What are the benefits of teaching as a postgraduate student?

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Having completed my PhD in the School of Psychology, Cardiff University, I was fortunate in having ample opportunities to teach. The experiences I gained at this time have been invaluable for a number of reasons, and I would strongly encourage any postgraduate considering whether or not to teach, that it will be well worth their while. I therefore aim here to briefly outline the teaching responsibilities that I took on whilst completing my PhD, and to discuss the benefits that postgraduate psychology students may gain from acquiring similar experiences.

When I began my PhD I signed up as a Postgraduate Tutor, a role that I would continue in throughout my studies. This allowed me to run small group (6–8 students) tutorial sessions and mark practical reports for the Research Methods in Psychology module. The main purpose of these tutorials was to support first year undergraduates in learning to complete research projects, produce practical reports, understand basic statistical principles, and to develop a good academic writing style. These sessions would typically be run every two weeks, and provided me with an excellent opportunity to gain experience of teaching in a small group setting. This was arguably far less intimidating than being thrown in at the deep end by having to teach large seminars or give lectures.

Having been a Postgraduate Tutor for the first three years of my PhD I sought out new challenges in my final year. Firstly, I began teaching second year bioscience students, which provided me with experience of working with students from a different discipline, as well as
with those at a later stage of their degree. Secondly, I became a Graduate Teaching Assistant. This job was considerably different from being a Postgraduate Tutor for several reasons. I was now teaching larger groups (14–16 students), and supported learning on three different modules (Biological Psychology, Language & Memory, and Social Psychology). This role was arguably more demanding than that of Postgraduate Tutor, as seminars were conducted more frequently, and covered a greater diversity of topics. I was also required to mark essays, which were quite different from practical reports, and followed a different set of marking guidelines.

Some postgraduates may not wish to teach because they feel nervous or under qualified for the job. In response to such reasoning, one should remember that we all have to start somewhere; even the most experienced professor will have been in this position at one time. Furthermore, students can on occasion ask challenging questions. However, this is arguably something a teacher should welcome, because it shows their students are eager to learn, and that they are engaging with them effectively. Although it might seem counterintuitive, being a little nervous at first might even improve the quality of one’s teaching, as it provides additional motivation to plan seminars thoroughly and to keep up to date with the recommended reading. This motivation is not only advantageous to your students’ learning, but can also benefit your own knowledge. I noticed this because, having completed my undergraduate degree in psychology at Swansea University, I found the course at Cardiff to differ in certain aspects. This therefore challenged me to learn new skills and new subject matter. For instance, I remember leading a seminar on inflexional morphology, even though I had never myself studied the subject as an undergraduate.

Although the focus of teaching should be to facilitate the learning of one’s students, gaining such experience is extremely useful for those aiming to follow an academic career, whether it research focused, teaching focused, or a combination of the two. In fact, most who make a career out of academia are not purely a researcher or a teacher; even those following a research career without lecturing need the skills required to supervise project students. Therefore, taking on teaching responsibilities as a postgraduate can help prepare you for what inevitably lies ahead if you intend to pursue this career path.

As an early career researcher, teaching as a postgraduate looks good on your CV, and this can be very useful when applying for jobs. Even for research-based positions, the subject of teaching often comes up at interview. If for no other reason, employers like to know that you have developed the relevant expertise required to teach in higher education, as this affords them
a greater range of opportunities in which to utilise your skills. In some instances, teaching responsibilities might not be a requirement of one’s role, but may instead be encouraged if available. This can provide a number of benefits, such as being able to supplement one’s wages, and to learn new skills, as well as maintain those already developed.

So what if you have already gained teaching experience and want to provide evidence of this to potential employers when applying for jobs? A good way to demonstrate your abilities and commitment to teaching is to apply for recognition from the Higher Education Academy (HEA). The HEA has four levels of qualification, which can be applied for depending on one’s teaching experience: (1) Associate Fellow, (2) Fellow, (3) Senior Fellow, and (4) Principle Fellow. Once I felt I had gained enough experience, I applied to be an Associate Fellow, and feel that this has since served me well. As many institutions require their teaching staff to have completed this (or a similar qualification), it can be useful to get ahead of the game whilst still a postgraduate. Completing the qualification whilst holding a teaching role can also make the application process much easier, as it ensures that your relevant experience is fresh in your mind. As the process involves reflecting upon one’s teaching practices and experiences, it can also help to complete the application at this time because it affords you opportunities to modify your teaching based on these processes, which can help determine the methods that work best for you. Beyond aiding in the application process itself, this also has obvious benefits regarding one’s professional development, as well as the quality of teaching that your students receive.

Teaching in higher education can help build confidence and communication skills, which are clearly important in a range of situations encountered in the world of academia. An often-underrated ability is that of taking a complex idea and presenting it in a way that makes it accessible and easy to understand. This ability can be developed through teaching, and is something that will serve you well in many other aspects of your career. For instance, this mentality can help us to step back from a manuscript we have drafted, and to try to see things from the perspective of the reader. This process can then lead to an improvement in the overall quality of the final product (i.e. a stronger paper, more effective communication of ideas, greater impact). Running seminars and tutor sessions can also help develop our public speaking skills, helping us to relax and speak at the right speed and volume to engage our audience effectively. Keeping on topic and sticking to time are also useful skills, which can translate directly into better conference presentations and public engagement.

I have now considered teaching itself, but what about providing feedback and marking
coursework? This is something that many postgraduates feel inadequately prepared for, having often only recently graduated themselves. This transition from somebody hoping their work receives a good mark to being the person that decides upon the grades assigned to others can be quite daunting at first. As with that encountered when beginning to teach, I feel that this apprehension can actually be utilised productively, leading to thoughtful feedback and consistent marking.

Reflecting on one’s own experiences as a student can be informative when teaching. For instance, as an undergraduate I found myself frustrated by the unspecific feedback I would sometimes receive, for example when a marker would simply ‘tick’ throughout the essay rather than write anything of substance. I found that reflecting on this experience has led me to making extra effort to provide good quality, relevant feedback. For instance, when marking essays I found that specifying two areas on which a student should work is an effective way to facilitate improvement. Further to this, marking student essays and reports helps develop the ability to look at a piece of work objectively, and with a critical eye. As many academics receive their first invitation to review a manuscript whilst still working at the postgraduate level, this can be an extremely useful skill to have acquired. This can make the gravity of the experience less overwhelming, and lead to a more thorough assessment of the work that is being considered. In addition to this, the ability to critically analyse a piece of work can directly translate into improving the overall quality of one’s own work as well as that of one’s colleagues.

Although teaching as a postgraduate is sometimes mandatory this is not always the case, which leaves many unsure as to whether they should allocate some of their considerably limited time towards the practice. Considering the range of benefits both to one’s students as well as to oneself, I would strongly encourage postgraduates to participate in teaching, even if in an unpaid capacity. It is not necessary to take on copious amounts, but some relevant experience and knowledge of teaching is likely to be personally rewarding, and of further benefit throughout numerous aspects of your career.