

# **The Significance of Care in a Global Higher Education Institution: An insight from the Periphery**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the significance of an ethic of care (Noddings, 2005) in higher education pedagogy, in light of the rapid growth in the undergraduate student population. Drawing on the experience of teaching from the periphery, as both students and staff, four Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) reflect on the issues arising from their respective practices, as they taught on an undergraduate social sciences programme at a London-based Russell Group university.

A resounding concern for providing sufficient care to their students emerged. The continued growth of student cohorts sustained the GTA's interest in ensuring that students felt supported and included during their learning. This was explored through Noddings' (2005) seminal scholarship on an ethic of care, which has since inspired the development of more opportunities for relationality and responsiveness in taught sessions.

Notably, the authors considered how participating in a community of GTAs helped to navigate teaching on a rapidly expanding programme. A discussion depicting their journey of professional development is offered, along with reflections detailing their experience of becoming genuine, contributing members of the teaching community. While the benefits of this community were significant, several challenges still arose. These were broadly a result of the lack of clear expectations in the GTA role, the striving for a consistent pedagogical approach across the seminars, and the doubt in expertise encountered by the GTAs.

The discussion aims to promote the GTA voice, and to equip early career teaching staff with the knowledge to help them thrive in the current higher education landscape, which is characterised by large cohorts.

## Introduction

The number of students enrolling in Higher Education (HE) in the UK continues to soar (HESA, 2022), undeterred by the weakening staff-to-student ratio. Consequently, university staff are accountable for supporting a growing number of students. Although this is known to place further pressure on administrative staff, in addition to presenting pedagogical issues for permanent teaching staff, Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) are also confronted with challenges as they are oftentimes responsible for seminar delivery (Quinterno, 2012; Partin, 2018).

In this article, we report our experience of this, as GTAs, focusing on our pedagogical practices carried out over the 2022-23 autumn term on an undergraduate social sciences programme at a London-based Russell Group university. On average, we each led two seminar groups with approximately 18 students in each. The process of reflecting spanned a ten-week teaching block, which revealed how we addressed the issue of care and support in the classroom as a result of the sharp rise in student numbers.

The reflections demonstrate how we strived to ensure that care would still be encountered within the learning setting, both as a value and a practice (Held, 2007). Throughout the article, Noddings' (2005: 15) ethic of care is referred to; the essence of which is based on "...a connection or encounter between two human beings – a carer and a recipient of care, or cared-for".

As Persky (2021) reports, in order to experience care, one must feel that they are being responded to within a

relationship. These relationships are not limited to two individuals, but it is required that care is aimed at one person at a time, focusing on their needs alone. This corresponds with Noddings' (2012) warning about the suitability of care from one person to the next. The process of grouping students into classes, cohorts, and populations, means losing the unique attributes brought to the space by the individuals (Keeling, 2014). In a caring relation, it is the personalised nature of the relationship that brings about a sense of worth and mattering (Cassidy & Bates, 2005).

To achieve the caring ethic, Clouston (2018) recommended that practitioners model an 'openness' in their teaching and learning settings, demonstrating a readiness to adjust and to be flexible towards the distinct needs of the learning community, though as noted by Persky (2021), this is not always the case. When practitioners project care and respect, students are presented with alternative ways of being with and around one another (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Gerde, Bingham & Wasik, 2012; Persky, 2021).

Barrow (2015) tells how teaching during the years of compulsory schooling tends to focus on an ethic of care, meanwhile teaching in HE tends to focus on content expertise; the notion of how and what care, and to who, is notoriously unclear in HE (Burford, 2013), emphasising the need for clarification in this context. Keeling (2014: 142) explains how oftentimes, "Institutions leave to individual members of the staff or faculty any responsibility for understanding, responsiveness, or empathy in their relationships with students", which although is telling of the individualised nature of care, also suggests there may be expectations of the assumed carers.

At the time of compiling these reflections, we were catapulted from the periphery into the department's staff community, which spurred on the establishment of a network amongst us, in which we could learn with and from one another.

In the discussion we explore the ways that students are supported through pedagogical practice, the support available to GTAs, how we adapted to the role of GTA, and the role of the GTA community. This article offers insight from the caring context (Cassidy & Bates, 2005), with knowledge addressed to early-career practitioners, in particular those who look to foster sensitive caring relations and personhood within their teaching.

### **Literature Review**

This review of literature has been compiled following an exploration of the contemporary higher education (HE) landscape in the UK, with a keen focus on massification and widening participation policies that have led to undergraduate populations becoming increasingly diverse (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021). While massification, in the context of the current research, has led to a globalised student population, it has also created an imbalance of resources and staff to students. Cassidy and Bates (2005: 69) confirm that "adequate material resources, time, and knowledge" are required to ensure care can be taken. In this article, we have argued that an ethic of care is required to support the continuation of student development and engagement within these growing classrooms.

The expansion of cohort numbers has been known to result in students feeling less connected with their surroundings (Deal, 2022). Indeed, to ensure that individuals feel partnered with their learning experience, students need to encounter interdependence, to feel that they are part of, related to, or embedded in a community (Held, 2007; Keeling, 2014).

“It really always comes back to us saying, you are worthwhile, you are meaningful, and this is your place.” (Cassidy & Bates, 2005: 81)

Ensuring that individuals receive care during their learning is fundamental but challenging. With contemporary views of ‘success’ that focus on completion of a module or graduation tarnishing the role of education (Keeling, 2014), practitioners are faced with weaving care principles into their pedagogy with minimal guidance (Noddings, 2005; Cassidy & Bates, 2005).

### **The Cared For**

The transition to HE is undertaken by more individuals every year and with many arriving from overseas, from marginalised communities, as mature or returning students, the urgency to learn about their unique needs is enhanced (Wilson, 2022). This paper proposes several benefits to implementing an ethic of care to support undergraduate students in their pursuit of learning.

Noddings (2012: 771) has centred her interpretation of an ethic of care around five characteristics, which include “listening, dialogue, critical thinking, reflective response, and making thoughtful connections among the disciplines and to life itself”. This process is driven by a motivational displacement (ibid.), whereby the carer accepts the undertakings of the cared-for as their own, on their behalf

(Barnacle & Dall’Alba, 2017). The literature also evidences empathy as a distinctive quality that educators can employ to establish a caring environment (Noddings, 2010); this notion of ‘feeling with’ (ibid.) enables the other to understand and become more aware of an individual’s situation. Held (2007: 15-16) tells that “in practices of care, relationships are cultivated, needs are responded to, and sensitivity is demonstrated.” Deep engagement with students throughout their learning has been thought to empower them and to “foster[s] student independence in the future” (Owens & Ennis, 2005: 401). There are perceived obstacles to solidifying these relationships in HE, including the fleeting nature of interactions as students continue in their progression of learning (Gravett, Taylor & Fairchild, 2021), from module to module, as well as the limited opportunities to converse one-to-one (Burford, 2013).

As the student population continues to grow, individuals are encountering larger cohorts within lectures and seminars, which may lead to assuming that their participation is not valued, preventing them from feeling like a member of the community (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The struggle for a sense of belonging can be owed to how one feels they are attached to, or connected with, a situation or collective (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Deal (2022) reports that without this, students face feeling less motivated and less willing to attend their learning. Feelings of belonging to a community may also stem from establishing trust and an emotional connection with others (Osterman, 2000); this links with the characteristics of Wegner’s (1998: 73) community of practice comprising “mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire”.

Where an ethic of care approach is taken, there may be a striving to ensure that students feel that they matter. In Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering (1989), five stages are confirmed as a means to communicate how individuals are valued in a given situation. These include receiving attention, feeling important, an ego extension, feeling that one can depend on another, and the impression of being appreciated. By sensing these, individuals may encounter the opportunity to feel heard through their contributions, to bask in receiving praise, and to feel that they are cared for. Relational pedagogies facilitate students to feel valued; where this is achieved, a collaborative and co-creative learning space can be formed (Gravett, Taylor & Fairchild, 2021).

### **The Carers**

While students can support their peers to become part of a collective, the GTA role has also been recognised as a resource to facilitate integration and adjustment; some qualities that support this include their closeness in age to the students, being perceived as approachable, and the enthusiasm they bring to classes (Kendall & Schussler, 2012; Wald & Harland, 2018). Matusovich, Cooper and Winters (2010: 1) acknowledge the emerging contributions made by GTAs to the student experience, including "setting the tone for the classroom climate, and serving as mentors and role models".

In the context of the authors' practices, opportunities to exercise care predominately arose in seminars. These provided opportunities for the cared-for to recognise the caring relationships within their student community and to offer a response (Noddings, 2005). As the carers in these

seminars, the GTAs felt responsible for the learning and the holistic development of the students, leading to their feeling compelled to show care in this setting by addressing the various needs (Held, 2007). As teaching can take place in different ways in HE, for instance in a lecture, tutorial or a seminar, the authors felt that the opportunity for students to interact in smaller groups was advantageous.

The GTAs also exhibited an ethic of care within their community of practice which provided encouragement for their mutually sought lifelong career paths. This also impressed upon the development of their pedagogical practices; through an exchange of anecdotes and encounters, the novice educators reflected on how harnessing this approach fostered the development of a student-centred relational pedagogy. As the GTA practices began to align, they too felt cared for.

Following this brief review of literature, the authors explored how an ethic of care was employed within their community of GTAs to support the development of their professional roles within the institution, and how the continuation of this approach helped to produce supportive seminar spaces for undergraduate students as they acclimatised into HE.

## **Methodology**

This reflective qualitative inquiry was carried out by four GTAs employed at a UK Russell Group University, as they supported a thriving Bachelor of Arts social sciences programme. The collaborative exploration transpired from observations of the rapid growth in the undergraduate population in recent

years, leading to their consideration of the significance of an ethic of care within higher education (HE) and how this could be maintained.

The GTAs were prompted to reflect on how their teaching practices strived to support undergraduates in their pursuit of education, despite the challenges of marketisation and massification (Burford, 2013; Wald & Harland, 2018; Burke & Larmar, 2021). In contrast to grand lecture halls populated with row after row of students, the GTAs were afforded the opportunity to provide more individualised pedagogies to students in seminars and group tutorials; the need for this approach is seemingly becoming less commonplace in HE now as students are encouraged to become more independent and accountable for their learning (Blackie, Case & Jawitz, 2010).

The GTAs arranged to meet regularly and reflect on their experiences of working within the department. The themes discussed throughout the findings, and the theory supporting many of these ideas emerged from informal discussion, and as such are representative of the collective concerns. This reflective article compiles anecdotes and shared views on the GTA teaching experience as discussed informally by the authors. While there has been no data collection or processing, the institution and programme remain anonymous so not to influence the experience of teaching or care, should the article be disseminated widely.

## **Discussion**

Following several reflexive encounters, four notable aspects

of our teaching practices arose as commonalities when considering how the notion of care is thoughtfully woven into much of what Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) do within higher education (HE). These included: supporting students through pedagogical practice; adapting to the role of the GTA; support available for GTAs; and the GTA community.

The role of the GTA is to support undergraduate students through the course content. Therefore, when multiple GTAs are working on a module, the team must maintain a level of consistency across all seminar groups. Consistency can be facilitated through centralised decisions made at the module level, for example, centralised decisions regarding assessment, core content, and discussion topics. Consistency can lead to the same learning objectives being met across the module, while also supporting learners to engage with and understand the institutional norms. Whilst the delivery of the seminars may differ contingent on the personal pedagogical practices employed by the GTA, further consistency across seminar groups can be facilitated through the application of Noddings' (2005) ethic of care principles.

The size of the seminars (approximately 18 students) enabled us to build relationships with students, monitor student well-being and provide pastoral support. We all strived to build positive professional relationships with students, establishing time within our seminars to discuss how each student is adapting to university life and providing an inclusive, supportive space for questions to be answered. This is in keeping with the ethics of care, which extends beyond academic achievement, prioritising the holistic development of the individual (Scott, 2015). It was felt that the caring ethic was more easily transferred to a larger space following the

experience of a seminar; in the lecture theatres students had become familiar with one another as well as members of staff, providing a sense of community. This is remarked in Deal's (2022) article, where they contend that creating small groups within large communities can help maintain participation.

The collaborative nature of seminars, coupled with pedagogical adaptations facilitated by the GTAs, exhibits Noddings' (2012) five characteristics of the ethics of care. For example, the characteristic of listening can be assisted through classroom adaptations; dependent upon the needs of the students within each seminar group, we may use table groups to encourage students to discuss the course content and to listen to one another. Other GTAs may move the furniture so all students sit in one large circle, encouraging students to listen to the responses from the whole group. Furthermore, prior research identifies that students in HE value a dialogic approach to learning, where they can share their views and be treated as equals (Motta & Bennett, 2018). We found that we were able to facilitate a dialogic approach in seminars by scaffolding questions and using structured models of discussion such as think-pair-share, affording students a chance to consider their response and then review.

Although the ethics of care principle underlies almost all pedagogical decisions made within our seminars, the approach also presented vital challenges, particularly considering workload as GTAs are often employed through an hourly rate of pay (Quinterno, 2012; Partin, 2018), and balance teaching with PhD research. However, with students citing ethics of care as a vital component of effective teaching

(Scott, 2015), the importance of the principle should not be understated.

While the principles of an ethic of care currently unite our teaching practices, there was initially disparity in our former teaching experiences, which led to various adaptations in how we carried out this ethic in the role of GTA. Coming from various teaching backgrounds, spanning from primary schools to higher education, transitioning to the GTA role was an emotional but gratifying experience. This included adjusting our pedagogies to support the increasingly diverse cohort of students, as well as adapting to the role of a GTA seminar tutor and understanding our place within the teaching community. It was felt that Cassidy and Bates' (2005: 82) research on enacting an ethic of care in education, confirmed our conception of care, stating that it relied on "creating the right environment, building relationships, showing respect, adapting the curriculum, being empathetic and nonreactive."

The delivery of seminars was another concern, as we grappled with embracing the unfamiliar module content. Full autonomy was given to us to modify the seminar resources based on our expertise, but there was an underlying feeling that we should not veer too far from the structures given. This prompted intermittent feelings of uncertainty, which led to miscommunicated expectations and reduced confidence in our roles.

In some of our previous roles, as the main teacher, one might have had full control over the lesson structure and resource content. However, in this instance, there were seven tutors, including the module leader (ML), delivering across 15 seminar groups. The sheer quantity of students that we felt

responsible for bought about pressure to ensure consistency across the seminar groups, striving to ensure that we were offering the same learning experiences as fellow GTAs. Weekly seminar topics were prearranged by the ML, which led to a renegotiation of how we perceived our roles on the programme, at times feeling more like a facilitator, delivering the seminar on behalf of the ML. Beaton (2022) aptly describes the GTA role as a dual practitioner, stating that dual practitioners are established teachers in their first career but novices in their new HE educator role. This connected with our feelings of confusion in our positionality; we did not hold the position of lecturers, despite our previous professional experiences working as educators.

In addition to the dual practitioner role, we encountered the dual role of being a teacher and student at the same time, which led to feelings of imposter syndrome. Levy (2022) described imposter syndrome as a feeling encountered when an individual passes oneself off as being more capable than they are. Over the duration of the teaching term, it was felt that there was an expectation that the seminar tutors would have certain credentials, and this was assumed by the students on many occasions, referring to us as 'Doctor' or 'Professor'. This further added to our insecurities in the role, questioning whether we had the expertise to deliver seminars.

Within the department, we were sign-posted toward several individuals who formed the web of support for GTAs. These resources were available in addition to the informal supplementary encouragement and care offered by the GTA community, the latter a prominent finding in Partin's (2018) investigation of the GTA teaching experience. Relevant

training was offered through mentoring, where we were partnered with experienced academics or more experienced GTAs; Aparicio-Ting et al. (2022) recognise the mutually beneficial aspect of this practice, where social interaction facilitates the exchange of knowledge, experience, and new perspectives. Pairing practitioners in this way has been thought to gradually bring individuals in from the periphery (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sutherland, 2009), providing opportunity for “learning how the community functions, how teaching is undertaken by more experienced community members, how they fit in to the community, and what they might have to offer to the community” (Sutherland, 2009: 148).

The community we created on the programme impacted both our students and us directly. The former was a result of our ability to share our questions about a point of teaching. In doing this, we were able to connect with people who had a range of histories and prior qualifications, that fostered a greater teaching experience, when we intersected each activity with our differing competencies. Together we were able to create a microculture workforce of like-minded people where we wanted our students to have a positive experience; we were proud to represent our institution and we all enjoyed the teaching. Within the microculture, we modelled the care we intended to show in our seminars, to one another. Cassidy and Bates (2005: 79) verify the significance of “embracing the vision” in order to practice projecting our values across all of our teaching encounters.

Mirroring many of the principles of the Expansive Learning Environment Framework (Engestrom, 2014; Fuller, 2014) we have learnt to be better GTAs as a result of the culture and

community we work in. Some of the community was generated by the ML who acknowledged our expertise and encouraged us to develop the seminars as we saw fit. A second yet equally important aspect was the role of community in our doctoral journeys. There is an element of isolation in our academic practice; negotiating the change in identity from a student to an academic and researcher is a solitary journey for a doctoral candidate (Aitchison et al., 2012; Sala-Bubaré & Castelló, 2017), and prior to joining the GTA community, we had few people to turn to. This community supported us to feel that we belonged. Wenger (2000) argues that the social capital gained by our membership to this network as we engaged with each other and aligned our activities with each other, was the force that produced and maintained the community of practice. For us, there is another advantage - not only is the community about the GTA role that we are being paid to fulfil, but it is also about support for our doctoral journey.

As individuals continue to perceive the value of credentials and lifelong learning, the higher education landscape and its population is likely to continue to expand. While this provides invaluable experience to practitioners, offering academics stages to global audiences and platforms upon which complex and critical material can be explored and disseminated, it is vital that the practitioner recognises the many other facets of the learning experience that support the student to flourish, beyond knowledge acquisition. We have argued in this article that the role of the GTA has been pivotal in providing environments for budding scholars' identity transitions, for finding their academic voice, and for becoming part of a wider network that cares for and values them. Indeed, we have also drawn on our practices from the

periphery to emphasise how significant our relationships with one another have been, supporting a continuation of care provision to others in HE, but that greater clarity over the expectations of our roles and how to achieve consistency in our teaching practices, would be welcomed knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article was to explore the significance of an ethic of care within the teaching practices of four Postgraduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) in a Higher Education (HE) environment with an increasing undergraduate student population. Critically, it was noted that increasing the number of students participating in learning does not tackle the issue of belonging or loneliness; people need to feel seen and cared for. The notion of caring should not become institutionalised, it is an individualised encounter (Noddings, 2005).

We recommend that further research is needed to clarify how members of staff who are teaching from the periphery can be supported to achieve consistency across their pedagogical practices. With this consistency would likely come some clarity about the changing expectations of GTAs in the midst of the changing HE landscape.

Above all, becoming a GTA far exceeded our expectations. We could not have been prepared for how much was to be learnt from our experiences of teaching; we could not have pre-empted how insightful our students would be as they critically reflected on the course content, nor how open-minded or how kind they would be to one another as they

engaged in friendly debates in class. This accepting and understanding atmosphere within the seminars could not have been achieved without the tutors promoting their ethic of care from the offset.

We learnt that in feeling valued and feeling cared for, we were better able to support our students, and to model a relational pedagogy. By forming our community of GTAs, and by exchanging our strategies, our coping mechanisms, and our knowledge, we felt connected, making the GTA identity feel like a stable place in which we could belong.

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