

What's in a name? Reflections on working as a 'teaching assistant' at University College London and as an 'associate lecturer' at The Open University.

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"We reveal ourselves in the metaphors we choose for depicting the cosmos in miniature." (Stephen Jay Gould 1997, p.7).

The Human Resources Department of UCL [UCL HRD] (2002) describes teaching as "a valuable experience for a postgraduate student" that can "contribute both to personal intellectual development and to the individual's grasp of the subject; it can also provide an opportunity for structured training for future academics". At the same time UCL HRD states that:

For ease of reference, we need a single descriptive term to refer to postgraduates who undertake teaching duties. 'Postgraduate Teaching Assistant', as the most appropriate designation, will be used to cover all kinds of postgraduate teaching assistant, including postgraduate demonstrators (to differentiate the latter from the formal employment category of 'Demonstrator'.

But why is 'teaching assistant' regarded as 'the most appropriate designation'? I was referred to as a 'Teaching Assistant' (TA) throughout most of the period I worked at University College London (1994 to 2002), but I am now an 'Associate Lecturer' (AL) at the Open University (since November 2000). The teaching I do is essentially the same (marking written work, tutorial teaching, and some administrative work). So, is there any significance of the different titles? Unlike Shakespeare's poetic rose, which smells as sweet by any name, I believe that these different names reveal striking differences in the attitude of these universities to the employment of tutors and the work they do. I shall look at some of the meanings connected to the words 'assistant' and 'associate' to illustrate my point.

An 'assistant' is defined, according to the OED, as 'one in a subordinate position'. Following some of the defining terms through the dictionary allows us to build up an illuminating picture of what being in a subordinate position may entail. 'Subordinates' are 'of inferior importance or rank, secondary, subservient'. Those who are 'subservient' are 'servile' and 'obsequious'. If you are 'servile' you are 'like a slave' or 'fawning'. Those who are fawning 'try to win affection by grovelling. The 'grovelling' are 'abject, base', or 'prone'. To be 'abject' is to be 'degraded or made humble, miserable' or 'craven'. I could go on, but by now you get the picture!

This rather unhappy constellation of meanings linked to the idea of being an assistant is even starker if we compare it to the connotations of the word 'associate'. 'Associates' are 'partners or colleagues'. A 'partner' is 'one who shares or takes part with others, a player on same side'. A 'colleague' is a 'fellow official or worker, especially in a profession or a business.' Interestingly, the word 'fellow' has many academic connotations apart from its general adjectival meaning as 'of same class' or 'associated in joint action' and its noun meaning as 'comrade or associate, counterpart, and equal'.

It is also used to refer to 'incorporated members of a college, a research student receiving fellowship' and 'a member of a learned society'.

I don't wish to imply that at UCL I was regarded as a grovelling slave or that my time with the OU has been wholly defined by collegial fellowship! I emphatically do not wish to stereotype the experiences I've had as a teacher with either institution, although I will admit that this paper has been inspired by some of the unease I felt about my time at UCL having had the opportunity to contrast this with the OU. But, as Gould suggests in the epigraph of my paper, the ways we chose to imagine the world affects our identities by placing limits on action and thought. The choice of terms such as 'teaching assistant' or 'associate lecturer' indicates the different ways that these institutions think about the people they employ to teach their students. Crucially, the subordination of post-graduate teachers and the implicit reaffirmation of old academic hierarchies creates an institutional framework that may hinder good teaching practice and, ultimately, the learning of students. Good, even excellent, teaching practices can be found within this sort of hierarchical setting, but this occurs despite the system, rather than because of the system. The main contention of this paper is that the teaching experiences of post-graduate students can only improve in academic environments where positive attitudes to teaching are part of both the ethos and institutional arrangements of the university.

By selecting 'assistant' as the most appropriate term by which to refer to post-graduate teachers, UCL's thinking places limitations upon what the post-graduate teacher can do. To quote the UCL Human Resource Department's document (2002) on their 'Post-graduate Teaching Assistant Scheme':

We cannot allow students to function as substitute permanent teachers. There is a fine balance to be met here between the interests of students, undergraduate as well as postgraduate, and the load on permanent teachers. It needs to be sensitively handled. Apart from these issues of balance, there are, of course, teaching duties which Postgraduate Teaching Assistants should not be required to undertake (e.g. supervising field work alone; or any teaching which involves being alone with a class in circumstances which require the presence of safety-trained Human Resources [unless a Postgraduate Teaching Assistant is so trained]...Departments should not employ so many postgraduate teachers that undergraduate students rarely come in touch with permanent staff.

The contrast between this and the tone taken in the OU's book 'Supporting Open Learners' (2002), which is given to all associate lecturers when they start their job, is illuminating:

We aim to explore what 'openness' means in The Open University and to assess briefly the impact it has on our work. For all OU staff, it is not just a statement of philosophy or slogan of convenience; it lies at the heart of our practice as both teachers and learners. Your own experience, skills and knowledge will help you enormously in your role as an OU associate lecturer. (p.11)

In one respect, the [Open] University appears 'closed'. The content of the courses you teach, the assignments set, the programmes for residential schools, the books that students are required to read and the final examinations have all been determined in advance. You do not have to create the course, but you play an important part in

delivering it. In order to do this, you will have to learn the course and this takes time; you may find it takes at least two presentations before you feel 'ownership' of your course. Your own teaching methods will be affected by the notion of openness... Freed from the burden of having to create and maintain the course, we can concentrate on the processes of learning and teaching. Many find this a very liberating experience as they and their students are more like equal partners in the enterprise. (p. 18-19)

It's not just that the language employed here is so different, but the underlying assumption that there is a long-term commitment on the part of both the OU as an employer and the AL as employee is also clear. This is given practical substance in the permanent contract (whilst the course one teaches is in existence) under which ALs are employed. The most telling indication of how seriously UCL takes its commitment to both the teaching assistants it employs, and ultimately to the undergraduate students that they teach, is that they are employed on a short-term basis with temporary contracts lasting only a term at longest. It's for this reason that I would probably describe the day I formally resigned from my first job with the OU, as one of the happiest in my life as a teacher. I actually had a contract I could resign from, rather than one that simply came to an end!

I shall give two examples of how I was affected by this sort of uncertainty regarding institutional identity whilst working at UCL. In 1997 the Institute of Archaeology (IA), which is part of UCL, started to include the Dept of Anthropology's 'Introduction to Social Anthropology' course as a compulsory course for all its first year undergraduates. This totalled about 100 students in all, doing various permutations of archaeology degree. It was decided that a single tutor would be required to deliver the tutorial teaching for these students and mark their written work (two essays), which would form the basis of their examination for the course. I was very pleased to be employed to do this as my own undergraduate degree was in archaeology, I'd recently carried out fieldwork with members of the Institute of Archaeology, and I had enjoyed my previous experiences teaching this course to Dept of Anthropology students. Many of the Institute's students were quite suspicious of the course, as it wasn't what they thought they had come to university to study. Nevertheless, the course achieved very high satisfaction ratings in the end course review (a mean of 4.2 out of 5) and both myself and the course lecturer were somewhat amazed and gratified that the Institute students ceremonially-presented us with the gift of a yam each in the final lecture to thank us for our work! As far as I was aware, I would be coming back to the Institute of Archaeology to teach the course the following year, and was looking forward to developing its presentation. I would describe this as one of the happiest and most satisfying teaching experiences I have ever had.

But later that year I received an apologetic phone call from the Institute telling me that they wouldn't be offering me the contract I had expected. It transpired that one of the permanent members of the academic staff had a gap in their teaching commitment for the coming year because hardly any students had signed up for her third year option course. Therefore, they were being asked to teach the social anthropology course to the first year students to make up the hours of teaching time that they were contracted to do each week. In an email I was informed by a senior member of IA staff that "the sole reason for giving the classes to an IA member of staff is financial – i.e. to save the Institute money" (4 August 1998). Clearly, I was supposed to be reassured that worries about the quality of my teaching weren't the reason for this decision. I learnt a great deal from this experience, and when I was asked to return to the IA to teach the Introduction

to Social Anthropology course for a single term, the tutor who replaced me having gone on study leave, I did so on the condition that I was paid at the same rate she was (albeit pro rata). I was employed for a term as a Temporary Lecturer, rather than as a Post-graduate Teaching Assistant, as I had been in my first IA contract.

More recently I marked exam scripts for a course I had taught for 5 years at UCL. Despite the fact that this marking had to be done to a strict deadline, which I duly met, I didn't receive payment for 10 months. I had no written contract for this work and it took almost a year and many letters and telephone calls to be paid. Similarly, I never automatically received any tax details, such as a P60, from UCL and my pay code (and often the spelling of my name!) changed from contract to contract. From the point of view of the Payroll Office at UCL, I was reborn with a new institutional identity at the start of each term.

I find myself in agreement with the anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker (2002, p. 164), who, writing in response to her ethnographic study of the Hollywood and the US film industry in the 1940s, observed that:

Many employees do not even understand the immediate aspects of their work situation. A study made by at an electric company, which had an unusually good relationship with its employees, showed that there was much that the worker did not understand about his [sic] job, even including the method of payment. The author thought that this lack of understanding caused a feeling of exasperation and sense of futility on the part of the workers.

I have found that one of the most reassuring aspects of working for the Open University is that I have a stable institutional identity that has (so far) led to no problems like those I've recounted above. This is despite the fact that I have moved my teaching from one region of the OU to another in the past year.

Another difference between working for the OU and UCL has been evident in my training as a teacher. During my 8 years and 14 contracts at UCL I have been offered (and accepted) a total of two half day training sessions on 'small group teaching'. The only written material I have received to support my development as a teacher is a short booklet on using audio-visual material in teaching. By contrast the OU has sometimes overwhelmed me with support, both in written form and in training sessions, since I started working for them in November 2000. Some of this training is specific to the particular needs of the OU (distance learning tuition, for example), but a lot has been about issues that affect all university teachers (dealing with plagiarism, improving students writing, using email to communicate with students, for example). Too often the general idea in universities seems to be that by the time someone has reached a stage where they have the necessary qualifications to be employed by a university they will have absorbed the skills necessary to teach by a process of osmosis. I know that many full-time members of staff do take advantage of the training their institutions provide, but I think it is clear that many members of staff do not view this as a priority area in their work. By contrast, the assumption at the OU is that, despite several years of experience as a teacher, there will be things I don't know or that I want to improve in my work, so the help is there should I need it.

Poor attitudes to teaching in universities are hardly surprising given the emphasis on research achievements, measured by publishing output and grant success, in the

careers of all academics. But this shouldn't be used as an excuse for poor teaching. The by-product of this attitude is that, although post-graduate teachers often have some good role models to emulate in their teaching work, the support needed to understand and develop this good practice is lacking. Teaching is also viewed as secondary to their main purpose, which is the completion of a thesis. As UCL HRD comments, "too much teaching erodes research time and is likely to limit the student's capacity to complete a thesis in the due time." It is also the case that, as the negative connotations of working as an assistant imply, the work that post-graduate teachers do (most frequently tutorial teaching, lab demonstration and marking written work) is viewed as onerous. It is a burden that the course lecturers are only too happy to off-load onto post-graduate students. This may have harmful effects on the culture of learning within a university and devalues some of the best opportunities for learning in the eyes of all concerned. How many post-graduate teachers have, for instance, received advice, either generic or course specific, on how assignments should be graded or how comments on this work should be phrased and presented to students? What structures are in place to ensure that standards in marking and feedback to students are, at least, satisfactory? I suspect the answer is that very few have, although I would be delighted to be proven wrong. I also suspect that post-graduate teachers haven't received this support because in most cases this isn't part of academics' regular teaching practice.

The people who ultimately suffer here are the undergraduate students we are employed to teach. Many undergraduates will feel their most exciting and enjoyable learning experience have been with post-graduate teachers because of the enthusiasm and up-to-date knowledge that they bring to the course. Also, they often provide the majority of face-to-face contact that students have during the course of their studies, either through written work, tutorials or through informal contacts. But, to reiterate the point I made earlier, this is the case despite the systems of employment, training and organisation that exist in most universities. Post-graduate teachers are undervalued, literally in the case of their salaries and contracts, but also by the prevailing academic culture that pays lip service to teaching whilst failing to address fundamental weaknesses in its provision.

So, what is to be done? I think there are several aspects of the organisation and culture of the OU that provide some help in answering this question. I have already mentioned that providing part-time teachers with a long-term institutional identity, beyond any that may be provided by their registration as post-graduate students of a department, is one answer. Better provision of raining is another. However, other aspects of the organisation of the OU further reinforce the culture of learning and teaching within the university.

Much of the teaching work done by post-graduates is the same as that done by lecturers in past and present times. Lectures are the only area of teaching consistently denied to post-graduate teachers, but these are increasingly being replaced as the basis for undergraduate teaching, so it is an inaccurate word to describe how most academics teach most of the time. Even so, the majority of undergraduates' 'contact' with their department's full-time academic staff is probably as members of their lecture audience. For this reason, it remains an accurate description of who they are and what they do in undergraduates' eyes. In some senses, as the above quotation from the OU 'Supporting Open Learners' book indicates, this is only one step removed from the situation in distance learning where the course materials are written by full-time

academics who will not be involved in the day-to-day running of the course. But, whereas in a conventional university only the course lecturer and the teachers who support them exist to run the course, the Open University has been forced by the nature of distance learning and the numbers of students involved to develop a different system of organisation. The basis of this system is the functional differentiation of the jobs done within a university (primarily teaching, research and administration), which in theory would normally all be done by full-time academic staff of a department with other teaching staff only providing assistance when necessary. In the OU these functions are allocated to different members of staff within the university in a systematic way with careful description and demarcation of job responsibilities between each. It will already have become apparent that ALs exist primarily to teach students on a day-to-day basis, whereas the teaching role of full Open University Lecturers is to write the course materials that the ALs and their students use. The lecturers in their teaching role as 'the course team' also produce the course-specific guidance on marking assignments, clarifying course material where problems arise, and constitute the examination committee for their courses (along with the external examiners). The ALs are involved in what we might call the tactical level of teaching, whereas the course team create the overall strategy.

Positioned between the ALs and the course team is another group of full-time academic members of staff, the Staff Tutors, who contribute to the research profile and administration of the university, but who are not involved in either the tactical or strategic level of teaching individual courses. Based within the 13 semi-autonomous regional centres into which the OU is divided, their job is to provide the link between all the other members of the organisation. They are the 'line managers' who oversee teaching work and help with academic matters. Experienced researchers and teachers, they provide training in and monitor the quality of OU teaching. They suggest solutions when an AL is confronted by a situation that needs clarification or if further help is required. It is the staff tutors in the regions who recruit ALs to their jobs. Staff Tutors are paid on the same salary scale as Lecturers.

Clearly, the precise system of organisation of the OU would not fit other universities. I'm not suggesting that other university should start employing ALs, Staff Tutors and remove all 'tactical' teaching responsibilities from their Lecturers. Also, I don't mean to give the impression that everything about my experience at UCL has been bad and everything at the OU is good. For example, the OU is a large bureaucratic organisation with all the potential for tedious administration and confusion that this sometimes entails. It would also be nice to have the more frequent face-to-face contact with colleagues. In addition to this, the role of OU AL has little or no room for the teacher's research identity, and this is clearly of massive benefit to any post-graduate who is close enough to the action in a department to work as a teacher. This separation of teaching and research identities is, however, one reason why Associate Lecturers' teaching is highly valued; it is the sole focus of their employment by the OU, despite the fact that they will almost certainly have other work commitments. Should the teaching that postgraduates do be undervalued and under-supported simply because they are still students? I would argue that when they are in the classroom they should be recognised as teachers above all else.

It could be that the creation of a similar role to that of the OU Staff Tutor would improve the learning culture in our universities. For example, if lecturers can go on research

sabbaticals, why shouldn't they also have teaching sabbaticals? During this time they could work to improve their own skills, contribute to the development of their colleagues teaching practices (including that of post-graduate teachers), and hold a functional position within departments similar to that of a Staff Tutor in an OU regional centre? It should be reiterated that OU Staff Tutors are expected to maintain a research profile, so I'm not suggesting here that lecturers would abandon their research. Employing a full time academic to fulfil the kinds of role performed by a Staff Tutor at the OU might also be an option. However, it would be difficult, given the emphasis on research as a means for assessing career development, to see how they would fit into the employment framework of a conventional university. I also think it would be counter-productive, as the point of my suggestion is to bring consideration of teaching practice closer to everyone within a department, rather than make it a specialist responsibility. In fact, I would imagine that most university departments already operate along the lines I suggest here, albeit in an unofficial way, as junior members of staff carryout comparatively more teaching, administrative and pastoral duties than their more senior colleagues. Completing a teaching sabbatical would allow these sorts of responsibilities to be done more effectively, should contribute to career advancement, and should be a regular responsibility of all members of staff.

The sort of Staff Tutor role envisaged here is not primarily that of a person reacting to problems in their departments' teaching. Rather they are colleagues whose help and advice about such a vital aspect of university life as teaching is regularly sought and valued. After all, peer review of research is a regular part of all academics life, whether this is through the review of journal articles or books, the weekly rituals of department seminars, or simply through informal comments on one another's work. This kind of peer review of teaching is part of the learning culture of the OU. Apart from my Staff Tutor, I also have a Monitor at the OU, who is another AL teaching the same course as me. She looks at a selection from each of the assignments I mark to see if she agrees with my marking and whether there are any ways that she or I can improve our marking. We also held regular joint marking sessions at the OU regional centre in London, where we could get together to discuss our work, and team teaching of tutorials is very common. The OU's Internet-based communication system (called FirstClass) allows all ALs to carryout these sorts of discussions online. (I was not issued with a computer access code at UCL because I was only employed on a temporary teaching contract and wasn't a full-time research student at the college; another example of my lack of an institutional identity!)

Commenting on teaching, however, seems to be regarded as something of a taboo or is dealt with perfunctorily at best. At the OU it is a regular and much valued part of everyone's work. I also think that increasing the prestige that academics attach to teaching would encourage universities to take the provision of training to the postgraduates they employ more seriously. After all, why should they bother providing these resources if academics don't use them? Interestingly, a recent article in *The Guardian* by Joel Budd (26 November 2002) on the employment of postgraduates as teachers observes that training is most effective when it is provided by people in their own field, rather than by generic schemes that are often seen as "irrelevant to their situation." Budd observes that the provision of both subject specific and generic training schemes in universities is "very patchy", but this is hardly surprising given that teaching is so poorly regarded and rewarded within academia.

The central purpose of this paper has been to argue that the lot of post-graduate tutors can only be improved if attitudes to teaching and organisation within departments and universities as a whole are rethought. We need to shift our focus from seeing the problems of the post-graduate teacher in isolation to see how they are representative of wider inadequacies in university teaching. If we accept that post-graduates do benefit from the experience of being a teacher and that limited funding and rising student numbers mean they are increasingly relied upon as front-line providers of teaching, it is clear that something should be done to improve both the terms and conditions under which they are employed and the skills upon which they rely. These improvements will only be made when everyone accepts that teaching is a serious responsibility and of equal importance to research when it comes to our identities as academics. This is especially the case in subjects like anthropology or any of the social sciences and humanities, which have little obvious material 'output' in the eyes of the public or government. When people observe academic anthropology what they see is it being taught in our universities. This point was brought home in a letter to *The Guardian* published a couple of days after I wrote the first draft of this paper (19 November 2002): As parents, are we now being expected to directly fund university research (Minister admits universities are in crisis, November 15)? This seems to be the message, if higher fees are necessary to attract the best academics. Before we meekly agree to a private education system for universities, can we ask why we have to pay for research quality as opposed to teaching quality? As investors in university, should we also have a say in what research is undertaken?

Yes, research underlies everything that we teach, but even the maintenance of present levels of support (both financial and ethical), never mind their increase, will only be achieved if we take teaching seriously. Sadly, the way universities treat their post-graduate teachers is a microcosm of the general poor regard that universities have for teaching. We should awaken our universities to the fact that deficiencies in the treatment of postgraduate teachers are symptomatic of the general crisis affecting universities in the UK at the present time.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank The Open University for the award of a grant from their 'Associate Lecturer Flexible Fund', which has helped considerably with the cost of attending the C-SAP Workshop. Thanks to Harriet Wilmore, an inspiring teacher who I've learned so much from, and Ian Harper for reading and commenting on draft versions of this paper.

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