Preparing tertiary teachers-the introduction to tertiary teaching initiative

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Abstract

The academic profession must be the only one whose members receive meticulous training in one aspect of its practice: research, and virtually none in another aspect: teaching. A newly appointed lecturer may emerge from years of study and research while gaining a PhD and find that the skills developed in becoming a researcher are of little use when required to lecture to a hall of 400 students, to design a first year subject or to mark a pile of essays. Some staff receive help and guidance from their Department: many, it seems, do not.

Introduction to Tertiary Teaching, an initial teacher preparation course, was introduced in 1992 by the University of Wollongong as a result of collaboration between the Faculty of Education and the Centre for Staff Development. Open to all university staff involved in teaching, it aims to develop basic teaching skills and to engender a reflective approach to tertiary teaching, equipping staff to continue to improve their teaching beyond the limits of the course itself. The author, who teaches the course in conjunction with Dr Max Gillett of the Faculty of Education, describes the way it is structured and how it attempts to meet the needs of staff from a range of disciplines and with a range of experience.

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The view that academic staff are, by definition, on appointment fully competent in all that might be required of them in academe (including teaching and administration) is dying (Moses, 1990:25). It is now recognised generally in the Australian higher education sector that initial training and ongoing staff development are necessary to ensure that staff receive appropriate support and that students receive the high quality teaching which they increasingly demand. This recognition is reflected in the recent establishment in several universities of Certificates in Teaching in Higher Education which aim to develop in participants basic skills appropriate to tertiary teaching.

The University of Wollongong was among the first Australian universities to establish a teacher preparation course for new lecturers and tutors. Co-designed and co-taught by the Faculty of Education and the Centre for Staff Development, Introduction to Tertiary Teaching (EDGA 807) aims to develop a range of teaching skills in planning, delivering and evaluating classes of various kinds as well as to give a brief introduction to subject design and assessment of student work. It is a one-session 8 credit-point subject offered in both sessions, and it may be taken by staff as a stand-alone subject or as part of the Certificate in Higher Education. Staff who take the latter option complete two further subjects from the schedule in Adult Education, and may then receive advanced standing towards completing a Diploma in Adult Education and Training. At present EDGA 807 does not attract HECS. It is anticipated that study at Master's level will be available from 1995.

The Introduction to Tertiary Teaching (ITT) has been offered for three sessions since it began in 1992 and so far has been positively evaluated by those who have completed it.

Design of the subject

It was recognised in designing the subject that it had to be able to cater for staff from a wide range of disciplines who might be using a variety of teaching methods and approaches. The Faculty of Law bases its teaching on a philosophy of student-centred, self-directed learning. Several of the departments training professional practitioners make extended use of practicums. Others in the sciences use field work in addition to lectures, tutorials and labs. Some staff in the School of Creative Arts teach largely on a one-to-one basis and the assessment of students' creative work poses unique challenges. So, while acknowledging that there are some generic skills common to most kinds of teaching, eg the design and use of effective

visual support materials, it was seen as important that the subject be adaptable to the teaching context of each participant, and be able to provide the basis for improvement of teaching within that context. The subject, then, is based on the principles of reflective practice (Schon, 1987) and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984, Boud and Griffin, 1987, Boud, Keogh and Walker 1985). It provides opportunities for staff to take a critical look at their teaching as they are practising it, to analyse it in terms of whether their teaching is likely to facilitate the kind of student learning they and their department aim for, to plan desirable changes to teaching methods, to implement them and finally to reflect on the value of changes made.

Methods

Staff are introduced early in the session to ways of identifying features of their own teaching. They select the means by which they do this, which include observation of their classes by the ITT teaching staff, videotaping of classes or visits made by a mutually agreed mentor. They are then assisted to analyse what they are doing in terms of what they intend to achieve in their teaching. Through consultation with the ITT staff and through accessing relevant literature on teaching in higher education they then identify several performance objectives for themselves to achieve on the course.
Some examples of these are:

- to achieve active participation from all students throughout each tutorial
- to prepare high quality visual support materials through adherence to appropriate principles and best practice
- to present lecture material in an enthusiastic and varied manner which generates active student learning
- to provide fair and accurate feedback on assigned tasks

These performance objectives may be quite general, as in the examples above, but staff are then asked to find ways of meeting them and to establish criteria by which they can judge whether they have met them. For example in the case of the first one above, a lecturer may discover from readings or from ITT classes a particular method of encouraging more student participation in tutorials. She or he may then write a detailed plan of how exactly the tutorial will run, and arrange to have the class taped or visited by a colleague. A suitable instrument will be chosen or designed to assess how well the method works in that

particular class and this, along with the taped data, and the lecturer's own reflections, will form the basis of the lecturer's evaluation of her work. This cycle may be repeated several times over the session, involving experimentation with the same or different methods.

The self-directed nature of the approach described above allows the staff member to concentrate on elements of teaching which are important in his or her discipline. It also provides experienced staff with an opportunity to focus on more sophisticated or innovative teaching techniques if this is appropriate, rather than restricting them to the basic techniques needed by new lecturers. Several experienced lecturers have in fact undertaken the course, and they are encouraged to draw on their experience to contribute to weekly class meetings.

Weekly meetings

The class meets weekly for three hours. The meetings take a variety of formats, and the ITT lecturers attempt to model good practice in all the activities included. There may be input in the form of mini-lectures and structured activities, workshops, presentations by group members, critiques of videotaped or multimedia teaching materials, or visits to teaching sites to view, for example, computer-assisted learning material. Time is allocated for group members to bring up particular concerns about their teaching and to attempt to resolve these through discussion and input from other members.

Assessment

Assessment is through the completion of a teaching portfolio, a critical analysis of the design of a subject and a reflective journal. The journal is kept throughout the session as a record of a lecturer's analysis of his or her work, the experimentation process and the results and reflections generated by the process. The journal, as befits a personal record, may take a variety of forms. Some people keep it on their computer and submit it for comment on due dates via the electronic mail. Others keep a handwritten exercise book with mind-maps or a liberal use of colour to highlight and structure their observations.
The teaching portfolio is a compilation of the materials created through the reflective practice cycle described above. It may include taped data and self-evaluation of classes given, teaching plans, overhead transparencies or other presentation devices, and student or colleague feedback on teaching. The focus

is on assisting the development of habits of reflective practice in those who complete the course. Participants should acquire skills in planning, implementing and evaluating aspects of their teaching which will enable them to continue the process after the course has finished.

Subjects taught at university are rarely if ever static, and the ITT has evolved in response to feedback from participants and the reflections of those who teach it. Several of its graduates have gone on to undertake the Certificate in Higher Education and appear to be implementing their new knowledge and skills in their teaching. Whether they go on to further study or not, it is important that the process of critical reflection on their own teaching does not stop at the end of a formal course. Consequently, an informal teaching development group has been proposed. This group would meet weekly or fortnightly to discuss and analyse issues of teaching and learning brought up by participants.

The University of Wollongong is one which takes a commitment to good teaching seriously through the provision of staff development, a comprehensive system of student evaluation of teaching, the inclusion of teaching expertise in promotion criteria and now systematic teaching preparation for new staff. It is to be hoped that the introduction of the ITT will strengthen a University culture which already has a strong commitment to maintaining and improving the quality of the education it provides to students.

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For further information on the ITT, staff are invited to contact her, or Dr Max Gillett in the Faculty of Education.

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