Stakeholder summary

Teaching assistants (and their students) benefit from formal training programs

Formal training programs for teaching assistants (TAs) inform their teaching practices and can lead to improved student learning experiences according to a new study from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

Developing Teaching Assistants as Members of the University Teaching Team examined two TA training programs at the University of Toronto. The study found that both programs fostered teaching practices that were conducive to deep student learning – less focused on information transfer and more focused on students' conceptual understanding of course content. According to the study, TAs value their development as teachers and they believe the skills they acquire, such as planning and time management, will benefit their future careers.

Project description

Looking at both TA and student learning, the study examined the influence of the Advanced University Teaching Preparation Certificate (AUTP), offered by the University of Toronto's Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation; and the Writing Instruction for TAs (WIT) Program, offered in the university's Faculty of Arts & Science. Both aim to improve undergraduate student learning by ensuring that TAs are integral members of the teaching team and that they receive sufficient training and guidance to effectively support deep student learning. Using surveys and interviews, data were collected from instructors, students, TAs and senior-level TAs (peer trainers) at the start and end of courses.

Findings

Courses that incorporate some of the AUTP and WIT elements of best teaching practices are more likely to expose students to deep learning experiences, while TAs gain valuable skills such as using effective assessment methods, say the authors.

TAs who have a broader set of teaching responsibilities develop a teaching approach that reduces its focus on information transfer and increases its focus on asking students to think about course content in conceptual terms. And even more so than TAs, peer trainers tend to take a more student-focused, conceptual approach over time.

While a broader span of teaching responsibility did not increase TA comfort levels with writing or their own use of writing strategies, the study found that utilizing trained TAs increases the likelihood that students will receive valuable in-course (formative) and end-of course (summative) feedback on writing.

The study also found that the use of teaching teams may provide educational experiences for undergraduate students that are associated with deeper approaches to learning.

Recommendations / Further research

Among recommendations, institutions should encourage and expand opportunities for TAs to invest in their development as teachers through participation in training programs like AUTP and WIT.

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Providing TAs with a broader range of responsibilities as part of the teaching team will encourage a teaching approach conducive to deep learning.

The authors suggest regular and ongoing opportunities for TAs to have both formal and informal discussions and meetings to discuss pedagogy and course design with course instructors and other TAs. They also suggest utilizing TAs as important change agents in developing integrated teaching teams that can more effectively support student learning. "Opportunities for TA peer learning can contribute to strengthening the culture of teaching within higher education," say the authors.

Future, longer-term studies should focus on writing and feedback on writing, particularly on the role of TA and instructor feedback. Given that this study examined learners' perspectives of the writing process, future research might include measures of actual writing. The authors also suggest continued investigation of the effects of a range of formal TA training programs on the development of TA pedagogical skill development, identity as teachers and transfer of these skills into future career paths.

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