the opportunity for GTAs to take part in a reasonably comprehensive teaching skills programme and to gain a Certificate attesting to their training has gained a lot of support, despite the fact that some departments seem less than devoted to the idea. Catching these young university teachers when they are quite enthusiastic and can see the tangible benefits of such training may augur well for the next generation of academics so that on-going professional development for teachers becomes part of their university culture.

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