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Making sense of cultural bumps: Supporting international graduate teaching assistants with their teaching

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a study with over 100 Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), 69 of whom were international GTAs. We explore their experiences of 'cultural bumps' in their transition into one UK University. Following the principles of practice-based enquiry, data collection combined interviews with data generated in workshops, including transcripts, fieldnotes, student feedback and LEGO® models. We focus on three themes of starting teaching, essay marking and classroom boundaries to explore 'cultural bumps' where GTAs experience adjustment stresses transitioning into UK higher education teaching. We connect 'cultural bumps' to challenges reconciling teaching and researcher roles for GTAs. We conclude with an agenda for research work to further develop our understanding of international GTAs' experiences.

Introduction

The importance of teacher training for Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), both as induction into UK Higher Education (UKHE) (Muzaka, 2009) and as long-term development (Chadha, 2015; Sandi Urena et al., 2011), is a topic of long-standing research interest (Beaton & Gilbert, 2013; Park, 2002; Winter et al., 2017). Our study concentrates specifically on where international GTAs experience 'cultural bumps' and 'adjustment stresses' (Wu & Hammond, 2011) to UKHE. 'Cultural bump' is an umbrella term to designate events and experiences where familiar cues cannot be used for interpretation due to a move from one culture to another. These 'cultural bumps', or discrepancies in understanding, lead to anxiety and insecurity.

Previous studies show how GTAs can struggle to balance their identities as teachers and researchers (Park, 2002; Winstone & Moore, 2017). Our contribution lies in the focus on cultural bumps to examine the experiences of international GTAs. Our work points to cultural bumps and adjustment stresses emerging where international GTAs experience a disjunction between teaching and research identities. Arguably, much scholarship on postgraduate acculturation concentrates on placing students into one or another acclimatisation category to describe the experience of transition (e.g., Brown & Holloway,

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2008; Manathunga, 2014). We suggest international GTAs' acculturation may occur differently between research and teaching roles.

International GTAs bring their own 'hidden' curricula with them (Elliot et al., 2016, p. 739). Their transition includes navigating the formal curriculum and hidden codified knowledge, processes and assumptions in UKHE, in different arenas such as teaching and research. In this article, we argue that revealing tacit knowledge and navigating cultural bumps (Wu & Hammond, 2011) need to be at the core of teacher training for international GTAs.

We commence with a brief overview, our methodology and methods, and approach to data analysis before turning to reporting on our findings. We replicate the three-stage model of GTA development (Nyquist & Wulff, 1996), where GTAs develop through 1) survival to 2) developing skills, to 3) focusing on outcomes. We echo this, presenting three themes of starting teaching, essay marking and classroom and teacher boundaries in relation to knowledge that may be unknown or unclear for GTAs. We then explain how supporting GTAs with their teaching means helping them overcome the cultural bumps they experience. We conclude with an agenda for research work to further develop our understanding of international GTAs' experiences.

Background

Since 2000 a number of studies have sought to document the kinds of transitions that international postgraduates experience in UKHE (e.g., Brown & Holloway, 2008; Elliot et al., 2016; Quan et al., 2016). Scholarship has emerged around the relationship between students' cultural backgrounds and learning preferences (De Vita, 2001). Other studies focus on the 'sojourner' experience, examining the temporary adjustment of international Master's and PhD students to new educational environments (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Elliot et al., 2016). Yet other studies take an 'intercultural' focus on international doctoral students in supervision (e.g., Kenway & Bullen, 2003; Manathunga, 2014). One thing these approaches have in common is a recognition of the 'cultural bumps', 'adjustments stresses' and 'loss of cues' (Wu & Hammond, 2011, p. 425) international students encounter in transitioning to new locales. Manathunga (2014) terms this 'unhomeliness', Kenway and Bullen (2003) use 'ambivalence'; Elliot et al. (2016) use 'puzzlement'. However, there has been relatively little research into the specific adjustments of international GTAs (Collins, 2019; Winter et al., 2017).

A key facet of scholarship on acculturation is the emphasis on stress during sojourners' adjustments (e.g., Rogers & Ward, 1993), linked strongly to students' self-perception of their successful integration (Redmond & Bunyi, 1993). In order to understand the acculturation of postgraduates, the theories above tend to categorise participants. Manathunga's (2014) study develops three categories to understand intercultural supervisory interactions: transculturation, assimilation, and unhomeliness. Kenway and Bullen (2003) offer six categories, which include Reinvention (forging new identities), Affirmation (fitting in) and Ambivalence (making adjustments to the host culture but experiencing dislocation from home and host culture). Brown and Holloway (2008) meanwhile, see the shock of arrival resulting in three potential response pathways: multiculturalism, marginalisation, and segregation. Whilst these categories are useful in understanding different kinds of student responses to transitions in a new culture, we argue that for GTAs, a single

category is insufficient. The different roles of researcher and teacher suggest acculturation potentially happens differently in different arenas.

Academics have been understood to occupy a discrete labour market, experiencing international mobility differently than those in the general labour market (Bauder, 2012). Whilst institutional cultures play an important role in the experiences of transnational academics (Saltmarsh & Swirski, 2010), provision of 'support' to acclimatise can be problematic (Pherali, 2011). If we bisect 'academics' into subgroups, scholarship shows that GTAs can feel marginalised by permanent lecturers (Muzaka, 2009). Nevertheless, programmes for professional development can be a part of ameliorating isolation for part-time teaching staff (Leigh, 2014). Peer-to-peer interaction is crucial in learning (Vygotsky, 2012). Evaluations of GTA training confirm the importance of interactive discussions and communication with peers in increasing self-efficacy (Young & Bippus, 2008) and contextualising learning (Bale & Moran, 2020). We argue that peer-to-peer learning is essential in the training of international GTAs because it provides a space in which cultural bumps (and coping strategies) can be explored, and peer validation found.

Methodology

Research context and setting

The project to support international Graduate Teaching Assistants was funded by the Staff Educational Development Association. Our initial survey of postgraduate teachers, (n = 162 GTAs, 52 Hourly Paid Lecturers, 44% and 28% response rates) found demand for workshops in core teaching skills. Some respondents felt overextended and atomised. As a consequence, we instituted a series of short activities offering a broad variety of input and training. Our data collection encompassed workshops and classroom-based activities as well as conventional interviewing. Students signed up voluntarily to workshops and were given an opportunity to opt into the research project.

Participants

Our cohort included 109 GTAs, (69 Tier 4 and EU GTAs). Our workshops had 89 attendances of which 49 (55%) were international or EU students. Overall, 57 attendances were by women (64%); 26 Humanities (29%), 43 Social Sciences (48%), 20 Sciences (23%), the latter broadly representative of the faculty proportions of PhD students. We interviewed 20 international GTAs (Figure S1, Figure S2, supplemental materials); 14 from Tier 4 countries, and 6 EU GTAs. 10 participants were female and 10 were male, and across the sample 7 GTAs worked and taught in the Sciences, 11 in the Social Sciences and 2 in the Arts and Humanities. All GTAs were educated to undergraduate standard or equivalent, and some had undertaken Master's level education abroad. The majority had prior teaching experience, mostly in home countries, some had also taught in other countries.

Data collection

Prior to organising the workshops, we gained full ethical approval. Workshop attendees were informed about the dual purpose of the sessions: a training opportunity for post-graduate teachers and an opportunity for research. Attendees were provided with information sheets and consent forms to opt in. If they decided to not participate in the research, they were still able to attend and benefit from the workshops.

Given the context and scope of the workshop series as a practice-based enquiry, data collection was a dynamic process during the workshops and a scheduled event in the form of interviews. We collected data from eight (2–3 hour) workshops, which covered topics from becoming a teacher, questioning techniques, engaging a classroom, feedback and marking, planning, troubleshooting and work-life balance. These workshops have been consolidated into a toolkit (Collins et al., 2021).

Nineteen of the hour-long interviews were conducted in person or over Zoom. The last interview (which coincided with the COVID-19 lockdown) was conducted over email. Each interview commenced with a reflective exercise where participants built with LEGO® bricks (face to face) or (virtually) created a timeline of their journey as a teacher. Participants were asked about their challenges transitioning into teaching, their teaching philosophy, and their community. The final data set therefore consists of interview transcripts, fieldnotes and transcripts of reflection sessions, LEGO® models and timelines, feedback from students via anonymous exit slips, session plans and annotated transcripts from sessions.

Analysis

In line with an interpretivist approach to research, we view data analysis as a conscious and subjective process of identifying themes drawing on the researchers' personal experiences. Analysis occurred through a number of collective, reflective stages. All our workshops except one had two researchers present, one collecting data and the other leading on teaching: our post-workshop reflections and collective project meetings fed into analysis. We jointly developed a toolkit of resources which also provided another level of analysis. An early draft of the findings and recommendations were subject to member validation by a small number of our participants.

All data sets were coded using the iterative, inductive, semantic thematic analysis in its intended reflexive form (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Drawing on the three-stage model of GTA development (Nyquist & Wulff, 1996), we established the three areas that seemed most impactful on the GTAs' experiences: starting teaching, essay marking and classroom and teacher boundaries. From the codes we also identified cultural differences and sense-making processes as analytical 'hot spots' (MacLure, 2011), which we used to further develop our theoretical and practical understanding of participants' experiences. We consciously applied Wu and Hammond (2011) notion of cultural bumps as an analytical lens.

Findings

Our findings are organised through three themes: starting teaching, essay marking, and classroom and teacher boundaries.

Starting teaching

A number of international GTAs described feeling adrift initially. This related to not knowing what was expected of them, particularly in light of contrasts with teaching in their own countries. Some felt conscious of adjusting to English: e.g., pronunciation, speed and picking up the local dialect. GTAs' first teaching experiences were described as 'anxiety-driven', 'a bit scar[y]', having 'goose bumps', being 'very scared of not doing things properly', and infused with 'imposter syndrome' amidst cultural, educational and research adjustments. One GTA confessed to sleeping for only '2–3 hours' before their first seminar.

Starting teaching, occurring over time, was a layered and contradictory process. One GTA explained, '[w]hen I got here [...] I didn't have anyone to talk to about what to expect'. This resulted in a feeling of 'sinking' as there was so much to comply with (e.g., visa monitoring and module convenor lesson plans). For others feelings of fear and anxiety subsided quickly, and they began to develop their teaching identities. A key factor was the timing of training. For some, early inductions signified information overload, and teaching theories were forgotten; for others training by the second year was too late. Having the first term off was seen as a positive opportunity to adjust. It is also significant that most international GTAs had teaching experience in other countries. Although for some educational systems were different, they felt relatively at home in the classroom.

In our 'Becoming a teacher' workshop, we explored teaching challenges through Lego® model building. During this our researcher elicited cultural bumps from international GTAs. These included, repeatedly, navigating obstacles to understanding, e.g., 'the teacher engages the students, but has to take out the obstacles first to get to the student. To get this obstacle out you need to put a lot of planning into it'; 'so the alien [teacher] is passing down the knowledge [...] and there is an exchange [with students] as well'. Discovering different expectations of formality was also a theme: 'the atmosphere and environment are different [...] there's a kind of cultural enforcement in my country to be in formal [dress]'.

All the GTAs were asked to visualise their future teacher self, from the clothes they were wearing, to how they entered the classroom, to what the classroom looked like. GTAs articulated different configurations of meaning around how the visualisation activity made tacit aspects of teaching explicit, e.g., 'there were lots of sort eureka moments where I thought, ah I'd thought of that but I'd not sort of thought I should think about it.' The task was also one of a number of activities that challenged previous teaching styles GTAs had been exposed to. It also opened up a space to debate further the culturally and socially encoded differences in education.

Essay marking

For a number of international GTAs essay marking was a cause of anxiety, specifically the definitiveness of attributing a grade. They talked of the 'responsibility' and the 'human element' representing a challenge: 'when it comes to giving [...] some kind of indication, a mark, I'm like oh my god am I subjective?'. Some GTAs described different systems of grading in their home countries: 'I had no idea about what's a first class, a fail, a second, because both in the US and in Turkey [...] 100 is the highest'. In some countries, students

were not assessed through essays, so giving written feedback was also a learning process: 'you can't say that, you can in Italian, but you can't do that here'. There were also some comments that signified the UK education system was perceived as hegemonic or bureaucratic. One GTA who supported international undergraduates suggested these students wanted to bring more of their home learning styles into essays, but they feel that they will be marked down for it. Another GTA, discussing The National Student Survey, suggested that all essays had to feature positive comments, regardless of quality.

Responsibility in marking also translated into workload which exceeded allocated hours. GTAs felt that to do marking properly, time needed to be spent on the students' work: 'I just wanted to write something that they would understand. So [. . .] the writing of the feedback actually took all day'. In spite of this, the international GTAs suggested that support, via training from their schools, had a positive effect – not on time allocations, but on students' grades. One GTA made a link between team marking and positive student evaluations of module. Two other GTAs explained that when Schools scaffolded the marking process there was a positive consequential effect on students' assignment quality and their resulting grade.

In our workshop on 'Assessment and Feedback' our participants were given 10 minutes to build towers, 1 m in height, in groups, with the materials provided. They were then asked to give feedback on other groups' towers. The exercise prompted some grading, some formative feedback, and discussions on how students do not learn from feedback. The exchange below follows this element of the discussion:

> GTA: I can see why students don't care about the feedback they get with their mark, because they can't change it. [. . .]
>
> NB: Exactly.
>
> [Lots of people all talking suddenly. . .]
>
> GTA: It feels like what becomes really important is if we can't give draft feedback [. . .] that we need to spend time in our seminars saying this is how we do the task, this is how we assess it, these are the criteria.

In interviews, one GTA stated that the support from her module convenor was invaluable 'when [the students] wrote their answers, those things were in their answers'. Another GTA was able to suggest improvements for a marking rubric: 'we got to be able to refine a template for the students to follow [. . .] we as people marking them can get through it much more efficiently'. Thus, where international GTAs are included in processes of course preparation and rubric design, student outcomes may be more positive, and GTA marking efficiency improved.

Classroom and teacher boundaries

Our interviews yielded a cluster of results where students' use of mobile phones in lessons linked to renegotiating understandings of how a classroom works in the UK context. These renegotiated understandings connected with how participants under-stood their teaching identities. International GTAs variously described undergraduates' use of mobile phones in lessons as 'distracting' and persistent. Responses to phone use

in class linked to perceptions of how phones and learning were viewed in home cultures, or views on UK students. One GTA stated: 'In Ghana, being on your phone is not allowed, because when you are on your phone, I have that right to drag you away from the classroom'. Another felt that mobile phone use was effective terminated by adapting a formal style and 'taking charge of the class'. This contrasted with this GTAs' initial informal teaching stance based on teaching in their home country. Another GTA suggested that 'they haven't done their reading, they don't participate, they are on the phone all the time'. Here mobile phone use is equated with lack of student participation. In contrast, two other international GTAs suggested they absolutely accepted mobile phones in the classroom. Significantly, both these GTAs rejected what they characterised as 'hierarchical', teacher-centred models from their home cultures: 'I'm not going to ask you to put down your cellphone. If you respect the [. . .] space enough you will put down your cell phone and be attentive'.

Different conceptions of student engagement seemingly underpinned different understandings of whether the mobile phone is a distraction for passive students, or a tool in an active process of navigating learning. A key theme amongst GTAs in workshops and interviews was engaging disengaged students in the learning process. The theme of lack of student engagement was a cultural bump that impacted on how some of the GTAs talked about building their identities as teachers:

> I was taught and trained in a very low-quality education system. [. . .] I studied in University without computers. [. . .] Students [here] not good [. . .] they think like a business, they don't understand okay, learn for themselves [. . .] they complain a lot, yeah it's not fair.

> This is actually the fourth country that I've taught in [. . . learning] seems like a transaction here [. . .] some students cannot be engaged at all.

The implication here is that fees create a certain kind of student ('like a business', 'transaction'). These participants (and others) also hinted at being trapped or stuck due to lack in student engagement, e.g.: '[. . . I] always feel like I was trapped by others, like zebra [crossing. . .] where you must let other cross you'. Relatedly a perception emerged that students were more important to the University than teachers: '[you are] always stuck [. . .] in case of anything the University will always take the side of the student'.

Cultural bumps around classroom and teacher boundaries were also signalled by a fatigue. A number of GTAs mentioned being tired and lacking energy, specifically around speaking English, over-preparing, adjusting to the weather (overcoming illness), navigating bureaucracy, and having to remember terminology. Those who talked of being tired, stuck or trapped also revealed disjuncture between their teaching roles and research roles (one-third of our sample). This included teaching subjects unrelated to the PhD and trying to balance different responsibilities (see Figure S3, supplemental materials). Our workshops were spaces in which connections between teaching and researching identities could be forged. In 'Practical Planning', good teaching was aligned with good researching, 'good teaching is where you can take the walls away [. . .] in the student, where they can think bigger and actually connect the theories and ideas' (see also 'Work-life balance' for bringing teaching, researching and home life into balance, in Collins et al., 2021, pp. 49–50).

Discussion and conclusion

This study contributes to emerging work in understanding the experiences of international GTAs (Collins, 2019; Winter et al., 2017) and how international GTAs navigate 'cultural bumps' (Wu & Hammond, 2011). Our findings show that cultural bumps are a significant element in the experience of international GTAs. Our contribution to scholarship extends discussion of cultural bumps to GTAs; seeks to reframe this discussion in terms of the layering of GTAs' identities as students and staff, teachers and researchers (Winstone & Moore, 2017); and considers that different kinds of adjustments may be occurring in different contexts. Our findings showed that those who talked about cultural bumps – often designated through perceptions of tiredness or inertia – also indicated there were difficulties around reconciling the roles of teacher and researcher.

The three themes of starting teaching, essay marking and classroom and teacher boundaries highlight that cultural bumps revolve around the tacit knowledge embedded in the given teaching environment. For GTAs the contradictions and cultural bumps in teaching focussed around UKHE norms of formality and informality, seeking to understand how knowledge might be understood across different cultural backgrounds, adjusting to different expectations of assessment, and beginning to formulate a teaching identity in a new culture.

Navigating these cultural bumps therefore means beginning to make sense of things in an ongoing process (Weick et al., 2005, p. 415). In our workshops sense making involved excavating understanding of the 'tacit' knowledge within the formal, local learning culture (Blasco, 2015, p. 85). 'Local' or tacit knowledge and concomitant instructional styles may prove problematic as they do not overlap with the knowledge and learning styles of a diverse international cohort. Blasco (2015) contends that a culturally inclusive pedagogy would educate international students about the purpose, practices and steps of different learning moments. Indeed, one international GTA made precisely this point: '[international students] come here and they don't see why they should be doing things [. . .] in a certain way.' We sought to make the 'tacit' explicit in the creative workshops by not only running certain activities, but also critically reflecting on their structure, their potential advantages and disadvantages, their inclusivity, and their meaning in different contexts (see Collins et al., 2021).

The students' exploration of UKHE in our workshops showed the process of testing cultural cues was not exclusively top-down or teacher-centred, but occurred collectively (Weick et al., 2005). Navigating cues and building understanding was layered and complex, fostered communal knowledge, and was inflected by previous learning experiences as well as previous teaching experiences in home and other countries. Spaces such as workshops and other informal opportunities for navigating cultural bumps are crucial within University teacher training. Indeed, our workshops were open to home and International GTAs, regardless of whether they were undertaking an accredited professional development programme or not. Accredited programmes often rely on written assessments rather than tacit development of skills (Leigh, 2016), and are not always open to international students depending on their visa status. Our workshops were creative resources designed to enable GTAs to reflect on aspects of their teaching development and to learn skills, as well as the space to make sense of the cultural bumps they were experiencing in their journey.

Whilst our findings are relevant for understanding the experiences of the larger population of EU and Tier 4 GTAs, it is important to be conscious of the great variety in experiences across this diverse group. Most international GTAs had extensive teaching experience in their home countries and abroad, whilst a few had not taught before. All GTAs navigated UKHE in light of their own teaching and learning experiences. International GTAs constitute a significant global workforce (Beaton & Gilbert, 2013) and our findings are relevant to international GTAs teaching in contexts beyond their home countries. Arguably the richness of the qualitative data suggests that the value of this study lies in the enhancement of evidence around the cultural bumps international GTAs experience.

International GTAs did not only discuss cultural bumps. However, these experiences accounted for a significant element of GTA interviews. It is beyond the scope here to address evidence of racial micro-aggressions; cultural bumps in transitioning out of UKHE; difficulties navigating lack of autonomy in lesson material, compared to previous teaching experiences; and adjustments to teaching with peers from different cultures to name a few themes. Likewise, our workshop transcripts only include the audible and whole-class moments of discussion, rather than recording processes of informal sense-making occurring in GTA group discussions. Future work might seek to expand understanding in how cultural bumps are navigated by seeking more extensive exploration of how sense-making occurs in workshops.

Disclosure statement

Funding

Notes on contributor

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