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Short articles (around 600 words), news, tips, quotes, cartoons and other contributions of particular relevance to students are most welcome. Send to: Nicola Hills, c/o the Society's Leicester office. E-mail: Nicola_Hills@hotmail.com

Postgraduates who teach

STARTING a PhD is a daunting prospect – there's the mountain of research to accumulate, the obscure journals to track down at the British Library and then, shock horror, you actually have to read and use them. But for many the apprehension felt by stepping into the role of a PhD student pales in comparison to the other terrifying new responsibility – we actually have to run a seminar or take a lecture!

This alarming new role is made worse by the fact that for many of us the majority of our students are only a few years our junior. The embarrassment of a student exclaiming as you start your first lesson, 'You're the teacher? I thought you were a student' – cheers for the confidence boost!

Students naturally expect tutors, to be confident (not to mention competent) not only with the module they are teaching but also with any other psychology-related questions. However, in our new position as postgraduates who teach we have come to understand that tutors do not, and indeed cannot, have encyclopaedic knowledge of all psychological theory. Instead, behind that genial, confident façade, there is a furiously working brain, desperately trying to stay one step ahead of the students by anticipating any obscure questions that they might ask – as we have certainly been doing for our research methods teaching!

Our first seminars and workshops as postgraduate students at Kingston University consisted of a silent, uncomprehending class staring at us with blank incredulity as we tried to explain the difference between a z score and a standard

BY DEBBIE SMITH & NATASHA COPPINS

deviation. In those first few weeks we experienced difficulties in balancing our PhD work with our teaching responsibilities. Our own research left undone owing to the immediate necessity of seminar and lecture preparation and coursework marking, as well as to our inability to turn away students seeking extra help.

The support we have received from our supervisors, department and university has been commendable. As well as offering internal support, they organised for us to attend an external one-day workshop for postgraduates, run by Dr Jacqui Akhurst from the Higher Education Academy Psychology Network (HEAPN). We were apprehensive about attending, worried it would be a waste of valuable time. Thankfully, we learnt a number of practical teaching tips (see box).

Despite the multitude of tips and advice gained, the most advantageous part of the workshop for us was the opportunity to meet other postgraduates in the same boat. We have decided to continue this source of support by setting up (with the help of Jacqui and HEAPN) a self-help network of psychology postgraduates who teach in the southeast of England.

The Postgraduates who Teach (PGwT) network offers support via a website and quarterly workshops. A link from the student section of the HEAPN website (www.psychology.heacademy.ac.uk) includes a member profile section and a notice board that allows members to post any problems, comments and helpful tips. Workshops are tailored to give practical help on problems that members are currently experiencing, such as how to deal with difficult students and how to design assessment materials. PGwT members can post any workshop ideas on the website or e-mail them to us.

For many of us teaching undergraduates is not only a means of boosting our studentships, but is also a fulfilling and worthwhile experience that we should be able to enjoy and balance effectively with

our research. To achieve this balance, we feel the valuable support we receive from our supervisors and department is enhanced by the additional and unique support that other postgraduates who teach can offer through PGwT.

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TIPS FOR POSTGRADUATES WHO TEACH PSYCHOLOGY

Preparation:

To collect materials, ask previous lecturers, friends/colleagues, look on the internet and customise them for your use.

Identify two or three learning outcomes – list these at the beginning. These will be helpful when designing the assessment.

Teaching:

Remember what it was like to be a student – especially when explaining things. Don't use jargon.

To keep students' attention, try to vary materials and use different exercises every 15 minutes.

Make students feel comfortable – e.g. icebreaker exercises such as wearing name tags in the first few sessions.

Anonymous handwritten notes to display students' ideas for discussion can be very useful when the students are not keen to advance ideas openly.

At the end of a lecture or seminar, allow students a few minutes to reflect on the material and think of questions.

General:

Don't be afraid to ask other members of staff and peers for advice or help.

Be realistic in your expectations – your confidence will build slowly.

Experience is important – your teaching will improve, just as the time it takes to mark an essay will hopefully decrease!

Develop a professional approach; this is essential when it comes to marking students' work.

However, a good relationship with students is vital – they will be more willing to ask questions, if they feel relaxed. Ways to achieve this include using examples from your own research; by doing so you involve them in your work.

IRISH CONFERENCE

The 27th Annual Congress of Psychology Students in Ireland will be held this year at the Queen's University Belfast from Friday to Sunday 8–10 April.

The deadlines for abstracts from would-be presenters and for registration is 14 February.

□ More details can be found at the QUB website: www.psych.qub.ac.uk/congress05.