

5 Student voice

Finding your 'voice' as postgraduate tutor: Some thoughts and provocations

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// **Postgraduates who teach within the media studies context have to negotiate a complex, threefold identity as students, researchers, and teachers. The question of how to deal with these multiple roles and responsibilities prompted some thought-provoking discussion during a teaching workshop, led by Kate Brooks (University of the West of England) and Debbie Flint (ADM-HEA), at last year's MeCCSA Postgraduate Network conference in Bristol. At the time, we found ourselves reflecting on a suggestion by fellow postgraduates to wear a different 'hat' according to the role we had to fulfil in a particular situation. Their 'teaching hat' provided them with the authority and conviction in the classroom that they might not otherwise possess; according to this, leading a seminar seemed to necessitate a degree of performance and pretence. We struggled with the idea of leaping from learner to teacher without any sense of natural progression, and the thought of 'performing' authority, though valid and effective for some, made us feel dishonest and condescending towards the students.**

The above discussion coincided with our re-reading of a chapter by Sarah E. Deel in *Reflections on Learning as Teachers* (Susan Singer and Carol Ritz (eds), College City Publications, Northfield, 2004). 'Finding my teaching voice' is an honest and amusing account of the path that led Deel from miserable attempts at copying the teaching styles of her favourite lecturers to a realisation that she had to accept who she was, a 'rather earnest, intense, and detail-oriented [person], with just a faint hint of dry humor that [went] unacknowledged by [her] students'. Accepting that different tutors have different ways of teaching was a significant step in giving her confidence as a tutor, and she eventually managed to engage her students on a level that was agreeable to both her personality and their needs.

This struck a chord with us. Our article, then, was meant to be about finding our teaching voice as postgraduate students by making best use of our strengths and limitations. Yet in discussing the structure and content of our piece, we realised that the issue opened up a whole can of hitherto unacknowledged worms, which convinced us that instead of a structured 'voice-finding' argument, we should offer a set of observations and

provocations about the postgraduate teaching environment as a whole. For the purposes of this article, we take the liberty to generalise, and we accept that we might not speak for all postgraduates as we point out a number of curiosities. In the light of this lengthy introduction then, consider the following...

Teaching as postgraduate student can be an exciting and empowering opportunity. Although daunting at times, it is usually a sought-after experience, for both personal and professional reasons. Personally, it gives a sense and taste of agency (some would say power...), and it creates new challenges and responsibilities for a group of people who have previously stood at the receiving end of education and examination. For some, it also pays enough to cover the rent or the groceries. Professionally, it is an essential requirement if one intends to pursue a teaching career in higher education.

At the same time, media and arts departments benefit because employing postgraduate teaching staff provides flexible and cheap additions to full-time members of staff. With full-time staff's increasingly stretched workloads, it sometimes seems as though everyday teaching schedules would crumble were it not for the commitment of postgraduate students who teach. And yet our experiences, and those of colleagues at other institutions, suggest that postgraduate teaching staff do not always receive the guidance needed to transform into confident and competent teachers, nor are they always fairly remunerated for their efforts. While we are expected to fulfil essentially the same responsibilities as our full-time (or even part-time) colleagues in terms of preparing for and teaching seminars, and while, arguably, we put in equivalent if not more effort doing so, some universities still employ the notion of 'postgraduate seminar teaching rates' which are lower than those of other staff. This has always seemed odd to us, not least because it goes against the principle of 'equal pay for work of equal value'. Although money is not our key focus here, the disparity in pay rates feeds into wider uncertainty about our status within the higher education environment. It also relates to a range of insecurities around questions of qualification, authority and autonomy in the classroom.

For instance, we have in the past encountered students who demanded to be taught by non-

postgraduate teachers, even before any teaching sessions took place, simply because they wanted to learn from those who appeared most qualified, knowledgeable and authoritative within the field of study. Some of our colleagues prefer not to tell their students that they are still students themselves, so as to avoid any *a priori* judgements about their authority or competence. Teaching media studies, or popular culture subjects more generally, raises a specific issue in this regard: some students come equipped with a vast amount of (sometimes specialist) knowledge about their chosen area of study, and one way such students may measure tutors' competences is by testing their familiarity with movie or music trivia and the like. It can take a while for undergraduate students to realise that the university context requires them to move beyond personal hit lists and towards a critical understanding and application of theory and practice. Likewise, few first-year students start out conceiving of seminars or lectures as communal learning and teaching environments in which teachers are not so much the bearers of all knowledge but the enablers of constructive learning. Until this understanding of the university experience is achieved, postgraduate tutors in particular may lose students' votes of confidence, unless they share those kinds of popular culture tastes that transform them into buddy aficionados.

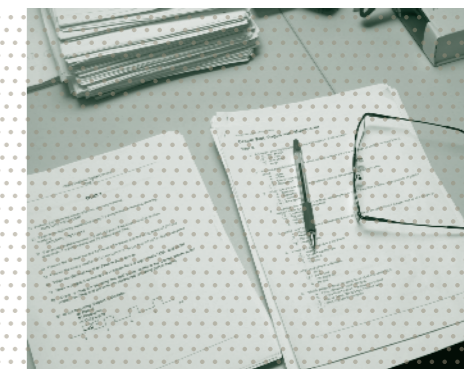
Of course there are a number of advantages to being taught by postgraduate students. We are, on the whole, more approachable and perhaps

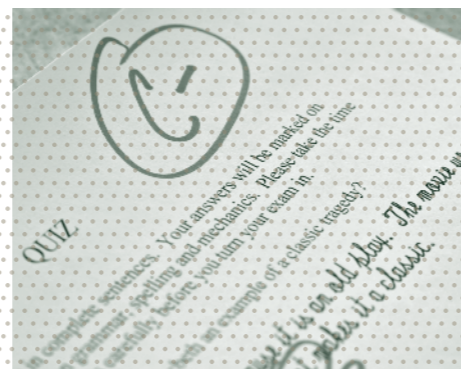
"Some of our colleagues prefer not to tell their students that they are still students themselves, so as to avoid any *a priori* judgements about their authority or competence".

less intimidating than our senior colleagues. Our own relatively recent experience as students allows us to relate more easily to students' positions, perhaps enabling us to see things from their perspective (at least in theory - that this is not always the case will be discussed below). Because we have less teaching experience to draw upon and, importantly, are still learning (or re-learning) at the same time as the students we teach, we also have to find ways of making sense of new material as and when they do. As such, our 'eureka' moments in relation to theories, issues, and interrelations are relatively fresh in our minds, and we are able to break complex topics and concepts down into digestible chunks accordingly.

At the same time, however, it would be wrong to assume that the way in which we learn and arrive at our 'eureka' moments is also the way in which others learn best. It is here that we stumble across questions of how best to actually 'teach'. Looking back at our own undergraduate experiences sometimes provides a clear picture of how we *don't* want to teach, but it is more difficult to identify and apply the teaching practices that led to successful learning outcomes.

Uncertainty over classroom strategies and the structuring of lesson material can add to already existing insecurities around feeling 'unqualified' to teach. While some module co-ordinators provide tutors with seminar plans and useful tips for small-group teaching, many of us are left to plan the style and content of sessions on our own. This can be liberating and empowering: it enables us to experiment with whatever approach best suits us and meets the needs of our students. Yet because there is little discussion about teaching strategies and ideas, every year new postgraduate teachers have to 'reinvent the wheel'. Much of what could be shared seems straightforward in hindsight but might not always be obvious as we prepare for our first ever seminar, for instance that students' different learning styles require challenges and engagement on a range of levels. Techniques such as splitting classes into even smaller groups for project-based work or discussion can go some way to solving the problems of silent classrooms or 'discussion dominators'. Yet some fellow tutors don't seem to use this productive teaching tool, perhaps because they have not had the opportunity to discuss its benefits.





Of course we do receive some form of training, either as part of our research training schemes or departmental inductions. These sessions, however, are often too abstract to be of practical use and only scrape the surface of what it means to successfully lead seminars. Besides, some sessions are only offered to 'fully-fledged' members of staff, not to postgraduate tutors (again problematising our status as teachers). Further, there is no real platform for discussion of difficulties after training sessions are over, nor any formal incentive or opportunity to try and improve one's teaching style. Like many training initiatives, teaching inductions appear to constitute a necessary evil that institutions are forced to provide. Thereafter, you either have it, or you don't.

It sometimes feels as though asking staff for help and guidance with regards to teaching, marking or administrative duties is frowned upon; such requests have met with responses that suggested others 'had to muddle through, so you should, too'. The contrived notion that good researchers are automatically good teachers still seems common, even though research and teaching require markedly different skills. Often members of staff are struggling to cope with their own work loads, and so their reluctance to help is less a result of unwillingness than of their own levels of stress, as well as pressures to produce research (that departmental funding is, through the RAE, dependent on research rather than teaching quality in part explains why teaching is demoted to 'second place'). While we understand these pressures, we do not understand why we should endure old problems simply because generations of postgraduates and junior academics have had to go through the same ordeal before us (not least because the nature and scale of PhD studies has clearly changed over the years). Would it not be more productive and constructive to improve the situation for each successive generation of postgraduate teachers? And would students not benefit from more confident and self-reflective tutors?

We have incidentally noticed ourselves and our postgraduate colleagues falling into a curious and, to us, unhealthy habit in our talk about teaching that focuses on the negatives in our classroom experiences, without necessarily aiming to find solutions to specific problems. In particular, this creates a 'slacker student discourse' that paints a picture of undergraduates as lazy, reticent,

or generally useless class members whilst ignoring the fact that we were once part of such unforthcoming groups of students ourselves. It is an interesting reversal of the dynamic we may have experienced as undergraduates: then, we might have blamed our tutors for bad classes; now, we tend to blame the students. Blame and responsibility seem to be shifted depending on the side of the learning and teaching environment we currently inhabit.

Discussions about marking follow a similar pattern: rather than centring on ways of arriving at fair marks or guidelines for writing constructive feedback, they focus on the decline of syntax, particularly amusing stretches of student argumentation, or hilarious spelling mistakes. Ridiculing students' essays or generally getting into a tizz about declining literacy standards is entertaining, and it sometimes constitutes a much-needed distraction after hours of mind-numbing marking. Yet it also adds to the aforementioned 'slacker' discourse, and very simply put, it is arrogant.

Such talk is not restricted to conversations amongst postgraduate tutors, but it seems particularly out of place in view of our unique position. We seem to enjoy drawing a line between postgraduates and undergraduates. Whilst having to realise that we are not treated (nor paid) in the same way as full members of staff, we seem to cling to any sense of superiority, including the pretence of authority in the classroom. Instead of making best use of our special position as student teachers, and instead of seeking to collectively create knowledge and understandings in classes we teach, we further alienate a mass of undergraduate students.

Rather than searching for our authoritative 'voice' or 'hat', then, perhaps we should promote the notions of shared agency and shared responsibilities which see good learning experiences as two-way interactions between teachers and students. As postgraduate students, we are best equipped to encourage and create a path for students' independent learning. Just as we would like to be taken seriously as teaching members of staff, undergraduate students also deserve more respect. Students are quick to identify weaknesses or facades; they will appreciate teaching approaches which are genuine and transparent.

Although teaching is only one part of our postgraduate experience - one that should be balanced with our research responsibilities - it matters, both to us as individuals and on a larger scale. It should be clear that the education of today's students is fundamental to ensuring the quality of future research in our field. While there is room for personal improvement (such as a more positive stance towards undergraduate students), postgraduates need to be supported if they are employed to teach in higher education. We should be open and honest about the kinds of difficulties or obstacles we face, and feel comfortable asking for guidance. The mentoring scheme for junior academics that exists in some institutions could be widened to postgraduate tutors. Staff and postgraduates could more consistently share teaching material, useful classroom tactics, and effective marking techniques. We are aware that the current situation provides few incentives for staff or departments to enhance postgraduate teaching support beyond these small-scale improvements. Clearly, we do not wish to create additional work for already busy people. Instead we endorse calls for the higher education sector to rethink its stance towards research and teaching, and to create funding frameworks that assure quality in both areas. As such, postgraduate teachers must not only 'find' their voice but also 'raise' it.

We propose that postgraduates continue to address teaching issues with their colleagues and mentors; further, we hope they will exchange views across institutional boundaries. Ongoing discussion about postgraduate teaching in media and cultural studies is needed and should, importantly, avoid the 'slacker student' discourse outlined above. Some institutions have already begun such conversations. Coming to the end of our own postgraduate studies, we strongly feel that teaching excellence will derive from, amongst other (aforementioned) factors, collegial and supportive exchanges about good practice. Recounting positive experiences for others to build upon is as important as raising problems and concerns that, in turn, might receive constructive feedback from peers and more experienced academics.

This is only a small step in generating discussion. Please come and join the debate: <http://www.adm.heacademy.ac.uk/forum>.

6 Projects

2008/9 Projects

// In November 2007 ADM-HEA put out a call for projects to run for 12 months from June 2008 to May 2009. Bids were invited across three themes:

- Transitions
- Community and Voluntary Sector Exchange
- Innovations

These themes generated considerable interest and enquiry from staff in the sector which culminated in a record number of proposals being received.

All the proposals were externally peer-reviewed and assessed by an academic panel at ADM-HEA which reached a final decision to fund a total of seven projects:

John Marland and Robert Edgar-Hunt at York St John University in collaboration with Tim Anderson, at Wyke College, Hull, will look at the transition from school, further education and other routes into higher education.

Dr Barbara Dass from the Faculty of Art, Design and the Built Environment at the University of Ulster will be examining issues emerging from the transition between specialist undergraduate to multidisciplinary postgraduate learning environments.

Dr Erik Bohemia and Kerry Harman who are based at Northumbria University will disseminate teaching and learning resources from an innovative online programme called the Global Studio to the ADM-HEA community.

Dr Natasha Mayo, at University of Wales, Cardiff will be devising a means of teaching the fundamental structures at work in the development of ideas in the context of ceramics practice using MPEG recordings.

Dr Darren Mundy with a team at University of Hull will develop and evaluate a series of interactive forum presentations for use in a lecture theatre environment.

Maureen Gamble at University of Worcester will produce an in-depth, qualitative, longitudinal case study of a small sample of art and design students at two Higher Education Art Institutions who self-disclose as having mental health difficulties.

Deborah Wilson at School of Journalism, University of Lincoln will bring students together through a new community radio station to enhance teaching skills and work experience in broadcasting.

Project holders will have an opportunity to meet one another and ADM-HEA staff in April to network, share views and devise effective dissemination strategies for their research. For more information about the projects visit: <http://www.adm.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/adm-heaprojects>

Effective work-based learning in Art, Design and Media

// In recent years the government has placed an increasing emphasis on flexible modes of delivery, including work-based learning, as important mechanisms for achieving the realisation of the UK's higher skills agenda (Leitch Review, 2006). In 2000, Foundation degrees were set up by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) with the then Department for Education and Skills, to facilitate this shift. These two-year qualifications are supported by Foundation Degree Forward (fdf), a national body funded by HEFCE to support engagement between employers and higher education, particularly in relation to Foundation degrees.

ADM-HEA and fdf are jointly funding a project to identify models of good practice in the delivery of work-based learning in art, design and media. Paying particular attention to Foundation degrees, the project will identify aspects of learning that are effectively delivered through collaboration with creative industry, and examine how these collaborations contribute to curriculum development and work-based learning.

The project is being led by the Arts Institute at Bournemouth and will also include valuable input from three other institutions from across the South-West, Bath Spa University, Plymouth College of Art and Design and University College Falmouth. Surveys will be undertaken to identify models for employer engagement and work-based learning within these institutions and case studies reflecting the students', institutions' and businesses' experiences of activities undertaken will be developed.

The project will result in a collection of case studies that we will be sharing across our network. These will be available on the ADM-HEA website in August 2008.