

# **Introduction to Postgraduate Pedagogies: Centring Graduate Teaching Assistants in Higher Education**

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Across the United Kingdom (UK) and beyond, Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) are an integral part of universities and a substantial part of the Higher Education workforce. While there is a growing body of scholarship about the role of the GTA, and texts and materials which seek to support them as they carry out their responsibilities, the voice of GTAs themselves is less often heard and there exists no systematic account of their perspectives, experiences and contributions. This open-access journal aims to help fill this gap by bringing to the fore GTA voices and experiences. Based on the firm belief that GTAs bring important and potentially unique skills, ideas and approaches to lecture halls, labs and seminar rooms, it includes contributions from current or recent GTAs, and those working with them. *Postgraduate Pedagogies* aims to synthesise and analyse, reflect on and assert the unique experiences of GTAs, the contributions they bring to the Higher Education (HE) teaching and learning environment, and the specific challenges they face.

Recent changes in higher education institutions across the UK, including increased student numbers (ONS, 2016) and increased job precarity (UCU 2016, 2021ab), are pushing GTAs into the foreground. Universities have begun to rely more heavily on part-time, fixed-term and hourly paid staff, including postgraduates, to deliver undergraduate and, on occasion, postgraduate teaching (Muzaka, 2009). GTAs are typically doctoral researchers who teach, although within this definition there is great variation in both what duties and responsibilities the GTA may have (for example, lab demonstrating, facilitating seminars, marking) and also what motivates the individual GTA to take on teaching alongside their other duties. Some choose to teach out of interest, for pleasure or to explore a potential academic path; for others, especially unfunded doctoral researchers, it might be a financial necessity to pay fees and make a living; and for some it might be a contractual obligation that ties in with how their research is funded. Nevertheless, what GTAs have in common is that as postgraduates who teach, they occupy a different position to other members of staff who teach and support learning. In all cases, GTAs will have to balance teaching with their own research, and negotiate being teachers while also being in the position of students, and all the myriad difficulties and opportunities this entails.

The journal was initiated by a group of GTAs (at the time) and academic developers working in GTA training and support and grew out of a desire to create a space for autonomy, power and voice that GTAs often feel they lack (Muzaka, 2009). With this journal we aim to provide a valuable opportunity for GTAs to use their voice to draw attention to

important issues related to them. We hope to provide a space that will demonstrate, both academically and professionally, how vital GTAs can be, and how approaching their role from, for instance, a position of radical collegiality (Fielding, 1999) might foreground their professional development.

A strong ethos of partnership between GTAs and staff working with GTAs also underpins all aspects of the journal and this will hopefully ensure that the journal remains relevant to those working as GTAs, as well as provide opportunities for reflection on practice, scholarly development and empowerment. While reflection-on-action (Schön, 1987) is often seen as an individual endeavour for the individual's benefit, reflection on practice and identity construction can also be empowering for readers who might be struggling with similar challenges or experiences, letting them know that they are not alone, and also allowing them to learn through the experiences and suggestions of others. This may be even more empowering and important for those who are positioned in liminal spaces, like GTAs and early career academics, who may be inspired to engage in reflection about their own experience. It is thus our hope that by encouraging GTAs to engage in 'reflection-on-action' (see Schön, 1987; Brockbank, 2007) we can encourage them not only to deepen and situate their learning about teaching and research, but also to engage in scholarly writing to further develop their knowledge of scholarship by learning by doing.

In this introduction to the inaugural issue of *Postgraduate Pedagogies*, we draw out three central themes that all six

contributions to this inaugural issue respond to: the role and identity of GTAs; relationships and partnerships between GTAs, academic staff and taught students; and reflections on implications for GTA practice. These themes highlight the importance of building a community that helps GTAs explore and navigate their liminal role, sharing experiences and suggestions for future practice. We end by introducing the six articles that make up the inaugural issue.

## **Themes in this inaugural issue: identity, partnership, and practice**

### **1 Role, identity, and liminality**

The idea that GTAs occupy liminal roles in-between student and teacher is common in existing scholarship and is also picked up by authors in this issue. Park (2004) explains that GTAs have acted as teachers for a long time in the USA and that their role 'is a recognized position, with its own status and niche within the higher education system' (p. 349). Park sees this as fundamentally different to the role of GTAs in the UK who engage 'in some teaching, often primarily in order to secure financial support and, often secondarily, to gain teaching experience' (p. 349). The lack of a recognised position, and the related tension between roles such as researcher/teacher and staff/student, mean that GTAs' roles are often seen as conflicting. As Park and Ramos (2002) argue, 'they are both student and teacher, but neither fully' (p. 52).

While the two studies above are now a couple of decades old, similar findings have been reported from more recent studies, showing that little has changed in this respect.

Compton and Tran (2017) asked a series of questions about GTA identity that resonate with the one expressed by Park and Ramos above: 'Are they [GTAs] still students? Are they researchers? Are they university staff or "almost staff"?' (p. 1). Their research found that most GTAs have strong researcher identities and that only few see themselves as teachers. The explanation that is offered sees this as a logical consequence of teaching only occupying a limited amount of the GTAs' total time spent in this role. However, they argue further that how doctoral researchers navigate these many, and potentially conflicting, roles, may play an important role in determining whether they 'experience a more positive liminality or the uncertainty of limbo' (p. 13).

If Compton and Tran's research shows how different GTAs perceive their role(s) in different ways, Muzaka (2009) found that this holds true for the ways in which other groups perceive of GTAs too. This research found that both GTAs and students perceive that GTAs' lack of subject knowledge can be a problem, whereas academics generally do not express this view. What most academic staff were more concerned about, on the other hand, was the GTAs' lack of teaching experience which they thought could disadvantage students taught by them. Another area where there was asymmetry in the perceptions was around authority, relating to how modules are organised, with some GTAs perceiving a lack of authority but no staff mentioning this as a possible issue.

While the above examples support an understanding of GTAs' role identity as being liminal and a potential area of tension, a comment such as the following from a student

shows how their complex identity can also be perceived positively. The student explains that they see GTAs as being “halfway between academic staff and student” (Muzaka, 2009, p. 5). This is not meant as a critique; rather it means that the GTAs are more approachable and less intimidating and ‘more in touch with students and academic demands’ (p. 5). This representative comment from the research thus both confirms the idea that GTAs are in a liminal space, and shows how GTAs’ role-conceptions are not necessarily problematic but can also be seen as an advantage. This argument is supported in recent research by Winstone and Moore (2017) who conducted two focus groups with a total of nine GTAs from a School of Pharmacy in a UK university. Their findings resonate with those of Muzaka (2009), arguing that

emphasising those aspects of the GTAs’ position that are unique to their status frames the perennial “neither fish nor fowl” issue in a more positive light and comes with the added benefit of encouraging GTAs to reflect on their interactions with both students and faculty members and the most appropriate strategies to deploy in each situation (Winstone & Moore, 2017, p. 500).

## **2 Relationships and partnerships**

Perhaps because of the liminal space that GTAs inhabit as both students and staff, it seems fitting that they often assume roles where they work in collaboration (and occasionally partnership) with staff, as well as simultaneously being seen as better able to communicate with and anticipate the needs of students. As mentioned in the

previous section, Muzaka (2009) comments on the unique ability of GTAs to be less intimidating to students while also being aware of the staff perspective.

Unique to the GTA experience is the maintaining and simultaneous holding of multiple relationships with both students and staff (Oberlander & Barnett, 2005). In terms of their engagement with staff members, GTAs are colleagues, less experienced academics, and sometimes students of those who they report to for their teaching jobs. This brings up an interesting phenomenon in which GTAs are managing different ways of engaging with academic staff at the same time, which can leave room for exploitation and power imbalances, as well as career and personal development that comes from having role models and mentors (Biaggio et al., 1997). The same could be said for GTA relationships with students at other levels of education—while GTAs might attend social events with their students (i.e., seminars, societies, clubs, or university events), they also have the authority to mark their assignments, leading to difficult boundary issues as a result of holding multiple relationships with students (Oberlander & Barnett, 2005). Multiple relationships are quite common in certain disciplines, like psychology, and therefore mental health professionals have adequate training about how to cope with these situations. Nevertheless, Oberland and Barnett (2005) argue that while these situations often occur for GTAs, they have little to no training in managing them. Many GTAs start teaching before being properly trained and are expected to learn from their own experience of being a student or from working with more experienced colleagues, meaning that they are thrown

in at the deep end of managing relationships with students and staff and when navigating the classroom.

Essential in these considerations is the role of power and who has the autonomy and authority to make decisions about teaching practice and research that is carried out collaboratively. Indeed, the organization of the university is complex, and as such the power differences between different levels of staff and students are less clear, potentially leading to issues and misunderstandings. Therefore, being aware of and reflecting on the power that operates at multiple levels within student-GTA-staff relationships is essential to optimise the usefulness of such collaborations. Student-staff partnership work suggests that engaging with challenging power dynamics within the traditional student-staff dynamic can be both challenging and transformative for staff and students, potentially revealing how power operates in other dynamics as well (Cook-Sather, 2014). While power dynamics are often thought of in a linear, hierarchical way, perhaps the unique position of GTAs calls for a more dynamic, nuanced understanding of how power operates in the university where different stakeholders are simultaneously holding different roles and relationships with other stakeholders. By reflecting on the role of power and exploitation in universities, GTAs can begin to consider the kinds of relationships they want to create with students and staff, both as GTAs but also as more established academics.

### **3 Implications for GTA practice**

GTAs are often assumed to be enthusiastic, motivated teachers, who are passionate about the material they teach. And teacher enthusiasm means positive outcomes for

students: their enjoyment, interest, achievement and motivation all increase (König, 2020 and references therein). However, as noted above, early research into the role of the GTA found that, in the UK, GTAs' primary motivation was often financial (this was contrasted with what were assumed to be more intrinsically motivated GTAs in the US, where the role is an established one and a recognised step to becoming an academic) (Park, 2004). Motives for taking on a GTA role are likely no longer so divided; nevertheless, a more recent study by Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko (2020a) looked at motivations of GTAs in a research-intensive institution in Israel and found that the majority were driven by extrinsic motives such as income and convenient work (p. 552).

In terms of the implication of this on teaching practice, the study found that an individual's reasons for taking on a GTA position are an important predictor of the benefits that they would gain from it, with those who identified intrinsic motives tending to report having benefitted more from their experience (p. 548). In addition, those GTAs who articulated an interest in teaching were more likely to invest time and effort in their work, leading to improved instructional and interpersonal skills, enhanced subject matter mastery, and greater self-confidence (Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko 2020a, p. 548).

Motivation is evidently an important factor in teaching, but it does not necessarily equate with confidence and self-perceived competency. In a linked piece of research into GTAs which this time explored their concerns, Nasser-Abu Alhija and Fresko (2020b) found that the majority of GTAs they questioned expressed reservations regarding

pedagogical skills and subject matter mastery (p. 8). Interestingly, GTAs from social sciences and humanities showed more concern for competency as compared to those who taught in the mathematical and life sciences, which the authors of the study equated to the difference in the type of teaching undertaken. GTAs in arts, humanities and social sciences were more likely to be leading discussions than those in the sciences, requiring them to be more flexible and creative to stimulate learning, in turn necessitating – or so the GTAs might believe – a higher degree of pedagogical competence (p. 13).

Across the disciplines, whether lab demonstrating, leading discussion groups, assessing students' work or supporting learning in a different format, most GTAs will be working with relatively limited autonomy over the material they are teaching. The implication of this on their practice can differ: for some GTAs working within a relatively bounded framework may help counter concerns about competency and help increase their confidence, while for others the lack of flexibility may actually decrease motivation for those with an interest in teaching. As noted above, the lack of clarity and perceived liminality of the GTA position is an important factor in their experience and will certainly also have implications for their practice as teachers.

It is also recognised that those new to higher education teaching will tend to rely on their own experiences as learners when it comes to their own practice (Oleson & Hora, 2014). GTAs may base their methods on what worked for them when they were students, or try to model the behaviour of a preferred lecturer or academic; likewise, of

course, they may also be trying to do everything they can *not* to teach in the ways that they experienced as learners! A study undertaken in a large research-intensive university in the Asia-Pacific region sought to explore whether it was possible to shape and mould GTA teaching practices away from reliance on experience through a teacher development programme (Shum, Lau & Fryer, 2020). The study found GTAs' teaching approaches and self-efficacy to be malleable. Disciplinary differences in teaching approach were observed at the outset of the training course, but not at the end, suggesting the importance of training and development opportunities for early career HE teachers (p. 13).

This is supported by research in the UK, which found that when GTAs engage with training, they find it useful in preparing them for their role (NUS, 2013, p. 24). However, in the 2018 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), only 69% of respondents said they had received formal training for their teaching – meaning that 31% had not – and only 59% agreed that they had been given appropriate support and guidance for their teaching (Neves, 2018, p. 15).

Beyond formal training programmes – or where these do not exist – mentoring and professional interpersonal interactions are considered essential to GTAs' development (Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2020a). Peer interactions, whether facilitated through training programmes or emerging more organically, can often provide the most effective location of support and guidance for GTAs. Networks and peer communities in which challenges are shared, best practice ideas exchanged, and professional relationships developed are considered highly beneficial in GTA development (Wise, 2011). One of the aims

of this journal is to offer a space which provides just such a network and community of peers.

Finally, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the input of GTAs has become even more essential to the successful delivery of university teaching (Cornell, 2020). While GTAs are instrumental to supporting online learning, their role should not be instrumentalised to neglect developmental and challenging experiences (Austin, 2002). It is, therefore, more important than ever before that we provide a space for conversations about GTA teaching practices and the role more broadly. It is our hope that *Postgraduate Pedagogies* will contribute to these conversations and provide a platform for GTAs to reflect on and interrogate their experiences and develop their practice as educators.

### **Introducing the articles in this issue**

In the first contribution to this inaugural issue of *Postgraduate Pedagogies*, entitled 'Class Act: Reflections on a working-class academic sense of self as a Graduate Teaching Assistant', Alex Hastie (Coventry University) reflects on his own experiences as a working-class GTA in a Russell Group institution to highlight that what is currently missing from the GTA scholarship is a consideration of what it means to be a working-class GTA. While work on GTAs continues to grow, including that relating to identity, there remains an absence of working-class voices in research on GTAs. He calls for a more central consideration of class in discussions of GTAs and offers suggestions for future research and debate.

The next contribution by Rowan Jaines, at the University of Sheffield, is titled 'Perverse Relationships: The Graduate

Teaching Assistant in the Neoliberal University'. Rowan centres the liminal position of Graduate Teaching Assistants in neoliberal universities, conceptualizing their in-betweenness as 'invisibility', using this to have a broader discussion about the centrality (and yet perversity) of GTA labour and its possibilities as a site of resistance.

Manuela Irarrazabal Elliott (University College London) and Jenny Marie (University of Greenwich) reflect on the role of GTAs in Student-Staff Partnerships in their contribution 'Advancing student-staff partnership through the unique position of GTAs'. They argue that GTAs' unique liminal position allows them to better bridge the perspectives of staff and students, such that they can play an important role mediating between the two and providing invaluable insight to teaching and learning enhancement.

Lauren Clark (University College London, Institute of Education) follows directly from this by centring power relations in her contribution 'Bridging the Power Gap: GTAs and Student-Staff Partnership'. She argues that the concept of partnership can be challenging for staff and students alike who may be more accustomed to a hierarchical power dynamic but finds that GTAs are uniquely positioned to enable student-staff partnerships to empower both students and staff to learn from each other and produce innovative research and ideas.

Frances Brill (University of Cambridge) and Sarah Kunz (University of Bristol) turn the focus on teaching beyond the classroom with their essay 'Teaching outside the classroom: the contributions and challenges of GTA teaching on

fieldtrips'. They discuss their own experiences as GTAs on fieldtrips, and identify the benefits for students, faculty, and the GTA, whilst also highlighting some of the challenges involved. For the potential benefits of GTA teaching on fieldtrips to be best realised, they offer a number of concrete suggestions for academic departments, the staff leading fieldtrips and GTAs themselves on how to prepare and implement fieldtrips.

Hannah Mathers, Pamela Rattigan, Alice Lacsny, Natalie Marr, and Allan Hollinsworth (all University of Glasgow) conclude this inaugural issue with their reflective essay on 'The value of teaching observations for the development of GTA educator identity'. Their paper presents a model for the integration of teaching observations (TOs) and associated reflective practice into GTA development that will help to build confidence, self-evaluation and the notion of evolving pedagogic practice into GTA teaching methodology. Drawing on experience from the sciences and social sciences, and the perspectives of both the observer and observed, they reflect on a number of ways in which engagement with an observation process can be pivotal in GTA identity formation and participation in the wider teaching community. They end the article with recommendations for GTA-stage relevant training and development by classifying GTA experience under three terms they have defined as: 'hatchling', 'fledgling' and 'on the wing'.

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