

A Collaborative Approach to Developing Transferable Teaching Skills Among Student Workshop Facilitators



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The teaching assistant program at the University of Windsor facilitates opportunities for students to develop leadership capacity, creativity, and pedagogical knowledge. This study explored the skills that student workshop facilitators were developing and/or enhancing, and how these skills might be used outside of teaching-related duties. Data from former student workshop facilitators were collected through an online survey (n = 15) and semi-structured interviews (n = 6). The results indicated that participants developed a range of teaching-related skills through leading teaching and learning workshops. The knowledge and skills that facilitators garnered often resulted in them being perceived as teaching and learning leaders amongst their peers. Further, participants emphasized that leading workshops provided a unique opportunity to practice, increased their confidence, and led them to apply their skills in academic and non-academic endeavours.

Le programme d'assistantat d'enseignement de l'Université de Windsor aide les étudiants à acquérir des compétences en matière de leadership, de créativité et de connaissances pédagogiques. Dans notre étude, nous nous penchons sur les compétences que les étudiants animateurs d'ateliers ont assimilées ou affinées et nous nous demandons comment ces acquis peuvent être transposés à d'autres tâches en dehors de l'enseignement. Au moyen d'un sondage en ligne (n = 15) et d'entrevues semi-structurées (n = 6), nous avons recueilli les données provenant d'étudiants ayant animé des ateliers. Les résultats indiquent que les répondants ont développé diverses compétences liées à l'enseignement en animant des ateliers portant sur l'apprentissage et sur l'enseignement. Grâce aux connaissances et aux compétences acquises, les animateurs étaient souvent considérés par leurs pairs comme des leaders en matière d'apprentissage et d'enseignement. De plus, les répondants ont souligné le fait que l'animation d'atelier leur avait donné l'occasion d'exercer leur pratique, de gagner en confiance et d'appliquer leurs compétences en contexte universitaire et non universitaire.

There has been an enduring discourse in higher education about preparing graduate students for wide-ranging careers, which maintains an early consensus that graduates generally lack the non-academic competencies associated with professional settings (Porter & Phelps, 2014). Within the current

context of a rapidly shifting information-based economy, employees must not only be able to develop and maintain a set of knowledge and skills that are tailored to their discipline, but also display a set of skills that are generic and transferable to a variety of occupational conditions (Bridgstock, 2009).

These types of generic skills that promote employability have been previously referred to as “transferable skills” and “key competencies” (Bridgstock, 2009; Mayer, 1992).

In response to this demand from the workforce, there has been an international push among higher education institutions to foster graduate employability. While some authors note that employability is not something that a person gains and keeps for life, but rather a lifelong process, there are various skills that contribute to “employment” as a graduate outcome (Dacre Pool, Gurbutt, & Houston, 2019). Such employability skills have been defined as, “transferable core skill groups that represent essential functional and enabling knowledge, skills, and attitudes required by the 21st century workplace” (Overtoom, 2000, p. 2). These transferable skills are thought to be essential not only for success at the career level, but also for success at all stages of employment and education. As such, there is an ever-increasing expectation by both governments and industries that students are proficient in a diverse set of skills that can be transferred and applied widely, particularly beyond discipline-specific content knowledge (Matthews & Mercer-Mapstone, 2018).

To add to this general push toward employability, there is also a certain social need to have graduates develop leadership skills (Mitchell & Poutiatine, 2001). And, in order to build skills that are both effective and adaptive, it is best that leadership programs be experientially based. Gardner (1990) offered various practical suggestions, including providing opportunities for students to navigate through shared responsibilities. Students’ knowledge and judgements should be developed by setting up appropriate environments including exposure to diverse populations, as well as providing situations where students can practice making decisions with limited information.

The University of Windsor’s GATA Network has responded to these demands by facilitating opportunities for graduate (GAs) and undergraduate (TAs) teaching assistants to develop and mobilize leadership capacity, creativity, and

pedagogical knowledge. The GATA Network is a collaborative initiative coordinated by two graduate student positions and supported jointly by the Faculty of Graduate Studies and the Centre for Teaching and Learning. The GATA Network facilitates a continuously evolving teaching assistant development program targeted at students who are interested in teaching and learning. The program is loosely structured and includes a set of activities that students can opt into, including a fall and winter orientation event, ongoing workshops (both broad and department-specific), online and print resources, digital outreach, and award recognition for exceptional GAs and TAs. Students do not have to currently be GAs or TAs to participate in fall and winter orientation events or to benefit from our resources. These opportunities are open to any students interested in enhancing their pedagogical knowledge and skills throughout their academic career in the institution. Workshop topics vary at events and often cater to the needs and interests of GAs/TAs and departments. Sample workshop topics include: Grading and Effective Feedback, Effective Lecture Preparation and Delivery, Using your GA/TAship for Employment and Career Progression, Leading Effective Labs and Tutorials, and Decolonizing Practices for Pedagogy.

The teaching assistant development program enables students to develop, practice, and sharpen transferable skills in various areas, including leadership, teaching, communication, and collaboration. Since the inception of the program, there has been an intentional effort to structure peer mentorship, professional development, and resource sharing with the goal of engaging students from the moment they begin at our institution through to their graduation. By taking advantage of the program’s various opportunities, students foster skills that are desirable in academia as well as public and private sectors.

The GATA Network is led by students. The teaching assistant development program establishes an atmosphere that promotes mutual growth, support, and empowerment. The peer-supported, distributed leadership model ensures that GAs and

TAs from across campus mentor and are mentored by each other to develop and lead workshops. By engaging in these mentorship opportunities, students have a chance to enhance their knowledge and craft, strengthen their communication and teaching skills, and garner significant personal enjoyment (Reddick, Griffin, Cherwitz, Cérda-Pražák, & Bunch, 2012). This chance for students to plan and facilitate teaching and learning workshops gives them an avenue to test their knowledge and implement the tools they have learned in a real classroom setting. Workshop leaders are often presenting to a diverse group of students in terms of both personal and academic backgrounds which is reflective of real-world contexts

As is common in many teaching and learning environments, especially those that involve active learning techniques, workshop facilitators are sometimes faced with not knowing all the answers and having to think on their feet. The program aims to partner new student presenters with experienced workshop leaders or faculty, thus having to share their responsibilities with a co-facilitator. Partnerships with students is noted among the principles of good Scholarship of Teaching and Learning practice (Acai et al., 2017). Student partnerships are collaborative and reciprocal and provide an opportunity to “contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, p. 6-7). For this reason, the teaching assistant development program has remained a valuable contributor to a learning-centred atmosphere and the focus on student experience.

The present investigation sought practical implications. The goal was to assess the student impact of leading workshops in partnership with the teaching assistant development program. To do so, we surveyed current and previous students who have developed and facilitated workshops for the program to gain insights into how those involvements may have led to transformative learning experiences. Specifically, we were interested in learning the types

of skills facilitators had been able to develop and/or enhance, and how these skills are transferable into other settings. Research has suggested an agreement among both staff and students that the development of skills which can be implemented in varied career-related circumstances is an important outcome in higher education (Haigh & Kilmartin, 1999). Hence, it was a specific interest of the authors to consider student perceptions of the development of transferable skills. We were also interested in the areas where improvements could be made to enhance these partnerships between teaching assistants and the program itself. As such, this endeavour also served as a method of quality assurance to help improve our ability to provide effective and adaptable transformative learning opportunities for workshop facilitators.

Methodology

Philosophical Assumption and Design

This research was grounded in ontological relativism and constructionist epistemology (Smith & Caddick, 2012) and informed by a qualitative descriptive approach (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010) with narrative overtones. These overtones are appropriate given that qualitative research “is produced not from any ‘pure’ use of a method, but from the use of methods that are variously textured, toned, and hued” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 337). Qualitative description allows the researcher to ‘stay close to the data’ and thus requires less interpretation. As such, qualitative description has strong descriptive and interpretive validity (Maxwell, 1992; Sandelowski, 2000).

Participants and Procedure

Participants were former student workshop facilitators for the teaching assistant development program in either the fall or winter orientations, or ongoing workshops throughout the year. Data was collected using a two-pronged approach. First, previous student workshop facilitators for the program were invited to participate in an anonymous online survey (hosted by Qualtrics) that asked for

information on their experiences leading workshops, the skills they developed and/or enhanced, and how they applied these skills in settings outside of their normal teaching duties. At the time of this study, the teaching assistant development program had recruited and mentored more than 80 student presenters over the course of about 10 years. However, we were only able to locate the publicly available contact information for 27 individuals given that many former workshop facilitators had graduated. These individuals were sent a recruitment email and invited to complete the online survey. Of the 27 former student workshops facilitators emailed, 15 completed survey responses. At the end of the online survey, participants were asked if they would be interested in participating in a follow-up interview. Those interested selected a link that took them to a separate survey where they provided their contact information and were then contacted shortly after for a follow-up interview. This information was in no way connected to the anonymized survey responses. Utilizing interviews following the completion of the online survey allowed us to gather more in-depth data and probe for additional information. This form of purposeful criterion sampling (Patton, 2002; Sparkes & Smith 2014) led to the selection of “information rich” participants who could share insights about our research questions (Patton, 2002; Smith & Caddick, 2012). Six of the survey respondents took part in a follow-up interview. All participants who were interviewed were current graduate students from a range of academic disciplines.

This project received clearance from the authors’ institutional Research Ethics Board. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted by the lead researchers. We began the interviews using the same questions from the online survey, but, within the context of the interview, we were able to probe for more details, greater context, and clarification. This allowed for less restriction and a natural progression of ideas and discussion topics. Responses from the online survey were used to inform interview probing. Six interviews were conducted face-to-face at a location of participants choosing and ranged from 26.19 to 43.50 minutes (m

= 33.53 minutes). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. For the purposes of data presentation and to ensure confidentiality, online survey responses are labeled 1-15, while interview responses are labeled A-F.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted as it allowed for theoretical flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six phrases of thematic analysis was used to analyze the data through:

1. Familiarization with the data;
2. Generating initial codes;
3. Searching for themes;
4. Reviewing themes;
5. Defining and naming themes; and
6. Producing the report.

This method was chosen as it allows for both inductive and deductive coding and recognizes that researchers are often informed by previous theory (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Patton, 2002).

Rigor

A relativist approach was used to select criteria to evaluate the rigorousness of our study. This approach allows researchers to select criteria that are open-ended rather than predetermined (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This ensures criteria selected align with the philosophical assumptions of the research (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Tracy (2010) highlights that sincerity, credibility, and coherence are criteria that can be used to evaluate qualitative research. Sincerity was achieved through transparency in the methodology that was employed. Credibility was illustrated through multiple-analyst triangulation as well as providing “rich descriptions” of participants’ perceptions of the skills they developed as a result of facilitating workshops. Coherence was accomplished through utilizing methodology, data collection, and data analysis

techniques grounded in the philosophical assumptions of the study (Tracy, 2010).

Results

Teaching and Facilitation Skills

Participants identified a plethora of teaching and facilitation skills that they developed while facilitating workshops for the teaching assistant development program. Specifically, participants described developing and/or enhancing their communication skills and teaching strategies as well as managing a teaching environment through creating and leading these workshops. In particular, one participant described facilitating their workshop for the teaching assistant development program as a pivotal experience and a starting point for their teaching career: “that was the first time I ever facilitated a workshop, so for me it was the beginning of my teaching career” (Interviewee D). Participants also explained that the skills they acquired benefited their own teaching. For example, Interviewee C described that through developing their workshop they created resources that they later used to be a more efficient

grader: “because of [my workshop facilitation], and because of developing a rubric that was also easier for me to mark with, it made me much more efficient [as a GA]. Not only was I providing better feedback, but I was also faster.” Interviewee C also shared the information presented in their workshop with a course instructor in order to develop a more effective rubric for a class assignment. See Table 1 for a list of the teaching and facilitation skills identified by facilitators and sample quotes.

This research was primarily exploratory and aimed at better understanding the skills student workshop facilitators were gaining through their experiences. Ultimately, it is the goal of the teaching assistant development program to be able to foster and strengthen teaching and facilitation skills noted by the participants.

Beyond the teaching-related skills acquired by student facilitators, three general themes emerged from the data that were not directly related to teaching. Specifically, having an opportunity to practice their knowledge and skills, a chance to apply this knowledge and skill outside of one's GA or TA duties, and an avenue to engage in leadership and mentorship.

Table 1

Teaching and Facilitation Skills Identified by Participants

Skill	Example
Communication	<p>“Any time you get to practice public speaking, is an opportunity for improvement. Facilitating a workshop (and the skill[s] I've learned) have definitely transferred over to speaking at events, presenting at conferences, and even guest lecturing” (Survey respondent 7).</p> <p>“Public speaking – most of my grad classes are seminar classes, so you always have a portion where you need to give a large presentation, usually about 90 minutes. Before I even started those classes I had done three workshops for the [teaching assistant development program], so speaking in front of a group of 5 people as opposed to the 30 or so I had been used to in those workshops was really easy by that point because I already knew how to use a lesson plan, I knew how to facilitate a 90-minute lecture effectively” (Interviewee E).</p>
Lesson Planning	<p>“I used a lesson plan for [a] conference presentation which my peers’ thought was really weird, but it kept me on track, and I found them really useful. I don’t really think I would have done that...yeah, [teaching certificate course] helped me learn</p>

	<p>what it was but I didn't have a lot of buy-in until I decided to use them for the [workshop] facilitations to see if they work and I liked doing it so much that now I use it for basically any presentation I have to do" (Interviewee E).</p>
Active Learning	<p>"Enhanced my presentation skills, as well as my skills in planning interactive activities" (Survey respondent 2).</p> <p>"It has assisted me in learning to be an effective teacher, both in terms of instructional practice, collaborative teaching, and deploying active learning techniques" (Survey respondent 8).</p>
Leading Discussions	<p>"Something my co-facilitator and I have continued throughout the years and adapted to other audiences I think would be the use of discussion. So, really getting into what discussion can be used for and exploring that more thoroughly" (Interviewee F)</p>
Flexibility and Adaptability	<p>"The workshops helped me to be more flexible in my delivery of talks to audiences which varied in size. You don't know ahead of time with the workshops if you will have 5 or 25+ attendees" (Survey respondent 6).</p> <p>"I think the experience has helped me to anticipate the kinds of questions new GA/TAs may have and to adapt my workshops to their needs" (Survey respondent 15).</p>
Time Management	<p>"during facilitation, you always think you're going to be able to do this, this, this, this and this. But you develop skills to put in backups... so I think time management, giving it, but also just...[knowing], okay, that's unrealistic to even try to do all that...so I think you definitely get better at time management" (Interviewee C).</p>
Use of Scholarly Literature	<p>"A skill that I've developed... specifically with delivering the workshops is my comfort level with the SoTL language...I found having to prep for the workshops, that just becoming more immersed with the literature and the language was something that was really helpful for me, and that I could bring back... when working as a [GA]" (Interviewee A).</p> <p>"when I was not only using these strategies in the workshop or promoting them, I needed to look to the literature to see ... which conditions they might be effective. So that was a skill that I relied on was using literature" (Interviewee B).</p>
Co-facilitating	<p>"Most of the workshops that I did were with a partner and that was new for me... I'm the type of person that likes to do things alone, but I actually had a really great experience working with my co-facilitators and I found that they brought so many new insights and ideas and different types of energy and that was really cool" (Interviewee E).</p> <p>"I'm not a huge group work person...so I found facilitating ... made me a lot more comfortable working with somebody else and... trusting other people... I felt like I was more able to not micromanage" (Interviewee C).</p>

Opportunity to Practice

Participants consistently described facilitating workshops for the teaching assistant development program as an important opportunity to practice new and existing teaching skills. For example, Interviewee A highlighted that “giving workshops kind of gave me a space to...test [interactive activities] out so I would try different ideas.” They also stressed that their facilitation provided a unique environment that allowed them to practice in front of their peers: “I’m really grateful to have gotten to facilitate because I think it does really help practicing in front of your actual peers” (Interviewee A). Similarly, another participant responded that their facilitation allowed them to reflect on best practices as a GA: “It’s helped me to connect more with what I believe makes a good GA. I get to preach, and then practice what I preach! It’s a good opportunity for me to check in and reflect on how I think I’m doing as the kind of GA I want to be” (Survey respondent 14). Multiple survey responses supported the important role the teaching assistant development program workshops had in allowing facilitators to practice their teaching skills: “I was able to pilot and implement teaching strategies in the... workshops that I use in my roles as a sessional instructor and when I have to guest lecture as a GA” (Survey respondent 4).

These opportunities to practice often allowed facilitators to become more confident and comfortable in their departmental teaching roles. Interviewee E explained that the skills they learned presenting for the teaching assistant development program allowed them to be more comfortable in front of students. This increased confidence helped them as a GA responsible for leading labs: “Last semester I had to run three 1-hour labs every week...because I had already done [this as a workshop facilitator] I was super comfortable getting up in front of this room of 30 first year [students]... I already had so much experience with the [teaching assistant development program] so that was really helpful.” Initially, we may have underestimated the value and importance of providing a safe environment within the context of their peers for students to develop,

practice, and employ their skills which they can then transfer to engagements outside of our institution.

Transfer of Skills Outside of GA and TA Duties

We were pleased to observe that participants were utilizing many of the skills they developed as workshop facilitators in capacities outside of their formal teaching. This included their career, academic and non-academic presentations, and volunteer experiences. Interviewee D explained that the co-facilitating skills they developed prepared them to interact and work with new people at their job: “... co-facilitating helped to prepare me for my work outside of academia, since I was often asked to pair with new people because of my presentation skills.” Similarly, another participant explained that they were able to use their facilitation experience within their internship:

I would say that [facilitating workshops] is most directly applicable in terms of my internship. Part of what I had to do was develop training material and then train all the staff in a somewhat large agency—I trained about 200 people in small groups. So, I used all the skills like planning, learning objectives, incorporating different activities using active learning. (Interviewee F)

Multiple participants highlighted that they were able to transfer the skills they developed facilitating workshops to other settings where they were required to speak publicly: “The workshops have helped prepare me to present [at] three different conferences as a PhD student and as a group facilitator in my role as a community counsellor” (Survey respondent 4). Another participant illustrated that facilitating workshops allowed them to take the skills and topics they had presented about and share them with other people following their workshop. Specifically,

Interviewee A explained how they were able to teach others the importance of lesson planning:

I've had to co-present with people from [a community organization]... [and]...going back to the lesson planning, integrating that into it because we had a 75-minute time chunk and I know that this person could talk for a really long time. So, I had everything laid out like by the minute and it was really great because that was one of my goals to stay on time and we did because we stuck to the lesson plan. So, I think using those skills and then sharing them with other co presenters [is important].

Interviewee C discussed that their workshop changed their mindset and approach to providing criticism to others. Specifically, they explained that after volunteering for a poorly organized event, they intentionally crafted a response to the event organizers that was informed by the principles of effective feedback that they learned through creating their workshop on this topic:

normally I... would have sent a 'quote unquote' nasty email and [said] you wasted my time... but telling them it sucked wouldn't have helped...so I was actually able to write an email that hopefully was a lot more helpful to them in terms of running a better event next year.

These results suggest that having the opportunity to facilitate teaching and learning workshops can prepare students with the competency and “soft skills” that they can use in various facets of their personal and professional lives.

Leadership and Mentorship

Multiple participants described that their experience, and the skill set they developed and/or enhanced through leading workshops allowed them to be

teaching and learning champions in their own departments and mentor other student instructors: “students from my program that were participants in one (or more) of my workshops have approached me to ask for additional information/advice on GAing” (Survey respondent 14). Another participant described themselves as “a leader, a go-to person when other GAs had questions” (Survey respondent 1).

One participant described that they were able to use their workshop experience to support the GA that was assigned to a course they were teaching:

“when I had my own GA assigned... I was able to bring... my experience with the [teaching development program] workshops to hopefully provide something that was meaningful for my GA... I think it really helped with the relationship that we had because she could tell right away that I wasn't just going to throw all my marking at her. I wanted her to be active in the classroom. I allowed her to teach a lesson in the class. So, I think that the workshops just helped me to be a good supervisor of a GA” (Interviewee B).

These findings suggest that the teaching assistant development program contributes to building leadership capacity and pedagogical knowledge sharing.

Discussion

The results of the investigation suggest that the teaching assistant development program at the University of Windsor has been instrumental in helping students to build their competence and capacity for a variety of skills, among which include leadership, communication, and collaboration. An investigation into Graduate Student Professional Development across Canada purported findings that resembled our own. Specifically, they found that various topics were associated with transferable skills

and competencies, such as leadership and team building, communicating with different audiences, and time management (Rose, 2013). Moreover, Rose (2013) lists several strategies in which graduate students can acquire and demonstrate leadership skills, including: taking an active role in interdisciplinary workshops and teaching, participating in intellectual communities across disciplines and specializations, demonstrating knowledge beyond their own disciplines, honing the ability to communicate to interdisciplinary audiences, developing collaborative interpersonal skills, and seizing upon leadership opportunities within and beyond their programs. Many of these are listed among the competencies that students built and enhanced as workshop leaders for the teaching assistant development program. Furthermore, the development program also provides outlets (e.g., mentoring, collaborating and workshop facilitation) for students to develop these skills in alignment with the strategies proposed by Rose (2013).

While preliminary, these findings indicate that the efforts of the teaching assistant development program are indeed making an impact on the development of transferable skills, particularly those associated with leadership. Moving forward, we intend to maintain the approach of interviewing and surveying both new and experienced facilitators on an on-going basis. In this way, we uphold our quality assurance objectives, first to assess the impact, then to determine how to best support these students in their professional development, and finally to enhance the culture related to teaching and learning on campus. Further, we anticipate that this model can be used to develop student skills beyond our institution and may be adapted to fit the needs of other programs and organizations hoping to achieve similar goals.

It is difficult to accurately measure the transferability of higher-level skills, such as the ability to effectively communicate complex information to laymen (McWilliam & Singh, 2002; Porter & Phelps, 2014). However, findings from this research study suggest that student workshop facilitators do perceive the skills they are developing and enhancing as

applicable to other contexts and valuable to their professional endeavors. Nevertheless, since engagement within the program is voluntary, it may have been the case that the students who chose to facilitate workshops were already eager to engage in professional development opportunities, and thus, may have had better outcomes because of their predisposed interest in improving and developing their knowledge and skills.

An additional limitation of the study included the inability to contact all former student workshop facilitators. As such, there were restrictions in the assessment due to the constrained pool of former presenters. Nevertheless, while there may be a limited ability to measure the impact of these instructional interventions beyond assessing student perceptions, these experiences remain highly valued by students who worry about post-graduate life and who find comfort in gathering practical strategies through their exposure (Porter & Phelps, 2014). While mainly targeting teaching assistants, the teaching assistant development program is a resource for all those at our institution that are interested in teaching and learning more generally. Beyond offering valuable opportunities to develop and practice various skills, the program works to foster a deeper sense of belonging and engagement for students across campus. This type of interactive support can provide a notable impact on the quality of education on campus in several ways. For instance, students develop increased awareness and application of teaching and learning scholarship and practices, which can result in a growth of discipline-specific resources to draw on for future workshops and training. While cultivating accountability and professionalism, there is also the prospect of improved partnerships between students and their peers, faculty, and the teaching assistant development program. Furthermore, students get access to more support and networking opportunities. Through engagement in mentorship opportunities like those provided by the teaching assistant development program, students can enhance their knowledge and craft, strengthen their communication and teaching skills, and garner significant personal enjoyment

(Reddick et al., 2012). Together, these findings suggest that the teaching assistant development program has been able to provide unique avenues for students to build both their confidence and capacity throughout their time at our institution. We are optimistic that other institutions can integrate these approaches in their own campus programs to further the impact that can be had on graduate and undergraduate students.

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