Technicians as Teachers for Student Experience

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Introduction

The aim of this poster is to discuss the developing role of creative technical demonstrators for the delivery of a new form of curriculum – Higher Technical Skills

The poster has two objectives:
1) To present the role of the CTD in the emerging third space of higher education.
2) To discuss the key role CTDs play in developing the student experience for vocational and higher technical students.

Key Terms:
CTD – Creative Technical Demonstrator
ATF – Academic Teaching Fellow
HTS – Higher Technical Skills

CTDs: Practical teaching, skills focussed

ATFs: Theoretical teaching, academically focussed
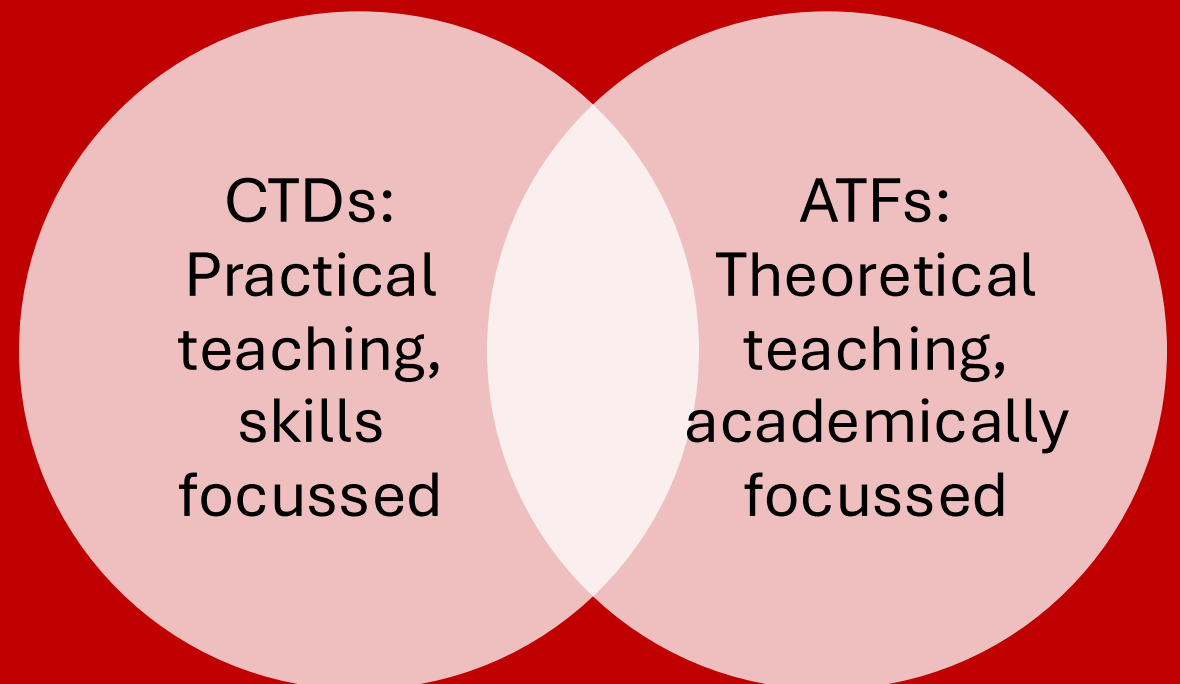
Particular attention has been paid to the role of the CTD and the ATF. This is because through this teaching initiative, a teaching CTD is effectively placed at the same institutional position as the ATF. The experience of the year allowed me to question the differences between these two roles and how any similarities and differences can be applied, transferred or adjusted for teaching HTS qualifications.

Objectives

This work was to develop and highlight different styles of teaching at Level 4 and 5 HTS qualifications - providing an alternative higher education offer to traditional 3 year degree study. This promotes widening participation, and providing recognition at the same level for students who have strong technical and practical skills as opposed to academic skills. Creative Technical Demonstrators (CTDs) are ideally placed to teach these skills, in principle.

"Academic teaching is often conceived of having conceptual and theoretical emphasis, whereas technical teaching is more frequently associated with the practical"

(Savage, 2024)

Photo by Dave Michael on Unsplash

At its core, the use of CTD's to teach these skills is to address and provide relevant hands on teaching to those who are enrolled onto higher technical skills courses, providing a quality student experience for the future of skills delivery in the UK. This will explore and examine the work of CTDs in the classroom and identifying development where necessary to provide for student experience whilst still remaining true to the principles of technical education.

Methods

Through my leadership role, the opportunity to give CTD staff teaching experience in a meaningful way was taken. After an academic year of trialling this system, a period of self reflection occurred, involving a traditional literature review to gain insight from the broader sector. Benchmarking my work against that of others proved that this is an area of meaning, and is occurring across the sector though often hidden from external view. Comparing published academic work with government policy documents and real world experience allowed me to draw new conclusions as to how to apply the skills and experience of CTDs to suit a new curriculum and kinaesthetic learners whose primary goals are technical in nature.

In our institution, the role of the CTD when uplifted to teach sits alongside that of the Academic Teaching Fellow. It is therefore important to identify the differentiator between a CTD and an ATF. At our institution, the following passages can be taken from the role descriptors:

The primary purpose of the **Creative Technical Demonstrator** is to provide support for the delivery of technical services to all our customers including students, academics and external clients
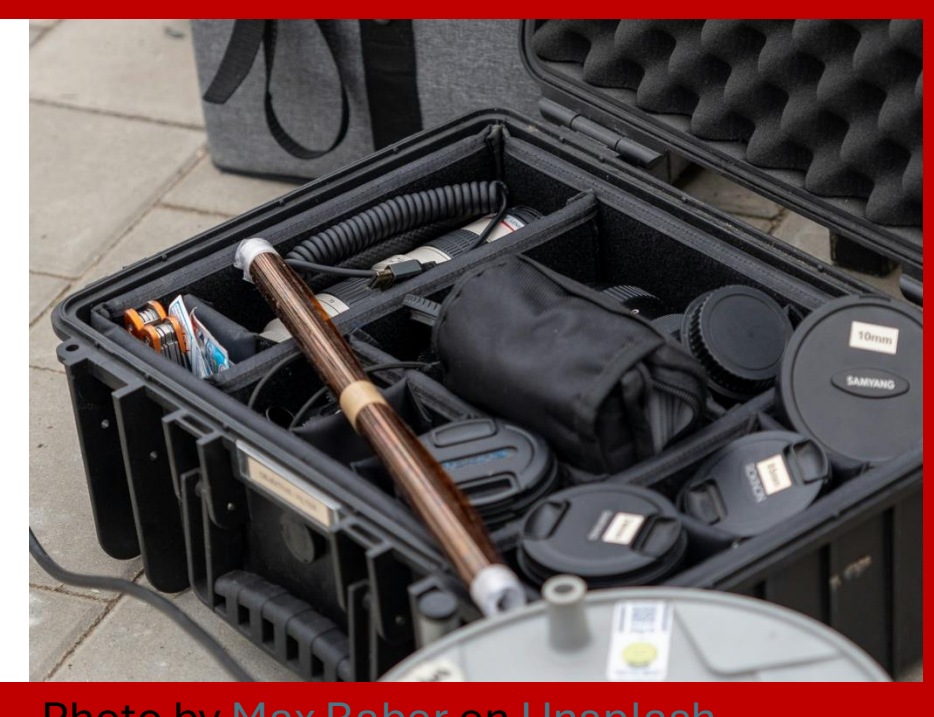
Photo by Max Raber on Unsplash

The primary purpose of the **Academic Teaching Fellow** is to undertake a range of teaching, assessment and administrative duties and to support students in all aspects of their studies as appropriate. To develop personal subject/research activity in conjunction with professional development as a teacher.

Photo by National Cancer Institute on Unsplash

Comparing these two infers that in a skills-based curriculum, the difference between a CTD and an ATF is arguably very thin, and yet an ATF is historically on a higher pay scale than a CTD.

Compared to other disciplines, creative arts technical staff were significantly more likely to be involved in all suggested teaching and teaching-design activities, and were more likely to: identify solely as teaching technicians; have received training for teaching activities; and have completed part or all of an externally recognised qualification.

(England, 2022)

Photo by Tim Winkler on Unsplash

Results

While it is important to recognise technician advantage in the classroom, there are also key considerations to observe. Teaching expertise and experience is fundamental to learner needs. The HEPI student academic experience surveys from the last decade continuously show that students value high quality teaching staff. "Teaching" in our university context is more than delivery of information. It has a wider scope, including but not limited to student support; accountability; regulation; EDI provision; empathy; administration; systems training.

Teaching is also about understanding the generation and cohort of students around us, and how they learn. There is a demand for skills in the country, or so the data and government rhetoric suggests. If a generation of students is coming to universities expecting more hands-on approach, then we as teachers/academics/lecturers need to recognise that and use the best resources at hand. It should be also be noted that the demand for initiatives generally, and in this case the focus of 'skills' has a rapid acceleration, and success in these areas in HE relies on University response speed.

Supporting technicians as teachers and guiding them in best practice and avoiding pitfalls is as important as giving them opportunity.

Conclusions

Universities need to acknowledge and develop alternative career paths that are not constrained by the current academic versus professional staff dualism.

(Grant & Kennie, 2024)

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Institutions should focus on recognising and rewarding experience in supporting teaching and learning, rather than positional status and its inclusiveness across staff designations: The latter is increasingly important when institutions are...expecting professional staff to have major input is into significant educational initiatives"

(Beckmann, 2018).

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In this poster I have explored the notions of the third space employee in a University and how that applies to technical staff. The ability and skill of technical staff to teach students and provide an appropriate student experience is present and can be harnessed with the correct support. There are technical staff who know far more current, skills-based practices in their discipline than their academic colleagues who are responsible for modules and programmes, and their input is invaluable. In a financially unstable HE climate, it is almost a waste of resource to not formally tap into this already present knowledge.

The sector has a very wide pool of employees doing exactly the jobs that skills-based education is looking to deliver, and perhaps as the government look to steer HE further towards a skills based agenda, we should be looking to harness the wider pool of our resources to enrich learning, with an emphasis on nurturing the quality of teaching of delivery.

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