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Teaching and Learning Centre Case Study #1 -

Government/Philosophy Graduate Teaching Assistant Away Day

The Teaching and Learning Centre offers a New Academic Staff Induction Programme in September, and various workshops throughout the year. Departments also have their own way of getting new members of the team prepared for their teaching. But there's always room for more engagement, at a Departmental level.



Here, Alex Marcoci and Diana Popescu discuss how they organised an Away Day for graduate teaching assistants from the Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method and the Department of Government. Both Diana and Alex are Fellows and teach on *GV100 An Introduction to Political Theory*. The Away Day was organised as a means of giving GTAs a meaningful induction into teaching and as a means of sharing ideas, insights and issues. The funding came from the LSE Teaching and Learning Development Fund and from contributions from the two departments, but the will to make a difference came from Diana and Alex.

The idea was to get all the GTAs from the two departments off the hallowed turf of the LSE for an afternoon, and give them some insider information on teaching from established School academics. GTAs got the chance to hear ideas and suggestions from academics, technologists from Learning Technology and Innovations and staff from the Teaching and Learning Centre, who shared their real-life experiences of the teaching and learning dynamic. In the end, almost all the GTAs from the two departments attended and a range of LSE teachers gave up their time and experience.

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It wasn't easy to get this many people in the same place at the same time but the event was a real success. GTAs got the chance to discuss and examine pragmatic approaches to teaching and they got the chance to form supportive networks for the years ahead. But the emphasis wasn't just on practical issues – the relationship between mental wellbeing and teaching was also explored. As Diana put it:

A lot of people say that they feel much more confident after that Away Day, and I think that's also because the academics tend to be more open and honest, willing to share their more difficult experiences ... it's that kind of honesty, that reassurance that's helpful. And people have reached out to us saying that now we've established this working together, let's do even more in collaboration. A lot of people like the social aspect of staying for drinks after the official schedule is over.



The Away Day took place in the Freud Museum on 1 September 2016, a venue which Alex and Diana thought would have a lot of interest for the GTAs in attendance, as well as being suitable for varied discussion, weather-flexible (with a covered garden) and fairly cheap to hire. They are considering using larger venues in future, partly for space and partly for variety – many GTAs like to return to the Away Days for a second or even third year, which has benefits for the less experienced GTAs in Q and A sessions.

With the new *Education Strategy 2015-2020*, the LSE has placed emphasis on teaching as core part of the triad of academia – we are not just an institution that finds the causes of things, we also prepare the next generation to find the causes of things. But organising how education can be developed takes time and effort. Clearly having some funding helped give Alex and Diana the chance to organise the Away Day so that it could get the respect due, but it also helped to have some key departmental figures onboard. As Alex tells us:

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Some GTAs also think teaching can't be 'taught' or improved by training – they often go into sessions just thinking of it as a tickbox exercise, in case something goes wrong, to point at - I had the impression that people are a bit more engaged, when they have academics they respect, research-wise, coming in and talking to them about teaching, because they sense it's more serious, these important researchers coming in and talking to us about teaching. This leads to easier adoption of improvements by GTAs.



Diana and Alex suggested that having a venue to meet and hear informed insight from academics who see the benefits of teaching for their students and for their own professional development was a real benefit. The GTAs involved felt that this was a valuable learning experience and better skilled teachers should lead to better learning outcomes for the students. But the benefits were not just educational – the informal venue gave GTAs a chance to open up and see that the problems they faced were often shared by others and that obstacle are easier to overcome if we use our collegial strengths and insights. The real success of the Away Day was that it helped build a supportive network of GTAs who are engaged with the teaching/learning environment.

We are sure that the students of the Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method and the Department of Government will be the real beneficiaries of this intervention and it is always good practice to share good ideas. So, if you are thinking about running your own Away Day to help enhance the quality of teaching in your department then Alex and Diana have some words of wisdom:

I think the mentality needs to change. One cannot be worried about the NSS scores, while at the same time being cynical about the value of offering more teaching training to your GTAs. So get involved!

It wouldn't harm to apply for some funding too!