Supporting Graduate Teaching Assistants at Trinity College Dublin (TCD)

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Supporting Graduate Teaching Assistants

INTRODUCTION

Although the main activity of postgraduate students is research, many also have

significant teaching roles and responsibilities. These individuals are known as graduate

teaching assistants (GTAs). Their role is particularly significant in research-intensive

institutions (Travers, 1989). For example, one recent estimate reported that 85 percent of

the undergraduate courses within a school at a research-intensive Canadian university

were taught by non-faculty staff, many of whom were postgraduates (Hickson and

Fishburne, 2007).

GTAs support undergraduate student learning in various different teaching contexts, and

their roles vary in relation to disciplinary contexts, opportunities and constraints. Typical

responsibilities of GTAs include facilitating student learning and helping students prepare

for assessments (Morss and Murray, 2005). In some higher education institutions,

particularly in the United States, the role of GTAs is officially recognised with employee

status, whereas in others the role is not as formalised (Park, 2004). Even within an

institution, support and recognition may vary from department to department.

Postgraduates' motivations for becoming involved in teaching vary considerably, and

may include the need to supplement their incomes as well as a desire to gain experience

in teaching as preparation for developing their career prospects (Park, 2004; National

Postgraduate Committee, 1993). Postgraduates who have taught or are intending to teach

noted the value of the experience in a survey conducted at the University of Oxford, with 87 percent of those considering an academic career indicating that teaching was likely to benefit their research (Trigwell and Dunbar-Goddet, 2005).

The challenge of supporting GTAs has been researched internationally. Reports such as that by the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKGCE) (1999) have attempted to summarise key elements of practice. For example, the UKCGE report (1999, p. 10) identified a postgraduate teaching development programme at University of California at Davis, which contained many of the features cited as best practice by Sprague and Nyquist (1989). These included faculty/staff member involvement (mentoring/supervision); accommodation of time constraints (released time); and the development of a recognised teaching culture (continuing professional development).

At a national level in Ireland, the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) (2005) has acknowledged and identified the teaching roles of postgraduate tutors and demonstrators. The Board recommends that basic training to support these roles be provided, as well as indicating that it might be desirable for those students considering an academic career to acquire a formal teaching qualification during the course of their research studies.

There is currently a range of provisions available or developing for GTAs across Irish higher education institutions. These provisions differ in structure, content and location for delivery within institutes, reflecting the history of support provision prior to the national guidelines, institutional variations in the roles of GTAs, and funding mechanisms.

Examples from the sector include:

- accredited modules or programmes provided by central teaching and learning support units, varying from 10 to 12 weeks in duration and including the use of peer observation and micro-teaching

- short "clinics"

- discipline-specific provisions, ranging from one-day workshops to short courses leading to certification for example a Certificate of Continuing Postgraduate Professional Development in 'Sociological Teaching and Learning delivered by the Sociology department, NUI Maynooth,

- accredited modules or parts of modules and a cross-institutional initiative from NUI Galway, University College Cork (UCC) and Trinity College Dublin (TCD) to develop an inter-institutional module for GTAs, building on the strengths and approaches within the collaborating institutions.

We begin this chapter by describing briefly the historical context of support for GTAs at Trinity College Dublin (TCD). We then present and compare three case studies of central teaching support structures, introduced and evaluated as pilot approaches for GTA support at the University during 2006 and 2007. From these case studies, three themes emerge: the role of the disciplines in supporting GTA teaching development; the need for peer support of GTAs; and the importance of appropriate timing for GTA teaching development. Towards the end of the chapter, we consider TCD's case studies in relation to the national context, considering implications for future development.

SUPPORTING POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS WHO TEACH AT TCD

A central educational enhancement unit, the Centre for Academic Practice and Student Learning (CAPSL), was established at TCD in 2003. Between 2003 and 2006, it regularly delivered two standard workshops for GTAs on presentation skills and small-group teaching. These were promoted to heads of discipline and delivered within disciplines and departments at their request. The large number of disciplines and the small number of attendees at individual disciplinary workshops made the approach increasingly difficult to sustain, however. When, in 2006, the disciplines were restructured into 24 schools assigned to one of three faculties, the opportunity arose to reconsider the central approach to support GTAs. The new system was planned by CAPSL with input and endorsement from the Graduate Studies Office, school officers with responsibility for postgraduate students, and the Graduate Students Union.

The new system featured three main initiatives:

- a short, introductory course in third-level teaching

- a one-day induction to teaching and supporting learning

- an annual events programme.

These initiatives are described below as brief case studies and their key features are compared in Table 1. The different activities aimed to provide a varied range of teaching development opportunities accessible through-out the teaching year, aimed at both experienced and novice GTAs. Following the case studies and table, this section presents and discusses the following emerging and recurrent themes:

- the role of the disciplines in supporting GTAs

- the need for peer support and community building as a key element of professional development for GTAs

- the importance of scheduling, timing and prioritising teaching development for GTAs.

Case Study 1: Introduction to Teaching at Third Level – A Short Course

In Spring/Summer 2006, a short course was delivered through 10, three-hour sessions run fortnightly over a five-month period, supported by a virtual learning environment (VLE) (WebCT) with resources and discussion forums. The course aimed to introduce participants to key aspects of third-level teaching and prompt them to apply principles and techniques within their disciplines using a critically reflective approach. Session topics included:

- lecture design and delivery

- active learning in small groups

- assessment of student learning

- course and module design

- teaching and learning

- e-learning

- evaluation of teaching.

The course was structured to encompass the development of a reflective teaching portfolio and the involvement of a discipline-based mentor. Participants chose a mentor who would be available to observe their teaching and offer feedback on it; an additional

session brought mentors and participants together to discuss the course aims and the mentoring role prior to the observations. A certificate of successful completion was offered to participants who completed a reflective teaching portfolio and an assignment on course design.

Case Study 2: One-Day Induction to Teaching and Supporting Learning

A team of three developers contributed to the design, content and delivery of a one-day induction to teaching and supporting learning. The day was designed specifically for postgraduates with no prior teaching experience. The initiative was influenced by four main factors: the IUQB (2005) publication; international models and research on supporting GTAs; the experience in the previous academic year of a 10-fold over-subscription for the short course for postgraduate teachers (case study 1); and the feedback from the short course participants. The induction day was offered six times at the beginning of the academic year. The day consisted of four sessions on the following topics:

- understanding the GTA role
- introducing the scholarship of teaching and learning
- working with diverse learners
- evaluating and developing teaching practice.

The main aims of the day were to enable participants to build their confidence, skills and enthusiasm through a range of activities and discussions within a network of peers. Participants were also given a folder of materials and resources with which to initiate their own teaching portfolio.

Case Study 3: Annual Events Programme

In October 2006, a series of activities commenced to maintain support for GTAs, with some specifically for participants of the one-day induction (case study 2) and the five-month short course (case study 1).

An interactive VLE was developed within WebCT, and the participants registered for access. The VLE incorporated faculty-based discussion forums and discipline-related teaching and learning resources. An activity prompting reflection on teaching was added after a few weeks, and updates were made periodically during the year. Fifteen of the 57 registered site users accessed the VLE, many doing so after being informed of additional resources or activities.

Acknowledging that face-to-face meetings are integral to sustaining online interactions, we also scheduled a series of one-hour discussion sessions. The first session was attended by six GTAs – two in their first year of teaching and four who had participated in the short course. Based on feedback, the subsequent sessions were scheduled in early evening. Unfortunately, however, only two or three GTAs responded for each session and met in these small groups or individually. This pattern of low numbers recurred across the year, including the final session in May that followed an online activity on reflecting on teaching.

In March 2007, a one-day Teaching and Learning Colloquium was held. The day was planned to support novice and more experienced GTAs. It consisted of parallel workshops on topics suggested as future areas for development by participants of the one-day induction course. Participants from the short course were invited to take part as session facilitators.

Table 1: Comparison and Evaluation of Three Initiatives to Support GTAs at TCD

Approaches to support Graduate Teaching Assistants	Key features	Successes	Issues Raised	Student Comments
Short Course: Introduction to Teaching at Third Level	• Structured short course: 30 hours plus independent study over a five-month period • Certificate of completion provided for attendance and the development of a reflective portfolio	• Discussions with peers developing the reflective portfolio • Participating in the sessions • All participants completing the course • Mentoring process	• Some respondents suggested that there should be more discipline-specific focus and that they would have liked greater involvement from members of schools or experienced tutors	• *I thought the quality of the content was most significant. The different disciplines within the class also made it easy to gain new ideas.* • *Interaction with other course participants –*

	• Participants mentored by academic colleagues from their own disciplines		• Some participants felt the mentoring process was of limited value, or they did not participate in the process	*exchange of thoughts and experiences with people from different disciplines was brilliant.*
One-day Induction to Teaching and Supporting and Learning	• Four study units delivered in one day • Presented and modelled various small-group teaching methods and communication skills, and introduced the	• Opening task to identify, pool and resolve teaching concerns • The interactivity of the day created by discussion, exercises and problem-solving	• Ambivalence about value of exploring learning theories • Participant fatigue towards the end of the day, so less gained from afternoon sessions • Raised awareness of	*• Getting to know that others have the same worries and realising my concerns were natural.* *• Discussing key concerns and coming up with practical*

	scholarship of teaching and learning • Participants could choose to attend days for disciplinary or cross-disciplinary groups		differences among local, departmental approaches to supporting postgraduates in teaching roles	*solutions.* • *...finding ways to promote active learning in lectures and seminars and experiencing some of these techniques directly on the course.*
Annual events programme consisting of seminars, online activities and a one-day colloquium	• Tutor and peer-led meetings throughout the year • VLE populated with generic and discipline-specific	Postgraduates contributing their experience and expertise by leading seminars, colloquium discussions and via the VLE	• Low engagement with the VLE and attendance at tutor-led meetings • Better attendance at end of the year peer-	• *...learning from experience of others.* • *Like every other postgrad, finding time to participate is difficult but I would*

	teaching and learning resources and hosted online discussion forums • One-day teaching and learning colloquium		led meeting and colloquium	*certainly like to contribute when I can.*

The Role of the Disciplines

The initiatives described in the case studies above were all university-wide developments and brought together GTAs into generic, central activities to develop their teaching. The generic approach allowed us to acknowledge common issues and foster constructive learning among peers from across the disciplines, and participants appreciated this. On the other hand, the initiatives were also tailored to some extent to better meet disciplinary teaching contexts. In this, we anticipated participant feedback that they would like more discipline-specific focus. With this in mind, for example, we:

- organised for discipline-based mentors to contribute to the learning environment for the participants in the short course (case study 1 – when this worked successfully, the mentor–mentee relationship was a very positive and significant component of the course)

- worked with faculties to coordinate the one-day induction courses (case study 2)

- ran workshops at the teaching colloquium focused on some discipline-specific aspects of teaching practice (case study 3)

- used examples and activities relating to discipline-specific teaching contexts in activities where possible.

These were built-in refinements, and it was clear from participant feedback that their disciplinary teaching contexts and approaches to learning were foremost in their thoughts, providing a lens through which they appraised the relevance of the course content.

What now emerges is the challenge of exploring whether local and central teaching support can be developed further to work synergistically to support GTAs. Recent

research and analysis by Knight *et al* (2007) points to the importance of supporting part-time teaching staff through situated, informal learning (within disciplinary teams and academic structures such as schools and departments). They suggest that "professional formation is ecological in the sense that it is evoked by engagements with other colleagues in the 'lived' workplace environment" (Knight *et al*, p. 421). They identify more formal learning opportunities (such as those developed, structured and delivered by central educational development units) as "only a part of the picture" (Knight *et al*, p.430.) They also note several issues related to institutional and local policy and practice in supporting part-time teachers – for example, the need for local structures to value, support and enable reciprocal learning with and from part-time tutors.

The Need for Peer Support and Community

One feature across the three case studies was the sharing of experience, practice and problem-solving approaches among peers – the participants singled this out for positive comment. This feature was usually linked to developing a sense of unity and community. Community-building was a universal, often explicit, objective of all these centralised initiatives, and built upon CAPSL's general aim of creating networks, enabling dialogue and fostering "teaching commons" at TCD (for example, see Hanratty and O'Farrell, 2007). This was achieved through tutor-led approaches to small-group work (see Exley and Dennick, 2004), carefully matching the interactive teaching methods and content used by course and workshop facilitators to the teaching roles and contexts of the postgraduate participants. Other strategies to encourage the development of peer support included the:

- involvement (by invitation) of participants from the short course (case study 1) in contributing to and leading some of the open events and activities (case study 3)
- peer-led learning sessions on facilitating discussion in small groups, held throughout the year
- web-based activities to encourage discussion and the sharing of practice on generic themes and on faculty-specific teaching contexts and experiences.

Despite the positive feedback received by the community-building aspects of the initiatives, only a small percentage of GTAs carried their networking through into the discussion forums on WebCT (both the general and faculty-specific forums) or attended the lunchtime "get-together" discussions. This indicates that, without direct support from coordinators and facilitators of the GTA initiatives, the sense of community is relatively fragile and would need further consideration of ways to create strong, institution-wide, student-led or virtual networks for collegial exchange. It is possible that the lack of interest in or commitment to independent networking occurred precisely because the GTA initiatives described above were quite structured and depended on the leadership of facilitators and coordinators. It may also be related to the third emerging theme below, which is time. Additionally, there may be pre-existing networks of peers, particularly within schools or discipline areas, which obviate the need for GTAs to retain links with colleagues from the wider college community. There is certainly evidence of local networks and communities within some areas of the University, where postgraduates are actively working with their schools to provide supports for other postgraduates who are teaching. For example, some schools provide annual inductions for part-time tutors,

including postgraduates, and others have established their own central postgraduate skills development programmes that incorporate support for teaching.

Scheduling, Timing and Prioritising Teaching Development

The third theme that emerged from our analysis of the GTA initiatives was the difficulty of scheduling central teaching support – of ascertaining the most appropriate time of year, the optimum duration of events and the most appropriate time of day to enable attendance. During the planning of each course or event, we were very aware of the need to ensure that the activities were scheduled sensitively to allow participation but did not require a heavy time commitment that would interfere with postgraduates' primary research responsibility.

Generally, there was better attendance at the one-day induction course for postgraduates new to teaching (case study 2) than at other individual events (case study 3). The former was scheduled at the beginning of the academic year and we presume that the "just in time delivery" approach addressed an acute and immediate need. Some events in the annual programme were rescheduled based on feedback from potential participants; however, even with these efforts, attendance was not high. Most frequently, difficulty attending was "physically articulated" by absenteeism post-registration, although a peer-led session on facilitating small-group discussion, the last event of the academic year, reversed the trend of declining attendance. It proved difficult, however, to determine whether this was because of the topic and format, the scheduling or other factors.

Conversely, feedback from participants on the short course (case study 1) indicated interest in more frequent meetings with overall greater duration:

- *I found the time quite restrictive. Maybe the course could run on a weekly basis.*

- *Perhaps two meetings a week of two-hour duration – because I am so swamped with my own work I think I would have been a little less of a procrastinator at the end if we met more frequently – it would serve to reinforce the programme and keep the ball rolling.*

This may suggest that if participants make an initial commitment to a scheduled and structured course, they would accommodate it within their schedule. The additional approaches of an award (certificate of completion) and the active involvement of a mentor to support the participant's progress may also have acted as incentives for committed attendance and participation.

NATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS, DIRECTIONS AND CONTEXT

The one-day induction (case study 2) attempted to assist the University in meeting the IUQB (2005, p. 35) guideline that states that institutions must provide "basic training in appropriate teaching and supervisory skills … with a sufficiency of such training given in advance of the commencement of teaching".

It also aimed to reflect similar international approaches by central educational development units at comparable research-intensive institutions – for example, those at the Universities of Durham and Warwick in the UK. When reviewing the support

provided to GTAs in other countries and institutions, it is important to consider the number of hours that GTAs are permitted to teach and relate this to the provision of associated training. Six hours per week is the recommended limit for those on university and national research body bursaries. In such circumstances, the central support programmes are not comparable in scale to those in the US for similarly appointed graduate teaching assistants (Park, 2004). It is envisioned, however, that the centrally delivered training is only part of the support infrastructure, which would best consist of a mixed model of formal, central provision and local support in the "lived" teaching environment.

Although many GTAs noted the value of participating in a programme for supporting their current teaching role within contexts such as tutorials and laboratories, many were looking further ahead, with a view to pursuing an academic career. In formal and informal feedback, as well as discussions with GTAs, recognition and certification emerge as strong incentives for participation in central programmes, including the short course (case study 1). The issue of certification is noted in the IUQB guidelines:

> Provided it does not impinge on progress with the PhD project, and with the agreement of the supervisor(s), it is possible for students planning an academic career to acquire a formal teaching qualification, such as a certificate in higher education (IUQB, p. 29, 2005).

The stage of postgraduates' research projects, their teaching experience and their confidence may all influence their relative interest in and need for teaching support (for

example, see Park, 2002). Those approaching the end of their research projects may be more determined to gain teaching experience and participate in associated programmes, particularly for certification. Feedback to CAPSL recorded frequent requests from GTAs for support with teaching large groups and lecturing. It is possible that some postgraduates are strategically planning an academic career from the outset of their research and want to spend their time as efficiently as possible by gaining teaching experience and certification during their early research career. Unlike in the UK, it is not currently a requirement in Ireland that academics employed as lecturers possess (or are pursuing) a postgraduate certificate in education or equivalent. The emergence of a growing number of GTAs with teaching certificates or qualifications may prompt further discussion on this issue, however.

Time as a valuable and limited resource clearly emerges as a running theme from the case studies. Although the guidelines may limit teaching to no more than six hours per week, GTAs may be spending additional time on preparation, feedback, assessment and attendance at lectures. They may experience the same tensions and challenges as academics in terms of balancing their research and teaching; however, as the postgraduates' primary role is to undertake research, difficulties with time management may result in major problems with the progress of their research and may require intervention by supervisors. As Park (2004) notes in his review of approaches to supporting GTAs in the US, GTAs in US higher education institutes have a more significant and recognised role as well as more established support structures, compared to GTAs in the UK.

FUTURE INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES

At TCD and across the Irish university sector, centrally coordinated discussions and developments have prompted the careful examination of postgraduate skills development, including its availability and timing. While these wider discussions continue, at TCD, teaching skills is one of six areas currently being developed as part of an inter-institutional project with colleagues at University College Cork (UCC) and National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG). Here we define some of the general principles that are emerging and will inform central practices and priorities for the further short-term development of central support structures for GTAs at TCD.

Strengthened Central Structures

The case studies document a series of central initiatives that can contribute to a more comprehensive programme of central support, matched to GTAs' various stages and roles. The most pressing issues now are scaling central provision to meet demand and creating the opportunity for an accredited study route or a similarly in-depth learning experience that is formally recognised. It may be that these are interrelated, insofar as the experiences to date show that the more formal and structured courses have generated the greatest interest among the GTA community. Both issues pose challenges in implementation, not least because of resource limitations. This might prompt CAPSL to explore approaches such as resource-based learning and student-led learning networks. At institutional level, developing accredited study routes will test the existing curriculum resource models.

Complementary Local Support for Centralised Teaching Development

Internationally, it has not always been the case that GTA supports have developed so readily from within disciplines and schools, although many GTA teaching development programmes in the US are situated within the disciplines. In the UK, "Roberts funding" has significantly influenced and enabled the development of central programmes and support units, although colleagues in an institution comparable to TCD are identifying the emerging need to move the location/ownership of skills training closer to the main academic experience (Turner, 2007). On the basis of evidence from our own institution and the wider international experience and literature, we contend that local support is a core component of an effective "partnership approach" to support GTAs. By this, we mean a mixed approach of local support from academic colleagues and peers within the discipline complemented by access to central formal learning opportunities. Central programmes allow cross-disciplinary discussion and learning, which add value to local support. Developing an integrated local and central support model poses challenges for development and implementation, but it is likely that this approach will best support GTAs' individual experiences, roles and aspirations, as well as their home disciplines and departments. It will also fulfil the University's commitment to supporting the graduate and undergraduate learning experiences.

CAPSL's Role in Continuing Development and Evaluation of GTA Programmes

As formal and informal and local and centralised support for GTAs continues to develop at TCD, CAPSL's role may need to broaden beyond responsibility for central training

and support. As national developments in postgraduate skills training continue and international experiences are increasingly shared, CAPSL will play an important role in maintaining a critical and informed perspective on the currency of emerging programmes. It will be important for CAPSL to be active in feeding ideas and practices from other contexts to schools and disciplines and supporting innovation and development at local level. Similarly, if a holistic model is to be taken forward, CAPSL may also have a role to play in developing appropriate evaluation approaches that can capture and respond to accounts of GTAs' experiences, as well as those of their students, supervisors and academic colleagues.

CONCLUSIONS

The Irish government has clearly articulated a commitment to expanding and developing research activity and to increasing the number of students both at fourth and third level. As the country's universities prepare to meet these goals, it is likely that the presence of postgraduate teachers in undergraduate classrooms will become critical in enabling institutions to meet their missions. The development and implementation of effective, inclusive and appropriate programmes that support postgraduates in developing their teaching skills in a range of disciplinary teaching contexts will contribute to the increasing professionalisation of teaching within Irish higher education as well as to the personal and professional development of individual postgraduates who teach. The creation of such structures will challenge a range of existing practices and paradigms. This is no bad thing, because it is likely to enrich the debate on teaching, learning and research as synergistic activities at institutional, disciplinary and individual levels.

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