

Triple Identities and Resilient Liminality: Reflexive Narratives on Negotiating Identities as an International Graduate Teaching Assistant in the UK

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Abstract

In the current discourse on Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) in the United Kingdom, a prominent paradox revolves around how GTAs negotiate their dual identity as novice teachers and PhD students. However, there is a notable lack of attention to international GTAs (IGTAs) within this discussion. IGTAs, being non-UK residents and part of a migrant community, embody an external group in the broader cultural context of the UK. Their social identity is intricately woven with academic and professional identities, creating a more complex interplay that requires careful juggling and negotiation of identities. This study takes the form of a reflective essay and draws on Rosenberg's (1997) concept of the 'multiplicity of selves.' While reviewing the autobiographical narratives, diaries, and reflections produced during my tenure as an IGTA, this study places particular emphasis on an examination of my efforts in negotiating multiple facets of identity. Specifically, attention is directed towards the intersections, conflicts, transformations, and integration within the tripartite framework of personal professional identity (GTA), academic identity (PhD candidate), and social identity (international student/immigrant). Furthermore, this paper delves into the inquiry of whether the 'liminal position' arising from tensions between distinct identities can serve as a resilient space, fostering possibilities for the emergence of novel identities. Employing an autoethnographic approach, the paper aims to utilise personal narratives to reveal how individuals position themselves within the vast socio-cultural space, informing choices and perspectives for others and providing insights into conceptualising identity positioning and comprehensive development for future IGTAs.

Introduction

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) represent a position designed to provide teaching experience, deepen subject knowledge, and skill preparation for graduate students aspiring to future university teaching roles (Gilmore *et al.*, 2014; Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2021). In the UK, the escalating enrolment in higher education, juxtaposed with diminishing per capita funding and resource allocation at the national level, has compelled numerous universities to adopt policies involving increased recruitment of part-time teachers. Among these, a substantial number are GTAs, often occupied by PhD students (Park & Ramos, 2002; Standen, 2018), making discussions about GTAs particularly pertinent (Vostal, 2015). Currently, a prominent contradiction revolves around how GTAs perceive their dual identities as both teachers and students (Muzaka, 2009; Cho *et al.*, 2011). Research indicates that the overlapping identities of GTAs make it challenging for them to form a cohesive sense

of identity, described as being ‘neither fish nor fowl’ (Park, 2002: 50). Harland and Plangger (2004: 73) use the term ‘chameleons’ to underscore GTAs’ efforts in negotiating their identities across various contexts. However, existing research on GTAs lacks attention to international GTAs (IGTAs). In this study, ‘international’ refers to non-local students in the UK (Ban, 2023; HESA, 2023). Beyond the student and teacher identities mentioned, some international students coming from the Global South also have to navigate the multiple connections and tensions between national identity, race, ethnicity/language, and social class (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017).

This study posits that the concept of identity offers an effective perspective for a comprehensive understanding of how IGTAs construct and negotiate themselves in different environments. Drawing on Rosenberg’s (1997) concept of the ‘multiplicity of selves,’ which focuses on the interrelations among different self-identities, and considering the complexity of IGTAs’ identities, this study takes the form of a reflective essay. By building on Ellis and Bochner’s (2000) recommendation to make the researcher’s own experience a topic of investigation, this paper, through a retrospective examination of autobiographies, diaries, and reflections written during my tenure as an IGTA, focuses on my efforts in negotiating identities. Specifically, it delves into the intersections, conflicts, transformations, and integrations of my triple identities: personal professional identity (GTA), academic identity (PhD student), and social identity (international student/immigrant). Additionally, the paper endeavours, through reflection, to explore whether the ‘liminal position’ formed by tensions between different identities can inspire the creation of new identities and actively envision the comprehensive development of my future identity.

This paper employs an autoethnographic approach with the aim of constructing practical knowledge from my personal experiences and reflections, guiding subsequent actions. Simultaneously, the study endeavours to extrapolate broader insights from the particular, drawing on personal narratives (Hamdan, 2012) to illuminate how individuals endeavour to imbue their lives with meaning transcending temporal and spatial boundaries (Pavlenko, 2007).

Conceptualisation of identity

In a broad sense, the concept of identity is a way of understanding self and interpersonal interactions (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). It is not a pre-existing fact but a continually evolving production that is always in the process of formation and consistently constituted within representation (Hall, 1990). It is a bidirectional, dynamically flowing social process (Goffman, 2016). Building upon this notion, individuals construct their identities through complex social interactions that incorporate their personal history and present circumstances. This construction not only draws upon personal past and present experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990), and reflections (Schön, 2017), but also involves the projection of future goals and aspirations, thereby influencing the decision-making (Erikson, 1968). The formation of identity is significantly shaped by time and space (Giddens, 2008), associated members (Tajfel, 1978), and specific social contexts. Therefore, scholars

conceptualise identity as a social construct (Gee, 2000), situational (Yon, 2000), and continually evolving (Zacharias, 2010).

Rosenberg (1997) introduces the concept of the multiplicity of selves, aligning with a postmodern perspective on identity. This perspective acknowledges that individuals possess multiple identities: one can be a daughter, an Asian, a student, and a feminist based on various social contexts. The postmodern view of identity is particularly relevant in the context of the emerging transnational discourse, as personal identity is no longer confined to local class, gender, and racial categories (Wurgaft, 1995). Instead, it needs to be applied to different global spaces, recognising the possibility of generating new identities through ongoing social interactions and experiences.

Considering the above discussion, in the context of this study, especially within the doctoral research framework where I both study and work, I find my personal identity dynamics to be highly intricate. From being solely a doctoral candidate (academic identity) to emerging as a new academic in the field (professional identity), and concurrently, as an Asian female, navigating the Western world through second language acquisition and integration into the local society (social identity). Amidst the continual changes in the social environment, the diversity of my personal identity brings complexity (Rosenberg, 1997). This complexity is evident not only in the intersection of my threefold identities, for instance, my qualification for a GTA role arises from the alignment of my PhD identity with the subject expertise required for teaching responsibilities, but also in situations where the overlap of these identities cannot seamlessly translate into cultural fluency for adapting to another identity. Such instances create tensions, often placing me in an ‘in-between’ or liminal position that is “ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification” (Turner, 2018: 232). For instance, during initial teaching experiences, I might perceive myself as a genuine student masquerading as a teacher; during essay marking, I grapple with whether my grading perspective aligns more with that of a teacher or a student. Like many other doctoral students, I sometimes position myself in a swinging status between different identities, transcending the student role yet not fully attaining the professional identity (Winstone & Moore, 2017).

In the following, I aspire to employ a postmodern perspective in this reflexive essay to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct my identity as an IGTA (Koehne, 2005), aiming to provide insights for readers to understand the multiplicity, intersectionality, and resilience of IGTA’s identities.

Methodology: Self-as-subject

Tedlock (2005: 467) describes autoethnography as a research approach that attempts to “heal the split between public and private realms by connecting the autobiographical impulse (the gaze inward) with the ethnographic impulse (the gaze outward)”. As a self-as-subject qualitative research design, autoethnography supports the notion that valuable knowledge can be extracted from the lived experiences of individuals (Lewis & Throne, 2021), trying to establish connections between personal

experiences and cultural and social interpretations (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). It believes that the new knowledge derived from individual life experiences can offer societal implications (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011), providing insights and enhanced understanding for both the 'self' (author) and the 'other' (reader) (Spry, 2001). Such narratives situate individual and unique life experiences within a broader historical and social context, aiding in our comprehension of the structural dynamics of the world (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Therefore, employing autoethnography allows the researcher's own experiences to become a subject of study (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), offering reflective narratives that elucidate the researcher's personal experiences to analyse cultural beliefs, practices, and the social experiences influencing identities (Wall, 2008). Especially for IGTA's, this approach is beneficial for them to re-evaluate the various flexible roles they undertake and reassess the hidden relevance within their practices (Campbell, 2022).

In this paper, I will engage in a retrospective analysis of my personal experiences by reviewing personal journals and reflective notes during my tenure as an IGTA, providing an additional demonstration for readers to comprehend the concept framework of multiple identities proposed earlier.

Triple Identities within the Same Field

"Extremely awkward. In the first seminar, I couldn't independently operate the classroom screen in front of the students, which left me feeling quite defeated. (...) Fortunately, the technical issue was resolved, and the remaining class time proceeded very smoothly. However, this smoothness is my personal perception; how will my students evaluate it?"

This is a diary excerpt written on the first teaching day. The embarrassment of encountering an unforeseen technical situation and the subsequent joy of seemingly smooth teaching lingered in my mind. The course I taught as an IGTA was a mandatory undergraduate class related to my academic background, so my long-standing academic performance endowed me with sufficient intellectual capital to contribute to the emerging role of a teacher. However, during lesson planning, I realised that proficiency in the knowledge base of my specialised field did not guarantee a smooth development of teaching identities. This includes professional teaching skills, placing me in an awkward situation of 'expert becomes novice' and 'loss of expertise' (Pavlenko, 2007).

During my time as a student, my role was passive - I would quietly sit in the lecture hall, awaiting the teacher to coordinate all aspects, such as the lecture outline, screen projection, and sharing of reading materials. As a student, participation involved adhering to the teacher's pre-designed classroom activities rather than actively engaging (Kuo, 2011). Therefore, I naturally perceived these academic duties as 'given.' However, the dynamics shifted significantly when I, as an IGTA, stood at the front of the classroom. Despite the teaching occurring within the same field of the

classroom, a profound transformation in identity occurred. The academic responsibilities were transferred into my emerging teacher identity (Caspersen & Raaen, 2014). To optimise the limited class time, it is imperative that I fully immerse myself in the role of the ‘teacher’ when designing learning and instructional activities. It is essential to structure courses that are reasonable, engaging, and inclusive. Additionally, this extends to the meticulous debugging of electronic devices mentioned at the outset of this diary entry, ensuring their seamless functionality to facilitate a smooth teaching process. Upon carefully addressing every minutia of these instructional details, I take pride in my ability to impart personal knowledge production to students. This sense of self-efficacy serves as a driving force in my role as an IGTA (Fairbrother, 2012).

However, this joy is accompanied by anxiety. Doctoral students are often confident in their identity as researchers but approach the role of a teacher with caution. During the Q&A session at the end of the class, I would worry that my knowledge as a novice teacher might not be sufficient to clarify students’ queries. These moments also deepened my realisation that the depth of understanding required for the IGTA role goes beyond my academic achievements earned during my PhD. The study by Nasser-Abu Alhija and Fresko (2021) supports the idea that GTAs are often selected based on their prior achievements in the course domain; however, there can be significant differences between the course content that students are learning and the instructor’s teaching syllabus. IGTAs often lack extensive teaching experience, systematic teaching training, and a long-term academic foundation, which could negatively impact the maintenance of their authority during the initial stages of knowledge exchange with students (Douglas, Powell & Rouamba, 2016).

Moreover, as an international student, I am required to deliver smooth and comprehensive instruction in English, which is my second language, in local classrooms in the UK, where most students bear Western facial features. Despite having previous study experience in the UK and sufficient English proficiency to assimilate into Western classroom environments, when roles are reversed, the ‘social identity’ of being an international student and an outsider intervenes in my identity negotiation. I find myself reflecting on the imbalances created by multiple identities: Will my pronunciation, pace of speed, and grammar be accepted by students? Am I capable of delivering teaching of equal quality to that of native teachers? Can my educational experiences in my home country aid in my adaptation to British classrooms?

In the field of the classroom, a complex interplay and detachment of my triple identities emerged. Lave and Wenger (1991: 57) describe the process of developing and negotiating identities both inside and outside the classroom as ‘contradictions and struggles,’ a continuous theme throughout my tenure as an IGTA. I realised that the overlap between academic and professional identities does not seamlessly translate into cultural fluency for adapting to another identity. Social identity intervenes in the identity negotiation within a broader contextual background, creating tensions and

often placing me in an ‘in-between’ liminal position. In this intricate scenario, I position myself as a student, a novice teacher, and simultaneously an outsider to the broader cultural context of the UK. This compels me to flexibly negotiate these different identities (Haniford, 2010).

Resilient Spaces within Identity Tensions

“A student emailed me seeking an analysis of a concept, and I spent a day researching literature to provide a comprehensive response (...). She expressed her gratitude in person at the end of the week's class, praising my materials and teaching style, stating, 'I find your lectures particularly engaging and approachable.' I consistently find greater self-satisfaction in positive feedback from others.”

“I shared the feedback and trust given by the students with my parents and friends. They expressed their enduring belief in my capabilities, reassuring me not to be overly anxious.”

Over time, with more teaching practice and interaction, I have gained extensive opportunities for the development of a ‘provisional self,’ and my identity as a teacher has gradually taken shape (Winstone & Moore, 2017: 497). The positive feedback mentioned in the diary excerpt here made me realise that the vibrant, enthusiastic, and empathetic qualities developed in my family and home country have internalised as personal characteristics. In international environments, these familiar traits take on a culturally significant influence, positively impacting my personal identity. In other words, the legitimisation of my professional identity is closely tied to the respect and positive feedback expressed by students. However, I have harboured doubts regarding whether this professional identity has genuinely formed, or if I have created a new identity during this transitional phase.

It becomes apparent that, from the student perspective, a GTA is more than just an emerging teacher; rather, they are perceived as more capable ‘near peers’ (Ryan, 2014). GTAs serve as an embodied and personified form of scaffolding (Bruner, 1978) and a visual, tangible assurance. Despite the observation by Winstone and Moore (2017) indicating that GTAs’ ‘in-between’ status denies them a stable identity consistent with either students or teachers, this instability of liminality, from my perspective, provides a resilient space for innovating identities. Through the accumulation of positive feedback, I have discovered an approach to alleviate the inherent tensions between teacher and student identities. This involves positioning myself as a ‘reliable peer with additional knowledge’ for the students. This perspective aligns with the earlier discussion on identity formation, emphasising that constructing identity is a mutually negotiated process with others (Goffman, 2016). However, my own brief experience as an IGTA cannot guarantee an entirely rosy picture of this role. Solid investigations into student groups by Muzaka (2009) have

shown that feedback regarding GTAs is often mixed, with negative comments primarily focusing on the lack of comprehensive subject knowledge and teaching skills. These findings echo my above-mentioned concerns. Therefore, it is imperative to enhance and professionalise doctoral students' experiences, advocating for a more deliberate approach in crafting systematic professional development programmes for IGTAAs that effectively combine research training and teacher education (Harland & Plangger, 2004).

"Today, my class was originally scheduled to end at 2pm, but several students queued up to ask me questions about their essay topics and understanding of core concepts. By the time I had addressed their queries, it was almost 4pm. However, the process was mutually enjoyable for all involved."

This emerging identity, situated between the realms of academic and teaching identities, possesses a high degree of fluidity and resilience, providing an expansive space for me to navigate the transition between binary identities. I have also applied this reflective approach to subsequent teaching experiences. For instance, when delivering specialised knowledge, I emphasise the professionalism of my self-expression and knowledge presentation, adopting the identity of a knowledgeable person inherent in the definition of a teacher (Winstone & Moore, 2017). However, in classroom interactions and everyday communication, I choose to enter a liminal space, maintaining the authority of the teacher identity while leveraging the advantages of a peer identity to create a new identity for engaging with students. This new identity makes me more approachable, engaging, empathetic to students' expressions and thoughts, and better able to design personalised class content - as I have recently gone through their learning stage as well (Kendall & Schussler, 2012). As mentioned in the diary, positive feedback seems to prove that activating and synthesising multiple identities is possible in the limited field of practice (Marginson, 1997).

Evolving identity negotiation: A summary

"I would like to express my gratitude for everything you have done this semester (...). You consistently brought us informative slides, engaging explanations, thorough essay feedback, and always responded to emails promptly."

"Today marks the last seminar, and I feel a sense of relief. However, upon receiving this email, I realize that I have become accustomed to the rhythm of reconciling different identities – a life filled with freshness, challenges, and vitality. This has transformed my once calm doctoral life into something more anticipated."

This is an excerpt from an email received from a student after my last class as an IGTA, along with my corresponding journal response. The continuous construction of my identity revolved around being an international student, a PhD candidate, and an emerging teacher, presenting both challenges and charm. The interconnection among

these roles highlights the intersectionality of identity (Jones, 2009), emphasising that isolating any single aspect of identity will overlook my authentic experience (Reid & Comas-Diaz, 1990). Reflective practices on my multiple identities did not cease with the end of the IGTA contract. I realised that maintaining reflexivity helps me consider how my personal values influence my practices, relationships with others, and engagement with the world (Kreber, 2010). This underscores the significance of connecting personal experiences with the broader background factors that shape academic practices.

In the social environment of the UK, I function as an ‘outsider’ from an East Asian country, performing the identity of an international student. In the unfamiliar classrooms, I engage in teaching using a second language, striving to integrate, and become an ‘insider.’ This process is characterised by spatial transitions and the juggling of identities. The specific space I inhabit, whether micro-level such as the classroom or macro-level like the UK, generates distinct new identities, intensifying my desire for identity negotiation. These multiple identities are not easily harmonised or smoothly transferred. As an IGTA, my identity is conceptualised as a form of liminality, representing “a period of uncertainty, confusion, or doubt” (Keefer, 2015: 18). Nevertheless, this liminality in my practice is not filled with unrest; instead, it provides me with an intermediary space full of resilience and potential. This space incorporates multiple factors such as feedback from others, personal reflection, supervisors’ support, and the care of family and friends. As shown in Figure 1, in this liminal space, these factors allow me to creatively shape a malleable intermediate identity within the tensions of complex identities. It serves as a buffer and bridge, facilitating flexible navigation between different established identities and alleviating conflicts among them.

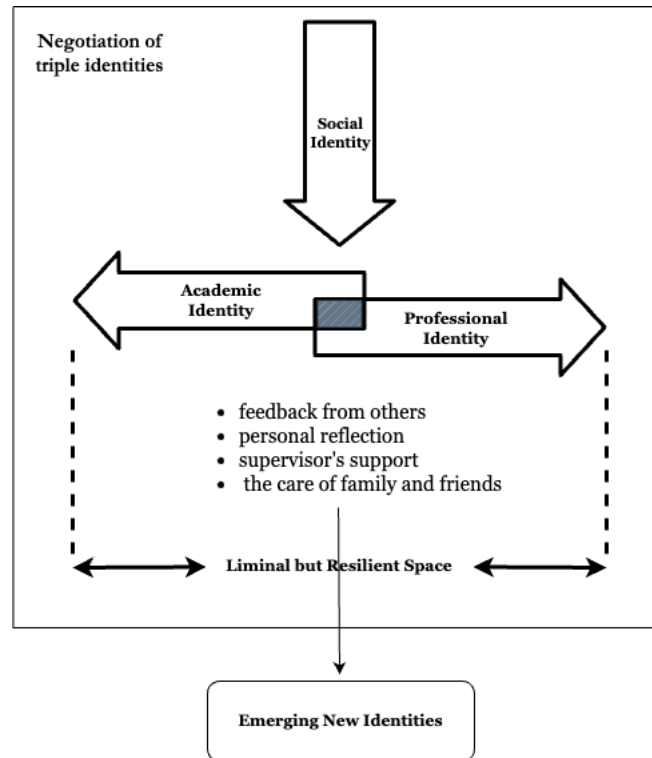


Figure 1. The negotiation of multiple identities and how new identities emerged from liminal space, adapted from Winstone and Moore (2017)

In conclusion, despite encountering multiple challenges in the process of identity negotiation during my tenure as an IGTA, I am far from a passive recipient. On the contrary, I actively accept, choose, clarify, create, and redefine my multiple identities to seek a dynamic balance. For me, viewing multiple identities as a static cluster of labels falls short; instead, they collectively generate a threshold, a transition always emerging through the combined processes of being and becoming (Fortier, 2020). In this paper, I have attempted to alleviate the concerns within the academic community regarding the awkward and ambiguous position of GTAs as ‘neither fish nor fowl’ (Winstone & Moore, 2017) by employing the flexible agency and resilient reflexivity inherent in personal storytelling. I have provided a new narrative: in the evolving process of identity negotiation, it is through the exploration, acknowledgment, and widening of boundaries between self and others that I can redefine the significance of the multiple identities. The construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of identities constitute agent scenarios. Although this process is constrained by factors such as the limitations of foreign contexts, cultural differences, and disparities in educational mechanisms, these factors do not determine the process. Instead, the process itself becomes a potent force, allowing the full expression of my personal agency. Finally, considering the complexity of my identity negotiation process, I suggest that future doctoral training programs should establish a comprehensive GTA professional development plan. This plan should not only include academic training but also encompass teaching and managerial skill development. By doing so, it would address the issue of doctoral students potentially being underprepared when serving as

GTAs to a certain extent and cultivate a skill set that is becoming increasingly important in the future educational job market. I believe that this not only forms the foundation for exploring new identities as an IGTA but also contributes to maximising the potential of the IGTA role, benefiting students and the entire education system.

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