Teaching Assistants (TAs) as Secondary Facilitators in an Academic Support Unit in a South African University

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Abstract

Student learning and development is the central purpose of higher education. It is common practice that higher education institutions, globally, adopt teaching and learning systems that focus primarily on staff and student development. Teaching assistantships are common funding sources for postgraduate students which at the same time assist departments in meeting their needs and achieve flexibility necessary to accommodate and respond to course and module challenges. This practice aims at creating an enabling, effective and supportive learning environment which meaningfully contributes to the overall quality of learning, successful throughput and student retention. A variety of duties is performed by these individuals; amongst others, they lead laboratory and teaching sessions, help with marking and entering of marks, carry out administrative duties, mentor others and so on. Noticeably, most teaching assistants receive little training before taking on their duties whilst at the same time have enormous responsibilities. It is contended that they are literally thrown into teaching environments in a sink or swim manner with no experience or training. This paper seeks to investigate the nature of the TAs' experiences as secondary facilitators in an academic support unit under the guidance of academic literacy lecturers. Semi structured interviews were used as methods to collect data. Underpinned by the constructivist approach whereby the TAs construct their conceptual and content knowledge understanding through guidance and training from experienced lecturers and faculty members of staff. This approach was used to frame and analyse this work. Findings reveal that teaching assistants need to be trained continuously on the job and that such programmes develop aspiring and future academicians, unintentionally, as most of them developed a great passion for teaching and thereby expressed a wish to switch their professions.

1. Introduction and Background

Specific duties of teaching assistants vary by course, discipline, and institution. As for lecturers who are their primary mentors and guiding counsellors, operational activities at departmental level are essentially driven by the teaching and learning philosophy of an institution which is a reflective and systematic statement that defines an individual's or an institution's conception of effective teaching and learning, taking into account the institutional and social contexts in which teaching and learning may occur. There has been limited research in terms of the experiences of teaching assistants in the higher education sector in South Africa. The focal study in this paper is the University of Technology, Durban in the KwaZulu-Natal province. Student engagement in the unit customizes or tailor makes its teaching methods

and approaches in order to accommodate diverse fields of specialization focusing on their unique discourses, e.g. technical vocabulary for engineers. One of the guiding principles of the teaching and learning policy of the institution is to provide the full range of social and academic support to ensure that its registered students are enabled and empowered to make the transition from school to university. To what extent therefore do teaching assistants contribute to the success and throughput rates of students in the area of academic support during their tenure as senior students at the university? In this context, assisting with the monitoring and supervision of students' work from a variety of disciplines in the faculties of engineering, natural sciences and management sciences is one of the primary functions of the teaching assistants. The university also provides a high quality, technologically advanced service to students in order to improve throughput rates through its integration of eLearning platforms.

2. What is a Teaching Assistant? (TA)

Teaching assistants fall under the category of peer facilitators, like, student mentors, writing consultants, SI leaders, student assistants, etc. In this context, the experiences of teaching assistants in an academic literacy unit will be explored. In general terms, literacy involves far more than the ability to read and write. Although one already has conscious command of the basic skills of reading, writing and speaking, there are many other aspects of literacy which one has been unconsciously using. School subjects, for example, each have their own style of literacy (known as a discourse) which includes a specialised vocabulary and a specialised way of reading, talking and writing about texts. In this sense, literacy in Science is different from literacy in English. In its broadest sense, literacy involves using language for thinking and meaning. It is helpful to understand literacy as having three different aspects (Green: 1996), namely, operational, cultural and critical literacy. Teaching assistants are literally thrown into teaching environments in a sink or swim manner with no experience or training. In this context, in order to meet the needs and expectations of all students who come to the unit for English remedial intervention purposes, it is always of great assistance to acquire the services of teaching assistants or tutors to provide an academic literacy and complete language service to students. They also have additional duties of assisting in the reading and language laboratories. This gives them the opportunity to engage in the unit to assist them in enhancing their teaching and learning skills, strategies and technique. However, the researcher wishes to investigate if they are thrown in the deep end of managing the classroom behaviour and carrying out duties and responsibilities they were never trained or coached for. The significance of this study focuses on their experiences in this regard. Student mentors, amongst other things, display exceptional, high achieving or self-driven capabilities with a good command of English. They need to be well trained in order to assist "at risk" students and other peer assisted learning as mentioned above. It is also important to consider how institutions can better prepare TAs for their teaching responsibilities, to maximize their success both in the classroom and in their future careers and to increase their confidence and skills in dealing with challenges as they arise (Amlung, L. et.al:2015).

3. Literature Review

Teaching assistants' roles have changed dramatically from being the historical classroom assistants to developing professionals and future academicians (Visser et. al, 2017; Amlung et.al, 2015; Cassidy, et.al, 2014). Cultivation of TAs' learning and understanding also depend

on learning from each other in communities of practice. To draw on work done by researchers in academic literacy, McKenna (2004), Van Dyk, et. al. (2013), Evans and Morrison (2011) contend that academic literacy comprises the norms and values of higher education as manifested in discipline-specific practices. Students are expected to take on these practices, and the underlying

> *"We are active creators of our own knowledge."*

epistemologies, without any overt instruction in, or critique of, these ways of being. Further, the development of the academic literacies is an essential graduate attribute for all students (Paxton and Frith: 2006). It is therefore argued that university lecturers should not expect or look for error-free and finished products from students but rather be part of the preparation and guidance of students in the reading and writing process. Embedding academic literacies in discipline-specific curricula is crucial rather than teaching academic literacy as generic skills courses is essential. It is for this reason that developing teaching assistants in reading and writing development practices becomes an integral part of student development in a variety of genres in higher education. Academic writing, per se, supersedes all required and acquired soft skills as assessment and evaluation ultimately take place through tests and examinations in standardized forms characteristic of universities. Academic literacy is knowing how to act in terms of reading and writing in a particular discourse (van Schalkwyk: 2008).

Attempts have been made to strengthen the capacity of teaching assistants in the academic support unit in the direction of developmental workshops. Engaging the teaching assistants, on a continuous basis, with academic writing skills development, it is hoped that they will in future assist the students improve their written academic tasks in different genres. It is therefore important for staff to consider how they can better prepare TAs for their teaching responsibilities, to maximize their success both in the classroom and in their future careers, and to increase their confidence and skills in dealing with challenges as they arise.

4. Theoretical Framework

Underpinned by the constructivist approach, the TAs construct their conceptual and content knowledge understanding through guidance and training from experienced lecturers and faculty members of staff, and this approach was used to frame and analyse the work.

Constructivism and connectivism construct meaning whereby students in the constructivist classroom ideally become "expert learners"(Bruner: 1990). This gives them ever-broadening tools to keep learning. The key research question "What are the experiences of teaching assistants in an academic support environment in a UoT?" focuses on the novice professionals as they prepare, engage and reflect on their practices and at the same time build their future careers in a non-threatening environment where they support unprepared students in academic literacy skills development.

Further, constructivism is basically a theory based on observation and scientific study about how people learn. It says that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experience and reflecting on those experiences. When we encounter something new, we have to reconcile it with our previous ideas and experience, maybe changing what we believe, or maybe discarding the new information as irrelevant. In any case, we are active creators of our own knowledge (Amlung, et.al: 2015). People must ask questions, explore, and assess what they know. As explained previously, the participants in

this study have diverse experiences of undergraduate study and what the university experience is, overall. It is critical to examine how TAs learn to teach, demonstrate learning and adapt to teaching and learning frameworks of academic literacy and other disciplines and how they develop as future academicians.

5. Enhancing TAs' Potential through Teaching, Training & Development

Teaching assistants play a pivotal supporting role in academia and it is imperative for the faculty members to develop promising and excelling students to become the next generation of teaching faculty. Many feel unprepared for their teaching responsibilities and report a lack of structured teacher training. Therefore, what kind of measures could be put in place in order to address the seemingly pervasive lack of preparation? It is a fact that TAs need to be given the basic skills necessary to begin their teaching responsibilities. Boyer (1990) contends that faculty at institutions that value research more than teaching may be ineffective teaching mentors for graduate TAs. The value that is placed on mission statements of universities cannot be overlooked whilst developing teaching assistants. Most graduate students will likely receive at least some teacher training from faculty mentors who base the value of the scholarship of teaching and learning. Scope for teaching assistants is wide as creating the next generation of faculty members is one of the main programmes that some universities have adopted.

6. Methodology

The data collection method was through semi-structured interviews whereby the researcher had initially planned to engage six participants. Purposive sampling was used as the author targeted a total of six; divided as follows: three present and three past TAs to form part of the study. According to Cohen, et. al. (2007:114) purposive sampling is a feature of qualitative research whereby researchers handpick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgement of their typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought. The sample is chosen for a specific purpose and as indicated, participants will be drawn from present and past teaching assistants. All potential interviewees were consulted, but only five participants were finally interviewed. This was due to work commitments from the previous teaching assistant as she could not be reached. An apology was received in good time. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants. What is common about the biographical details of the participants is that they are postgraduate students who annually are recruited in departments representing different faculties. Criteria used on section of candidates involve committed, hardworking and in some instances academically excelling students. It must be mentioned that the past three TAs are now based in different portfolios as employees; two are in lecturing positions and one is in an administrative position. The rationale for selecting the previous teaching assistants was to evaluate the unit practices to better inform planning and operating procedures with the end goal of transforming teaching and learning spaces for students.

The interview responses of participants were measured on a five-point Likert scale:
 (where 1 = never/ disagree/not satisfied and 5 = always/ agree/ fully satisfied)

	Interviewee 1 Neezi (postgrad student)	Interviewee 2 Psypho (postgrad student)	Interviewee 3 Benz (presently: lecturer)	Interviewee 4 Koo (in admin position)	Interviewee 5 Taboo (enrolled for PgDE)
Understand my Role as secondary facilitator	4	4	4	5	5
Handling small or large groups	3	3	3	4	4
Administrative duties	4	4	4	4	4
Training or orientation received	2	2	2	2	2
Highlights and achievements	4	4	4	4	4
Setbacks (any)	4	4	5	5	5
Career pathing	4	4	4	4	5
Relations with staff	4	4	4	5	5
Relations with students	3	3	4	4	5
Further training	3	3	3	3	3
Opinions about Academic Literacy	4	4	4	4	4

7. Key Research Question

What are the experiences of teaching assistants in an academic support environment in a UoT? As illustrated above, eleven key points framed the themes of the study.

8. Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

In her interview, Neezi explains why the training process is important and could be improved: *The Academic Literacy and Language Unit staff outlined the work I should do and gave me some orientation in terms of administrative duties. One of the experienced TAs took me along as he had been on the ground the past year. Formal training was given in laboratories by lab assistants and service providers on how to operate the Tell Me More (TMM) language learning software.*

This meant that they learnt from each other on how to handle and manage classes; formal training sessions are not in place prior to taking their responsibilities.

In most interviews, workshops by staff in writing development exposed the TAs in the writing process related to student development.

In his interview, Psypho states: *"Academic literacy should be compulsory for all students who register at MUT"*. Skills acquired at the unit are termed 'soft skills'. They are very critical skills needed in the work place and the world. They include presentation skills, reading and writing skills, report writing skills, etc.

Continuous and further training was recommended by most interviewees whilst self-development was also a priority. Unit staff were also commended for playing a significant role in their academic life in the area of criticality in academic literacy.

9. Conclusion

It was noted that for most TAs, exposure to academic literacy and academic support happens for the first time, that is, once they join the unit. An important observation was also made that some of the participants did not know or did not take the opportunity of visiting the unit whilst in their undergraduate study. Lecturers and laboratory assistants in the reading and language laboratories train, guide and mentor teaching assistants during planned sessions, on the job. What is lacking is that TAs are not prepared before taking the opportunity to serve, however, it is assumed that they have graduated and are now "competent" to serve faculty. As mentioned above, two of the past teaching assistants are presently in lecturing positions and rightfully have become academics in different disciplines of study. Training or orientation received was minimal for some of the participants and needs to be improved in the future. What the teaching assistants espouse in this particular context endorse what the institutions has set for itself in terms of the ideal graduate it seeks to produce regarding graduate attributes. To name a few, graduates must be employable and entrepreneurial, have sound disciplinary knowledge, are curious intellectually and see learning as a lifelong process.

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