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AP innovations for postgraduate teaching assistants: A case to prepare early career colleagues for future-proof teaching scenarios

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Abstract

Arena One at UCL (University College London) provides an initial teacher training programme for PGTAs (Postgraduate Teaching Assistants). The programme is divided in two parts: a compulsory 3-hour workshop for all PGTAs involved in teaching related activities and an optional 5-session course, TAP (Teaching Associate Programme). TAP runs for a total of 15 hours (5 sessions of 3 hours each) and it was traditionally offered in two face-to-face formats: either fortnightly or as an intensive one-week course. One of its major strengths is that it brings together PGTAs from different disciplines and backgrounds who can reflect on their experiences as both students and educators and develop a common, shared language of learning and teaching.

During the academic year 2019-20, TAP was reviewed with the aim of embedding online and distance learning activities and being delivered in blended mode (Kupetz and Ziegenmeyer, 2005). This review started in autumn 2019 and was accelerated due to the Covid crisis. The syllabus was revised to include a broader and deeper reflection on internationalisation of the curriculum (Leask, 2015) and inclusivity (Smith, 2006). The rationale behind these choices is to make TAP more flexible for early career colleagues who have to juggle tight schedules, but also to model practice in relation to pedagogical innovation. The revised version of TAP includes the use of numerous functionalities of our Moodle platform and integrated systems, combined with tools such as mobile response systems and interactive recordings (Paladino, 2008). The new TAP was delivered twice in spring 2020 and it received positive feedback and a high level of engagement from participants.

1   Introduction and context

The Arena Centre for Research-Based Education at UCL (University College London) provides support and training opportunities for academic staff at different stages of their professional development, by offering a number of programmes, resources and workshops to enhance teaching and learning in higher education (HE). Arena runs two main programmes (Arenas 1 and 2) that cater for the training needs of experienced teaching staff on probation and for postgraduate teaching assistants (PGTAs). Our provision draws from the experience and academic expertise of staff and is mostly reflective in nature. By that I mean that we encourage staff to reflect on and problematise the opportunities and challenges of research-led teaching (Fung, 2017), as per the UCL Connected Curriculum framework. We focus on how to meet the needs of an ever-changing professional landscape and student population; innovative teaching approaches; different delivery modes; embedding technology in the curriculum; accessibility and inclusivity; assessment and feedback; and evaluating one's practice (Gunn, 2008; Morss and Murray, 2015).

Both programmes are designed keeping in mind the requirements and context of the UK PSF (UK Professional Standard Framework), and to prepare participants to apply for the Higher Education Academy (HEA)/Advanced HE fellowship recognition scheme for teaching and learning in HE. The scheme is broadly recognised across the sector, and HEA fellowship accreditation is becoming a key requirement for mechanisms of promotions or selection criteria for new teaching positions in the UK. Experienced staff with at least 3 years' full-time equivalent teaching experience can apply for a Fellowship, whilst teaching staff with less extensive experience can apply for an Associate Fellowship.

In addition to Arenas 1 and 2, we offer stand-alone seminars and workshops on a number of topics on learning and teaching led by UCL colleagues and external guests; we organise two conferences yearly on learning and teaching; and we manage and constantly update a bank of student and staff-led case studies and "toolkits" available on our teaching portal. We also work in close collaboration with the 11 UCL faculties and offer support in relation to a number of pedagogical projects, such as assessment, personal tutoring etc. Finally, we work closely with the Digital Education team (Digi Ed) and promote and model good practice in relation to digital and distance learning. In November 2019 I led the organisation and delivery of a Digital and Distance Education summit involving colleagues across the institution, to capture current practices and trends and develop a better understanding of training needs. This event proved to be an excellent opportunity to analyse current resources and online provision, and to facilitate collaborations across different areas of the university.

2   Arena 1

Arena 1 encompasses the training provision of PGTAs. The provision is funded by the Doctoral School and it caters for up to 800 students yearly across the 11 faculties. Arena 1 comprises two parts: one compulsory face-to-face 3-hour workshop for all PGTAs with teaching/assessing responsibilities, and an additional 15-hour course, TAP (Teaching Associate Programme), which is optional and delves more broadly into the topics touched upon during Gateway. TAP is designed to support participants who are putting together applications as Associate Fellows (AF) with the HEA.

Gateway's syllabus covers some milestone topics of learning and teaching in HE and helps students reflect on the policy context of UK HE institutions; the peculiarity of different teaching settings; student interaction in multicultural learning environments (Leask, 2015); and the purposes of assessment and feedback (Gibbs, 2006). It encourages participants to engage with active learning approaches and embedding technology in the curriculum (Millis, 1997). TAP broadens and deepens reflection on the same themes, whilst fostering reflectivity on one's practice (Campbell and Norton, 2007). The course is underpinned by theory, but mostly hands-on. Each session provides plenty of opportunities for discussion and for participants to work on practical tasks that they will actually use in their teaching practice. For example, participants are asked to design session plans, review resources and activities, conduct micro-teaching sessions and write case studies that they can use for their AF applications. All activities also include elements of peer-support and feedback.

Gateway caters for over 700 students per year, and its sessions are offered throughout the academic year. After completing Gateway, students are offered the opportunity to enrol in TAP. On average, about 200 PGTAs yearly decide to continue with TAP. The feedback we receive is always very positive, as is the pass rate of AF applications. One key aspect and focus of both Arenas 1 and 2 is their interdisciplinary approach. We believe that both teaching staff and PGTAs can learn much from working with colleagues from different disciplines, as this can trigger new reflections and generate genuine learning opportunities and consequent case studies and peer support.
The ethos of TAP is to shape a new generation of educators with an interdisciplinary approach to pedagogical practice (Smith & McCann, 2001) and to engage them in debates and

development opportunities that identify learning and teaching as core to their academic career trajectory. UCL vision is routed in research-led teaching through the connected curriculum (Fung, 2017), and TAP offers a unique opportunity to reflect on the possibilities spurred by bridging together innovation in teaching and disciplinary research. Teaching is now at the heart of metrics of "quality" (Gunn, 2018) and student experience, and is gradually being embedded in mechanisms of promotion and professional accreditation (e.g. Advance-HE schemes). despite these discourses of accountability, TAP aims to expose early career colleagues to a shared approach and language of teaching (Morss and Murray, 2005), including fit-for-purpose use of technology (Kupetz and Ziegenmeyer, 2005) and an active awareness of the challenges and opportunities that our diverse student body presents (Leask, 2015).

I joined Arena in June 2019 and took over responsibilities for Arena 1 provision. Although the programme was already extremely well received and participants mostly engaged with enthusiasm, I felt that by enhancing its blended component we could provide more opportunities for participation (Jun and Zhou, 2011). The face-to-face TAP consists of 5 sessions of 3 hours each, and this can be challenging for students with work or care responsibilities outside the university, for those with tight schedules and heavy workloads, and for those approaching completion of their PhDs. I also felt that the digital experience we were offering to our TAP participants could be intensified to make them more aware of the possibilities of engaging students through different media.

3   Planned changes to the delivery mode

Since Autumn Term 2019 I have been planning changes to be introduced to TAP. The initial idea was to turn some of the class activities into asynchronous, interactive tasks in order to enhance flexibility and reduce face-to-face contact hours (Jun and Zhou, 2011). I opted for a blended approach, as it would allow not only continuity but also an opportunity to make the learning experience more personal and self-paced, particularly for students whose first language is not English and who tend to participate less during group discussions (Marlina, 2009). I noticed that these students tend to collaborate more when using distance response systems such as Mentimeter or when posting their ideas anonymously on interactive noticeboards such as Padlet (Paladino, 2008).

I also planned to integrate the syllabus with a new asynchronous course on core teaching skills designed by UCL together with other universities and recently released to the public. This online course was developed by Epigeum (part of Oxford University Press), and we embedded it on our Moodle platform via a dedicated page. The course includes videos, readings and self-paced assessment opportunities such as quizzes. Exactly like the TAP syllabus, the Arena: Core Teaching Skills course is mapped against the UKPSF.

The initial idea for the new TAP was to split each session into two parts, as per a flipped classroom approach (Vasiliki, 2016). Participants would be asked to complete asynchronous preparation activities and readings adding up to 90 minutes per session, and then come to class for a hands-on follow up of 90 minutes.

As mentioned above, our Virtual Learning Environment is hosted on a Moodle platform. This allows the creation of

- Interactive quizzes
- HP5 activities, such as interactive presentations and exercises
- Online workshops where students exchange feedback (this can also be done anonymously)
- Wikis, portfolios and blogs
- Embedded videos, online reading lists and external resources

The platform also allows activity completion monitoring and much more.

In addition to the Moodle functionalities, I was planning to make extensive use of Mentimeter and Padlet, both for asynchronous pre- and post-session tasks. The interplay of these platforms would ensure an interactive and flexible experience for students with different disciplinary and teaching experiences.

3.1   Response to the Covid-19 crisis

The Covid crisis forced us to re-think our provision more drastically for full online delivery. Both Gateway and TAP were moved completely online and offered to participants who would be teaching online themselves.

Because much of the planning had already been done, the transition was relatively smooth. Sessions were split into a series of asynchronous tasks (adding up to 2 hours of work) and 1-hour synchronous sessions delivered via Blackboard Collaborate. At the same time, I was involved in designing the Connected Learning Essentials (CLEs) course for experienced staff. This asynchronous, interactive Moodle course was designed by Arena and Digi Ed to provide UCL colleagues with a coherent pedagogical framework for online teaching in line with our Connected Curriculum (Fung, 2017).

A "light-touch" version of the Connected Learning Essentials was developed for PGTAs. We were therefore able to offer a learning "package" that can be accessed in a modular form. Students have access to technical training only (CLEs, separate Moodle page), or the TAP course, including the Core Teaching Skills page, and technical training.

4   Conclusions

The Arena 1 provision caters for more than 700 PGTAs every year across UCL faculties. It provides PhD students with tools, strategies and a pedagogical framework to start their teaching experience in HE. It also contributes to creating a community of practitioners that value teaching as central to their academic career. During the academic year 2019-20 a number of changes were implemented to make the provision more accessible to a wider audience; initially by re-planning the provision as blended and then as fully online. The cohorts that have completed the online TA so far (May and June 2020) gave positive feedback in relation to the structure, clarity and quality of resources. Future developments will concern improving expectation management and monitoring workload.

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