

## Learning & Teaching in HE

### *Training for Postgraduate Students*

This paper comes about in the context of the on-going debate about the value of offering discipline-specific versus generic interdisciplinary training in learning and teaching to postgraduate research (PGR) students. The paper examines the question from the perspective of educational development in HE and through consideration of recent pedagogical research into UG learning and teaching which included a vital contribution from postgraduate students. These ideas were originally presented as part of a panel at the CA conference in Nottingham (2014) contributing to the debate on the future of postgraduate training and skills development in our discipline. Since then the suggestions in my paper have been put into practice in the Department of Humanities at Roehampton.

At Roehampton new PGR students need to take a short SEDA course entitled *An Introduction to Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* before they are allowed to undertake any teaching. The course is generic and is offered to all PGR students across the university in subjects ranging from Dance, Drama, Languages and Humanities to Education, Social Sciences, Life Sciences and Psychology. This approach makes sense logistically as it is practical to bring students together and teach them together. The programme is also built on the findings of educational developers that it is beneficial to take an interdisciplinary approach to share best practice across disciplines rather than sticking with one mode which is essentially the way that you yourself were taught. As Schulman (2005) has convincingly argued, by examining the 'signature pedagogies' of other disciplines, that is the characteristic forms of teaching and learning in each discipline, educators can improve teaching and learning in their own discipline. Another positive aspect is that students get to meet peers from across campus. A similar approach is taken in the longer and more in depth programme for new staff members for a similar set of reasons.

I spoke to a small number of PGR students in Humanities (studying in the fields of Classics, History, Philosophy and Theology) to find out their impressions of this short course. They told me that they appreciated the basic training they had received while undertaking the introductory course. In particular the opportunity to do a trial class in front of their peers was deemed valuable as they received feedback on their teaching style and technique. However all the students surveyed said that the course was too short and very basic. They desired something additional to supplement this course, ideally with a more disciplinary focus. In addition some of these PGR students were keen for further experiences, not just of teaching, but also of developing material for teaching and developing assessments (see also [Hilder](#) in this issue).

Two of these Humanities students subsequently agreed to take part in an HEA funded collaborative project on '[Developing undergraduate students](#)'

[understanding of historical enquiry and research through flexible online learning and feedback](#)’ which was run by my colleague Ted Vallance in collaboration with historians from Edge Hill University. The aim of the project was to ‘develop online platforms to support undergraduate history students’ enquiry and research skills’. The team decided to include input from PGR students as well as academic staff from both institutions to help enhance both subject-specific skills and the kind of independent critical thinking which is needed for university-level study. The main focus in both universities was the teaching of a first-year History skills module, using technology to develop UG students’ research skills. The project made use of PGR students from disciplines other than History including Classics, Philosophy and French. The particular role of the PGR students was to collaborate with each other under the guidance of staff to develop digital material to enhance the modules involved in this project. For example they designed online quizzes for the undergraduate students and they took part in online discussion forums with the undergraduate students on the VLE answering questions and stimulating debate.

The PGR students who took part were happy to be involved in the project as it gave them an opportunity to think through what kind of material to design in teaching a session, how to interlink ideas that were being delivered in the classroom with the learning outcomes, and how to interact with and give feedback to students. There were benefits to the academic staff involved too, because the PGR students came at problems in a different way partly through their experience with technologies and partly because of their memories of learning as undergraduate students made them approach problems differently. The undergraduate students on these modules also benefitted through their use of material developed by the PGR students. In particular those students who engaged fully in one-on-one online discussions with PGR students benefitted substantially, as could be seen from analysis of an exercise in which they answered the same set of questions in week 1 and week 10. In week 10 students who had engaged in the online discussions with PGR students showed that they had met the learning outcomes through their more nuanced and thoughtful answers.

The project demonstrated advantages to all involved when PGR students were involved. But a question remained about how this work could be sustained when the funding came to an end. At the same time, the desire of our PGR students to receive some form of disciplinary training in learning and teaching needed a solution. The solution which I trialled in the Department of Humanities was an enhancement of our peer observation scheme to include PGR students even where they are not teaching. The original simple system paired up academic staff who were asked to watch the teaching of a colleague for an hour and note a couple of things that they had learnt from the session. For the new scheme I created groups of three, each including a full-time member of staff, a full-time or temporary lecturer and a PGR student. While at Roehampton we have a limited number of PGR students, the advantage of working with groups is that larger numbers of students could be accommodated in the scheme. Groups were asked to observe teaching. As an alternative colleagues were encouraged to collaborate with PGR students to develop an idea for teaching in a system of ‘peer collaboration’. Possibilities

suggested were that PGR students might be given the opportunity to get some experience of preparing a class activity, creating a Moodle quiz, or leading a seminar. It was stressed that no activities should be unduly arduous. The groups in our department were interdisciplinary over Classics, History, Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies and Ministerial Theology. The advantage of the scheme is that it is logistically practical, interdisciplinary, and allows colleagues to get to know one another from across disciplines, but at the same time can allow PGR students to learn more about teaching before they undertake it through observing the teaching, or collaborating in teaching-related activities. Research has demonstrated that watching others teach can be more beneficial to learning than receiving feedback on your own teaching, because observers can enhance their confidence and learn new strategies by watching others (Hendry and Oliver, 2012), so just including the PGR students in the rota and encouraging them to observe teaching is valuable on its own. The possibility of peer collaboration as trialled in our scheme is an additional mode of supporting students, but is not essential to enhance their learning. The PGR students were not placed in groups with their supervisors necessarily as working with a range of people over their studies would supplement their knowledge and experiences. This would enable students to gain experience in developing and thinking through teaching materials, styles and approaches as well as gaining practical tips and advice from more experienced staff, while the staff could potentially also learn something e.g. about technology that could be used beneficially in the classroom from the PGR students.

Feedback from PGR students who participated in the scheme was positive. They were pleased that they had been included in the rota and spoke of things that they had learnt from experienced members of staff and the feedback they had received. As Jennifer Hilder has reported in her piece for this issue, the University of Glasgow also ran a peer observation scheme in Classics which included graduate students for the first time this academic year. She noted: 'From my point of view, I think it was very useful particularly for the newer GTAs to get some reassurance as well as constructive feedback, but also as a slightly more experienced GTA I enjoyed seeing other people's teaching style and made me think more about the way I organise class time, for example.' However one PGR student from Roehampton commented that he did not want to take part in the scheme as the staff members in his group were not from the same discipline and he could not see the benefits of observing teaching which was not in his own subject area. Conversely a student in Theology and Religious Studies working on a PhD on sacred space felt that he benefited from his experience observing a field trip for first year classical civilisation students to a neoclassical garden temple at Roehampton, including 'the way such an informal session allowed individual discussion between tutor and student'. Following on from this feedback, I will look carefully at the disciplinary groupings of the PGR students in the scheme going forward to ensure they are offered both disciplinary and interdisciplinary peer observation opportunities in the course of their studies.

*The message from PGR students involved this year is that including them in peer observation rotas can be a very valuable way for them to enhance their disciplinary learning and teaching and where possible to gain further insights on learning and teaching through interdisciplinary engagement.*

### **References**

[Assisting UG History Students via Online Learning tools \(2014\)](#)

Hendry, G. and Oliver, G. (2012) 'Seeing is Believing: the Benefits of Peer Observation', *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* 9.1: Article 7

[Hilder, J. \(2015\) 'What Postgraduates Want', \*CUCD Bulletin\* 44](#)

Schulman, L. S. (2005) 'Signature Pedagogies in the Professions', *Daedalus* summer 2005: 52-9.

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