

Example Four – Teaching MSc Students: Navigating the near-peer boundary and perceived authority

Across my higher education employment, the most common course I have taught is statistics and R (programming language) at Masters level. One particular personal teaching challenge that I have reflected on extensively is navigating the near-peer teaching boundary when the students perceive me (correctly or otherwise) as their junior in age. To contextualise, this sort of demonstrating typically involves classes of 50+ students, working at computers, following guides and question sheets, with roaming demonstrators at hand to tackle questions. These practical sessions conflate teaching the concepts and application of statistics with programming in the R language, with students rarely being confident at both. This combined focus, and the complexity of statistics widely adopted across ecology and environmental sciences, creates a fairly unique teaching paradigm which can be difficult to advise upon from more general sources – a problem recognised throughout STEM, where a balance must be struck between acknowledging the unique demands of topic-specific teaching and not succumbing to myopic views of how to teach (Skelton, 2004).

In dealing with students who are likely to perceive me as near-peer, I have often relied on the admission that R & stats is a necessary evil, and that I only enjoy it after being forced to learn the program well during employment, citing difficulties in grasping the subject during my taught degree. From my perception of student attitudes and unsolicited feedback from students, this informal, pragmatic admission seems successful. However a subset of students – mature students studying for Masters degrees – as a rule struggle more with these modules and do not seem responsive to this personal narrative tactic. Replies to encouragement often refer indirectly to age – e.g. “*Its hard to pick this up at my age*”, “*I’m too old to learn this new stuff*”, “*I didn’t grow up with this technology like you did*”. Unwillingness to learn is often cited as a common frustration amongst new lecturers dealing with (younger) students (Barlow and Antoniou, 2007), however there is little discussion of the reverse situation. I’ve discussed this with many of my peers as well as some mentors, although am conscious that amongst the PTAs I am relatively young and perceptibly younger than reality, making it harder to find similar experiences. Part of the issue is certainly my lower confidence in dealing with learners who are significantly older than I am, with extensive career experience, as it disarms my usual tactics of framing programming and statistics as a major help when applying for future career steps (despite this remaining true).

I have not yet finished tackling this challenge, although replacing my own personal narratives with discussion of the lecturers who had to adapt to new technologies has been a successful improvement. It will be difficult to say whether time and experience lead to better solutions to the problem, or if simply being older and with more experience will change the student-teacher paradigm and remove the problem.

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Barlow, J., Antoniou, M., 2007. Room for improvement: the experiences of new lecturers in higher education. *Innov. Educ. Teach. Int.* 44, 67–77.

Skelton, A., 2004. Understanding “teaching excellence” in higher education: a critical evaluation of the National Teaching Fellowships Scheme. *Stud. High. Educ.* 29, 451–468.

Other Information

Having taught in Higher Education formally for over two years, with a will to continue doing so for the rest of my career, this application feels fitting to the experience and intention I have. It provides a remit for me to set aside time alongside my research to reflect and develop my skills in outreach, learning support and active teaching – something I am fortunate in not having to defend verbally to my supervisors, but would value when speaking with Doctoral Training Programmes. I have focussed on gaining as broad a teaching experience as possible to best understand what teaching in my discipline fully involves – for example, the BES residential field course, an opportunity my department doesn’t provide. Formal accreditation as a result of these efforts would then allow me to seek out ‘higher levels’ of experience, with opportunities to teach entire modules during my time as a visiting researcher at [REDACTED] (soon to commence). Further, I respect the efforts made by my institution to pioneer reflective teaching practice across all levels of teaching, and consider applications to ASPIRE to be a mutual benefit for both myself and University of Exeter.