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# Teaching Assistants – a hit or a miss: The development of a teaching assistant programme to support academic staff at a university

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## Abstract

*Access and equity have long been fundamental concepts underpinning transformation in higher education. Increased student enrolments necessitated the implementation of support structures to bolster student success. However, support provision for academic staff is often overlooked when prioritising student success. In this article, we examine the need for academic support structures in relation to student success from the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. We argue the merits of a Teaching Assistant (TA) programme to address issues related to equity of access and success by highlighting the experiences of TAs and academic staff in what can be considered constraining university structures. Based on qualitative participatory principles we collected data by means of a World Café. The paper concludes with the significant contribution made by TAs to academic staff support in addressing the challenge of equity of access and success when working collaboratively. Universities are encouraged to strengthen academic staff development through initiatives that support lecturers in creating spaces for closer student staff engagement, enhancing teaching and learning in the process.*

**Keywords:** *teaching assistant, discipline-specific tutorial, World Café, collaboration*

## 1. Introduction

South African universities, despite providing access to a broader base of students with varying levels of preparedness, continue to face numerous critical transformation challenges. These challenges include addressing institutional cultures that have remained relatively unchanged and dealing with academic staff development needs through the provision of academic support (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015). Aligned to the transformational principles contained in the Education White Paper 3 (Department of Education, 1997), universities have implemented staff and student academic development programmes to address issues of equity and redress in higher education. Despite these developments, the recent student protests of 2015-2017 in higher education renewed the call for more meaningful

engagements between academic staff and students with regard to curriculum development and academic support programmes at universities.

A review of the literature on the evolution of staff and student development programmes in higher education focus on the need to improve the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning in higher education (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007). However, with widened access and an increase in student numbers, the pressure on academic staff to be involved in research and publication in the face of reduced funding has led to a need for additional academic support (Knott, Crane, Heslop, Glass, 2015). This was recognised by Boughey (2007: 3) who suggested that institutional development focus on “systemic and institutional efficiency” to support teaching and learning. However, Badat (2010) contends that inadequate state funding could be a barrier to such development placing staff academic support programmes at risk. This issue was raised in a recent report by the Council of Higher Education (CHE, 2016: 67) which emphasised the need to understand how academic staff can be supported to effect systemic change. Quinn (2012) highlights the need for more appropriate structures and material resources in higher education institutions (HEIs) to support academic staff.

A crucial part of academic support structures is the development of tutorial programmes. Faroa (2017) points out that tutoring programmes are a central part of a university’s teaching-learning process. Underhill, Clarence-Fincham and Petersen (2014) notes that an increase in engagement between academic staff and tutors most times result in what can be referred to as a reciprocal collaborative mentorship. While extensive research has been conducted on tutorial programmes (Clarence, 2016, Topping, 1996; Layton & McKenna, 2016), very little research has been conducted on the development of Teaching Assistant (TA) programmes as a form of academic support structure in the teaching and learning process.

In this paper, we explore the multiple benefits of a Teaching Assistant programme and the impact it had on teaching and learning. We build on the work of D’Andrea and Gosling (2005) and Duthie and Freeman (2016) who refer to the role and role relationship and the benefits of TAs as a form of academic support for academic staff. These authors argue that TA programmes creates the space for academic staff to be more responsive to the academic development needs of students. They further add that TA programmes facilitate the development of academic discourses among students. This paper broadens the debate on the role of TAs by discussing the experiences of TAs and academic staff in their attempt to provide quality access and effective teaching and learning environments for students. We argue that collaboration between TAs and academic staff and the consequent rethinking of academic arrangements, to adapt teaching and learning practices, is central to the development of a TA programme. We further argue that TA programmes opens up the possibility of addressing the systemic and institutional change within teaching and learning programmes at universities.

We relied on the ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner (1995, 2000) to unpack the multi-dimensions that academic staff and TAs have to navigate. This ecological theory allowed us to focus on the bidirectional interactions that take place at a micro level within the context of the discipline as well as the broader university structure. Within these dimensions, identifying the conditions needed for such a collaboration to thrive became important to understand. We examine these conditions and the crucial role it played in the experience of academic staff and TAs in the Teaching Assistant (TA) programme and the impact it had on teaching and learning to address issues related to equity of access and success.

## **2. The context of the study**

The TA programme emerged from the Fundani Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) at CPUT in South Africa. The centre provides academic support to staff and students. Within this centre, we provide tutorial training to undergraduate students. In 2012, an evaluation of the tutorial training programme (Hassan, 2015) was conducted to address the lack of information regarding the impact of tutorials on the performance of students across the institution. The report suggested two aspects to be addressed to assess the impact of the tutorials. (1) There was an over-emphasis on generic training at the expense of discipline-specific tutor training. (2) There was a lack of training for academic staff in the management of tutors and tutorials.

A further two recommendations emerged from the evaluation: firstly, a need for post-tutorial training for tutors within disciplines, and secondly, academic staff required additional support to develop their tutorials. The TA programme emerged from this evaluation as an academic support mechanism to assist academic staff in departments with their teaching and learning programmes. The programme was conceptualised through an extension dialogic process with departments and faculties that allowed us to think differently about the development and implementation of the programme. Southwood (2012) refers to this dialogical orientation as a means to reconsider the traditional approaches to teaching and learning and to open the possibility to new ways of thinking. The broad consultation provided insight into the academic support staff needs. We developed the discipline-specific tutorial training (DSTP) programme for TAs and academic staff to address the needs identified. The DSTP was conceptualised as a joint training of TAs and academic staff to encourage open dialogue and engagement through sharing of ideas and experiences. The programme was arranged in this manner to disrupt the long held traditional spaces held by staff and students with clear power differentials and instead to reconsider the roles and relationships between the two. Through the joint training a dialogic space (Southwood, 2012) created an opportunity to reimagine a new pathway to teaching and learning characterised by participation, reflection, interrogation, construction and negotiation (Southwood, 2012).

## **3. Theoretical framework**

Bronfenbrenner's (1993, 2005) ecological theory provides a useful analytical framework to examine the development of the TA programme and the possibilities that this type of support offers to academic staff and postgraduate students. His theory allows us to see the broader institutional and external factors that impact of the TA programme. Bronfenbrenner (1993, 2005) focuses on the bidirectional interaction between person, environment, people, objects and symbols over an extended period of time. He (2005: 97) suggests that the development of educational programmes is a "sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment". This is referred to as the process, person, context and time model (PPCT). PPCT includes four interacting concepts that form the basis for the theory. He regards 'process' as one of the key bidirectional concepts in explaining the 'interactions of the person in the immediate environment, which Bronfenbrenner refers to as proximal processes. These proximal processes occur within the TAs' and academic staffs' ecological contexts, which comprise micro, meso, exo and macrosystems. By examining the experiences of TAs and academic staff within the framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system we are able to highlight the constraints and enabling factors within the teaching and

learning institutional infrastructure in which academic staff and TAs engage in. We focus on these various contexts in the next section.

#### **4. Reconsidering traditional lecturer and student roles**

The student movement (2015-2017) heightened the need for the relational dimension (micro-level) between academic staff and students to be reconsidered. Included in the student protest, was the call for deeper engagement between staff and students in academic support structures and curriculum development. At this micro level the individual is the most important part of the ecosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005: 148). Microsystems in higher education have mostly been characterised by long held traditional patterns of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person (student) in a given face-to-face setting (classroom) with particular material and physical features and containing other persons with distinctive characteristics, personalities, and systems of belief (Bronfenbrenner, 2005: 148). These patterns of activities, personalities and systems of belief were the central focus of student protest, reflecting the deep inequalities that continue to exist in post-apartheid higher education. Despite the significant strides made by the transformational agenda for equity of access, the achievement of success remains evasive, with the high dropout and low throughput rates (Ramrathan & Pillay, 2015).

To address this challenge, Cook-Sather (2014) urges higher education institutions to move away from these traditional roles of lecturer and student, toward recognising students as partners in the teaching and learning process, as well as being involved in 'pedagogical practice' (p. 187). For this to be realised, advancing democratic values in teaching and learning would be necessary (Bergmark & Westman, 2016). This shift requires an academic culture, in which diverse perspectives are valued and multiple voices included. In this study, the personal characteristics were regarded as significant in terms of social interactions between academic staff, TAs in an environment underpinned by the intention to advance democratic values in teaching and learning (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). For staff and students to engage authentically, an openness towards diverse perspectives, moving between knowledge, knowers and the unknown (Gustavsson, 2009) was essential. The TAs, as senior postgraduate students who have discipline-specific knowledge, bring to the programme their own experiences of the course and department. Academic staff are traditionally considered as part of the university structure and interact with TAs regularly on this premise.

Bronfenbrenner suggests that recognition of personal characteristics have the ability to change environments. Central to this model is the person or people whose actions and choices are influenced by their educational background and experience, emphasising that learning takes place in a social and physical context where personal experiences and the whole human being are considered. Similarly, Deleuze (2004) noted that this view of education is depicted by "mutual and intertwined relationships, whether social, discursive, or material, such a view places high expectations on the students' abilities and willingness to contribute, collaborate, and take action in their education. Bronfenbrenner's (2004) ecosystem in which academic staff and TA develop connections and linkages consists of a network of interpersonal relationships that overlap across the various settings in the DSTP. Within this ecosystem, Lewthwaite (2011) suggests are the beliefs and practices of the mesosystem that influences the development processes in the microsystems.

The exosystem does not directly affect individuals; rather, it consists of connections with a setting “which does not contain the developing person but in which events occur that indirectly influence processes within the immediate setting” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994: 40). The exosystem constitutes the more distal influences, including the structure of the university where the person is located and settings where the person is not directly involved (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This would include the influences of the university administration and strategic units such as Fundani CHED, student affairs and research units at the university. The macrosystem consists of the “overarching pattern of the micro, meso and exosystem characteristic of a given subculture or culture” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994: 40). The macrosystem is a combination of ideological, institutional systems and external influences that shape a culture (Killian 2004). This indicates that higher education policies and broader university structures and systems influence individuals in an environment.

Time has a prominent place in this developmental model, constituted across the three levels: micro, meso, and macro. The time element suggests the time spent across the various environments: micro, meso and macro. This refers to face-to-face consultations between academic staff and TAs, meetings and interactions with students over a period of time, as well as shifting expectations at the university. Bronfenbrenner’s (1993, 2005) model is helpful to explain the experiences of TAs and academic staff working collaboratively as it will assist in elucidating the systems and structures they confront to be able to work collaboratively with academic staff. Lewthwaite (2011: 10) suggests that Bronfenbrenner’s framework of analysis enables us to consider the “way in which individuals and external forces interplay to influence development” (Bronfenbrenner (1993, 2005). Bronfenbrenner’s theory thus provides a suitable lens to understand the experiences of academic staff and TAs within the teaching and learning system at the university. By using his theoretical framework, we are able to examine some of the underlying factors within the teaching and learning ecological system that constrain and enable the development of teaching and learning support programmes.

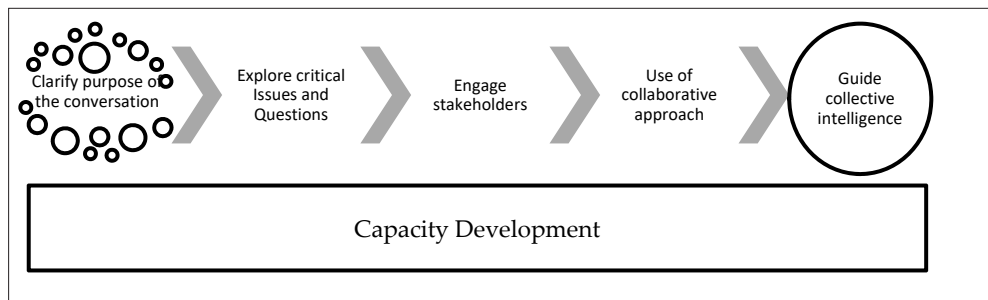
## **5. Methodology and design**

A qualitative participatory research method was adopted for this study to determine the experiences of academic staff and TAs working collaboratively in the DSTP. A fundamental principle of this approach required a democratic social and political context (Berghold & Thomas, 2012). The nature of participatory research relies on openness from participants to share and disclose personal views of their experience. Traditionally, within a higher education context, academic staff and students often do not interact on this level, because of the power differential that exists. However, participatory research specifically seeks to highlight different opinions and view to create new understanding and knowledge through the process of discovery. The World Café approach was decided on to explore the experiences of TAs and academic staff on the TA programme. According to Jorgenson and Steier (2013), the World Café fulfilled the purpose of constructing an alternative space or dialogic ‘container’ in which the usual routines and authority structures are suspended. It further provided the opportunity to develop collaborative ways of exploring key questions related to the support TAs provided academic staff at the university. The World Cafe approach was thus suitable in addressing the power relations between Academic Staff and postgraduate students.

The World Café method is grounded in the process of (1) clarifying the purpose of the conversation, which was to establish the collaborative experiences of TAs, (2) exploring critical issues and questions which focused on the challenges and successes of TAs, (3) engaging

key stakeholders such as academic staff and TAs, directors, and teaching and learning coordinators, (4) using collaborative social approach such as the World Café method that focuses on the physical and social space to encourage collaborative learning (Hurley & Brown, 2009), (5) guiding collective intelligence towards effective action which results in improving collaborative relationships between academic staff and TAs, and (6) fostering innovation capacity development that harnesses the skills, knowledge and personal qualities of TAs and academic staff. Academic staff and TAs who attended the DSTP training were invited to participate in the in the TWC. Structured collective conversations took place as a focused group discussion which aimed to equalise the power relationships between participants in order to understand and learn from multiple points of view (Slocum, 2003).

Figure 1 depicts the World Café process that was adopted as our research design (Hurley & Brown, 2009).



**Figure 1: World Café process**

The World Café has been described by Koen, Du Plessis and Koen (2015) as an effective, qualitative data-collection technique that combines interviewing, drawings and narratives, making time available to reflect on what group members have shared, which creates a form of member checking.

Based on this process, a café ambience was created in which participants discussed a central question or issue in small groups around the café tables. At regular intervals participants moved to a new table to address a different question. One table host remained and summarised the previous conversation which was captured on a flipchart to share with new table guests. The summaries recorded on the flipchart paper were included as research data. The conversations thus were cross-fertilised with the ideas generated in former conversations with other participants. To address the overall research question, the participants were asked to reflect on the following questions at the World Café:

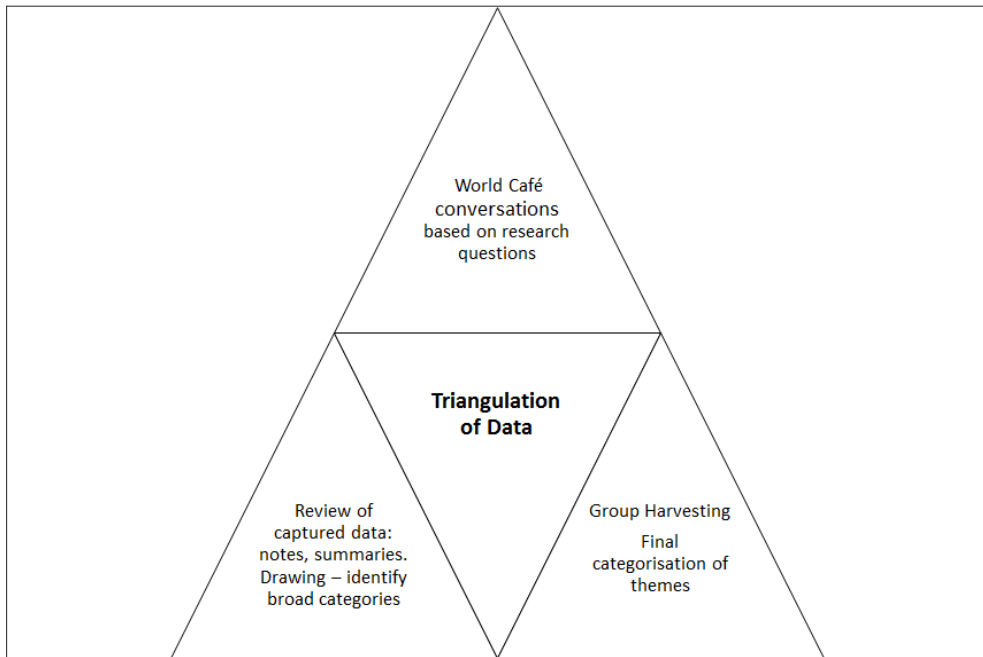
Question 1: What collaborative examples can you share of roaring successes or catastrophic failures? What conditions supported or impeded you in your doing great work?

Question 2: What are tensions, dilemmas, and challenges you face as you work collaboratively?

Question 3: What are the required values and leadership practices that would help build a stronger culture of collaboration?

Question 4: How would you describe the impact of the TA initiative in the subject/ department/ faculty?

At the end of the process, the main ideas were summarised in a plenary session and follow-up possibilities were discussed as a group to elicit the “collective intelligence” from the participants (Hurley & Brown, 2009). Figure 2 depicts the World Café data process adapted from Koen et al., 2015.



**Figure 2: World Café data process**

The research design enabled a joint dialogue between academic staff and TAs about their own personal collaborative experiences. The intention was not only to draw on a rich diversity of opinion, but that ideas are cross-pollinated through exposure to a broad range of perspectives and to engage constructively in meaningful conversations (Brown, 2002). A second central assumption of the World Café is that wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges resides within the individuals who are actively engaged in the programme (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). The objective of the World Café is to create the appropriate context to assist participants in accessing this deeper knowledge, providing the opportunity to contribute their wisdom and creativity to the collective (Brown, 2002). To enhance the rigour and trustworthiness of the data, member checks were included as part of the harvesting process. This process allowed for participants to verify the information shared at the individual discussion tables in comparison with the notes captured by the host. Through this triangulation process, we were able to validate the data during the harvesting process.

## 6. Ethical considerations

Prior to the commencement of the research project, an application for ethical clearance was submitted to CPUT. Full informed consent was obtained from participants prior to the study, thereby ensuring their protection and privacy. Participatory research relies on the openness of participants to share their opinions and in some cases dissenting views. To ensure that a

credible, trustworthy and safe space was created, we included “rules of engagement” where participants were encouraged to, focus on what matters, contribute to thinking, speak mind and heart, listen to understand, link and connect ideas and listen together for deeper insights and questions. Adherence to the principles is fundamental to the World Café and extends the ethical considerations in order to maintain a respectful space to enhance conversation (Fouché & Light, 2011). Being aware of the power differentials between academic staff and students, participants were encouraged to find collective solutions to the challenges that emerged from the dialogue. Throughout the research process, including the reporting of data, confidentiality was maintained. The compliance requirements as stipulated by the institution were met and the necessary ethical clearance received.

## 7. Recruitment of participants

A convenience sampling was selected for the World Cafe and invitations to attend were sent to academic staff and TAs who participated in the discipline-specific tutorial training programme. The relevant stakeholders included one director, nine academic staff, one teaching and learning coordinator and eight other administrative staff and student assistants. In total 19 TAs participated in the World Café. A distribution of the faculties represented is presented below with 38 participants attending the World Café. As the discipline-specific programme was fairly new, not all faculties were equally represented as the programme had not been implemented to the same extent. The Faculty of Business and Management Sciences and the Faculty of Engineering are the largest two faculties at the University of Technology, which could account for the representation in Table 1.

**Table 1: Faculty representation**

Faculties/Units	Number	
Applied Sciences	1	2.6%
Business and Management Sciences	7	18.0%
Education	1	2.6%
Engineering	22	58.0%
Health and Wellness Sciences	1	2.6%
Strategic Units	6	16.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>100%</b>

## 8. Data analysis

The World Café is a type of storytelling that takes place through facilitated meaningful conversations, capturing of thoughts through pictures, drawings, doodles, summaries, keywords and phrases. A qualitative thematic analysis was used to organise the data. Before analysis could begin, all data generated from the facilitated discussions, texts captured notes and summaries were transcribed. Once completed the transcripts were then collated and thematically analysed following the steps proposed by Clarke and Braun (2018). A fully qualitative, thematic analysis was most suited, this meant that researcher subjectivity was considered as a resource in the analysis of data, reflexivity and the situated and contextual



meaning are fundamental to the analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2018; Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013; Koen *et al.*, 2015). By reviewing the raw data, such as flipchart papers, pictures and summaries, keywords and phrases, we identified patterns that led to themes that explained the collaborative experiences of TAs (Bloor & Wood, 2006). Thirty-four sheets of data were collected and recorded using ATLAS.Ti. The themes that emerged from the data analysis were the 1) relational aspects developed through the experiences of successful collaborative mentoring in the TA programme and 2) experiences of 'tensions' and collaborative challenges in the TA programme. In the next section, we focus on these two themes that emerged from the data analysis.

## 9. Roles and relationships: Experiences of successful collaborative mentoring in the TA programme

The first theme we identified was the successful collaborative interactions between academic staff and TAs. Finch and Fernández (2014) and Keith and Moore (1995: 201) suggest that academic staff have a significant role to play in preparing teaching assistants as future academics and scholars, by “[enhancing] teaching assistants’ experience of the programme, [increasing] their professional confidence and [encouraging] levels of engagement in the discipline”.

We defined collaborative relations with academic staff as supportive interactions between academic staff members and teaching assistants towards a common goal. Similarly, Bronfenbrenner (2005) and Lewis, Ross and Holden (2012: 695) suggest that collaboration “relies on interpersonal networks—sets of interactions between individuals—which can take many forms”. Our research shows that the values the participants expressed in relation to their academic responsibilities were core to the collaborative interactions in the academic environment. Academic staff and TAs in the faculties identified values such as *enthusiasm, work ethic, open-mindedness, confidence, accountability, trust, creativity and being supportive* as crucial to their collaborative interactions in departments and faculties. This advances a very different notion of student engagement one in which academic staff and TAs are open to each other and intra-act (Barad, 2007) within the discipline to improve teaching and learning. In a sense, a collaboration of this type can be described as a form of student engagement, where partnership is forged between the academic staff member and the TA with traditional roles and relationships rearranged (Bergmark & Westman, 2016).

An example of this rearrangement could be seen in a form of reverse mentoring; lecturers were able to learn new skills to improve their own technological skills and in doing so enhanced the delivery of their teaching and learning in the programme. This is congruent with the reverse mentoring proposed by Murphy (2012) occurs when a younger, junior employee as the mentor shares knowledge with an older, senior colleague as the mentee. Meister and Willyerd (2010) suggests that the skills acquired by academic staff are technical knowledge, current trends, cross-cultural perspectives and insight into the student generation. This is the opposite relationship structure to traditional mentoring relationships. Here, the process of mentoring becomes a reciprocal relationship that benefits the mentor, who otherwise may be disadvantaged in terms of time and opportunity costs. Reverse mentoring resulted in TAs and academic staff working in a supportive capacity to develop creative teaching strategies.

One of the striking aspects of the collaborative engagement was the positive contribution that TAs made to education technologies, advanced computer skills, social media tools, and

online platforms. As indicated by a lecturer: *TAs introduced education technologies to the teaching and learning environment*. Evidence of this was found in the establishment of online platforms such as WhatsApp for students to engage with academic staff and TAs in a chat room environment. Through these platforms the TAs were able to identify that students struggled with the learner management system, Blackboard, and needed support in navigating the system. The TAs thus *assisted students in using Blackboard more effectively*. Online channels of communication such as this improved communication between the TAs, academic staff and student body. The chat rooms *extended the availability and access of academic staff beyond class time* and were deemed a useful additional resource by students. Considering a rethinking of the traditional roles of academic staff and TAs (Cooke-Sather, 2014) *journaling was central as a collaborative exercise*. In one of the departments TAs were required to submit a weekly journal reflecting on their experiences in the TA programme. Academic staff, in turn, gave regular feedback to TAs. Journaling was not only seen as an effective communication tool, but also as a form of reflective practice for academic staff and TAs in the process of collaboration. The reflections allowed academic staff and TAs to breakdown traditionally held hierarchical structures through co-creating new teaching practices to support student learning within the programme (Bergmark & Westman, 2016). Furthermore, reflective journaling as a practice provided opportunities for self-awareness and evaluation of teaching practice.

A further benefit of the TA programme was improved student feedback with regard to teaching and the course. The TAs highlighted that *students felt more comfortable engaging with them* and that the *feedback received from students was in some cases referred back to the lecturer*. The TAs therefore felt that they played an essential role in the feedback and communication loop between academic staff and students leading to improvements in the programme.

Our data evidenced complex interactions and activity between TAs and academic staff and particularly complex forms of mentoring activities in the TA programme. The regular interactions over a period of time between academic staff and TAs resulted in reciprocal interactions and reverse mentoring between TAs and academic staff that benefited the teaching and learning environment. The TAs' knowledge of ICTs showed that they were able to introduce new ways of communication to enhance the teaching and learning environment. TAs and academic staff were able to develop a *sustained, progressively more complex interaction* in the teaching and learning environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2005: 97). The data thus illustrates the key role of collaborative mentoring between TAs and academic staff in the TA programme. The next section of this paper focuses on the tensions and collaborative challenges as identified by the academic staff and TAs.

## 10. Experiences of 'tensions' in the TA programme

This section focuses on the collaboration challenges experienced by TAs and academic staff. At a meso systemic level (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) it was evident that numerous challenges were experienced by academic staff and TAs which impacted on the collaborative process, resulting in what was referred to as *tensions* by the participants. These challenges could be categorised into academic and non-academic aspects of their collaboration.

Our analysis shows that at a microsystem level of the university, a lack of infrastructural resources has the ability to impact on the collaborative process. This was evident in the lack of physical space for TAs, a constraining element of the programme that often led

to frustration and isolation in faculties. Our research suggests the need to strengthen the resources availability for TAs, aligned to Park and Ramos (2002) who suggested that TAs be incorporated into the department and provided with the necessary resources to support academic staff successfully. These results are supported by the idea of Gardner and Jones (2011) who agree that departments create a culture of teaching through the commitment of tangible resources to support the TAs in this role, engendering a sense of community and belonging for the TA.

TAs raised important concerns about the lack of distinction between the role of the TA and that of the tutor; at times, the TA role was conflated with that of a tutor. Some TAs felt that lecturers were abusing TAs and they were *asked to do little jobs for other lecturers*. They raised concerns about drawing *boundaries* between academic staff and TAs and having *no one to talk to*. This reveals that the TAs were not sufficiently inducted into departments and felt isolated among the academic staff. The greatest challenges identified by Underhill et al. (2014) are the lack of uniformity within university systems in providing support to junior staff and the management of student academic support structures such as tutor programmes. Similarly, our research shows inadequate systemic support and infrastructure, as well as resource allocation, in the implementation of the TA programme to support academic staff. Gardner and Jones (2011) found that there is a real need to reflect on the pedagogic preparation of TAs, which would include role modelling to adequately prepare students to take on this new role and responsibility. An example of this was evident in the lack of academic support from academic staff with regard to curriculum issues. The TAs expressed concerns about their *limited content knowledge and experience* when *dealing with academic matters* and felt that they needed to be *inducted into the academic culture*. They experienced challenges in the academic environment, such as poor class attendance by students during scheduled sessions. They also expressed the need to meet with tutors regularly to have contact that is more meaningful with students. Dotger (2011) and Nicklow *et al.* (2007) recommend that TAs receive additional discipline specific support/training from academic staff who act as mentors. Providing the necessary discipline pedagogic tools would assist in the professional development of TAs as future academics.

## 11. Enhancing equity of access and success through engagement

Despite the many challenges and tensions experienced, TAs have made a positive contribution to teaching and learning through the support provided. This was reflected in the responses from academic staff who reported a *strong culture of engagement* that developed, making academic staff more *accessible and approachable* to students by having TAs on-board. Zepke (2014) argues that student engagement be reconsidered critically, to explore other means of engagement which focuses on the effort of students, academic staff and the institution to support and enhance learning outcomes for students. Through the TA programme, a student-staff partnership emerged allowing for multiple voices to be included in teaching and learning to achieve this outcome. Bergmark and Westman (2016:30) identified that learning takes place in a "social and physical context where personal experiences and the whole human being are considered". This *interaction was sustained* through TAs and their engagement with students, where student needs were identified and articulated. Opportunities of this nature are rarely available for academic staff and students however, the levels of support provided to students improved as TAs were seen as *filling in the gap between lecturer and students and*

*conversations about teaching and learning issues to support the needs to students* became a part of what was referred to as a *cycle of improvement* creating opportunity for academic staff reflect on their own practices. A further opportunity created was suggested by Cupido (2017) that developing the potential of future academics through exposure to academic practices, reflective journaling helped in raising awareness and enhanced the practice of experienced teachers, as well as the professional development of the TAs' academic potential. We argue that new forms of engagement be included which creates opportunities for epistemological access, in which students authentically engaged in the teaching and learning process. The TA programme has created such an opportunity courses in this research.

## 12. Conclusion

In this paper, we discussed the experiences of academic staff and TAs in the Teaching Assistant programme at CPUT. We argued that the nature of the interaction and engagement with the structures of the university is core to understanding the experiences of TAs and academic staff in a TA programme. We argue that collaboration between TAs and academic staff leads to a rethinking of teaching and learning practices in order to provide students with quality access to learning in HEI.

Our discussion showed that the participants experienced successful collaborative mentoring relationships. Reverse mentoring was a key part of the successful mentoring collaborations in the TA programme as TAs introduced ICTs and social media tools to the teaching and learning courses. The paper also highlighted tensions in the TA programme and the lack of physical space and infrastructure for TAs in departments. The findings show that more training and support for TAs and academic staff is needed. TAs and academic staff experiences demonstrated the possibilities for effective teaching and learning practices at the university through practices such as journaling, mentoring and utilising ICTs for improved communication between TAs, academic staff and students. The findings also indicate that a lack of structure and organisation of TAs in departments led to feelings of isolation and a diminishing of the value of the TA programme. The findings further underscore the importance of the broader university structures and policies to support academic staff at the university. We further argue that TA programmes allow lecturers to engage in dialogue with TAs and to find creative and innovative ways to approach their teaching and learning.

The article provides insight into the experiences of TAs and academic staff in a TA programme. It highlights the TA programme as an academic support programme designed to support academic staff in their teaching and learning courses and showed new forms of student engagement resulting in epistemological access and improved opportunities for success. The paper recommends placing TA programmes at the centre of faculties and providing effective infrastructural support to strengthen the TA programme at the university. It suggests that the university provide more resources, structures and accountability mechanisms to support the TA programme. We conclude that further research is required to understand the contributions made by the TA programme to the development of the curriculum.

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