Evolving as a GTA: Teaching, Performing and identity

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Abstract

In this critical reflection, I will explore the role of identity and performance in shaping my evolution from a novice to an expert GTA. Most early-career GTAs lack confidence in their instructional abilities, but for those who are a minority in academia, this can be compounded by questions about what 'bringing their whole self to work' looks like. I initially approached teaching as a performance in which I had to play the role of a 'neutral', omniscient guide, masking aspects of myself to maintain perceived authority. As discussed by Lauren Berlant in On the Inconvenience of Other People (2022), the performance of teaching became dissociative, and I constrained myself to teaching the topics I found most straightforward to teach. As my teaching experience grew, I began to branch out from teaching mathematics to (geo)physics, and from small group tutorials to field-classes and lectures. In doing this, I developed not only practical strategies for different scenarios, but also a deeper understanding of how my personal identity as queer and disabled shapes my teaching style. I realised that whilst teaching is in some sense performative, performative need not mean inauthentic or 'perfect'. By unmasking, I was able to connect better with students and became a more effective teacher. Using milestones and different experiences in my GTA journey as vignettes, I will argue that the evolution from novice to expert is not simply about mastering content or classroom management, but also about learning to teach authentically. I therefore suggest that GTA training ought to recognise how GTAs' lived experiences can enrich their teaching practice and should support GTAs to develop tools to be as authentic as they wish in their teaching practice.

Key words: Teaching identity, Authenticity, Performance, Inclusivity

For many early-career GTAs, the transition into teaching involves developing a teaching persona, wherein students perceive you both as competent and approachable, whilst maintaining some authority, particularly in cases where students may have recently been your peers. However, for those of us who represent minorities in academic spaces, these challenges are compounded by additional considerations about visibility, authenticity, and the complex negotiations involved in 'bringing our whole selves to work'. Goffman (1959) argued that all social interaction involves a degree of performance, with individuals negotiating between front-stage presentations and backstage realities. Teaching, perhaps more than most professions, amplifies this dynamic.

This critical reflection examines my journey from novice to experienced GTA through the lens of identity performance and authenticity. My interpretation of these experiences is inevitably shaped by my positionality as a queer, neurodivergent, early-career academic in a predominantly non-disabled, heteronormative discipline. This positionality influences not only how I experience teaching interactions but also how I understand issues of authority, belonging, and visibility within them. I believe that becoming comfortable as an educator involves not simply mastering content or classroom management techniques but learning to teach in ways that honour both professional responsibilities and personal identity. Here, I will trace how my own teaching practice with reference to four examples of my teaching experience in an Earth Sciences department: mathematics tutorials, geophysics instruction, field-based teaching and lecturing.

Teaching is always, in some sense, a performance. When we are in front of a class, we automatically adopt certain body language and styles of speech to engage our audiences. However, there exists a crucial distinction between performance that enhances authentic engagement and performance that becomes dissociative, severing the connection between our teaching selves and our broader identities. The boundary between these types of performance is a function of the mode of delivery, the content being delivered and the group size (Mills & Alexander, 2013).

In my early teaching experiences, I felt I needed to present myself as a 'neutral', omniscient guide. In this I attempted to mask my neurodivergence as I worried it would undermine my credibility or authority. As a queer, disabled academic in a field traditionally dominated by white, straight, non-disabled voices, I felt pressure to perform a kind of invisible neutrality that would allow my expertise to speak for itself without the 'complications' of personal identity. As Lauren Berlant describes in *On The Inconvenience of Other People* the performance of teaching became dissociative as it demanded the suppression of aspects of myself in order to meet external expectations (Berlant, 2022).

My first teaching experiences involved leading small groups of first years in mathematics tutorials. However, for some of my students presenting myself as an expert proved intimidating. As I discovered, the traditional models of teaching authority based on the premise that expertise requires the appearance of effortless mastery can impede learning by creating unrealistic expectations for both instructors and students (i.e. the promotion of a 'fixed mindset', (Dweck, 2016)). It was not obvious to my students that I had struggled just as they were now struggling, and instead they perceived me as some kind of prodigy who must have understood differential equations at the first attempt. I took on the group after they had already had one term of teaching with another tutor, and some students lacked confidence

and had struggled with the transition to university. I therefore sought to be more relatable to my students. One way I approached this was to make mistakes in my examples and to do more work ‘on the fly’. This helped model how I really work, including working out how to fix mistakes, and that the way to the right answer need not be the most elegant approach presented in the worked solutions. As discussed by Tompkins (1990, p. 654), “Fear is the driving force behind the performance model” and so this required me to have confidence in my own abilities (that I wouldn’t back myself into an algebraic corner that I couldn’t escape from) and faith that my students would engage with me in good faith. As students became more confident to make mistakes as a result of this approach, we were able to work together to solve problems, further building the student-teacher relationship. I therefore became confident to make relevant self-disclosures (Cayanus & Martin, 2008) about being neurodivergent and how that impacted the way I did mathematics. In future terms, I made this disclosure straight away and this allowed me to act as a mentor for students who were finding their way with the transition to university work, particularly for those who are neurodivergent.

As I started to be more myself when teaching, I found myself enjoying it more and more. As well as continuing to develop my small group teaching through delivering tutorials in mathematics and other subjects, I also branched out into demonstrating for larger group practical classes. One pivotal moment in my teaching career was when I was unexpectedly left in charge of a practical class whilst the computer-based practical was not going particularly smoothly. This moment really showed how I could present myself as ‘in control’ whilst also dealing with unexpected setbacks. In the classroom, strategic self-disclosure can increase student perceptions of immediacy and relatability (Cayanus & Martin, 2008), whilst humour, when authentic and contextually appropriate, can enhance relational connection and reduce classroom anxiety (Wanzer et al., 2010). By appropriately using vulnerability and humour, I quickly built rapport with the students, and we were able to work though the issues together to find a solution. In this, students were able to feel more ownership of the issues and felt more engaged.

As a geoscientist, field teaching is a key dimension of our practice, which is not as common in other disciplines. Field-teaching provides a great way for students to apply their knowledge to real-world settings, but places staff and students in a very different dynamic than a traditional classroom. Unlike the classroom, where the built environment acts to sustain some of the boundary between students and teachers (Turcotte et al., 2025), the field can see the collapse many of the usual boundaries: we travel together, share meals, and experience the same weather and logistical challenges. This proximity creates opportunities for more genuine connection but can also be intimidating for those who perhaps want to maintain discretion over some parts of their identity. As I have become more comfortable in my own identity, I have chosen to be visible as a queer and neurodivergent teacher and scientist. This has positioned me as a role model for some students, and this has led me to have a range of conversations with students where I have been able to provide support and advice. Regardless of perceived similarity between student and staff experiences and identities, GTAs are often seen as more approachable than the “scary” staff and thus are often the first call for support.

Fieldwork also highlights issues of accessibility for both students and staff. My own experiences with struggling with the physical demands of fieldwork allowed me to spark conversations about how particular field activities were or were not accessible, including identifying potential adaptions and discussing activities with students to make sure they knew what to expect. In this sense, the field became a site not only for learning about rocks but also for challenging disciplinary norms and demonstrating a pedagogy of authenticity and inclusion. Teaching on field courses has given me a much deeper insight into both how students learn and how external and environmental factors affect different students. By observing and reflecting on how students responded to weather, fatigue, and logistical challenges, as well seeing the longer-term impacts in changes in our teaching approach and pacing over the days in the field, I was able to better support individual students and implement strategies which helped the field-group as a whole. I have then been able to take this forward into other teaching settings. For example, on fieldwork some students struggle with the change of routine and by providing clear outlines of the day and of each activity. However, this is no different to students transitioning to university and the change in schedule inherent in that, or even students who want to know the structure of teaching sessions ahead of time so they can mentally prepare. Therefore, I now make sure to explain how sessions and courses will be structured.

Now that I have finished my PhD, I have taken a teaching position and suddenly have a new type of teaching to grapple with: the lecture. The larger group sizes and different mode of teaching shifts the performance, authenticity, power, and authority of both students and teachers (Mills & Alexander, 2013). Before one of my first lectures, a colleague shared that they treat lecturing like a pantomime performance. Lecturing is perhaps where performing is most needed and yet where presenting an act can be the greatest barrier to connecting with students. Lecturing is where teaching being a performance is most controversial. Some authors believe that “viewing teaching as a performance […] place[s] the onus of learning in the classroom squarely on the performer” (Jaidev, 2024), and that it removes any opportunity for teacher-student interaction. In contrast, bell hooks writes that “to embrace the performative aspect of teaching we are compelled to engage “audiences,” to consider issues of reciprocity. […] our work is not meant to be a spectacle. Yet it is meant to serve as a catalyst that calls everyone to become more and more engaged, to become active participants in learning” (hooks, 1994, p. 11). Palmer (1998) and Tomkins (1990) distinguish between performance that emerges from genuine engagement with subject matter and students, versus performance that serves primarily to protect the instructor's ego or maintain institutional authority. In seeking to do the former, I have also evolved my teaching persona to one which, as Brookfield (2015) describes, is a deliberate construction that allows authenticity to be communicated in ways students can recognise rather than one which acts as a mask.

At least initially, the training I received as a GTA was limited. It necessarily focussed on logistics and expectations and attempted to get everyone up to speed on the institutional peculiarities that were part of an otherwise hidden curriculum. I was later able to enrol in a course which led to Associate Fellowship of AdvanceHE. Whilst this encouraged reflection on my teaching practice and provided an introduction to various pedagogical schools of thought, I still do not feel like this equipped me to navigate my own teaching identity. Instead, it was the connections I

had made within and outwith my department who were generous with their time and expertise that has enabled me to develop as a teacher to what I reflect on here. However, reliance on social capital means that teacher development becomes even more inequitable. I was lucky to do my PhD in the same (relatively small) department where I did my undergraduate, and to be involved in a range of departmental service opportunities where these connections have naturally grown. However, this should not be relied on. Instead, I suggest that departments provide opportunities for GTAs to find mentors from amongst more experienced teachers and also build a community of practice where GTAs can learn from each other and develop their teaching. It is particularly important that GTAs are trained to deal with difficult situations, or at least know where to signpost students, rather than being left to their own devices. Minoritised GTAs are more likely to be placed in challenging situations, either by virtue of people's reactions to their identity or because they are seen as a safe person for students to disclose personal information or difficulties to, making adequate training and support even more imperative. Advance training is particularly important on fieldwork, where it is important that GTAs are trained not only in first aid or mental health first aid, but also to deal with situations that may arise over the course of an extended period with students.

Looking back at my experience in all these settings, I can see my evolution from dissociative performance towards a teaching practice grounded in authenticity. Early on, I believed credibility demanded neutrality and detachment. Yet, as I disclosed more of my identity and my lived experience, I found that students not only learned more effectively but also felt a stronger sense of belonging within Earth Sciences. However, coming out and disclosing more of my personal identity was not without worry, for how my colleagues and students would respond and for my future career prospects. I have been lucky to generally be welcomed, and to have been supported through more challenging situations, but at least some of that success is down to my own personality and position within the institutions I inhabit. Not everyone is so fortunate or willing to take the risk.

Ahmed (2012) notes that minority academics are often positioned as both hyper-visible and invisible within institutions. My own journey highlights how GTA development must go beyond technical training to include structured opportunities for reflection, mentorship, and community-building that acknowledge the emotional and identity work inherent in teaching. Supporting GTAs in developing authentic teaching identities rather than expecting them to conform to a "traditional" approach to teaching can foster both inclusivity and pedagogical effectiveness. The challenge now is for institutions to recognise and support this labour, ensuring that authenticity is not something individual educators (or indeed anyone) must 'risk' alone, but something embedded within cultures of teaching. Only then can GTAs, and indeed all educators, fully bring themselves into the classroom in ways that benefit both their students and their disciplines.

Ethical Claim

No institutional approval required. No conflict of interest.

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