POSTGRADUATE PEDAGOGIES
Volume 4: 1

Graduate Teaching Assistants' perspectives and reflections on the effectiveness of group work for first-year social science undergraduates

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Wang, Y. and Lei Y. (2024) 'Graduate Teaching Assistants' perspectives and reflections on the effectiveness of group work for first-year social science undergraduates'. *Postgraduate Pedagogies Journal*. 4, 1.

Abstract
In higher education, researchers are continuously exploring and discussing the effective ways to improve students' learning quality and experience (Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012). Compared to teacher-focused lectures, seminars are designed to transfer the power from teachers to students, and seminar tutors act as facilitators. Small group discussion, as part of the student-centred learning (SCL) pedagogy, is one of the most commonplace activities in seminars (O'Neil & McMahon, 2005).

Students engaging in group discussion do not only construct knowledge with their peers but also hone their collaboration and communication skills (Hoidn, 2017).

The authors reflect on their experiences of teaching in first-year undergraduate seminars as graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) working in social sciences disciplines in two UK universities. One author's seminar group consisted of mostly international students in a city university, and the other was dominated by local students in a campus university. Challenging the stereotype of reticent international students and vocal native speakers, both authors witnessed a generally weak intention of students to socialise and engage in group discussion. In addition, the authors observed that first-year students often find it difficult to draw on academic sources and produce relevant productive output. This paper aims to discuss and reflect on the effectiveness of group work and SCL pedagogy in first-year undergraduate seminars in the two UK universities, exploring the nuances in developing student autonomy while considering students' specific emotional and academic needs.

Introduction

Teaching and research have long been the two primary goals of higher education since the late 20th century (Cage, 1991). The academic members of staff are pressured to continuously produce high-quality research and take the role of teaching simultaneously (Chadha, 2013). Additionally, with a massification of higher education, students increasingly expect to receive valuable teaching that is worth the investment of their money and time to thrive in academic terrain and labour markets (Hill & Walkington, 2016). The student demands from large cohorts coupled with teaching staff availability means that Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) are needed as teachers and facilitators in higher education through seminar delivery (Wald & Harland, 2018).

Compared to lecture delivery to a large cohort of students, seminars usually consist of smaller numbers of students. It is argued that seminars provide a collaborative, accessible and student-centred environment (Chadha, 2013; Mathers et al., 2021), where deep learning with an intention to understand materials rather than simply memorising them happens (Baeten et al., 2010). Specifically, the goal of promoting student-centred deep learning is to foster students' ability to conduct critical questioning, contextualisation, analysis and evaluation of an issue, and come up with suggestions, an ability important to students' academic pursuits and beyond (Hoidn, 2017). Further, the emphasis on collaboration stems from the belief that knowledge is co-constructive and social, and cannot be simply transmitted from a teacher (Elliott & Reynolds, 2012). Thus, GTAs as seminar leaders are not required to perform the role of an instructor but rather a facilitator that encourages and guides students to be proactive and independent in collaborative practices such as group work.

However, while a student's individual knowledge can contribute to collaborative learning in seminars, their mental readiness and motivation for engaging in group discussions are key determinants to the outcome. During the pandemic, online learning was adopted in a number of institutions globally to gather students virtually and mitigate the interruption to student learning, yet it was found that most students did not turn on their camera or microphone (Neuwirth, Jović & Mukherji, 2021). This could undermine students' psychological intention of building and maintaining relationships with peers and GTAs through interaction and collaboration (Dingle, Han & Carlyle, 2022), and further deprives them of the opportunity to be familiar with and practice skills of initiating and engaging in academic discussions. Further, certain student populations seem to be more likely to be affected by the transition to online learning than others. As pointed out by Nyar (2021), among all student populations, during the pandemic, the first-year undergraduates were especially vulnerable, as they underwent a 'double transition' that included both the first-year transition into an unfamiliar field of higher education and the navigation of the pandemic.

In this article, we reflect on our experiences as GTAs and report our observations of and pedagogical practices on two undergraduate social sciences programmes in two UK universities. We both led seminar groups of first-year undergraduate students who spent nearly their entire upper secondary school in intermittent online learning due to the pandemic. One of the universities is a London-based Russell Group university and the programme consisted of a large number of international students. The other university is a campus university dominated by local students in the North of the UK. The length of the teaching in the former spanned across ten weeks in the 2022-23 spring term, whereas that of the latter lasted for two terms in the same year. This exploration by the authors was inspired by the perceived

emphasis on student-centred learning in training sessions for GTAs and the authors' later practices of applying it in the seminars in post-pandemic higher education. Although at present the actual event of Covid-19 has passed and teaching has resumed to face-to-face in most contexts, the impact of it still remains. With slight difference to Nyar's (2021) findings about first-year undergraduates' transition to online learning, the authors led offline seminars for first-year undergraduates who were more or less immersed in online learning prior to entry to higher education. The resumed demands for students to engage in frequent social interaction combined with students' preliminary understanding of the subject and environment could pose particular challenges to GTAs.

Methodology

The methodology applied for this paper is reflective qualitative inquiry conducted by two authors as GTAs of first-year undergraduate students in social science programmes at two UK universities. The authors met regularly and reflected on their pedagogical experiences and challenges encountered in organizing the seminars. Training and support received by each author in their own program and university as well as anecdotes exchanged with co-workers were also discussed in the meeting for a more comprehensive picture of the GTA experience. The findings of this article are drawn from shared opinions and exchanged anecdotes between the authors, and the identity information of all relevant parties will be removed throughout the article. While the programmes and universities covered in the article are too few to generalise any overarching conclusion, this article offers insight into an underdeveloped area, which is the student-centred learning in seminars of first-year undergraduates. It navigates the nuances in organising and facilitating collaborative practices for this

particular student population after an unprecedented pandemic and provides recommendations for future research and practices in regard to how GTAs can be supported and involved to improve students' learning experience.

Literature Review

Student-Centred Learning in Higher Education

With the development of cognitive and learning science, there is an increasing attention on how best to teach students and promote their learning (Sawyer, 2005). Many education theorists and researchers have tried to explore the ways that students can learn effectively, obtain skills and create innovative projects, with the aim of improving engagement and instruction (Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012). A variety of teaching methods were developed due to the impact of constructivist learning theory, which defines learning as an "active process in which learners are active sense makers who seek to build coherent and organised knowledge" (Mayer, 2004: 14). This constructivist learning theory acted as a source of the development of student-centred learning (SCL) approaches (Hannafin, Hill & Land, 1997); the paradigm shift away from teaching to an emphasis on learning has also encouraged power to be moved from the teacher to the student (Barr & Tagg, 1995). The teacher-centred learning (TCL) format such as lecturing has been heavily criticised, and this has paved the way for a widespread growth of SCL as an alternative approach (O'Neil & McMahon, 2005).

In higher education, the theoretical understanding of SCL is often absent in the literature, which brings a lot of confusion about what SCL actually is (Lea, Stephenson & Troy, 2003). Thus, there are various terms or definitions that are closely related to SCL, such as active

learning, collaborative learning, experiential learning, problem-based learning, which emphasise the centrality of the students' role in terms of practice, curriculum, and content (Lee & Hannafin, 2016). According to these different terms, different people may have different ideas about what truly constitutes SCL. Normally, SCL is described as ways of teaching and learning that think highly of student responsibility and activity in learning rather than content or what the teachers are doing (Cannon & Newble, 2000).

Methods including problem-based learning, discovery learning, collaborative/cooperative learning, and project-based learning, have all developed to enhance SCL (Baeten et al., 2010). These teaching methods emphasise the independence of students, and teachers are regarded as facilitators, knowledge is regarded as a tool rather than the aim, and students' activities are often presented as the opposite of traditional lectures where the teacher provides information that is passively received by the students (Prince, 2004). Although SCL is often contrasted with TCL, we should not simply understand SCL as active learning techniques and collaborative pedagogical activities, and TCL as unidirectional lectures and tests (Kain, 2003). Using SCL does not mean abandoning lectures since different learning pedagogies are needed for different learning aims (Mascolo, 2009).

Here, the authors do not aim to regard SCL and TCL as opposite sides or argue which one is better, we accept both have their valuable functions in different situations for specific learning purposes. Rather, we are interested in how SCL is implemented when there is an ongoing discussion and confusion about what SCL actually is. Specifically, we want to discuss to what extent adopting SCL in higher education teaching, especially in seminars, is effective in enhancing students' learning quality and experience.

Generally, seminars are described as small group learning, where group discussion and interaction are the key features and teachers are playing a supportive role (Steinert, 2004). During the seminar, students are suggested to move from acquiring and reproducing knowledge, to seeking meaning through the application of knowledge in assignment and discussion with peers. It combines the core characteristics of SCL, which are the teachers' design of active and deep learning, and students' autonomy and responsibility for learning (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). However, seminars may vary on numerous dimensions such as intended outcomes, the role of teachers/facilitators, the size and experience level of the group, the duration, scheduling, and number of the sessions (Stes et al., 2010). Therefore, it can be argued that seminars can be used differently in diverse contexts, and it is important not to homogenize them and explore the particular practices of seminars for distinct groups of students.

SCL and student engagement in the seminar

In practice, with the massification and widening participation policies in UK higher education, both undergraduate and postgraduate populations are becoming internationally diverse groups. Although this massification has led to a globalised student population and international learning experience, it also led to an imbalance of resources and staff to students, especially when permanent staff are facing the heavy workload and time pressure (Partin, 2018; Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021; HESA, 2022). As a result, universities are continually finding ways to support students' learning experience and enhance the SCL approach for the growing undergraduate student population (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021). Postgraduate researchers, who also consist of a large number of students in the UK and need teaching experience,

are encouraged to take on graduate teaching assistant (GTA) roles to support academic and teaching staff with instructional responsibilities (HESA, 2022).

To help researchers and teachers understand SCL and implement activities in this approach, five key aspects of SCL in higher education have been introduced by Wright (2011) and Weimer (2013), including: 1) the balance of power between facilitators/teachers and students; 2) the function of content is to contribute to the learning process and obtaining skills rather than just memorisation of knowledge; 3) the role of the teacher shifts from instructor to facilitator; 4) there is an assumption that responsibility for learning rests on independent and self-motivated students; and 5) the purpose of evaluation is not only to generate grades but also to be a means for students to learn, practice skills, and be given feedback. During the seminar, group work and discussion are viewed as main activities to enhance SCL, to make learners motivated and engaged in the seminar.

Although good in theory, and there is widespread use and implementation of SCL, Lea, Stephenson and Troy (2003: 322) claim that one of the main issues with SCL is the fact that "many institutions or educators claim to be putting student-centred learning into practice, but in reality they are not". The authors also question whether this pedagogy truly enhances students' learning engagement and effectiveness. As mentioned above, due to the diversity of duration and size of seminar groups, as well as the pedagogical practices taken, we could not generalise the benefits of seminars and group work underpinned by SCL as something that can be enjoyed by and suited to all students. For example, a comprehensive study was conducted in 2004, by the University of Glasgow, on the use of SCL with full-time undergraduate students. In the study, they found that SCL was more

prevalent in the later years of the student degrees, and they believed it was often related to the class size going down (UoG, 2004).

During the seminar, student engagement has been largely understood in terms of what can be measured, such as asking questions and participating in discussions with peers; those forms of learning that cannot be measured, including silent reading, reflection and contemplation, may be overlooked or even slighted as uncritical and passive learning (Graham et al., 2007). However, those who value or have experienced a more teacher-focused approach may reject the student-centred approach as frightening or indeed not within their remit (Prosser & Trigwell, 2002). For example, Zhou, Knoke and Sakamoto (2005) state that there are difficulties with implementing SCL in 'high power distance' societies or cultures where hierarchical relationships are more salient, like Asia. Also, the authors have documented silence among East-Asian international students, including Chinese students, in western/English classrooms. Students' communication competence and cultural differences from mainstream western society have been identified as the two main primary barriers to participation and engagement (ibid.).

However, the authors believe that without considering aspects of the educational context in which those characteristics interact, there is a risk that over-simplifies and distorts the mechanism underlying students' silence in the classroom (Zhou, Knoke & Sakamoto, 2005). Silence is a complex myth in the seminar, for both international and domestic students. To simply tie engagement with being vocally active in the seminar and see it as inherently benign, while quiet behaviour may be bracketed as problematic (Gourlay, 2015), poses a danger that deprives students' academic freedom to choose whichever approach they prefer to learning (MacFarlane, 2016). Specifically, MarFarlane (2016) argues that overemphasizing students' active participation in

higher education could lead to students 'performing' learning rather than true engagement, which refers to students being physically present at seminars and faking participation through various means (e.g., raising hands). The reason for this, according to MacFarlane, is that students are aware that they are formatively assessed by this and attempt to a leave positive impression on teachers, which does not necessarily mean that their learning is effective. In addition, students can change their views on learning during their university years (Perry, 1970). In support of Perry's work, Stevenson and Sander (2002) highlight that first-year medical students were suspicious of the value of SCL methods. Therefore, it should not be simply understood that only vocal students are engaged in the seminar, and silence mainly exists among 'high power distance' societies or cultures.

Discussion

Drawing from the reflexive discussions between the authors, several aspects of the GTA experience related to the use of group work in seminars, which included the strategies employed by GTAs as facilitators of learning as well as certain limitations and barriers in practice.

Regardless of the different activities used in the seminars across the term, both city and campus university students were expected by the module leaders to be 'proactive learners' that contributed to group discussions. In the city university, this requirement was made clear in the powerpoint slides for every week to remind students of their role, while this was less explicit in the campus university where students were encouraged to be active in weekly discussions. The size of the seminar was approximately 18 students, who in most activities were asked to sit with peers in groups of 3 to 4, and engage in discussion

and (optional) presentation of topics posed by GTAs. In this process, we strived to facilitate smooth and productive discussions that not only enabled the students to deepen their understanding of the course content, as suggested by Baeten et al. (2010), but also to build connections with each other.

We employed multiple strategies to achieve this, such as moving the chairs around prior to the seminar so students can sit around different desks, encouraging students to sit with peers they haven't worked with before, asking them to vote within groups for a group leader, etc. New materials not covered in the lectures were not introduced in the seminar by us, as GTAs were expected to serve the role of a facilitator rather than an instructor in promoting SCL (Prince, 2004).

Moreover, as Autry and Walker (2011) claim that the use of art enables students to self-reflect on what they have learned more easily than texts, and elicit richer emotions, creative pedagogical practices were also employed to enhance students' motivation in engagement. In one session in the city university, the students were given a task to collaboratively work on an art piece related to that week's content using coloured pens and markers and present their work to other groups at the end of the seminar.

Planning learning activities is a crucial aspect of designing courses and everyday teaching. In order to achieve the intended learning outcomes, it is essential that the curriculum, subject, learning outcomes, learning activities, and assessment tasks are aligned (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Learning activities should encourage student participation, guide, and engage students in achieving the agreed learning outcomes (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Eventually, we found that a structured lesson plan and the model of posing a topic, starting group discussion, and inviting presentation and questions helped to

initiate students' engagement and reflection on their own, which was in line with van Diggele, Burgess and Mellis's (2020) statement that a systematic approach is critical to the success of group discussions. We were able to facilitate group work that afforded a dialogic and participative approach to learning.

Further, the diversity and inclusivity of the group work was another aspect we strived to promote. In the city university where there was a large number of international students, mostly Chinese, enrolled in the particular module, students from English speaking countries were a minority, and sometimes were vulnerable to marginalisation in group work. The GTA observed that this was because sometimes due to language barriers, the dominant Chinese first-year undergraduates tended to discuss in Chinese, excluding the non-Chinese peer(s) in the group. The GTA adopted the strategy of talking to the Chinese students after seminar and advising them to use English only so as not to isolate others, which increased the students' awareness of the issue, although not eliminating it entirely.

Also, the authors acknowledge that the teaching training opportunity provided by universities is useful for us to improve and reflect our teaching approaches in the seminar. The induction session for newly appointed GTAs at the beginning of a semester offered valuable insights regarding improving student engagement in seminars, and provided a platform for experienced and novice GTAs to exchange ideas, which was helpful for one of the authors as a newcomer of the GTA community. Moreover, the constant group meetings can also create peer support among GTAs, as it provides a safe place to discuss our difficulties and share useful teaching techniques for preparing and delivering seminars. One of the authors acquired a new approach to organizing the seminars of first-year students, which was to integrate different digital tools (e.g., mentimeter, Google Doc) as well as

traditional tools (markers, pens, posters) into seminar activities, in order to give students autonomy in choosing their preferred approach to learning.

Although our pedagogical practices with first-year undergraduates reveal certain merits of the group work approach, embedded in the SCL discourse, there are also limitations to it. Firstly, we noticed that a large number and a high frequency of group work in our particular module could overwhelm these newcomers to higher education. While these students were required to do preparatory reading before the seminar for better independent and collaborative learning, they were not always able to do so for they had other modules with similar requirements, and they were occupied with other tasks at the beginning of the navigation of university life, as pointed out by Nyar (2021), such as building new relationships and obtaining access to various facilities and information.

In this case, we found that most first-years in our seminar groups came unprepared, making it difficult for them to voice informed opinions in group work. As a result, silence fell upon the seminar room sooner than expected as the discussion often ended before the end of class, and few students volunteered to present their discussion outcomes or ask any questions. We tried to initiate the discussion when students were reluctant to, by giving examples of our own, and raising a question to the whole seminar or to particularly silent groups. However, apart from the sessions when guidelines of the module assignment were explained and students responded with clarification questions actively, our attempts at promoting proactive group work received fewer returns than expected. In hindsight, we could have adopted alternative approaches to encourage participation. For example, engaging students in debate of a controversial issue for them to identify the strengths and weaknesses of an argument could be

conducive, as Snider and Schnurer (2002) suggests. Moreover, decades of research in the learning sciences suggest that people construct new knowledge largely on the basis of what they already know (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000). Young et al., (2014) argue that the use of students' prior knowledge and experience is a pedagogical process rather than part of the curriculum, while the latter is defined as the conceptual knowledge students are to acquire. However, curriculum and pedagogy are deeply intertwined. Thus, it is important for students to reflect upon their previous experiences, such as a fond or challenging memory of formal/informal education, and make the link with relevant knowledge and concepts from the course. The link with their lived experience may narrow the gap between students' lives and seemingly abstract distanced knowledge, thus enhancing students' motivation and engagement.

In addition, as discussed in previous sections, we did not want to arbitrarily assume that silent students were 'bad' or 'disengaged', as they might adopt or prefer different learning approaches to relatively vocal students. Hence, we did not pick any student to voice their understanding in the effort to develop equal relationships with students rather than reinforcing the teacher-student hierarchy, and to avoid the danger of pushing the students to 'perform' active learning (MacFarlane, 2016). Also, it is worth noting that the lack of willingness to participate in group work is found among both the international students in the city university and among local students in the campus university in particular modules. While this paper does not collect students' views on this, based on the authors' observation and reflection, the silence found in local and international students could be attributed to their lack of preparation for the seminar, as some students admitted that they did not finish the essential reading or weekly tasks prior to the seminar. Also, some first-year students' confusion of their role and place at seminars were observed in both

case universities, as certain students explicitly stated that they did not find frequent group discussions meaningful. Without the attempt of overgeneralizing, this paper does underscore the importance of not labelling and stereotyping students into 'vocal' and 'silent' based on their background, otherwise posing a danger to undermine students' autonomy and overlook other factors potentially affecting their engagement.

However, in this way, we noticed that some seminar activities that were based on smooth collaborative discussion led by students were hard to implement, and we as GTAs lacked specific strategies to facilitate them. It is challenging to strike the balance between organising group work to facilitate students' collaborative learning, which is recognized as one of the prominent features of seminars (Entwistle, 2017), while also respecting their rights to choose not to engage, especially for first-year students in the post-pandemic era who might lack the knowledge base or motivation to participate in interaction with peers. A potential approach that shows the GTA's respect to students and promote democracy in seminars could be through demonstrating care, specifically through remembering students' names, making them feel recognised, and accrediting students' efforts and contributions. It is argued that a caring approach is beneficial to building trust between staff and students, which could in the long run enhance student engagement (Gravett and Winstone, 2022). However, a caring approach still needs to be critically examined before implementation, as it could increase staff workload or reinforce the stereotypes of different genders and gendered work in higher education, seeing how caring is usually seen as a feminine job (Motta & Bennett, 2018).

Therefore, the effectiveness of the seminar, being an elusive term itself, is hard to define and measure amidst the complex web of diverse

demands of students with different preferences and abilities. While the authors of this paper reflect upon some approaches such as caring and utilising various pedagogical tools that may have enhanced student engagement in seminars, it is found through observation that first-year undergraduates' engagement could be affected by various factors, such as their preparation and perceived usefulness of seminar activities. Thus, the importance of seeing students as individuals with different needs rather than members of a group is highlighted for future practices.

Conclusion

The aim of this reflective article was to draw from the pedagogical experience of two GTAs from two UK higher education institutions located in different cities with different student populations. There was a particular focus on their approaches in first-year undergraduate seminars to facilitate group work and student-centred learning (SCL), as well as challenges encountered.

The persuasive discourse of promoting students' independent, active, and collaborative learning in seminars was critically discussed, as the authors observed in practice that the SCL approach may not suit everyone, and it is necessary to consider various factors when taking the SCL approach to teaching and learning. The level of the students, their perception and lived experience of being a member of higher education at different stages, their previous educational background, and preferred approach to learning, could be considered to make a collective impact on the effectiveness of SCL.

Acknowledging the fact that the outcome of the seminar in higher education cannot be generalised in regards to the diverse missions of

different programmes, modules, student composition, and teachers' practices, we recommend that further research is needed to delve into the situated experience of undergraduates' through collecting empirical data, to enrich the field exploring how students' educational stage and their expectation of the teacher's role derived from previous experiences, could influence their engagement. Also, some clarity could come from such research and corresponding teaching practices regarding how GTAs can be better instructed and supported to perform their role in accordance with programme requirements and student demands in seminars.

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