Managing expectations of demonstrator training

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What is a demonstrator?

“A person performing a demonstration, such as to explain science or technology”

“A person responsible for the supervision of students in practical classes and for assisting students in the performance of tasks which have been devised by members of the academic staff.”

“…their job was not to answer all the students’ questions but to prompt, encourage and guide the students to find their own way to the answers”
What is the role of a demonstrator?

- “Baby sitting”
- Knowledge transfer
- Feedback
- Prompting curiosity
- Motivation
- Showing how to use equipment
- Show how to record results, write up experiments
- Support
- Teach concepts

- 1st port of call for students — more one to one
- Advising on experimental techniques
- Health and safety
- Marking
- Guide students though practical
- Reassurance and encouragement to give students confidence
- Help and advice
What most worries demonstrators?

- Subject matter
- Blank faces
- Unprepared students
- Difficult students
- Language barriers
- Marking
- The unknown
- Everything that can go wrong…
- Accidents
What help and advice do postgraduate demonstrators seek?

Consider the following:

• Students have been asked to work in pairs on an experiment. In one pair, one student appears to be doing all the work. How would you advise a demonstrator to respond or intervene?
• A student has fallen off their chair, apparently fainting in the laboratory. What would you expect the demonstrators to do?
• A postgraduate tutor co-leading a mathematical problem class is pitching explanations at too high a level. How would you, as another postgraduate tutor, help?
• A demonstrator has been asked to formatively mark a large batch of laboratory reports from a big first-year practical class. The rate of pay assumes each report should take ten minutes to mark, but each is taking the demonstrator 20 minutes. How could the demonstrator reduce marking time while still giving helpful feedback to the students?
• A postgraduate tutor marking a batch of tutorial essays strongly suspects two students of plagiarism. What should that tutor do?


Influences

• Own experience of demonstrators
• Research pressures
• Career plans
• Competition
• Payment
What training do you provide?

- When?
- Who for?
- What cover?
- Does it match role requirements?

Minimum training/support

- Clear guidance on role
- Lab manuals in advance (and rota$!)$)
- Emphasis on students preparing themselves
- Assessment criteria and marking scheme
- Feedback guidelines
- Know when to seek help
- Support from academic staff
- Health and safety guidance
Top 10 tips for demonstrators

1. Preparation - ensure familiar with practical and background
2. Confidence
3. Authoritative – set ground rules
4. Be consistent and fair
5. Be honest if you don’t know an answer
6. Ask for help if needed
7. Give clear and simple instructions
8. Vary delivery for different students
9. Challenge the students
10. Patience

Summary

- Preparation is the responsibility of both students and academics
- Provide clear guidance and expectations
- Reassure what is expected
- Encourage sharing of good practice