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Should PhD students teach?

Sophie R. Homer

The number of PhD students in the UK is growing exponentially, and in an increasingly competitive labour market, postgraduate research students are facing unprecedented pressure to demonstrate a range of skills within and beyond research management. Due to the popularity and broad-ranging nature of the discipline, psychology students will face particularly fierce competition throughout their careers and must be acutely aware of the need to produce publishable, fundable, and impactful work. Given these pressures on PhD students and their supervisors, does teaching during postgraduate study give worthwhile experience, or is it a needless tax on time that is both limited and strained?

THERE HAVE NEVER BEEN more PhD graduates in the UK as there are today. In the 2016–2017 academic year there were over one-hundred thousand postgraduate research students studying at UK universities, and this number has increased by more than 25 per cent in the past ten years (Universities UK, 2017). As a consequence, PhD students face more competition than ever before, and providers of higher education must produce not only capable and employable, but outstanding PhD graduates. Accordingly, encouraging students' engagement with PhD study is a priority for higher education institutions globally, and particular importance is placed on acquiring and honing a broad range of skills (Vitae, 2011; Willison & Buisman-Pijlman, 2016). In an increasingly competitive labour market, PhD students need to demonstrate a skillset above and beyond conducting independent research, and there are various drivers for broadening their skillsets. Up to 63 per cent of employers report that university graduates lack necessary skills such as team-working, self-management, and communication (Universities UK, 2015), and accordingly, the UK government is facilitating wider training via Doctoral Training Partnerships. Within this climate, it is essential for PhD students and their supervisors to seek opportunities for professional development, but what skills *should* be considered necessary for PhD students in psychology, and is teaching a worthwhile use of their limited time?

Due to the popularity of the discipline, PhD students in psychology will face particularly fierce competition throughout their careers. To fulfil career aspirations in research or academia, and particularly to obtain heavily sought-after permanent positions, PhD students should aim to build a portfolio of research management, ideally comprehending some knowledge or experience of publishing, obtaining funding, and planning and tracking the impact of their work (Homer, 2017). Indeed, some consider publishing to be so central to psychology that it should be actively encouraged during undergraduate study (e.g. Wendt, 2006). Meanwhile, others argue that if researchers are unable to secure sufficient funding, some branches of psychological research are simply unsustainable (e.g. Giordano et al., 2011). Given these pressures on Psychology PhD students and their supervisors, it is easy to see how the demands of teaching may be considered a needless tax on time that is both limited and strained.

The value of teaching for researcher development

Publishing, obtaining funding, and demonstrating impact are reliable ways to build and further an academic reputation, but are difficult to achieve and so cannot be relied

upon as the only substantiation of competent research management. Teaching-related activities, though too often considered inconsequential to research (Gregg-Jolly et al., 2011), can be a particularly effective way to foster and demonstrate researcher development. Institutions' accountability for the quality of education they provide is growing (e.g. HEFCE, 2017) and so, for researchers aspiring towards careers in academia, teaching prowess is becoming increasingly desirable. Accordingly, teaching features on the Vitae Researcher Development Framework in its own right (Vitae, 2011), but it can also be conducive to other research-specific skills. For example, supervising undergraduate or master's research projects, though ostensibly a teaching activity, provides invaluable experience of research-related skills such as collaboration, research supervision, management of a research team, and communicating one's research to a naïve audience. Moreover, Richards (2017) provides several examples of how teaching-related activities undertaken during PhD study have directly improved his practice as a researcher. For example, critically evaluating and marking coursework prepared him to peer-review manuscripts for journals and enabled him to look at his own work more critically; delivering complex content in an accessible way taught him to see his own manuscripts from the perspective of the reader; and having to keep on topic and on time was beneficial for conference presentations and public engagement.

Relatedly, many academics consider teaching and research itself to be mutually beneficial and intertwined (e.g. Neumann, 1992). For example, Brew (2006) argues that the consideration, deconstruction, and change in perspective required to teach one's research has the effect of deepening one's own knowledge and understanding, and that discourse with learners can be an invaluable source of research inspiration. As such, strengthening the teaching-research nexus is a priority for Higher Education Institutions (Hattie & Marsh, 1996; HEA, 2005).

PhD students who teach therefore stand to gain a deeper understanding of their subject through explaining and discussing it with naïve learners, considering and critically evaluating their methods, and reflecting upon this process. They can also gain a competitive advantage within academia by demonstrating aptitude not only to manage both teaching and research, but to actively use experiences of each to continuously develop and improve the other.

Beyond researcher development

Teaching is also an excellent way to foster and evidence broader skills that are necessary for, but not specific to, research. For example, effective oral communication requires confident delivery and clarity of expression, but teaching has the explicit requirement of having to actively engage, stimulate, and involve one's audience. Teaching consequently fosters a creative and inventive approach to communication which, whether verbal or written, must be presented at a level appropriate to learners' ability. Adapting the style of communication to suit a variety of audiences is an essential skill and is easily demonstrable through teaching students at different stages of their degree. Moreover, supervising undergraduate project students provides an invaluable opportunity to acquire and demonstrate skills in leadership, people management, and project management, which may otherwise be difficult to gain at such an early stage in PhD students' careers. More broadly, teaching inherently requires meticulous planning and organisation, general 'people skills' and provision of pastoral support, self-reflection to adapt and refine techniques, and time-management to balance teaching alongside PhD study. These transferable skills, applicable to a range of environments within and beyond academia, are particularly valued by employers (e.g. Bridgstock, 2009; Cumming, 2010; Tymon, 2013).

While generic skills such as effective communication and interpersonal efficacy are almost ubiquitously sought after

by employers, the factors predicting career competency and employer satisfaction may be more nuanced. Bridgstock (2009) argues that beyond generic skills such as effective communication are qualities that employers *really* want but may not ask for. These qualities pertain to self-efficacy and career-management, and finding opportunities within PhD study to apply, develop, and evidence these highly personal skills may prove more challenging. PhD students who teach, however, inherently demonstrate motivation to seek out opportunities for work and skill development; they show aptitude to create and maintain multidimensional professional relationships as both learners and teachers; they have the self-efficacy to undertake new roles and challenges; and they maximise their scope for appraising and building upon their strengths and interests.

The value of teaching for personal and professional development is evident, but PhD students are not the only ones to benefit from their efforts as teachers. An effective teacher models their ways of thinking and working within the classroom (Gregg-Jolly et al., 2011) which means that learners get first-hand experience of good research practice, critical evaluation, and creative thinking. This may be particularly effective if the teachers are closer in career stage to undergraduate learners than their lecturers are, as they may be more readily accepted as role models and their ways of working may be seen as more achievable and more directly applicable to the learner. Moreover, the Higher Education Academy (2005) argue that understanding and valuing research should be central to higher education, and arguably, these qualities may be more easily instilled in learners by research-active teachers who are inherently motivated, well-informed, and passionate about research.

Overcoming barriers

Teaching is therefore beneficial to both teacher and learner, but what caveats are to be considered by PhD students and their supervisors before committing to teaching responsibilities? To my knowledge, there is little by way of research into the experiences of postgraduate teachers. Callary, Werthner and Trudel (2012) describe how, while studying for her PhD, the first author found reward and satisfaction in putting her knowledge and skills into use by teaching others. However, it should be noted that the confidence in delivery and performance they describe are that of a 29-year-old PhD student with a substantial track record of teaching and coaching. Through self-reflection and discussion with my peers, I am aware that the prospect of teaching can be extremely daunting to those of us with little (if any) prior experience, a sentiment echoed by Richards (2017). Feelings of having to hide one's secret incompetence and insecurity, often known as 'imposter syndrome', are extremely common in early career researchers (Cohen et al., 2003) and may pose a barrier for some PhD students.

However, if not overcome, these worries should at least be alleviated through attending teacher training sessions, shadowing others, and starting small: marking essays or reports may be a less intimidating starting point and in itself provides valuable experience of critical evaluation, decision-making, and providing constructive feedback. Notably, Richards (2017) points out that apprehension of teaching or marking due to only recently having been a student oneself can actually be used productively: reflecting on one's own experiences as a learner may fuel more considered and consistent practice as a teacher. Another consideration for PhD students is the challenging equipoise between identifying as both staff and student concurrently (e.g. Livermore & Gallagher, 2015). This may never be more evident than during teaching: PhD students are suddenly in a position of responsibility and authority over learners (who, not long ago, may have been peers) but are also learners themselves, and as such may not be held (or may not hold themselves) in the same esteem as lecturers or permanent teaching staff. This can make it

difficult to establish an appropriate dynamic with learners and to manage boundaries; it can be tempting for PhD students, as intermediaries between student and lecturer, to show empathy with learners by over-facilitating. However, practice, trial-and-error, and self-reflection can help to establish and refine techniques and approaches that work for different teachers, learners, and contexts. Finally, PhD students should be aware that teaching can be time-consuming. Care should be taken to ensure that sufficient time is allocated to research, and that it is not impinged upon by teaching responsibilities.

Conclusions and recommendations

The current global research climate demands that PGR students gain more from their degree than a thesis. To stand out in an increasingly competitive labour market, they must demonstrate a broad range of experience and competencies, including the higher level personal qualities that transcend research-specific and generic transferable skills.

Teaching-related activities are an excellent way to develop and evidence both personal and professional development in these areas but must be supported at supervisory and institutional levels. PhD students and their supervisors may therefore find it useful to consult the following list of recommendations based on the literature and my own experiences:

- **Give teaching a chance**
  PhD study involves a transition to independence. As such, it is a time to learn, grow, and seek opportunities to try new things and broaden skillsets.
- **Be positive**
  Feelings of incompetence and insecurity are normal: they will improve over time and with practice.
- **Learn to teach**
  Whether one-off workshops or a full higher education teaching qualification, attending formal training will help to alleviate uncertainty and instil confi-

dence. I thoroughly enjoyed completing a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) qualification during my PhD, and have applied learning from this course to my practice as both a teacher and a researcher.
- **Start small**
  Marking essays or reports is much less daunting than facilitating taught sessions, and so makes for a good introduction to teaching.
- **Observe and be observed**
  Shadowing supervisors, peers, or other departmental staff in their roles can alleviate uncertainty and facilitates experience of different teaching techniques. Being observed by others, either formally or informally, will also help to improve practice by providing a different perspective.
- **Share experiences**
  Sharing experiences, whether positive or negative, with peers or supervisors will help to create a network of support and mutual learning. I found this crucial during my own experiences of teaching during my PhD.
- **Strike a balance**
  The demands of teaching can be time consuming, and so care should be taken by both PhD students and supervisors to ensure that they are not underestimated and are balanced appropriately alongside PhD work.
- **Self-reflect**
  Keeping an informal diary or reflective log can help to identify and refine techniques that work in different teaching contexts, and to document personal development.
- **Keep track**
  A record of successful teaching, which could be anything from module evaluation forms to emails of thanks, is an excellent demonstration of transferable skills.
- **Keep going!**
  Occasional disappointments and frustrations are inevitable, and all part of

the experience. Resilience is an essential quality for teachers and will develop with continued practice.

The author
Sophie R. Homer

School of Psychology, Cognition Institute, University of Plymouth, Devon, PL4 8AA, United Kingdom
Email: sophie.homer@plymouth.ac.uk

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