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SPECIAL ISSUE

Evolving Experiences in Postgraduate Teaching: Navigating Changing Landscapes, Practices, and Technologies

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Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community

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Team Description

This year's *Journal of Postgraduate Pedagogies and Practice (JPPP)* Issue 5 editorial team is led by **Arpit Jindal** (Chemistry/Life Sciences) and mentored by **Meifang Zhuo** (Applied Linguistics), supported by a dynamic group of Post-Graduate Research Teacher Champions from across the University of Warwick: **Areesh Fatmee** (Warwick Medical School), **Clarissa Muller-Kosmarov** (Philosophy), **Alisha Rodgers** (School of Engineering), **Usoro Akpan** (Warwick Medical School), **and Adila Fazleen Che Manan** (Education Studies). Together, the seven-member team brings a rich range of disciplinary expertise, cultural backgrounds, and lived experiences, reflecting the inclusive spirit of both the JPPP and the *Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community* (WPTC). United by a commitment to inclusivity, innovation, and the advancement of PGR teaching and

learning, the team works collaboratively to produce a journal issue that amplifies diverse voices while strengthening the visibility and impact of postgraduate teachers across the university.

Introduction to Journal of Postgraduate Pedagogies and Practice

The *Journal of Postgraduate Pedagogies and Practice* was founded to champion the voices of Postgraduate Teachers/ Graduate Teaching Assistant (PGTs/GTAs) and to recognise the breadth of knowledge, experience, and pedagogical insight they contribute to higher education. Across its previous four issues, the journal has evolved alongside the shifting realities of postgraduate teaching. Early editions examined the formation of teaching identities, inclusive pedagogical approaches, and creative methods of assessment and facilitation. Later volumes expanded into conversations on the emotional labour of teaching, interdisciplinary and collaborative practices, digital innovation, and the complex professional identities GTAs navigate as scholars, educators, and pastoral supporters.

Together, these contributions demonstrate how postgraduate teachers draw upon their lived experiences, disciplinary traditions, and reflective practices to cultivate meaningful, student-centred learning environments. JPPP remains committed to creating a space where these voices are not only heard but critically engaged with- foregrounding research-informed, reflective, and praxis-oriented perspectives from the PGR teaching community. As the journal continues to develop, it seeks to remain responsive, innovative, and dialogic- constantly reimagining what teaching, learning, and belonging can look like within an ever-changing academic landscape.

Success Story of JPPP so far

Across its first four volumes, the Journal of PGR Pedagogic Practice has traced the evolving landscape of postgraduate teaching from the height of the COVID-19 pandemic to broader questions of inclusion and space in higher education. The pilot launch issue (Vol. 1, 2021) centred on "*Postgraduate Pandemic Pedagogies*," foregrounding reflective accounts of teaching during the Coronavirus pandemic, with subthemes including navigating digital inequalities, experimenting with online and hybrid teaching practices, and cultivating a pedagogy of care amid disruption. Vol. 2 (2022), "*Virtual, physical or somewhere in between: Postgraduate pedagogies in the wake of the pandemic*," extended this focus into the post-pandemic transition, with contributions on online engagement, hybrid teaching, GTA identity and wellbeing, decolonising the classroom, and lessons drawn from teaching beyond standard undergraduate settings. Vol. 3 (2023), "*Breaking Barriers and Embracing Voices: Advancing Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in Postgraduate Pedagogies,*" shifted the lens explicitly to EDI, highlighting subthemes such as dismantling structural and classroom barriers, fostering inclusive learning environments, and navigating intercultural communication in diverse educational contexts. Most recently, Vol. 4 (2024), "*Re/De-Constructing the Teaching*

Space Piece by Piece," focused on how GTAs shape and reimagine teaching spaces, with subthemes around deconstructing traditional classroom formats, expanding GTA influence beyond perceived limits, and showcasing the growing international reach of JPPP as a global platform for GTA-led pedagogical innovation.

JPPP5: The First Special Issue marked with First ever Conference

The special issue of JPPP emerges from the *Warwick PGR Teacher* Conference 2025, which marked a key moment in consolidating and celebrating the growing visibility, expertise, and leadership of postgraduate teachers at the University of Warwick, while also extending the conversation to postgraduate educators across higher education institutions nationally and internationally. Organised as part of wider institutional efforts to recognise GTAs' pedagogical labour and professional development, the conference created a dedicated, transdisciplinary space where postgraduate teachers could share practice, build networks, and articulate their experiences as educators in their own right. The decision to develop *Issue 5* as a conference-linked special issue reflects a commitment to extending those conversations beyond a single event, offering contributors the opportunity to deepen and disseminate their ideas in written form while showcasing the breadth and quality of postgraduate-led teaching scholarship at Warwick.

Anchored in the theme "*Evolving Experiences in Postgraduate Teaching: Navigating Changing Landscapes, Practices, and Technologies*," the conference foregrounded the rapidly shifting conditions under which GTAs work and learn. The thematic strands, positionality and teacher identity, the evolution of GTA teaching, navigating technological shifts (including AI), cross-cultural and international perspectives, and balancing wellbeing and professional growth, were selected to capture the complexity of contemporary GTA roles and to make visible dimensions of practice that are often marginalised in mainstream pedagogical discourse. Together, these themes invited participants to interrogate how structural change, institutional cultures, and personal histories intersect in postgraduate teaching, and to generate critical, practice-based insights that could inform both local enhancement and sector-wide conversations.

The 2025 conference was a notable success in terms of engagement, diversity, and participation. It brought together GTAs and staff from across faculties, with a strong presence of international postgraduate teachers whose contributions highlighted the global and intercultural dimensions of teaching and learning at Warwick. The programme featured parallel sessions, workshops, and panels that enabled participants to engage with topics such as AI-enabled teaching tools, inclusive assessment practices, and strategies for sustaining wellbeing alongside research and teaching commitments. The quality and variety of contributions underlined the appetite for a sustained platform, such as this special issue, for reflecting on and disseminating postgraduate pedagogical practice.

The 2025 *Warwick PGR Teacher Conference* attracted around 60 registrations from across all three Warwick faculties and central professional services, including several external attendees, demonstrating strong institutional and cross-sector engagement. The programme featured just over 20 presentations and workshops

delivered by GTAs and early-career educators, covering a wide range of disciplines and pedagogical topics. The full programme is available online at https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/academic-development/pgrteachers/conference/programme/. The attendee list reflects substantial international diversity, with many presenters and participants bringing backgrounds and teaching experiences from regions such as East and South Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa, contributing to genuinely global perspectives on postgraduate teaching practice. A screenshot of the conference webpage is provided below for context, and readers can explore further details at: https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/academic-development/pgrteachers/conference/

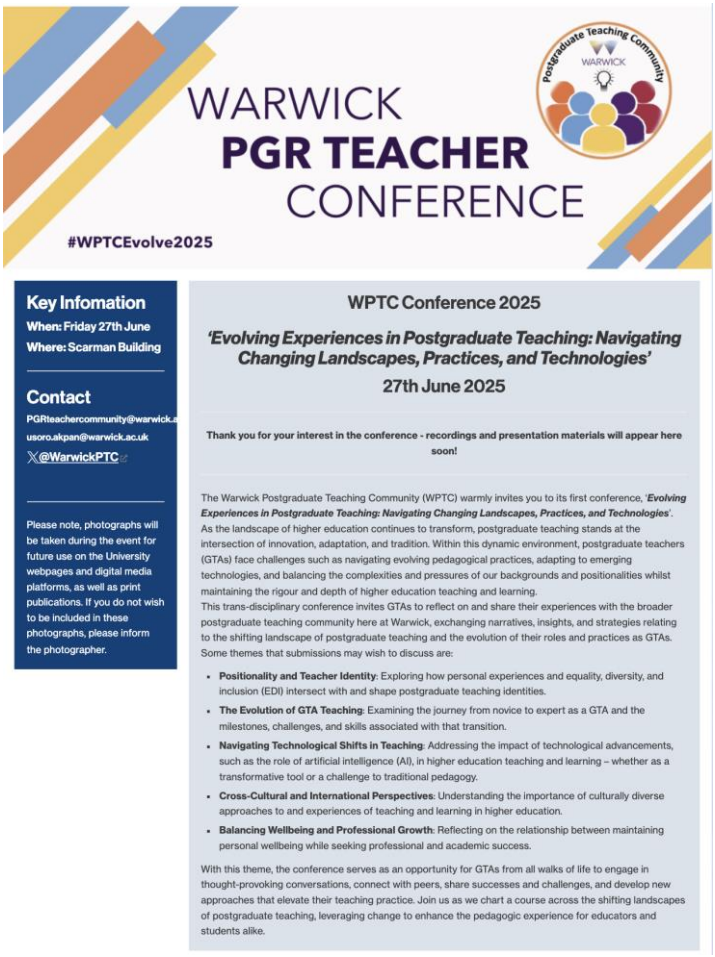

Figure 1 Screenshot of conference webpage

JPPP5 Motivation and Themes

A key motivation for selecting this year's theme for JPPP Issue 5 is that it addresses areas that have not been the primary focus of previous issues, particularly the intersection of AI, positionality, and wellbeing in the lived day-to-day realities of GTAs. Whereas earlier issues have tended to centre more established topics in higher education pedagogy, this special issue foregrounds emerging questions about how technological disruption, shifting labour conditions, and increasingly diverse student and

staff populations are reshaping what it means to teach as a postgraduate. By focusing explicitly on “evolving experiences,” this issue moves beyond static accounts of good practice to explore change, uncertainty, and adaptation as central features of postgraduate teaching, thereby filling an important gap in the journal’s existing portfolio.

Within this special issue, the published pieces collectively map multiple facets of contemporary GTA practice. Contributors examine, for example, how doctoral researchers negotiate their dual identities as students and teachers; how Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools are being critically and creatively integrated into seminar design, feedback processes, and student support; how cross-cultural experiences shape classroom dynamics and understandings of authority; and how GTAs develop strategies to protect their wellbeing while meeting the demands of research, teaching, and career planning. Other contributions trace the developmental trajectory from novice to more expert teacher, highlighting the role of peer communities, mentoring, and institutional support in fostering confidence and pedagogical innovation. Taken together, these articles and reflections offer a rich, situated account of postgraduate teaching as a site of both challenge and possibility. The thematic composition of JPPP Issue 5 published this year is as follows.

Our first thematic area on *Positionality and Teacher identity: The intersection of experience and Equality/Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)* generated a significant interest, resulting in four compelling submissions for inclusion in the issue. The first paper, **‘Two Voices, Many Languages’: A Duoethnographic Look at Multilingual Identity in Teaching Spaces in a UK University**, by Dr Yanyan Li and Kaiqi Yu, critically examines how multilingual Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) navigate and negotiate their evolving linguistic identities within the English-dominant environment of UK higher education.. The authors use duoethnography to reveal tensions around native speakerism and the emotional labour involved, arguing that multilingual identity is simultaneously a pedagogical asset and a site of struggle. The second submission, **In the Seminar Space: Navigating Graduate Teaching in Undergraduate Legal Education** by Hadijah Namyalo-Ganafa provides a reflective exploration of a GTA's evolving pedagogical role within a law department, focusing on seminar facilitation. This paper explores the complexities of cultivating student voice and balancing relational teaching with institutional demands, demonstrating how the GTA's identity is shaped by both institutional positioning and critical relational aspirations. The third paper, **Evolving as a GTA: Teaching, Performing and Identity** by Rebecca L. Colquhoun, offers a critical reflection on how the author's identity and performance shaped their journey from a novice to an expert GTA. Using personal vignettes, the author discusses moving from an inauthentic "neutral" performance to an authentic teaching style, arguing that evolution requires recognising how lived experiences, including queer and disabled identity, enrich teaching practice. The final submission, **Spaces within spaces: Teaching French culture from a British-Mauritian perspective and its relationship with GTA liminality and identity** by Adam Agowun**,** seeks to offer a more positive outlook on the notoriously difficult subject of GTA liminality. The author argues that personal liminal spaces, such as being a British-born Mauritian teaching French culture, can be used as an asset in navigating the "ambiguous, neither here nor there" space of the GTA role.

Our second theme on the *Evolution of GTA Teaching: Snapshots from the PGR Journey* attracted considerable interest, resulting in four submissions that capture diverse experiences and theoretical perspectives on the GTA development trajectory. The first paper, **Opening the Bandura's Box of Experiences: Exploring GTAs' Sense of**

Plausibility about ESL Teaching by Akshay Kumar explores N.S. Prabhu's construct of teachers' sense of plausibility (TSOP) as a tool for reflective practice among Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs). The case study with seven novice GTAs indicates that their TSOPs are rooted in themes like sustainable education and student agency, validating TSOP as a valuable reflective practice tool. The second submission, **"Dear Former GTA-Self": Reflections from the Final Chapter of a Graduate Teaching Assistant Journey - from Novice to More Experienced Educator** by Alisha Rodgers, takes the unconventional form of a reflective letter to the author's past self after concluding their doctoral journey as a GTA. This personal account revisits formative moments and interrogates assumptions, foregrounding the complexity of learning to teach critically and affirming the value of adaptability and care within institutional constraints. The third paper, **Teaching unfamiliar content can lead to brilliant teaching: Data-led reflections** by Junjie Li and Xinran Gao, explores the challenges faced by novice practitioners when teaching unfamiliar content and argues that this can, counterintuitively, lead to effective teaching. Using peer dialogue and reflective writings, the authors highlight three strategic themes, including taking a humble stance and fostering a bottom-up awareness of students' perspectives. The final submission, **From Clicks to Connections: Applying Activity Theory to Multimodal Materials Design for GTA Development** by Paula Villegas, addresses the limited formal training GTAs often receive by detailing the design and evaluation of asynchronous multimodal professional learning units. The author uses Activity Theory to analyse the tensions and affordances of the intervention, arguing that this framework enhanced engagement and agency through personalized, community-oriented tasks.

For the critical theme, examining the intersection of technology and pedagogy, we received one dedicated submission. The paper, **Pause, Reflect, Dialogue: AI as a Reflective Partner in GTA Teaching Practice**, by Azadeh Moladoost details a Graduate Teaching Assistant's (GTA) journey in transforming their teaching practice through a structured, time-bound strategy called the Five-Minute Reflection Rule. The author then integrated AI tools (such as ChatGPT and Grok) not to generate content, but to serve as non-judgmental, dialogic partners for critical self-inquiry, arguing that this low-stakes dialogue can help early-career educators build sustainable habits of reflective practice.

For our next theme, *Cross-Cultural and International Perspectives on PGR Teaching*, focusing on global and cross-cultural dimensions of postgraduate researcher (PGR) teaching, we received one submission. The paper, **Curriculum from the Margins: Experience of Building a Dalit-Feminist Business English Programme as an untrained facilitator,** by Nisha Kumari offers a critical reflective account of designing a business English curriculum specifically for Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi women learners in India, collaborating with a grassroots NGO. Rooted in a Dalit feminist pedagogical standpoint, the paper details how the curriculum was developed to foreground English not just as an employability tool, but as a site of dignity and resistance, while examining the ethical and emotional labour of negotiating intersections of caste, gender, and class within language education.

The crucial theme of Balancing Wellbeing and Professional Growth in Teaching, which focuses on the sustainability and care required within the Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) role, resulted in four submissions. The first paper, **Exploring the complexity of GTAs' co-teaching experience through zine-making: a collaborative self-study**, by Meifang Zhuo and Suji Ko, investigates the co-teaching experiences and evolving identities of two GTAs where one experienced, one novice using zine-making as a

reflexive data collection tool. The study identifies key themes like identity negotiation and emotional labour, concluding that zine-making is a powerful methodology for articulating the complexity of co-teaching dynamics. The second paper, **From Burnout to Balance: Embedding Wellbeing in the Professional Trajectory of GTAs**, by Nikita Goel, traces the author's shift from professional strain toward a more sustainable, balanced approach to the demanding GTA role at EFLU, Hyderabad, India. The reflection outlines four interconnected, proactive strategies, including structured feedback windows and peer support networks, arguing that wellbeing strategies are essential for the long-term sustainability of GTAs. The third submission, **Intentional Re-framing of Self-Care as an Institutional Priority in Postgraduate Teaching**, by Emmanuel Lucas Nwachukwu, takes the form of a review arguing for the critical necessity of shifting self-care from an isolated individual responsibility to an institutional priority. The paper advocates for deliberate approaches, such as developing comprehensive mental health policy frameworks and establishing structured, preventive wellness programs for educators to combat burnout. Finally, the paper **Building Resilience: Promoting Mental Well-being in Graduate Teaching Assistants Through Structured Institutional Support**, by Usoro Udousoro Akpan, proposes that institutions can transform the GTA experience from one of vulnerability to one of resilience and empowerment by adopting a comprehensive approach. This includes combining structured mentorship, robust pedagogical training, and equitable, policy-driven support systems to embed mental well-being across every facet of institutional culture.

For the theme titled *Personal Narratives: The Changing Landscape of Teaching*, we ultimately did not receive any article submissions. Therefore, although quite important and timely, it is regrettably not represented in the current issue.

Looking Forward

Journal of PGR Pedagogic Practice (JPPP) journey started in 2021 with the *Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community* (WPTC) as a testament to the dedication, innovation, and resilience of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs). As we publish this fifth issue, it's a fitting time to reflect on our achievements and layout the exciting course for the future. Since, its pilot launch JPPP has become a key scholarly, international platform for the GTA. What began as an "unknown dive into postgraduate pedagogies at the University of Warwick" has grown into a well-founded formula celebrating its fifth birthday. We have broadened our horizons, including:

1) **International Reach: Attracting contributors beyond the University of Warwick.** For example, Issue 3 celebrated its first international submissions from the National Institute for Nigerian Languages in Nigeria and Ateneo University in the Philippines. Issue 4 attracted the highest number of international contributors ever: 30%.

2) **Thematic Relevance:** WPTC has consistently tried to resonate the journal themes with the pressing issues GTAs face, including "Postgraduate Pandemic Pedagogies" within Issue 1, "Virtual, physical or somewhere in between" from Issue 2, and "Advancing Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)" from Issue 3.

The latest issue continued this by focusing on GTAs' (Re/De) Constructing the learning and teaching space, including timely themes like Crossing Disciplinary Boundaries and seeking submissions on the Impact of AI.

Looking ahead, WPTC is excited to build a strong foundation, enhance the impact, and raise voices of GTA to master the importance in higher education. To widen our GTA community both nationally, and internationally we hope to see: 1) Expansion of reviewer and editorial board to bring wider perspectives for the GTA community; 2) Prioritizing GTA-led submissions of evidence based original research; and 3) Focused mapping of the journal theme selection based on the GTA interests and needs. WPTC is thereby committed for peer-learning, professional growth, and dialogue through the yearly publication cycle of JPPP. We aim to foster the sustained peer dialogue through Seminar and Reading PGR Group series.

As a final note, the *JPPP5: Special Issue* is a collaborative achievement, and the editorial board extends our deepest thanks to all the authors who contributed to this journal, to the conference speakers whose work forms the core for special issue, and to the reviewers for their utmost contributions. We also warmly acknowledge the volunteer reviewers- Azadeh Moladoost, and Sena El Banna from outside editorial team, and special acknowledgement for this special issue goes to the JPPP editorial teams since its pilot launch for building this strong and robust foundation. Finally, we are immensely grateful to Sara Hattersley, Meifang Zhuo, *Academic Development Centre*, and the *Doctoral College* for their continuous funding, and support which are core testament for the WPTC success showcased through JPPP.

‘Two Voices, Many Languages’:

A Duoethnographic Look at Multilingual Identity in Teaching Spaces in a UK University

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Abstract

Despite the dominance of English and entrenched monolingual norms in UK higher education (HE), campuses are increasingly characterised by multilingual realities driven by intensified international mobility and internationalisation of HE. Many graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) and students come from multilingual backgrounds and routinely move across languages. While scholarly attention to multilingual identity in educational settings is growing, GTAs' experiences within this framework remain overlooked. To bridge the gap by answering calls to reimagine universities as multilingual spaces and to harness peer dialogue for GTA professional development, this study employs duoethnography to stage a critical conversation between two multilingual GTAs. Informed by Morea & Fisher's (2023) model of teachers' multilingual identities, we ask: How are our own and our students' evolving multilingual identities positioned in day-to-day teaching, and what affordances or constraints emerge within English-dominant pedagogical discourses? Through a reflective thematic analysis of our peer dialogue data, three key themes emerge: 1) managing our evolving relationship with 'Native Speakerism', 2) negotiating professional roles and personal identity through language use, 3) coping with emotional complexities of multilingual teaching. This study shows that multilingual identity is simultaneously a pedagogical asset and a site of struggle. By articulating these tensions, the study offers GTAs, GTA developers and programme leads practical leverage points for change, such as normalising translanguaging, fostering collaborative reflection on linguistic diversity, circulating language-inclusive teaching tips and foregrounding multilingual perspectives in departmental discussions, which may incrementally unsettle monolingual norms and cultivate more equitable, intellectually vibrant learning environments in UK HE.

Keywords: multilingual identity, graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), duoethnography

Introduction

The prevalence of multilingualism is far from a rarity but an increasing reality in today's HE institutions, following intensified globalisation and sustained internationalisation efforts (Blommaert, 2010; Wang et al., 2014). This trend is particularly evident in the context of UK HE, where multilingual students and staff represent a significant presence that actively contributes to the shaping of diverse linguistic ecologies (Preece & Marshall, 2020). Notably, international Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) constitute a distinctive yet integral group within the multilingual community, as they invariably occupy dual roles as students and teaching staff (Tavener-Smith et al., 2025), alongside an overlapping role as researchers (Bale & Anderson, 2024). From the 1990s onward, UK universities have relied on doctoral students in GTA role as a means of offsetting reduced staff-student ratios and maintaining teaching quality (Muzaka, 2009; Park & Ramos, 2002).

Despite growing multilingualism, English continues to hold a privileged position as both a global lingua franca and the dominant language of UK HE (Baker, 2011; Doiz et al., 2013; Seidlhofer, 2013). The dominance of English permeates almost every dimension of teaching, learning, and assessment practices in UK HE (Jenkins, 2013), which inevitably gives rise to the tension between emerging multilingual realities and entrenched monolingual norms. In view of the existing monolingual norms and underlying monolingual ideologies, current efforts to deconstruct them and promote multilingual inclusion in educational settings involve both a top-down approach (e.g., the European Union's promotion of plurilingualism) and a bottom-up approach (e.g., legitimising translanguaging practices in classrooms). Among the bottom-up approaches, an important initiative lies in empowering multilingual individuals through the affirmation and development of their multilingual identities.

While the research of multilingual identity has been progressing theoretically and empirically, the lived experiences and perspectives of GTAs remain insufficiently studied. The aim of this article, thus, is to explore how multilingual GTAs construct and negotiate their multilingual identities within teaching spaces in UK HE by capturing two GTAs' multilingual identities and tracking their development through peer dialogue, guided by Morea & Fisher's (2023) framework of teachers' multilingual identities. In the following section, a review on multilingual identity in terms of its theoretical groundings, characteristics, and formation is presented. This is followed by a brief account of duoethnography as the methodological framework, and its application for data collection. The subsequent section then reveals three tensions the GTA have encountered in expressing and enacting their multilingual identities. Finally, the article concludes by reflecting on the implications of the findings for supporting multilingual identity and informing pedagogical practice in HE.

Literature Review

Multilingual identity is an area of inquiry that has recently sparked growing interest in the sphere of education, against the backdrop of rising presence of multilingual students, and a broader shift from deficit perspectives to viewing multilingualism as a resource. The existing body of literature reveals conceptual diversity in approaching

multilingual identity, given the multiplicity of perspectives on both multilingualism and identity themselves, as well as the dynamic relationship between language and identity, which adds further layers of complexity. It is worth noting that in some cases the use of multilingual identity or its alternative terms can lack clear conceptualisations or may not necessarily engage with the subjective dimensions of identity as they intersect with multilingualism. To clarify, this article employs multilingual identity more as an analytical lens to explore experiences and self-perceptions surrounding being a multilingual speaker, rather than as an attempt to contribute theoretically to the construct.

Admittedly, research on multilingual identity is underpinned by a recognition of and a move away from the longstanding monolingual bias embedded in thinking and practice. Different strands of theoretical research have laid the groundwork for understanding multilingual identity as a distinct and valid construct, rather than as a set of parallel monolingual identities. For example, the line of research on multicompetence foregrounds the whole system of all languages in the mind of a second language (L2) user and the cognitive differences that set them apart from a monolingual native speaker (e.g., Cook, 1992, 2012, 2016). Multilingual individuals or L2 users are thus competent in their own right. It is invalid to measure them against the target of, or view them as imperfect versions of, monolingual native speakers (NSs). In the field of L2 motivation, in a similar vein, the notion of the deal multilingual self has been proposed to understand a multilingual's motivational system from an integrated perspective (Henry, 2017; Henry & Thorsen, 2018). This strand of research points to the possibility to move beyond an L2 identity to develop or envisage a more holistic multilingual identity.

However, being multilingual does not automatically translate into a multilingual identity. Empirical findings have testified to the socially constructed nature of multilingual identity and the constraining effect of the NS vs. non-native speaker (NNS) dichotomy on its development. It reveals that both teachers and students, especially those from monolingual English-as-a-Foreign-Language settings, frequently reported feelings of inferiority and insecurity, even when they demonstrated satisfactory English proficiency (Jenkins, 1998; Medgyes, 2001; Liao, 2017). They tended to orient themselves towards English NSs as models, with multilingual identity perceived as belonging exclusively to individuals from heritage or immigrant backgrounds. In light of this, Pavlenko's (2003) study demonstrated the possibility of helping English language teachers distance themselves from the traditional discourse of NNS and L2 learner and instead reimagine their identities as multilingual individuals and legitimate L2 users. In its context of TESOL[1] teacher education, it was through critical engagement with contemporary theories of bilingualism and multicompetence, along with topics such as linguistic diversity, native speakerism (Holliday, 2006), and language and identity, that an alternative identity option and imagined community of multicompetent, multilingual individuals was gradually opened up for the enrolled English language teachers. Moreover, multilingual identity was recognised as an empowering identity option to the English language teachers in the sense of professional agency and legitimacy.

Pertinent to the constructed nature of multilingual identity, another noteworthy research endeavour mainly engages with a participative approach to multilingual identity formation (e.g., Fisher et al., 2020; Forbes et al., 2021; Gayton et al., 2025). Their work is

[1] TESOL stands for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. It is a certificate course designed both for people with little or no experience teaching English and for those who already have experience but require an internationally recognised initial teacher education qualification.

grounded in the notion of multilingual identity as an umbrella identity that encompasses and transcends an individual's discrete language-specific identities, 'where one explicitly identifies as multilingual precisely because of an awareness of the linguistic repertoire one has' (Fisher et al., 2020, p.449). The formation of a multilingual identity, as Forbes et al. (2024) highlight, is typically not automatic. It involves deliberate and explicit construction through identity-based interventions in classrooms featuring a set of pedagogical and reflective practices. Although the starting point of fostering multilingual identity within this research framework is to empower students, increasing attention has been directed to supporting teachers' multilingual identity development. Specifically, Morea & Fisher (2023) conducted a study to investigate the role of an identity-oriented intervention in facilitating a group of pre-service teachers' multilingual identity development during their teacher education. The intervention was informed by the three dimensions of multilingual identity outlined by Forbes et al. (2021): experience (one's lifetime language exposure and perceived linguistic repertoire), emotion (the affective dimension closely related to one's language learning process and self-perception as a multilingual person) and evaluation (the cognitive dimension involving one's self-assessment as a speaker of languages). Building on their findings, they integrated two additional elements involving teacher conception of student multilingualism and teacher language practices in the classroom into the framework, thereby constituting a dedicated conceptual model for teachers' multilingual identities and extending the significance of multilingual identity development to the teaching spaces.

Perhaps not surprisingly, existing research on multilingual identity has predominantly focused on students with a gradual shift towards teachers, and there is limited attention to the multilingual experiences of GTAs. However, since GTAs occupy a dual identity as both students and teachers (Jazvac-Martek, 2009), this hybrid positionality can add complexity to their multilingual identity construction which further shapes their teaching practices, language use, and academic positionings. Accordingly, a more nuanced understanding of multilingual identity is needed, especially with respect to GTAs' situated experiences and perceptions.

Methodology

Informed by duoethnography, this study collected dialogic data from a peer dialogue between two senior GTAs (the first and second authors, namely, YL and KY) to collaboratively inquire into the construction and negotiation of multilingual identities in teaching spaces involving GTAs in the UK. Here, duoethnography is employed as a qualitative research methodology in which the two researchers collaboratively reflected on our lived experiences in a dialogic space, juxtaposing our individual life histories within pedagogical practice to develop new understandings of our multilingual identity formation and negotiation as HE teachers. This process is a critical step toward our development as critically engaged practitioners through contrasting views and perspectives (Lawrence & Lowe, 2020). Both GTAs are native Chinese speakers who use English in professional and academic contexts. YL and KY studied Japanese as our second foreign language during our undergraduate studies. YL also has intermediate proficiency in listening, reading, and writing Korean, and can listen to and speak Cantonese at an intermediate level. YL migrated to the UK for study and work in 2019, and KY did so in 2021 for the same purposes.

To operationalise duoethnography, we set up an online meeting on Microsoft Teams for collaborative reflection as part of our professional development (Zhuo & Li, 2024). Informed by Morea & Fisher's (2023) model of teachers' multilingual identities, we co-designed a reflective protocol consisting of questions across five dimensions: experience, emotion, evaluation, conception of student multilingualism and language practices in the classroom. The dialogue was reciprocal: one person posed a question and the other responded by sharing her experiences, after which the first could either agree or disagree by illustrating her own. The dialogue was conducted in both Chinese and English. The dialogue lasted for two hours and was recorded and automatically transcribed by Microsoft Teams. We later listened to the recording multiple times to correct the transcripts for data coding and analysis. The transcript included an idiomatic English translation accompanying the original Chinese text.

Data analysis was guided by reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), which is particularly effective for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of shared meaning across qualitative datasets. This approach suited the study's aim of exploring how multilingual identities are constructed and negotiated in teaching space through dialogic reflection. Following Braun and Clarke's six phases, we first immersed ourselves in the data by listening repeatedly to the recording and reviewing the corrected transcript to gain an initial sense of recurring issues. Coding was then carried out manually, with descriptive labels assigned to segments relevant to the research focus. These codes were iteratively grouped into potential themes, and their coherence and relevance were critically reviewed. Themes were refined, defined, and named to capture both convergences and contrasts in the two GTAs' reflective accounts. Finally, three themes were identified, and the analysis was written with reference to the research inquiry. The following section presents an analysis of these themes.

Analysis and discussion

The RTA of the peer dialogue reveals three key aspects of how multilingual GTAs express our multilingual identities and navigate the tension between monolingual ideologies and multilingual identities in our pedagogical practices. These include managing our evolving relationship with 'Native Speakerism', juggling professional roles and personal identity through language use, and coping with emotional complexities of multilingual teaching.

Managing our evolving relationship with 'Native Speakerism'

Both researchers delineate a clear trajectory in our conversation: moving from being constrained by the divide between NSs and NNSs and the perceived power imbalance of being positioned as deficient NNS of English speakers, to dissolving the idealised image of the NS and embracing our multilingual identities. This shift highlights our evolving relationship with native speakerism, the ideology that positions the NS as the ultimate authority on the English language and its teaching. As Holliday (2006) notes, this belief can implicitly devalue the linguistic resources of multilingual speakers, such as

the two authors, and often overlooks the strengths and complexities of migrant teachers' and students' multilingualism.

Extract 1

KY: '我的认知可能就是我心里还是有一个... native speaker 的一个 model，在那里的就是我觉得我当时的时候，其实我是觉得说我是想变成一个 native speaker 的... 就是我觉得他是有那个 power dynamics 在那里的... 然后你就突然觉得 native speaker 就是那种 power dynamics 突然就被消解掉了。'

('My perception was that I still had a native speaker model in my mind... I actually wanted to become a native speaker... I felt that it had that power dynamic there... But then you suddenly feel that the power dynamics of the native speaker are suddenly dissolved.')

The 'Native Speakerism' belief was once deeply ingrained in KY during her previous education, as reflected in her statement: '... I actually wanted to become a native speaker... I felt that it had that power dynamic there'. At the time, she aspired to become a native speaker, having regarded the native speaker as the model of a proficient English user. At the same time, she highlights the perceived inferiority of being an NNS in relation to an NS, feeling constrained by the NS-NNS dichotomy (Jenkins, 1998; Medgyes, 2001; Liao, 2017), which has contributed to the power imbalance between people with distinct linguistic repertoires of English. However, since moving to the UK in 2021 for study and work, her gradual immersion in English-speaking environments and the increasing opportunities for communication in English across all aspects of life have helped dissolve the power hierarchy she once perceived. Her description highlighted a positive shift from viewing NSs as superior in English communication to actively resisting the sense of inferiority imposed on NNSs by the NS-NNS divide.

Extract 2

YL: '我其实以前会很非常的审视，我自己讲的英文到底对不对... 就是用一种 right or wrong 的那种思维审视审视我自己讲的英文... 但是现在就是... 我已经习惯了，我就是个 second language learner，我也讲不到 native speaker 的那种感觉，但是我能表达我自己的想法就 OK，就这样。'

('I used to scrutinise myself very much, whether the English I speak is correct or not, using a 'right or wrong' mindset to scrutinise my spoken English... But now it's like... I've gotten used to it. I'm a second language learner, and I can't speak like a native speaker. But as long as I can express my ideas, it is okay. That's it.')

YL shares KY's concerns about scrutinising her own English use in terms of whether it was 'right or wrong' against the idealised NS model of proficiency. This reflects a common pressure among multilingual educators to conform to an often unattainable and idealised standard of using English language (Holliday, 2013). Distinctively, after years of socialisation in English-speaking environments in the UK and with NSs there, YL began to validate her identity as an NNS of English and acknowledged that an NNS like herself could never fully attain the level of an NS. Her perspective on English has positively shifted from pursuing a native-like standard to recognising its functionality in

expressing her own ideas in daily life, gradually acknowledging a multilingual trait in herself (Fisher et al., 2020).

Extract 3

YL: '我偶尔吧，我觉得我刚刚开始 teaching 和 teaching 的时候，我会把学生没有办法写好 English essay 这个事情和他们的 academic abilities 结合起来就是我会觉得说你连英文你都写不好，你学习也不怎么地吧，就是那种感觉就是就就会会有一种这样的感觉，但是后面，但是后面可能随着 AI 的的就是出现，然后大家都可以用来 polish English 之外之后了呢。我我我好，我好像反而不会这么觉得了，因为我也看不到那种语言特别混乱的 essay 了，现在我就会更，我就会越来越少的把学生的英语语言水平和他的学术能力的好高低联系在一起。'

('Occasionally, I think when I just started teaching and teaching, I would connect the fact that students couldn't write good English essays with their academic abilities, just I would feel like, if you can't even write English well, your studying is probably not that good either, that kind of feeling, just just would have this kind of feeling. But later, but later maybe with the emergence of AI, and after everyone can use it to polish English, I, I, I seem like instead don't feel that way anymore, because I also don't see those kinds of especially messy-language essays anymore. Now I would more, I would more and more rarely connect students' English language level with the level of their academic ability.')

Moreover, the ideology of 'native speakerism' has not only influenced how multilingual educators view themselves but has also affected how we perceive and interact with our students who are L2 users, such as the NNS students in YL's narrative. YL tended to associate students' perceived deficiencies in English use within academic contexts with our overall academic abilities, reflecting a negative attitude toward NNS students' performance. However, this perception has been moderated by the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), which can assist in correcting grammar issues (Jiang, 2025), as she rarely encountered poorly written essays when students could rely on AI for language refinement.

Comparatively, both researchers illustrate a positive trajectory from viewing the 'native speaker' as a model of authority to challenging and ultimately dissolving this ideal. Our relationship with the concept and ideology associated with the label of NS has evolved from feeling constrained by the perceived power and perfection of NSs to embracing both our own and our students' identities as NNSs, thereby validating what we once viewed as deficiencies while adapting to an English-speaking environment. Additionally, the advent of AI has contributed to this shift by assisting in the correction of language issues. This transformation, from aspiring to linguistic perfection to recognising the value of our teaching expertise, viewing English as a functional lingua franca, and acknowledging our own and our students' multilingualism, reflects critical rejection of the ideology of 'native speakerism' as we navigate and socialise within UK academic life.

Negotiating professional roles and personal identity through language use

The link between specific language use and identity in various contexts recurs throughout both researchers' narratives in the dialogue. The interconnection between conscious language choice and the construction and expression of professional and personal identities is particularly salient, as English in the context of a UK university functions not only as a medium of instruction but also as a means of self-representation of professionalism within the university setting (Dafouz, 2018) while teaching students from multiple ethnic backgrounds. The choice to use or not use English in formal or private teaching spaces signifies professional legitimacy while also delineating the active differentiation between one's professional self and personal life.

Extract 4

YL: '因为我觉得在这种环境让你用英文去工作，去教书的一个环境，你突然跟你的学生讲中文，我觉得是一种不专业的想法，不专业的表现... 我觉得英语对我来说就是就是 professionalism 就在这个环境里面。'

('Because I feel that in this kind of environment that lets you use English to work, to teach, if you suddenly speak Chinese to your students, I feel it's a kind of unprofessional thinking, unprofessional behaviour... I feel that English, to me, is just just professionalism in this environment.')

Extract 5

YL: '使用这个语言的场景有关，因为我们刚刚其实有谈到很多不同的场景吧，比如说在 supervision 里面在课堂在下课了之后，以及比如说在其他场景下面，其他场景包括 digital platform，比如说微信啊，teams 啊, bump into students 的时候，我们会不会就是在不同的场景下面对使用中文？有不一样的 perception，就比如说你要我在上课的时候用中文，我绝对 100 percent，我就是抗拒，但是你如果你下来问我问题，你想跟我说中文，那我是完全 OK 的，你在 supervision 里面，你跟我一对一的时候，你想跟我说中文那 OK 没问题，因为只有我们两个人在，但是如果呃，你在 teams 上面给我发中文，学生跟我发中文，我也很抗拒这个事情。'

('It's related to the context of using this language, because just now we actually talked about many different contexts, right, for example in supervision, in class, after class, and for example in other contexts, other contexts including digital platforms, like WeChat, Teams. When bumping into students, would we, just in different contexts, have different perceptions about using Chinese? Like for example, if you want me to use Chinese during class, I am absolutely 100 percent, I just resist. But if after class you come to ask me a question, you want to speak Chinese to me, then I'm totally OK with that. If in supervision, when it's one-on-one between us, you want to speak Chinese to me, then OK no problem, because it's just the two of us. But if, uh, you send me Chinese on Teams, students send me Chinese, I also really resist this thing.')

In YL's reflection, she associates the use of Chinese in an English-medium instructional environment with unprofessionalism, while positioning the use of English as a marker of professionalism. She captures this explicitly in her response: 'I feel that English, to me, is just professionalism in this environment', thereby linking the representation of her professional self to her language choice in teaching. Furthermore, she delineates clear boundaries between different communicative spaces, mobilising distinct linguistic resources in accordance with specific spatiotemporal contexts. In her account, formal teaching settings, such as the classroom or official digital platforms like Microsoft Teams, are construed as English-only zones tied to her professional role. This reflects an understanding of professional identity position as not only spatially situated but also linguistically constituted (Li, 2023; Naz & Beighton, 2024). It also resonates with the notion of transpositioning, which highlights how identities are continuously negotiated and reshaped through language practices across different spaces and contexts (Li & Lee, 2024). Additionally, in more private, one-on-one settings like a supervision meeting, the use of Mandarin becomes acceptable and is even seen as a resource. Nonetheless, she still reveals a sense of resistance stemming from the concern that, during dissertation supervision with Chinese students, using their shared first language (L1) might be perceived as unprofessional due to the potentially heightened rapport it could create by highlighting shared linguistic backgrounds and personal ethnic identities.

Extract 6

KY: '我也会考虑到，就是... 我会不会我说中文会，或是就是 reveal，这方面的 identity 会显得自己不够专业。'

('I also will consider, just... whether if I speak Chinese, or like reveal, this aspect of identity will make myself appear not professional enough.')

KY shares YL's concern about being perceived as 'not professional enough' when using Chinese in teaching spaces, further underscoring the interconnection between self-representation, professional practice, and language choice for multilingual teachers (Morea & Fisher, 2023).

Across both accounts, a clear tension emerges: the use of Mandarin is constructed as simultaneously 'unprofessional' and as a potential threat to teaching authority, thereby reinforcing a divide between public English-only professionalism and the private, pragmatic use of Mandarin for clarity. This belief in a negative correlation between first-language use and professional performance results in a highly contextual, spatialised, and deliberate management of our linguistic repertoires. Such navigation illustrates that professionalism is not a fixed state but rather a performance of linguistic competence, one in which language choice plays a crucial role in establishing teaching authority, signaling expertise, and maintaining boundaries between multilingual tutors and our students.

Coping with emotional complexities of multilingual teaching

Across the narratives of KY and YL, the emotional landscape of being a multilingual teacher is marked by a persistent sense of imposter syndrome which 'conveys not only an inability to recognise one's own success and internalise esteem

indicators but a conviction of fraudulence and inauthenticity' (Breeze, 2018, p.194), and a complex mix of conflicting emotions, closely tied to our use of language. This experience extends beyond mere performance anxiety, encompassing the emotional burden of teaching outside the perceived 'native speaker' norm. While being recruited to teach in English and succeeding in doing so brought a sense of pride, feelings of inadequacy regarding linguistic competence often triggered a duality of emotions. This tension, between pride and anxiety, competence and self-doubt, emerges as a defining feature of our professional experience.

Extract 7

YL: '我感觉我 imposter syndrome 不是因为我，我觉得我，我觉得我不够资格教，而是可能有一点语言方面的东西就是... 可能就是自己作为一个中国人...然后我要用我要用英文去跟他们讲，我可能会偶尔会觉得说啊，他们会不会审视我自己的英文什么的。'

('I feel my imposter syndrome is not because I, I feel I, I feel I'm not qualified to teach, but rather maybe a bit of language aspect stuff, just... maybe just myself as a Chinese... and then I have to use, I have to use English to speak to them, I may occasionally feel like, ah, will they scrutinise my English or something.')

Extract 8

KY: '会有就是我会觉得有一点我自己是个草台班子的那种感觉在... 我也不知道，但我确实觉得我当时去上课的时候，我确实就是有一种 imposter syndrome 在。'

('There is... I feel a bit like I'm of a makeshift team... I don't know, but I did feel that when I went to teach a class, I did have a kind of imposter syndrome.')

YL clarifies that her imposter syndrome does not arise from a deficiency in subject knowledge, but from the 'language aspect', specifically, her use of English to deliver instructions. In spite of her pride in being able to teach, this linguistic concern amplifies her anxiety, generating a persistent fear of scrutiny by students when teaching in an L2 as a Chinese educator, which in turn erodes her confidence and intensifies self-doubt. Beyond the immediate classroom experience, this tension reveals a deeper paradox: as an L2 user, she is expected to teach through a language that is not her first, while simultaneously negotiating her L1 identity, which is intimately tied to her ethnic and cultural self-conception. KY echoes this sentiment, describing the experience as being part of a 'makeshift team', a sarcastic yet poignant metaphor that captures the structural marginalisation and perceived lack of legitimacy experienced by multilingual GTAs, a group of student teachers positioned in the liminal space between fully established staff and students within institutional hierarchies (Bale & Anderson, 2024; Collins, 2021), which further diminishes her sense of qualification to teach. This 'in-between' positionality (Tavener-Smith et al., 2025), combined with the multilingual realities of GTAs, adds an additional layer of complexity to the negotiation of professional identity in the teaching space, as we navigate both our non-native language proficiency and our pedagogical authority. Collectively, these reflections illuminate the intricate interplay between language, identity, and power, highlighting how institutional instructional norms privileging 'native speaker' authority shape the emotional and professional realities of multilingual teachers whose L1 is not English.

The narratives of these two researchers further reveal complex emotional landscapes, encompassing both pride and imposter syndrome. This duality has enabled them to cultivate a participative multilingual identity (Gayton et al., 2025), through which we actively engage with our emotional sensitivity in practice and diversify our teaching beyond English-only templates.

Implications and conclusion

This duoethnographic study illuminates the teaching and living experiences of multilingual GTAs in a UK HE context. By staging a critical conversation between two multilingual GTAs, our findings reveal that multilingual identity is simultaneously a profound pedagogical asset and a significant site of struggle. The tensions explored, between embracing our identities and navigating Native Speakerism, between using language for professionalism and for personal connection, and between pride and imposter syndrome, are not merely individual psychological issues. Rather, they are reflections of a broader institutional environment that, despite its multilingual reality, remains shaped by entrenched monolingual norms. We hope that the implications of these findings extend to three key groups: multilingual GTAs themselves, the developers and supervisors who train them, and the institutional leaders who shape policy regarding supporting this group of student teachers.

For multilingual GTAs, this study validates their experiences of linguistic insecurity and imposter syndrome as a systemic issue rather than a personal failing. Our findings suggest that the emotional burden of teaching in a L2 is a core part of the professional experience for GTAs. Recognising this tension is a critical first step toward self-advocacy and building resilience. By collectively articulating these struggles, GTAs can move from feeling isolated and ‘unbecoming’ to becoming part of a community that recognises the shared value of their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Guo & Sidhu, 2024). Our duoethnographic process models how collaborative reflection can be a powerful tool for this purpose, transforming what were once private anxieties into a basis for collective strength and professional growth. This shift enables GTAs to critically assess and ultimately reject the monolingual ideologies that constrain them, thereby cultivating a more authentic and powerful professional identity.

For those responsible for GTA professional development and academic programmes, our study offers leverage points for fostering a more inclusive and equitable teaching environment. The findings highlight the need to move beyond standard pedagogical training to address the affective and identity-related dimensions of multilingual teaching, propelling an identity-based intervention in GTA development (Forbes et al., 2024). We recommend incorporating targeted professional development workshops that focus on the emotional aspects of language use in the teaching space. These workshops could offer a safe space for GTAs to discuss their experiences with imposter syndrome and to collaboratively develop strategies for leveraging their multilingualism as a teaching asset (Lu et al., 2025). Instead of framing multilingualism as a potential barrier, training programmes should normalise it as a natural and valuable part of the pedagogical landscape. This could involve circulating language-inclusive teaching tips that encourage linguistic diversity, celebrating the diverse linguistic repertoires present in the classroom, and creating opportunities for GTAs to share their unique cultural and linguistic insights with peers.

At the institutional level, our findings hint at the foundational monolingual assumptions that often underpin UK HE. The institutional expectation that English is the sole legitimate medium of instruction and professional communication creates a barrier to recognising and harnessing the intellectual and cultural richness that multilingualism brings. Programme leads and department heads can lead change by actively foregrounding multilingual perspectives in departmental discussions and policymaking. This means actively soliciting input from multilingual staff and students on the linguistic issues related to curriculum design, assessment, and communication practices, thereby acknowledging their participative agency in driving constructive changes to pedagogical practices in multilingual universities (Gayton et al., 2025) and contributing to the broader project of decolonising English in HE (Baker et al., 2025). It also involves critically examining and updating policies to acknowledge and support the use of languages other than English where it enhances learning and communication. By incrementally unsettling these monolingual norms, universities can cultivate more equitable, intellectually vibrant learning environments.

In conclusion, our study confirms that multilingual identity in the UK HE context is a complex interplay of struggle and asset. It is a site where GTAs navigate institutional expectations, professional standards and personal realities, often leading to emotional and professional tension. However, by articulating these tensions, we reveal a clear path forward. The key to cultivating more equitable teaching and learning environments lies not in assimilation to monolingual norms, but in the active, systematic validation of multilingualism as a core part of pedagogical excellence. The journey of moving from a position of perceived deficiency to one of genuine professional confidence is a testament to the resilience of multilingual teachers. This study demonstrates that by embracing collaborative reflection and fostering an institutional culture that values linguistic diversity, we can create an academic space in which multilingual identity is recognised as a valuable and powerful resource.

Ethical claim: This study only used the data involving the two authors and received the full consent from the two authors in using the data. There is no conflict of interests.

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In the Seminar Space: Navigating Graduate Teaching in Undergraduate Legal Education

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Hadijah's work reflects a profound commitment to global health, gender, human rights, and access to justice. Prior to joining Warwick, Hadijah taught law at Makerere University School of Law in Kampala, Uganda, contributing to legal education and mentoring future professionals.

Abstract

This reflective paper examines my evolving pedagogical identity as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) within a Global North law department, focusing on the facilitation of undergraduate seminars. Grounded in Warwick Law School's "Law in Context" philosophy, I reflect on a seminar where students critically engaged with the applicability of CEDAW in Global South contexts. This experience demonstrated how legal instruction can move beyond doctrinal delivery to become a dialogic practice shaped by lived experience, social histories, and interdisciplinary critique. Through scaffolded teaching, peer-led activities, and participatory methods, I aim to decentralise authority and foster cumulative learning across diverse student cohorts.

Navigating the dual role of postgraduate student and educator involves constant negotiation between institutional expectations and my commitment to feminist-informed pedagogy. I reflect on the emotional labour required to sustain inclusive engagement, respond to student needs, and maintain care and professionalism—labour that is often invisible, unevenly distributed, and unrecognised within formal teaching structures. Drawing on engaged pedagogy and personal experience, I argue that transformative legal education depends not only on intellectual rigour but also on emotional awareness, epistemic humility, and institutional recognition of the relational work performed by early-career educators. By foregrounding the complexities of care, credibility, and co-construction, this paper affirms the pedagogical agency of postgraduate teachers and calls for more socially responsive approaches to legal education.

Keywords: Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA), Seminars, Law in Context, Lived Experience, Emotional labour.

Introduction

This reflective paper explores my evolving pedagogical identity as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) within a Global North law department, specifically through the lens of undergraduate legal education. Drawing on my experience facilitating weekly undergraduate seminars, this paper reflects on how my teaching practice is informed by Warwick Law School's "Law in Context" philosophy as a relational and critically engaged pedagogy. To structure this inquiry, I apply Brookfield's (1995) Four Lenses of Critical Reflection, and the central guiding question is: How can early-career legal educators reconfigure authority, care, and credibility through feminist-informed pedagogy within institutional structures that often marginalise relational and emotional labour?

Navigating my dual identity as a postgraduate student and GTA requires constant negotiation between institutional structures that often prioritise standardisation and efficiency, and my commitment to inclusive, reflexive, and co-constructive pedagogy. My commitment stems from the belief that authority in seminars is not fixed but dynamic and relational. Rather than reinforcing a binary between teacher and student, I approach authority as co-constructed, emerging through student voices, peer-led presentations, and scaffolded learning. This reframing retains the educator's role in guiding inquiry while decentralising expertise and inviting students to shape the intellectual space. It reflects a feminist pedagogical commitment to shared credibility, and the collective construction of knowledge (Pugliese, 2023).

This paper reflects on how four interlocking dynamics inform my evolving practice. First, scaffolded teaching and participatory methods decentralise authority and support cumulative learning. Second, designing for emotional safety and epistemic humility acknowledges that cultural, linguistic, and disciplinary barriers shape engagement. Third, teaching demands invisible yet consequential emotional labour. Finally, occupying a liminal postgraduate educator identity brings both precarity and possibility, as I negotiate professionalism, care, and ongoing scholarly development within a system that seldom recognises relational work. Through these reflections, I argue that transformative legal education that fosters critical consciousness, contextual sensitivity, and inclusive participation (Duggan, M., & Bishop, C., 2023)— depends on scaffolded engagement, affective awareness, and the formal recognition of emotional and digital labour. These elements are essential for creating learning environments where diverse students can meaningfully engage with law as a socially embedded practice, even as early-career educators navigate institutional constraints and evolving professional identities.

Facilitating Seminars: Relational Pedagogy in Practice

Dressner (2025) describes relational work as the ongoing, often invisible labour involved in cultivating and sustaining meaningful relationships within the teaching and learning environment. Facilitating weekly seminars has become a central site for enacting my pedagogical commitments and navigating the tensions between institutional expectations and relational teaching. These seminars are not merely spaces for delivering content but dialogic environments where students are invited to interrogate legal concepts through experiential, and socially grounded lenses. My role as a facilitator is shaped by the "Law in Context" philosophy, which positions law as a socially embedded practice rather than a neutral or purely technical system (Nelken, 2009). The

“Law in Context” approach challenges students to critically assess not only what the law is, but what it does, whom it serves, and what it ought to become (Twining, 1997). It invites students to move beyond abstract doctrinal analysis by examining how law operates in practice shaped by lived experience, social histories, and interdisciplinary perspectives.

This can be illustrated by a seminar on CEDAW’s applicability in Global South contexts, where students examined how local socio-legal realities shape the implementation of global norms. One questioned whether CEDAW’s focus on formal equality addresses structural inequalities rooted in colonial legacies and customary law, another raised tensions between universal rights language and culturally specific gender norms. Anchored in the “Law in Context” philosophy, the discussion moved beyond doctrine to interrogate the values and power dynamics embedded in international legal frameworks. Students debated whether CEDAW enables transformative justice or reinforces top-down, exclusionary reform. This episode illustrates how contextualised legal education fosters critical engagement with law’s institutional purpose and its potential to address real-world inequities.

Each seminar fosters critical engagement, not only with legal texts but also with the historical, cultural, and political forces that shape how law is experienced and contested. For example, in exploring reproductive justice and social reproduction, students examine how legal frameworks intersect with care work, bodily autonomy, and racialised and gendered access to reproductive healthcare. Drawing on the framework of reproductive justice, which encompasses the right to have children, not have children, and to parent in safe and supportive environments (BlackDeer, 2025; Bhattacharya, 2016), students are invited to consider how law mediates power relations across class, race, and gender, and how it both reflects and reinforces broader social inequities. These discussions often reveal tensions between doctrinal clarity and socio-legal critique, demanding facilitation that balances analytical rigour and lived experience.

Students bring a wide range of experiences, epistemologies, and expectations to the classroom, shaped by intersecting factors such as race, gender, nationality, and prior educational exposure. To support this diversity, I employ scaffolded teaching strategies by initially providing structured support to guide students’ understanding, then gradually reducing this support as they develop confidence and autonomy in applying concepts independently (Belland, 2013). The two-semester structure of the module presents challenges for students in retaining and integrating earlier concepts over time. To address this, I embed regular thematic recaps and reflective prompts to reinforce key ideas, strengthen conceptual continuity, and support cumulative learning.

As students advance through the module, my role shifts toward facilitating deeper engagement with complex material and guiding them in connecting theoretical insights to legal practice. To support this progression, I employ participatory methods such as small-group discussions, peer-led presentations, and collaborative analysis as strategies that decentralise authority and promote shared ownership of knowledge. Small-group discussions allow students to process ideas collectively before contributing to the wider class, amplifying quieter voices and building confidence over time, especially among those navigating unfamiliar theoretical terrain or classroom dynamics (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). Peer-led activities further position students as active contributors to the learning process, fostering a sense of agency and intellectual investment. I strategically incorporate digital tools like Padlet to foster collaborative brainstorming and enhance student interaction.

These approaches reflect feminist pedagogical commitments to inclusivity, reflexivity, and co-construction of meaning (Abrams, 2021; Menkel-Meadow, 1988), and align with broader educational research on scaffolding as a strategy for cultivating learner autonomy and critical thinking (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). They also resonate with evidence that peer-to-peer learning enhances retention and analytical depth (Freeman et al., 2014).

Fostering meaningful engagement within a pluralistic classroom requires more than thoughtful structural design—it calls for a pedagogy that is critically responsive to difference and attuned to the affective dimensions of learning. As Ahmed (2012) reminds us, classrooms are never neutral spaces; they are shaped by histories of inclusion and exclusion, and by the emotional labour required to inhabit them. Student engagement is mediated by a complex interplay of cultural, emotional, and epistemic factors that influence how learners relate to legal content and to one another. Hesitation to participate often stems not from disinterest, but from navigating unfamiliar disciplinary terrain, linguistic challenges, or the emotional weight of sensitive topics. Recognising these dynamics is essential to cultivating inclusive spaces where students feel both intellectually and emotionally safe to contribute.

To support students in these complex learning environments, I cultivate a classroom ethos grounded in emotional safety, epistemic humility, and dialogic exchange. This involves designing activities that invite students to connect legal theory to lived experience, while also recognising the emotional risks that such engagement can entail. As Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia (2012) argue, academic emotions ranging from anxiety and frustration to pride and curiosity play a central role in shaping students' motivation, cognitive engagement, and capacity for critical thought. Creating space for these emotions to be recognised and processed is essential for inclusive and transformative learning.

However, responding to students' emotional and epistemic needs within these relationally attuned environments requires sustained emotional labour from educators. This labour is often invisible, unevenly distributed, and rarely recognised within institutional frameworks. The following section explores these complexities in depth, examining how emotional labour and engaged teaching shape my practice as a postgraduate educator in legal education and how relational design functions as both a pedagogical strategy and a form of resistance to depersonalised models of legal instruction.

Emotional Labour and Engaged Teaching in Legal Education

Teaching law entails a form of emotional labour that is often invisible yet deeply consequential. Legal education has traditionally privileged rationality, detachment, and doctrinal precision, leaving limited space for the affective dimensions of teaching and learning. Yet as Heath et al. (2018) argue, the emotional demands placed on educators, particularly those in precarious roles such as postgraduate teachers' roles are substantial and frequently unacknowledged. From a feminist ethics of care perspective, this emotional labour is not ancillary but integral to engaged pedagogy. It involves attunement to students' emotional and epistemic needs, the cultivation of trust, and the capacity to hold space for discomfort, vulnerability, and growth (Chadha-Sridhar, 2024). Recognising

emotional labour as a professional skill reframes care not as a personal disposition but as a deliberate, relational practice that sustains inclusive and transformative legal education.

As a GTA, I experience this emotional labour acutely. I am expected to perform care, maintain composure, and embody institutional professionalism, even while navigating my own uncertainties and evolving pedagogical identity. The dual role of being both a learner and an educator intensifies this labour, as I must balance the expectations of faculty with the needs of students, often without formal recognition or support. This is particularly pronounced in seminars that explore themes that evoke discomfort, vulnerability, and resistance.

To meet these challenges, I draw on bell hooks' (1994) concept of engaged pedagogy, which frames teaching as a practice rooted in mutual care, self-actualisation, and the integration of personal and political experience. hooks rejects the notion of the teacher as a distant authority, instead positioning the educator as a co-learner and someone who embraces uncertainty, models reflexivity, and cultivates spaces of critical inquiry. In my seminars, this means acknowledging my own positionality and inviting students to do the same.

Engaged teaching often requires navigating institutional constraints that limit educators' ability to respond emotionally to student needs. Rigid assessment frameworks, performance metrics, and prescriptive curricula can restrict the flexibility needed to foster inclusive and responsive learning environments. These pressures are especially acute for postgraduate and early-career educators, who must balance pedagogical care with expectations of professionalism, often without formal recognition or support. As Jones (2021) argues, emotional labour in legal education is shaped by power and identity; minoritised educators are frequently expected to perform inclusion, resilience, and emotional support in ways that exceed their formal roles. For postgraduate teachers, this creates a persistent negotiation between care and credibility, where efforts to build connection and foster student agency may be misinterpreted as a lack of academic rigour. These tensions underscore the need to reframe emotional labour not as ancillary, but as central to transformative legal pedagogy.

Despite these challenges, I view emotional labour and engaged pedagogy not as burdens, but as essential components of transformative legal education. They allow for the cultivation of critical consciousness, ethical awareness, and a sense of collective responsibility which are vital qualities for students entering a legal profession increasingly shaped by social complexity and moral ambiguity. By embracing the emotional dimensions of teaching, I aim to create learning environments that are not only intellectually rigorous but also humanising and just. For this work to be sustainable, institutions must recognise emotional labour as a professional skill. It should be reflected in workload models, supported through training in relational pedagogy, and redistributed through collaborative teaching practices that prevent its concentration on postgraduate teachers. In the next section, I reflect on how my identity as a postgraduate teacher informs and complicates my pedagogical approach, and how occupying this in-between space offers both challenges and possibilities for reimagining legal education.

Postgraduate Educator Identity in Legal Education

Navigating the dual role of postgraduate student and educator presents a unique set of pedagogical and institutional complexities. Positioned between learner and teacher, I occupy a space that is both transitional and relational and this position requires ongoing negotiation of authority, credibility, and care. This liminality offers opportunities for reflexive practice and pedagogical innovation, but it also exposes the structural precarity and emotional demands that often accompany early-career teaching in higher education.

Scholarship on teacher identity highlights that professional development is not a linear process but a dynamic interplay between personal biography, institutional culture, and disciplinary norms (Orfali et al., 2024). For postgraduate educators, this process is shaped by limited autonomy, unclear expectations, and the need to balance teaching responsibilities with research and academic progression. As van Lankveld et al. (2017) observe, early-career teachers frequently experience tensions between their emerging pedagogical values and the constraints imposed by curriculum structures, assessment regimes, and hierarchical academic environments. In legal education, these tensions are particularly pronounced. The discipline's emphasis on doctrinal rigour and performative authority can conflict with more inclusive, dialogic, and emotionally responsive teaching approaches. As a GTA, I often find myself negotiating between institutional expectations of professionalism and my commitment to feminist-informed pedagogy. This includes modelling reflexivity, acknowledging my own positionality, and creating space for students to engage with law through their lived experiences. While these practices enrich the learning environment, they also require emotional labour and pedagogical vulnerability, and these qualities are not always recognised within formal teaching evaluations or workload models.

The emotional dimensions of postgraduate teaching are further intensified by the partial invisibility of pedagogical labour, particularly its affective, relational, and preparatory aspects (Leutwiler, Amorim-Ribeiro, and Grangeiro, 2024). While outward-facing tasks such as lecturing, leading seminars, and holding office hours are visible and institutionally recognised, the behind-the-scenes labour of managing classroom dynamics, responding to student distress, and sustaining engagement with complex socio-legal topics often remains unacknowledged. As an international student, I am acutely attuned to difference, and in facilitating seminars, I carry the responsibility of ensuring that diverse cohorts engage meaningfully with the concepts under discussion. This is no small task; efforts to foster inclusive and responsive learning environments can sometimes be misinterpreted as a lack of authority or academic rigour, leading to feelings of self-doubt. In my experience, cultivating peer support networks and engaging in reflective dialogue with colleagues has been vital. This helps me to navigate these challenges and affirm the legitimacy and value of my pedagogical approach.

Despite its constraints, I view my postgraduate teaching identity as a site of possibility. It allows me to experiment with interdisciplinary methods, scaffolded learning strategies, and relational ethics that challenge traditional hierarchies in legal education. Anchored in the "Law in Context" approach, my practice foregrounds law as a socially embedded and contested institution, inviting students to engage with legal questions through historical, political, and cultural lenses. This interdisciplinarity not only enriches classroom dialogue but also shapes my own identity as an educator—one attuned to

complexity, reflexivity, and the transformative potential of legal pedagogy. Drawing on Thomas Dotta and Lopes (2023), I understand identity formation as a process of becoming shaped not only by institutional structures but also by everyday interactions, feedback, and moments of connection with students. In this way, the “Law in Context” philosophy is not just a pedagogical framework but a formative influence on how I navigate and inhabit my role as a postgraduate teacher.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the layered complexities of postgraduate teaching in legal education, foregrounding the emotional, relational, and intellectual labour that underpins inclusive and transformative pedagogy. Through the lens of seminar facilitation, I have reflected on how scaffolded learning, feminist-informed practices, and the “Law in Context” philosophy enable students to engage critically with legal frameworks as socially embedded and contested systems. These pedagogical commitments resist dominant models of doctrinal delivery and instead cultivate dialogic spaces where authority is shared, difference is acknowledged, and lived experience is valued.

Yet enacting such pedagogy as a GTA involves navigating institutional constraints, professional expectations, and the affective demands of teaching. The emotional labour required to sustain inclusive engagement, respond to student needs, and maintain pedagogical care is substantial and frequently invisible, particularly for minoritised and early-career educators. As I have shown, this labour is not ancillary but central to the work of teaching law in ways that are humanising, ethically attuned, and socially responsive.

Occupying a liminal space between student and educator offers both challenges and possibilities. It enables reflexive practice, interdisciplinary experimentation, and relational ethics that challenge traditional hierarchies in legal education. At the same time, it exposes the precarity and emotional intensity of early-career teaching.

Building on these tensions, I argue for a reimagining of legal education and the operationalisation of institutional recognition in tangible ways. Central to this is the provision of structured time for debriefing after emotionally demanding sessions, acknowledging the affective toll of inclusive pedagogy.

Such recognition must also extend to training in relational pedagogy and dialogic teaching, equipping educators to sustain inclusive practices with confidence and care. In parallel, evaluation systems should be bias-aware, moving beyond reliance on end-of-term student surveys to incorporate multiple measures of teaching quality.

Crucially, emotional labour should be formally acknowledged within academic workload models, ensuring it is not dismissed as “extra” or invisible. Embedding such practices into institutional frameworks allows legal education to move toward genuine pedagogical justice—one that recognises the emotional dimensions of teaching and places relational pedagogy at its core. Within this framework, postgraduate educators are valued not merely as seminar facilitators but as co-creators of a more humanising, ethically grounded, and socially responsive future for the discipline.

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Ethical Claim

This reflective paper is based on personal teaching experience and does not involve human participants or empirical data collection. Institutional approval for teaching-related activities was granted through my appointment as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) within the School of Law at the University of Warwick. I also participated in the APP PGR programme facilitated by the Academic Development Centre, which supports postgraduate researchers who teach. No conflicts of interest are declared, and all reflections are presented in accordance with ethical standards for professional and pedagogical practice.

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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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Spaces within spaces: Teaching French culture from a British-Mauritian perspective and its relationship with GTA liminality and identity

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Adam Agowun (he/him) is a final-year, Wolfson-funded PhD student in French Studies at the University of Warwick's School of Modern Languages and Cultures. His research is on French presidents and their relationship with the media. His thesis considers presidential image projection in the Fifth Republic, 1995-2017, and the various factors that have influenced and changed this, using personas to track the relationship between policy and performance. He has previously taught on the first-year module, 'The Story of Modern France', and continues to guest lecture on the second-year module, The Right in France, from the Dreyfus Affair to the Present'. He has also shadowed on French language modules. Adam is also a former Student Fellow of the Warwick International Higher Education Academy (WIHEA) who has a keen interest in aspects of co-creation between staff and students. He has been involved in several video projects with Warwick Library, and in his work with WIHEA and the Warwick Learning Design Consultancy Unit (LDCU), has sought to champion student voice.

Abstract

Due to its varying nature, GTA positionality and teacher identity and how it is understood is a notoriously difficult subject. Though this can provide GTAs with unique experiences, it also means that we have to navigate these identity tensions on a daily basis, and navigate this liminality and the spaces it inhabits. Liminality, a term developed by anthropologist Victor Turner, can be defined as 'neither here nor there, betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial', and is a term that continues to be used in the field of anthropology and wider afield. The majority of literature has identified how this can be a problematic term, with GTAs being both part of and absent from the literature. This paper has no intention of disagreeing with that, but it does seek to offer a more positive outlook and personal reflection on the matter. In this paper, I will argue that we can use our own personal liminalities as an asset in navigating GTA liminality. In order to illustrate this, I will use my own identity as a British-born Mauritian and how it informs my teaching of French culture as an example. The paper will first engage with what we mean by (GTA) liminality, before moving onto how I perceive this in the light of my own liminalities. I will then reflect on how this was received at the Warwick PGT Conference 2025, how this has caused me to further reflect on my experiences, and how these personal reflections connect to broader reflections on GTA teaching practice and identity.

Keywords: GTA identity; liminality; personal reflection; cultural identity.

It should be said that any discussion of positionality and teacher identity – particularly when it comes to Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) – is a notoriously difficult subject. First, the form of teaching can take different forms. It could be contracted, or more akin to a zero-hours approach. Secondly, the level of training GTAs receive varies on both an institutional and departmental level. Yet thirdly – and perhaps most importantly – Hannah Rachael Slack and Madeleine Pownall (2023) highlight how we 'do not fit neatly into the category of either staff or student'. This inability to neatly categorise GTAs subsequently makes navigating discussions surrounding positionality and GTA teacher identity rather challenging. Consequently, individuals such as Naomi Winstone and Darren Moore (2017) have convincingly argued that we need to engage in 'identity work' throughout our studies. Of course, there are significant benefits to 'identity work', allowing GTAs and the wider academic community to address the idea of GTA liminality, which in itself can be a slightly problematic term. However, I believe that the flexibility of this term makes it worth considering, particular when it comes to reconciling our identities as GTAs with our other identities outside of the teaching space, which this paper will explore. I will further consider how we can we practically apply this notion of 'reconciled identities' to our professional contexts – in my case, I will explain how I teach French culture through another frame of cultural reference, and argue that our personal liminalities can help us to better negotiate our identities as GTAs. This paper will seek to address this by first unpacking ideas surrounding liminality and liminal identities, before introducing a little bit more about my own, separate identity, and then looking at how I used this to enrich my teaching experiences within the context of some of my seminars. It will finally think about the wider implications of this for the academic community by reflecting on my experiences presenting these ideas at the Warwick PGT Conference 2025.

Liminality, though originally coined by ethnographer Arnold van Gennep, has come to be associated with British anthropologist Victor Turner (Wels et al, 2011). For Turner, the term can be used to describe a position which is 'neither here nor there'. Those engaging with liminality are, according to Turner, 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial' (Turner, 2017, p. 95). Of course, there are issues in Turner's use of the term, particularly that he did not use it precisely. As Jasper Balduk (2008) has argued, this is problematic in the sense that 'anything goes'. Indeed, Balduk goes as far as to argue that using liminality outside of the field of anthropology is inappropriate, taking it away from its original meaning. However, I would argue that that it precisely because of the flexibility of the term that we should be using it – and indeed, it continues to be used in both the field of anthropology and more generically (Wels et al, 2011) to describe this notion of being 'in-between' spaces. It is because of the various factors at play in GTA identity outlined above that we would argue that not only is liminality an appropriate term, but it also why we need to engage in discussions surrounding GTA positionality and identity. Where do we fit? What are our identities? Are we comfortable having multiple identities in our roles as GTAs, or not? This paper does not claim to answer these questions, not does it argue that we can answer them – rather, this is an entirely subjective set of questions that should respect our individual spaces and experiences as GTAs.

There has been extensive research on GTAs' space within the wider academic community. (e.g. Muzaka 2009, Casey et al, 2022, Green, 2010, Nasser-Abu Alhija and Fresko, 2020). Yet as Slack and Pownell (2023) have shown, the fact that GTAs cannot be neatly categorised means that they are paradoxically present in and absent from

research simultaneously. This idea that GTAs exist between spaces is what I am primarily interested in here – and I want to argue that it can also apply on several other, more personal levels. For me, as a British-born Mauritian, this raises itself through questions of cultural identity. In my experience, I effectively walk the space between being British and being Mauritian. Of course, this particular identity also resonates with the field of postcolonial studies as well, particularly given the case studies of seminars I want to use, where I worked with students on a text that wrestles with questions of postcolonial identity. This is itself an incredibly rich field, and I cannot expand on it here due to spatial constraints (e.g. Fanon 2021, Said 1995, Chakravorty Spivak, 2010, Bhabha, 2004). However, what this shows is that when we talk about GTA identity and the concept of liminality, we are often talking about other identities and thus other spaces where liminality exists, and it is the interplay between these and their effect on the teaching experience for both teachers and students that I want to discuss.

It is in this spirit that I want to share a bit about my other liminal identity, of being both Mauritian and British and neither – all at the same time. Mauritius itself speaks to this idea of liminal identities due to its incredible diversity. Having been colonised by three countries before independence in 1968, it is multiethnic, with people of Indian, African, Chinese and European (mainly French) origins. It is also religiously diverse, with a Hindu majority and significant Christian and Muslim populations. Again, this paper cannot and will not claim to offer a singular view on Mauritian culture and identity – indeed, as an Indo-Mauritian from a Muslim background, my reference points are different to other Mauritians. Yet this diversity furthers my argument surrounding different liminalities at play in both the GTA context and a wider social context – it is extremely nuanced, subjective, and gives rise to some wonderfully unique experiences.

My reference points are also different because though I have made several trips and even worked in Mauritius, I am not necessarily a ‘true’ Mauritian. As a GTA, I walk the space between teacher and student – and in my personal life, I walk the space between Mauritius and Britain. I was born here in the United Kingdom, educated here, and based on exchanges with my colleagues from when I was working there, am from here and not there. I also walk a space, partly because of Mauritian culture’s close ties to South Asian (particularly Indian) culture, and partly because of the larger Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi communities in this country, where I belong to a wider South Asian identity as opposed to my Mauritian one. This is somewhat disarming due to the nation’s geographical position off the coast of Africa. Consequently, like most other GTAs, I have to navigate different spaces where liminality exists – and these are often spaces to which I may not necessarily belong by any formal means.

But this liminality is a part of me, and naturally feeds into my teaching. Just as lecturers transitioning from a school context are encouraged to hold on to their identity and credibility as schoolteachers, we as GTAs are encouraged to engage in identity work and employ a sort of identity malleability wherein we move between our positions as students and teachers. I would argue that there is also a need for us to consider other spaces where liminality exists in our teaching, whether that is based on educational experience, cultural experience, and/or personal heritage to name but a few factors (Boyd and Harris, 2010). In my department of French Studies and the wider School of Modern Languages and Cultures, this is a huge part of what we do. We teach language, but we also teach that culture underpins language – you cannot really fully understand one without the other. For example, if first-year French essay classes look at cultural and

economic tensions in the suburbs (*banlieues*) of Paris through newspaper and political reports, first-year culture classes unpack this further through film, literature, and other media. Of course, this requires a common frame of reference through which we can explain this. It could be a question of reframing sentences into other, simplified versions or using idioms, but there may be the need for cultural references too. For the most part, given that cultural models are taught in English and the general demographic of students, this is largely through a British and Anglophone context. I myself have made references to popular culture or to texts and films students have studied on A-Level French courses in order to draw parallels and further their understanding of the material at hand. However, what I want to focus on here is how we might do this using another cultural context – a Mauritian, somewhat South Asian one.

To this end, I will be using the example of my seminar teaching on a first-year French Studies module, the Story of Modern France. This is a two-term breadth module, explicitly designed to introduce students to the varieties of subjects that they can study at honours level: politics, literature, French Revolution, and postcolonial studies *inter alia*. It spans an extremely wide period, from the 11th century *Song of Roland* to a 2019 film discussing *banlieue* identities. Teaching therefore requires seminar tutors to be prepared to teach in a variety of different ways. To help with this, colleagues who deliver the lecture often design worksheets to help seminar tutors guide our teaching, but we do not necessarily adhere rigidly to these, speaking to our fellow seminar tutors and thinking about the best way to communicate key points about the material to our respective seminar groups. I had a group of nine students, five male, four female. Three students were from an ethnic minority, and two of those three were from a South Asian ethnic background – this is significant because the materials I used tapped into my experiences of South Asian identity. Of course, the small sample size of students limits the effectiveness of my observations, and in future, I would consider a small questionnaire to gain a more accurate insight into how my methods are received. However, I have still been able to draw some valuable reflections from my teaching practices.

For the most part, I largely relied on my liminal GTA status, and went between my role as student and teacher. I also benefited from the fact I had done this module myself as an undergraduate, and there were texts that remained the same, including the one I now want to discuss: Maryse Condé's *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer.* Condé was a celebrated French author from its overseas department and region of Guadeloupe, and *Le coeur* presents itself as the 'true' stories of her childhood, going from her birth up until her higher education in France. Like her other work, it largely deals with questions of postcolonial identity – at points, she engages explicitly with the work of philosopher Frantz Fanon (a pioneer of the field) and other postcolonial scholars. However, this particular text is more personal in its nature, presenting itself as a series of short vignettes tracking her personal experiences growing up as a middle-class black girl in Guadeloupe and its effect on her experience of race and gender, as well as her complex relationship with her mother. In other words, Condé explores her own liminalities, and as such, I related to large portions of it, and used my own liminalities to teach the text.

One of the first things I did in the first of two seminars on the text was show a clip from the 1990s British sketch comedy show, *Goodness Gracious Me,* which I myself had seen extracts of growing up in a British-Mauritian household. The four ensemble cast members were British-Indians Meera Syal, Sanjeev Bhaskar, Kulvinder Ghir, and Nina Wadia, and the show explored the interweaving between traditional Indian culture and

modern British life in a humorous way. Of course, some of the mannerisms and language are heavily exaggerated, and I made a point of saying this before showing this to students: that it was made in a different time, and for a different audience. The clip in question was about the Coopers (Kapoors) and the Robinsons (Rabindranaths) who claim to be entirely English with no Indian blood whatsoever, but often give themselves away by using each other's real names, mispronouncing words or making ‘silly mistakes’ such as serving guests some Pimm's with sliced courgettes in it. They refuse to acknowledge their real ethnic background under any circumstances, and become very upset whenever anyone refers to them as foreigners.

The reason why I did this was threefold. First, Condé’s opening chapter is a portrait of her family, and they are very much presented in this same way, that they are more French than the mainland French people, rejecting their own Guadeloupean identity in favour of an idealised version of ‘Frenchness’. Second, and more practically, students today tend to engage better with video materials than they do textual material, particularly when said video is also in English. Third, because of my own aforementioned references growing up in a British-Mauritian household. It occurred to me that I should use this as a cultural frame of reference with which I could unpack the text because of my own experiences of liminality.

We watched the clip, and I asked students to respond. There was a little discomfort from some students of a Caucasian background, perhaps given the dynamic, but this was quickly dispelled when I encouraged honest responses. Furthermore, overall engagement seemed to be higher because students felt like they were getting something different from the carefully outlined seminar sheet, but also because such a specific example was unanticipated, piquing curiosity. When we were later discussing the use of Guadeloupean Creole in the text, I used my own experiences with Mauritian Creole – when we use it, within which contexts, and so on. Consequently, this delved into a separate but not entirely unrelated discussion regarding Creole languages, and I responded to personal questions regarding how I use it to further students’ understanding. Of course, I was careful to link it back to our discussion of Condé, but some of these more technical questions could be said to evidence some genuine curiosity and engagement from students with my own liminality in order to better understand liminality in the text.

In other words, by using my liminality as a British Mauritian, I furthered my ability to enrich students’ understanding of a French language text. However, it also enriched my experiences as a teacher, in the sense that I felt that that space, though designed for students’ understanding, allowed me to be seen as an individual and temporarily make the walking of these spaces where liminality exists a little easier. One of the South Asian students, who was one of the less vocal but still strong members of the seminar, smiled as we watched it, and I could feel that there was a shared understanding. Their responses for the whole seminar were more frequent, and they shared deeper insight on the text, sometimes even relating it to their own experiences growing up. In that sense, it was nice for me – as an ethnic minority male in a discipline that is largely Caucasian female – to be able to let a student feel seen in some part, but also be seen myself and assume centre-field as opposed to a liminal position.

This was made even more apparent to me when I chose to present these observations at the Warwick Postgraduate Teacher Conference (WPTC) earlier this year.

I had not really reflected on this concept of liminality before, taking it as a matter of fact, but thought it would be nice to share it with a group of my peers in order to show that there is a positive aspect to negotiating spaces where liminality exists. I was truly humbled by the response from others, some of whom attested to having similar experiences. I even received an email attesting to how it can be difficult to navigate the spaces of both GTA identity and cultural identity. In this sense, it is clear to me that we need to continue having these conversations. This in itself raises questions – where can we have spaces for this, and when? There are opportunities, such as the APP PGR programme or conferences such as the WPTC – but do we really enjoy these spaces within our own departments? Due to the fact that each individual has their own liminalities, it would be challenging – though not impossible – to organise talking spaces or forums within departments. There are some efforts to address questions of PGR liminality university-wide, such as the PGR Neurodiversity Network, which offers a community for PGRs who identity as neurodivergent. However, other than the aforementioned opportunities, I am not aware of a space that exists for GTAs specifically. In terms of strategy, it might therefore be worth raising this with departmental SSLC representatives, or for individuals to dialogue with other GTAs within their departments to get a sense of the liminalities that exist and how we might create networks to address this. In this sense, I hope this paper acts as a talking point that encourages GTAs to start having these conversations with each other, and try to foster spaces within our own departments that allow us to celebrate GTA liminality or address problematic aspects it may raise.

To conclude, liminality is a difficult aspect of GTA identity and positionality that requires constant work. However, as I have tried to explain here, because liminality naturally includes other spaces that are subjective to each individual, it is possible to use our other liminal identities – in my case, my British-Mauritian heritage – to help us navigate GTA identity and positionality. Furthermore, as shown by my experiences at the WPTC, these kinds of conversations are not only vital, but are also welcomed by other GTAs. Talking about how we navigate liminality and how we use it as a positive influence in our teaching is clearly needed within the GTA community. We need to keep a dialogue going on this subject, and look towards creating spaces that can be used to create a sense of community and to explore questions of liminality. Consequently, this paper has sought to contribute a more positive outlook on GTA identity, and how we should celebrate its diversity and engage in a dialogue that highlights this and contributes towards creating a community of support.

Ethical Claim

I declare that to my knowledge, the work here is all my own, except where I have stated otherwise, and that it is representative of my own reflections on my own experiences. Any references to other individuals are based on my own interpretations of comments made to/about me, and are not representative of the views of any other individuals mentioned in this paper.

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Opening Bandura's Box of Experiences: Exploring GTAs' Sense of Plausibility about ESL Teaching

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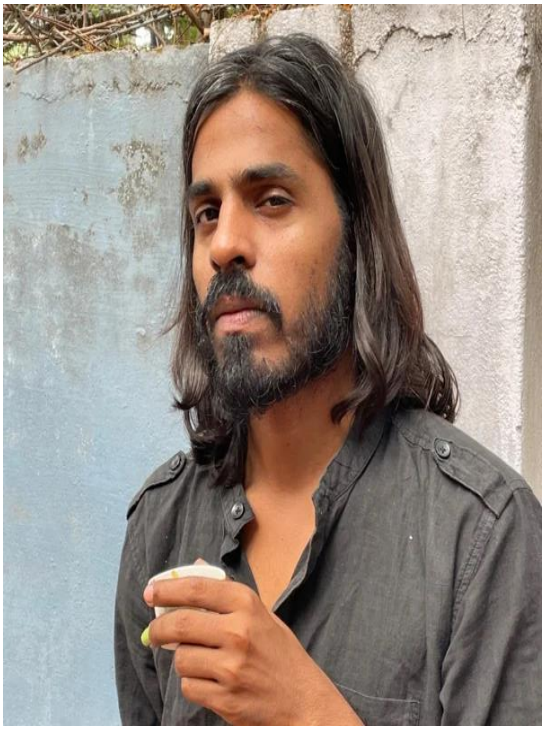

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Abstract

Most available resources on Graduate Teaching Assistants' (GTAs) classroom pedagogy often emphasise prescriptive accounts of their roles and responsibilities rather than underlying mechanisms which shape their teaching practices. Recent studies in GTA research have begun drawing on teacher education frameworks to better understand GTAs' teaching practices. Extending this line of inquiry, this paper aims to trace GTA's intuitive yet perceptual understanding of ESL teaching through N.S. Prabhu's construct of Teacher's Sense of Plausibility (TSOP).

It begins by discussing the recent literature, theoretical frameworks, and models that have been invested in exploring the nature and forces contributing to GTAs' pedagogical identity formation. Furthermore, the paper revisits the construct of the teacher's sense of plausibility, elaborates on its evolution, and presents a four-staged model of the same. The paper then reports a qualitative case study conducted with seven GTAs from the Indian context, which aimed at: a) getting insights into their TSOPs regarding teaching English as a second language, and b) finding out whether they think reflecting on their TSOPs is an effective reflective practice or not. The use of two writing prompts (a life history task and a TSOP discussion sheet for semi-structured interviews) to elicit data, upon content and thematic analysis (via inductive and deductive coding), revealed: a) GTAs TSOPs varied from traditional to creative forms of teaching, demonstrating potential links in their early career and educational experiences; b) While most GTAs valued TSOP as a reflective practice, they emphasised the need for contextually sensitive teacher training and institutional support to sustain its impact. The paper calls for a shift from prescriptive 'how to teach' approaches to reflective inquiries into 'what and how we teach', offering suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Teacher's sense of plausibility, Graduate teaching assistants, Teacher cognition, GTA Identity, ESL Pedagogy

1. Introduction

The trajectory of any studentship and teaching roles often triggers reflections on one's professional self, such as: Who am I made up of? Am I resembling the teacher I praised or resisted? Such reflections have been crucial in shaping and underpinning the existing research surrounding Graduate Teaching Assistants' (GTAs) professional identities. Current research has been in the direction of uncovering GTAs' struggles, frustrations over lack of clarity about their roles, facilitation, the training they get, and the fact that for some, teaching could be unsettling to begin with (Oluyide et al., 2025). They unarguably play an important role in any institution; however, their experiences remain underexplored. It is especially their professional identities in the classrooms that are still poorly understood or looked away from. On the other hand, contemporary teacher education research enforces the focus on the complexities, socially mediated nature of identity formation, shaped by life histories, personal beliefs, and perceptions alongside critical incidents or moments of teaching. This paper intends to utilise one such construct from teacher education, i.e., teacher's sense of plausibility, to map GTAs' intuitive yet perceptual understanding of ESL teaching.

2. Literature Review

2.1 GTAs' Pedagogical Identity Formation

The recent shifts in ongoing GTA research have been reflective of viewing GTAs as evolving educators with distinct professional identities, as compared to only recognising them for their instructional support. The ongoing research has shifted from macro-level examinations concerning their institutional roles to micro-level discoveries of their pedagogic beliefs, reflections, identity formation, and negotiations within and outside academia.

Zotos et al. (2020) report on how GTAs often view themselves as lab managers or tutors in their context as compared to simply being full-fledged instructors and realising their pedagogy is informed by prior experiences, institutional culture & factors, and teaching knowledge. Contrastingly, in contexts where teaching is considered secondary for GTAs, Goodwin et al. (2021) demonstrate how GTAs adopt distinct roles as student supporters, content deliverers, and research mentors, leading to inconsistent yet valuable Course-Based Undergraduate Research Experiences (CURE). Further, we also see reports around how GTAs negotiate their professional identities amidst institutional expectations by navigating personal teaching beliefs with pedagogical mandates (Robertson & Yazan, 2022). The GTAs are also viewed via teacher education lenses, utilising social learning theories such as Bale and Anderson (2022), demonstrating how they struggle to claim professional identity, perceived value of teaching, and interpersonal recognition. Similarly, in a physical education context, too, GTAs are reported to be feeling underprepared, struggling to balance their coursework and management of classrooms, highlighting the importance and need of structured training and mentoring, clearer role definitions, and efforts for their professional development (Brock et al. 2023).

Recently, the relational and affective dimensions of GTA development have also been captured by the researchers, indicating how GTAs derive value and meaning from their roles. This happens not only via skills acquisition, knowledge upgrade, or career advancements but also through community belonging, personal connections, and personal growth (Westwood & Srivastava, 2025). It also brings clarity to how the affective experiences of GTAs interact with institutional or contextual factors to influence their identity formation and sense of self as teachers through complex processes concerning their personal beliefs, professional demands, institutional cultures, and decision-making.

All these research trends point to GTAs as complex yet reflective practitioners whose identities are co-constructed through negotiated experiences and cognitions. This, in turn, calls for integrative models that successfully bridge GTAs' cognitions, experiences, and institutional positioning.

2.2 Existing Theoretical Models of GTA Development

Existing key research works are representative of how different theoretical frameworks and models across disciplines could serve as a lens which to make GTAs' experiences as focal points of investigations. Kajfez & Matusovich (2020) aimed at establishing first-year GTAs' profiles based on identity and motivation. They combined Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Possible Selves Theory (PST), revealing three identity profiles of being strong, transitional, and weak. They also found that motivation constructs matter to GTAs' individuality but do not significantly contribute to their profiles. Mathers et al. (2021) suggest a three-stage teacher identity framework for GTA training, involving phases of Hatching (enabling GTAs to reflect on their teacher identity rather than student identity), Fledging (consolidating teaching experiences and opportunities for pedagogical discussions), and On the Wing (providing support to GTAs for becoming proactive).

Similarly, Gish-Liberman et al. (2023) explored IGTAs' (International Graduate Teaching Assistants) identity formation grounded in a framework comprising Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality with Wenger's (1998) Virtual Community of Practice (VCoP). Zhu & Alsup (2024) studied GTAs' identity formation and development by adopting a theoretical framework from Beijaard et al. (2004) in a US-based university. Using a narrative inquiry in their interview-based study, they emphasised knowing about GTAs identity formation through four markers: a) professional identity being an ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences, b) professional identity implies both the person and the context, c) it consists of subidentities that more or less harmonize, and, d) agency is crucial for professional identity. Their findings suggest GTAs are struggling to make sense of course content due to a lack of systematic training and constructing their teacher identities through challenging processes of overcoming self-doubt, nervousness, and frustration to be comfortable, confident, and creative.

These theoretical investments in exploring GTAs' identity formation and development indicate two approaches that could be taken to explore the same. One could be to build frameworks comprising existing theories, and the other could be to base existing theories on coming up with holistic, concrete, stage-based models.

2.3 Emergence & Evolution of Teacher's Sense of Plausibility

The discipline of ELT, historically, has grown globally with the inception of different movements and borrowing(s) from various other disciplines for its evolution. The 'communicational teaching movement (also called 'The Bangalore Project') led by the late N.S. Prabhu, from the 1980s, remains a significant one. Prabhu and his team pioneered three major developments: communicational teaching approach, task-based learning, and the teacher's sense of plausibility (TSOP) (Maley, 2018). Prabhu (1987) defines TSOP in Second Language Pedagogy as "a varied perceptual yet intuitive understanding of how classroom teaching leads to desirable outcomes". Teachers develop this understanding over time, while interacting with different psychological factors and stipulated procedures." The first two developments saw an intense interest and work from the researchers, whereas it was the TSOP research which still remains scarce. It could be due to several reasons of it simply being an abstract psychological phenomenon and the unavailability to relevant psychological research to investigate the same. It may also be as Simon Borg in The TEFLology Podcast (2018) suggests, language teacher cognition initially being informed with cognitivists, viewing cognition from purely sciences perspectives in a limiting manner. The overarching emphasis on methodology and teaching in the discipline of ELT itself could also be a driving force behind less work around it. Another reason could be that of reliability and validity of potential operationalising it, a direction in which much of the recent work on it has started to take place. Table 1 below captures a brief evolution of this concept since its conception till today.

Table 1: Various definitions throughout the evolution of TSOP post 1987

Name of the Expert	*Definitions given*
Kumaravadivelu (2001)	Teacher generated theory of practice
Maley (2016)	Personal theory of teaching through continuous reflection
Maley (2018)	Best way which helps students by reflecting on their beliefs and experience.
Prabhu (2019a) & (2019b)	A conceptualisation of how language teaching takes place, hindered, or furthered by any form of teaching.
Mukundan et. al. (2020) & Mukundan (2024)	Knowledge that evolves out of personal experience.
Yang (2025)	It refers to teachers' perceptions about what defines effective teaching.

Mukundan et al. (2025)	It is a state of knowledge of teachers about teaching that develops out of experience.

Theoretically, the only framework which exists around TSOP is that of Maley (2019) being the revival figure suggesting a five-descriptor TSOP framework for experienced and accomplished educators in Mukundan et al. (2020), which encompasses indicators such as: 1) background or history of personal experiences does affect, 2) use of non-conventional methods remains common, 3) key personalities and their philosophies influence too, etc.

Other than these theoretical perspectives, the limited literature on praxis-oriented explorations of TSOP suggests its viewing to be more in terms of 'teacher perceptions', elicited via different teacher research tools. For example, Farjami et al. (2014) and Saeedi & Pahlavani (2018) utilised teacher & student perception questionnaires as well as attitudes and beliefs on classroom control (ABCC) inventory to explore the impact of TSOP on classroom practices and management. Further, Mukundan (2020) and Mukundan & Nimehchisalem (2025) through reflective writing tasks and teacher timeline enabled insights into expert teachers' TSOP (thinking of it as a state of knowledge) and thus, a five-descriptor framework. Kumar (2022), too, employed teacher perception questionnaires with a working model to reflect on what creates these perceptions and recently Yang (2025) investigated the development of TSOP among eight beginning EFL teachers by reflecting on their teaching practices through interviews, recorded teaching demonstrations, and written self-reflections.

Several observations can be drawn from its existing reportings from the TSOP research:

1. *Inconsistent definitions*: several definitions focus on differing elements being the driving force for their operationalisation, such as teacher generation, the best way of teaching, the conceptualisation of teaching, personal theory of teaching, and the knowledge evolved from experience. There has not been much consistent viewing of this construct, which could generate confusions and may require additional frameworks to confirm their reliability.

2. *Varying reports*: The minimal yet detailed descriptions of TSOP do exist. The issue that remains is that some work has emphasised more on defining it, some have focused on talking about its nature, while some have talked about its happening and impact as a phenomenon. It is to say that TSOP research suffers from crucial but scattered information around it, and not all works have necessarily been built on/ reported on the previous one.

3. *Operationalisation*: The varied definitions make it difficult to operationalise TSOP because even if one wants to call it 'knowledge evolved from experience', how do we measure this knowledge? Is it implicit or explicit, or both? Similarly, if we try capturing it as an 'intuitive yet perceptual understanding', one may need theoretical inputs from perception measures as well as intuition research.

However, all the experts should be appreciated for taking up such a task. The existing research still lacks a full-fledged model of TSOP, which can inform us: what it is (basing earlier research to substantiate), how it works, and how it could be utilised for teachers, in a cumulative fashion. Hence, it becomes necessary to re-examine, combine, and stick the pieces of existing research to come up with a concrete model of TSOP.

3. The Model of TSOP

A systematic inductive thematic analysis was considered to come up with a holistic model of this concept. It was done in three steps. Step one included arranging all kinds of information available on TSOP from twelve existing theoretical and practical reports (from Prabhu, 1987, to Mukundan, 2024). Step two included a data reduction phase of organising this information based on their focus, i.e., definition, operation, features, implications, and the research tools used to investigate it. Further, step three with a corroborative cycle of coding and highlighting the key terms used while discussing TSOP in these categories. Finally, the following themes emerged, with the hint of 'intuition' and 'understanding' being referred to the most, shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Analysis of existing TSOP research for informed operationalisation

	Total no. of studies (n): 12				
	Themes				
Intuition	*Perception*	*Understanding*	*Personal theory*	*Best judgement*	*Value and belief structure*
11+1+ 1+ 1+ 1+1	4+ 1	4+ 1+ 1+1	2+1	1	1
mentions = 16	mentions = 5	mentions = 7	mentions = 3	mentions =1	mentions =1

The analysis worked as a confirmation for it to be operationalised as an 'intuitive yet perceptual understanding of- what is effective teaching, what works and what does not, and how it happens in a classroom'. This was also in tune with Prabhu's (1987) first conception and could be tapped into with existing tools (writing task, teacher timeline, perception questionnaire), but with the addition of some means for including the intuitive aspect of this understanding. Since the existing tools only emphasise rationalistic yet conscious reasoning of the teachers. It could be done with the mood assessment and inclusion of any decision-making intuition model. In other words, another way of

operationalising TSOP could be through a rationalistic tool combined with the one that gives some insights into intuitive thoughts as well. Further, the information categorised for this analysis also served as the formation of the TSOP model (with a focus on GTAs as teachers) reported below through Figure 1:

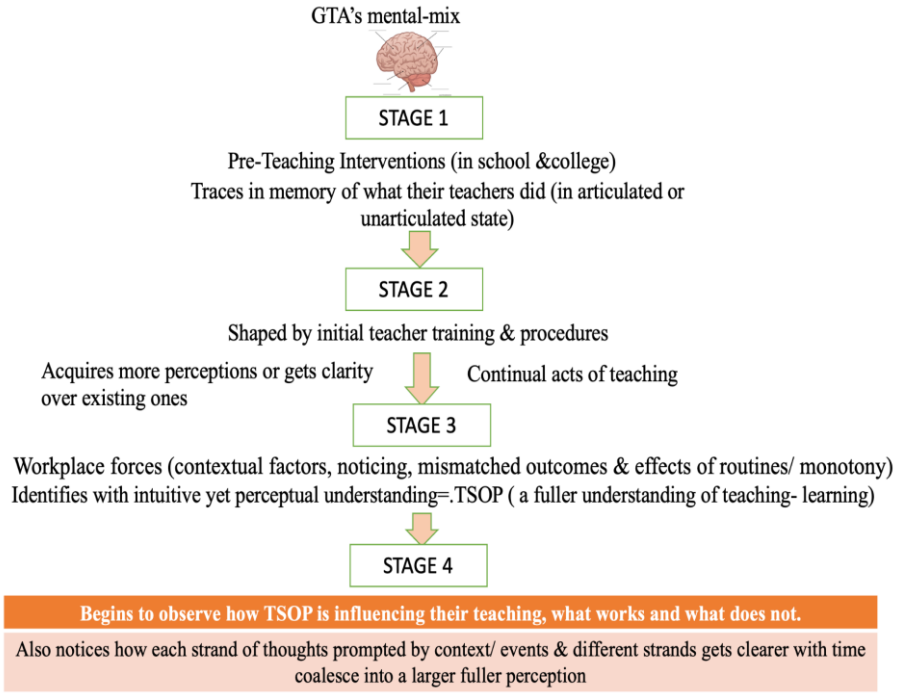

Figure 1: A four- stage model of GTA's Sense of Plausibility (based on a cumulative analysis of existing research on teacher's sense of plausibility)

The following stages of TSOP development can be understood in the following manner:

Stage one: *Forming Impressions*: The first stage intends to tap into information about the impressions that GTAs had regarding their school and early higher education. This is also the time when mental impressions about teaching are formed. For example, many of the GTAs may remember their own teachers and may or may not try to mimic them in different ways while they teach.

Stage two: Teaching Exposures: The second stage refers to the GTAs getting their first exposures to formal teacher training. The formalised instruction equips GTAs with not only the ins and outs of the teaching-learning process(es) but also enables them to fit the initially formed mental impressions into more meaning or form newer ones into the theory vs praxis of teacher education.

Stage 3: *Job's Taking Over*: The final stage encompasses what happens when GTAs start working. This is where the interplay of different psychological factors enables/disables GTAs to navigate forces within and outside of them. For example, a GTA may deal with burnout or have pressures of an upcoming deadline but has to conduct an engaging workshop while being in the shoes of a professional. Such instances eventually ask the GTAs to form an understanding of what kind of researcher and teacher they like and reflect on what their teaching looks like (i,e. TSOP). This is also the stage where GTAs notice, face unexpected outcomes, and experience the effects of routines on themselves.

Stage 4: *Cascading Knowledges*: A fourth stage where GTAs cascade the formed understanding (TSOP), upon having knowledge of themselves, contextual factors, students, teaching job, etc. They become aware of what works and what does not in their teaching. The overall TSOP formed gets channelised into their classrooms and beyond. The practices of continuous reflection will keep this understanding alive, or it may get fossilised or frozen due to the monotony (Prabhu, 1987).

It should also be noted that sub-processes under these stages, like continuous reflection, intuitive processes, observations, comparisons between old and new learnings, etc., do not happen in a linear fashion and are always overlapping each other. Thus, this arrangement of phases enables a concrete yet beginner-friendly mapping of the overall understanding (TSOP), common with most psychological constructs. For example, tests and tasks around measuring intuition, being one of the most debated psychological concepts, could also be debated. It is the informedness of these tests and tasks in relation to previous conceptualisations of intuition that ensures their reliability and validity. Similarly, this model reflects a synthesis of the existing minimal literature and suggests a potential tapping into TSOP through an approach of implementing intuition-based exercises as well as rationalistic measures such as narrative and life history approaches to research.

This model differs as well as complements the existing teacher cognition conceptualisations and models in several ways. On micro- levels, it compliments Shavelson's (1973) and Clark & Peterson's (1986) models of basic teaching skill and thought process. It also reflects how teaching acts are results of teacher decisions (both conscious and unconscious), highlighting teachers' interactive thoughts and decisions. Further, it also gives implicit insights into Woods' (1996) beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge (BAK) of teachers, along with recognising Borg's (2015) emphasis on exploring unobservable dimensions of teaching & learning and their relation to becoming, being & developing as a teacher. On the other hand, the present TSOP model follows an approach of these (and more) 'coming together of 'micro-cognitions'. It (re)conceptualises teacher cognition in relation to teacher identity formation, a potentially newer interest in teacher cognition (Borg in The TEFLology Podcast, 2018), suggesting holistic stages and a concrete picture of how teacher cognitions inform their professional & personal identity formations. Other than this, it also highlights the teachers' 'intuitive' moments, often absent in existing teaching teacher cognition models.

4. Bandura's Social Learning, TSOP, and GTAs

Additionally, the operation of these stages in the proposed model is also grounded in Albert Bandura's theory of social learning. As he explains, "most human behaviour is learned through observing through modeling; from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviours are performed, and on later occasions, this coded information serves as a guide for action" (Bandura, 1977). Stage 1 of early mental imprints in school and college experiences enables the teachers (GTAs in our case) to learn from direct experiences and practice the differential reinforcement via mediating processes between the stimulus from their teachers and the desired responses. It enables them to pick informative functions of reinforcement and enables them to reflect on their in-coming hypotheses about teaching and learning. Further, stage 2 enables them to model their behaviour by testing these hypotheses by attention to what works, retention of the same, reproducing the same in their teaching practicum, and feeling intrinsically or extrinsically

motivated about the learned behaviours. Stage 3 of job's taking over becomes complex in the case of GTAs due to their multitasking all the time and vicariously reinforcing punishment and rewards to themselves in various forms and ways. These regulatory processes get heightened in stage 3 and 4, where GTAs experience merging, overpowering, and formations of their personal and professional selves (self-concepts). They form their own intuitive understandings about their own teaching, stimulus, and contextual forces around them and what is required and what is not of, by, and from them.

Therefore, integrating the proposed TSOP model with Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1971) makes a distinctive yet analytical framework for understanding GTAs' cognitions and professional identity formation, along with the institutional mechanisms that surround it. It explicitly links the stages of 'becoming of a teacher' for GTAs with potential socio-cognitive processes which shape their professional (and personal) identity. This alignment is especially relevant to GTAs, whose learning is often dependent on guidance and modeling of senior teachers, peers, literary resources around them, and institutional norms, as compared to in-service teachers who typically draw on their expertise and classroom repertoires. The typical teachers mostly rely on their domain-specific knowledge, and do not get enough opportunities for continuous reflections as the GTAs get in their complex role amidst the pressures of submissions, teaching, publications, and academic socialisations. Teachers' intuitive understanding, too, is always at risk of getting fossilised in routines, whereas GTAs are more prone to face newer challenges even in their routine work. The agencies that GTAs have in their classrooms are also less as compared to teachers being mostly the sole decision-makers in their classrooms. In other words, teachers after their jobs take over, usually find themselves into a space of being self-responsible for their development; GTAs are largely governed not always by their own decisions, but prescribed duties, varieties of work assigned, and other training and institutional forces contributing to their development.

5. The Study

This qualitative study with a phenomenological research design aimed at exploring the usefulness of the construct of the teacher's sense of plausibility to know more about GTAs' identities, their evolution, and how they may or may not get poured into their teaching practices. The context was an Indian public university, involving GTAs who are managing their coursework and are also working as teaching assistants, teaching in courses, under a University Grants Commission mandate. The mandate asks doctoral candidates to get experience as teaching assistants for a minimum of two semesters of teaching. It was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What TSOP do GTAs possess about ESL teaching? How does it get operationalised in their classrooms?

RQ2: Do GTAs think that reflecting on TSOP is an effective reflective practice or not?

5.1 The Participants

Seven GTAs working as teaching assistants were included in the study. They were invited to the implementation of tools after obtaining their consent via a consent form. Three male and four female participants were involved, and they possessed teaching experience ranging from a few months to up to two years. As shown in Table 3 below, all of them belonged to the same public Indian university and were working in two different campuses, one in the Northeast and the other in Southern India. Additionally, their present status was them being from the first to third semester in their Doctoral programmes in English literature and English language education disciplines, respectively.

Table 3: Participant Profile

Name of the TA/ Gender	Ph.D. Semester	Employment in Courses
TA1/ Female	2nd semester	Department of English literature
TA2/ Female	2nd semester	Department of English literature
TA3/ Male	3rd semester	School of English language education
TA4/ Female	2nd semester	School of English language education
TA5/ Female	1st semester	School of language sciences
TA6/ Male	3rd semester	School of English language education
TA7/ Female	1st semester	School of English language education

These GTAs are involved in teaching courses in English literature and English language education disciplines, assisting their supervisors and other professors in the same. They are also involved in invigilations, creations of test-papers, organisation of talks and conferences along with giving presentations on a semester-end basis about their doctoral projects' progression.

5.2 Data Collection, Research Tools, and Data Analysis

The creation of data tools was done after surveying and evaluating the existing tools in the available TSOP research. Different approaches of narrative enquiry, teacher timeline, perception questionnaires, and writing tasks were found to be dominant. It was soon realised that these methods were serving only rationalistic explorations, when Prabhu, who initially conceptualised it, has repeatedly been defining it as being 'intuitive yet perceptive'. Hence, methods in intuition research (stimulated recall, discursive measures, and intuition models) were also studied to arrive at an informed development of the tools.

1. Writing Prompt: A writing prompt inspired by Maley's (2019) and Mukundan's (2024) use of a teacher timeline was created. Titled as 'My Life History of Teaching', it emphasised knowledge of key events, personalities, and literatures which have shaped the GTAs and their understandings of ESL teaching. The prompt also enables the revelation of the mental imprints they have had in the initial years of school and college experiences. It also tapped into the adjustments, if any, they had to make while transitioning post their teacher training exposures to the actual classrooms; in addition to contextual factors which were important as well as the suggestions they have to offer to other GTAs about ESL teaching.

2. TSOP Discussion Sheet & Semi-Structured Interviews: Another tool was required to tap into 'intuitive moments' or 'intuitive knowings of the GTAs. After the consultation with the existing literature on discovering and measuring intuition in educational settings, a TSOP discussion sheet was created. It had two exercises in the form of a mood assessment task and a task on the RPD (Recognition Primed Decision Making) intuition model. Atkinson & Claxton (2000) argues that tapping into the status of moods can make insights into 'affective ecologies' and thus, intuition visible. The receptive, relaxed, and low-arousal emotional states tend to enhance intuitive awareness, while the highly anxious, pressurised states or irritability tends to demonstrate the blocking or distortion of intuition. The mood assessment task encapsulated a 'Feel Wheel' (Oxford CBT, 2023) to name feelings and moods that GTAs might feel concerning their teaching. Kelin's (2003) Recognition Primed Model, as described below, also gives concrete steps for a researcher, GTA, and any practitioner to tap in their underlying cognitions behind intuition without any laboratory settings or neural tests (Kumar, 2024). It enables capturing of the day-to-day random decisions which GTAs make regarding their teaching practices, which they may consciously always remember, realise, or interpret for their becoming as teachers.

The participant consent form was sent to the GTAs along with a brief invitation letter, and the implementation of the tools took place in a hybrid manner, i.e., online to some GTAs and to some in an offline mode. In the first phase, both the writing task for reflection as well as the TSOP discussion sheet (attached in the appendix 1) were shared with the GTAs over email. They were requested to do the reflective writing prompt in their free schedule and calmer settings to elicit deeper, natural responses with a focused mind. Further, they were also asked to tick on the mood assessment chart, i.e., the feel

wheel, the feelings they felt before, during, and post their teaching sessions. The GTAs were asked to do so with at least three to five of their lessons/ classes, as per their preference and convenience. Additionally, they were also asked to list at least one quick decision they made while facilitating these classroom teaching sessions, stored for further discussion. GTAs were asked to share their responses via the email itself, and a few exceptions were made for those who could not write or find the time to do so. They were allowed to send in their responses via audio notes on WhatsApp. The author was available to them throughout the duration of almost two months over messages and calls for any clarifications, doubts, and support they needed.

The second phase of collecting data included the semi-structured interviews taken with the help of discursive conversations and stimulated recalls. The interviews emphasised on conversing about their feelings and the quick decisions and the potential roots and reasons behind them.

The qualitative data gathered from the seven GTAs were further analysed within an interpretivist-constructivist framework. Initially, it was collated, organised, and thematically analysed through an iterative and inductive cycle (an early analysis process) followed by an initial and focused coding. The coding was done manually to arrive at emerging subordinate themes. Further, another round of deductive coding was performed based on key characteristics of the four stages, and the emergent themes were correlated to arrive at superordinate themes. A senior GTA was later contacted for further triangulation of the data to ensure the validity and reliability of the generated themes with the assistance of the NVivo software. The GTA enabled the development of inductive codes through iterative reading of the responses. These codes were organised into NVivo nodes, which were later consolidated into higher-order themes.

6. Findings

RQ1: What TSOP do GTAs possess about ESL teaching? How does it get operationalised in their classrooms?

a) The overall picture…

The findings indicate GTAs' sense of plausibilities concerning ESL teaching to be developing on a continuum of- inheriting various teaching models to becoming reflective practitioners and implementing contextually grounded pedagogies. Overall, they provide a thick description of the workings of this continuum via the TSOP model reported in this study. An overview of GTAs' TSOPs formation is reported in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Overview of GTAs' TSOPs

Stage one: Forming Impressions
● Lack of exposure to English ● Teachers used lecture method in school ● Tasks of school/UG/PG teachers ● Learning summaries and grammar helps

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">
● Ideation of teaching personalities
● Menus, newspapers, sports commentary, cartoons, and comic books help in learning English
● Study materials are important to pass exams
● I was more interested in- sports, fashion, and theatre
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<tr><td colspan="3">Stage two: Teaching Exposures</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">
● Good teaching gamifies and explains complex topics in a simple manner.
● Focus on using variety of tools
● Using worksheets and theoretical readings helps teach better
● Ensure learners gets meaning of readings
● Focus on critical thinking
● Give scope for collaborations
● Utilise learner surroundings
</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Stage 3: Job’s Taking Over</td></tr>
<tr><td>Noticing</td><td>Unexpected Outcomes</td><td>Effects of Workplace/ Routines</td></tr>
<tr><td>
● Varying cognition & learner motivation levels
● Dissonance between curricular changes
● Less time to plan
● More ‘want’ of creativity
</td><td>
● It's hard to give individual attention
● Not much idea about cultures of the learners.
● Not knowing learners’ previous educational experiences
</td><td>
● Loads of assignments & deadlines
● Navigating AI amidst courses
● Thesis and presentations
● Peer support presence
</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">
Effective ESL Teaching comprises/ My TSOP of ESL Teaching is:
● Being affordable and innovative for learners
● Play between known and unknown
● Focusing on meaning of concepts than numbers
● Motivates and enables learners to make their best efforts towards learning
● Enables learners to reimagine curricular components and contexts
● Should build strong backbone of thoughts and critical thinking/ independent researchers
● Use of multimodalities to facilitate learning
● Punctual implementation and assessment of classwork
</td></tr>
</table>

Stage 4: Cascading Knowledges
● I use my notes and explain things on blackboard or smart board to explain literary texts ● I use a lot of movie trailers and reviews in my classes. ● I ask them to find similar literature around the text I am teaching. ● I allow learners to find topics and give presentations around different topics in ways they want ● I just facilitate the worksheets which teacher provides ● I call other GTAs as examiners sometimes.

The results from the inductive coding revealed several themes related to the larger themes of: a) inherited pedagogical models, b) contextual pressures and emotional well-being, and c) evolving professional agency. Early memories reflected strong mental imprints transmitted to them, such as teachers “just reading texts and summarising them”, “using newspapers and restaurant menus”, and even “including folklores and poster and poem-based tasks” as suggested by the GTA responses. These teaching actions were also key in forming their intuitive preferences concerning ESL teaching. As GTAs started teaching, their reflections illustrated an intuitive sense-making of this new role under classroom situations with their own real challenges. Their responses, such as “make more sense of what I was doing”, “I was keen on helping students to become curious and self-driven” represent learner-centered inclinations and modelling of behaviours which were reinforced well. Additionally, the different constraints, such as “shortage of time”, “workload stress”, “tracking your own growth”, “fatigue from research and teaching”, and "cognitive dissonance with diverse learner needs”, etc., inform us about not only the routine or contextual effects on them but also about their emotional well-being. These experiences also hint at the dire needs of greater professional agency, community building, researcher reflexivity, and mentoring.

b) Bandura’s coming together with TSOP…

The themes from the deductive coding dominantly reflected the collision of traditional vs experiential models of teaching. It also enabled a deeper understanding of the workings of Bandura’s theory and four-staged TSOP model. At the beginning stage 1, their conceptions of teaching largely get formed through observations of their own teachers and surroundings. Some GTAs' educational histories are largely shaped by these school and college experiences, which emphasised grammar teaching, lecture-based methods, and were largely exam-driven. ESL teaching in their contexts has largely been viewed as a one-way process, and GTAs as learners were corresponding with Lortie’s (1975) apprenticeship of observation, observing pedagogical details in their lessons. This is also in sync with Bandura’s insights about the differential reinforcement mediated by different kinds of stimulus around them in the form of their own teachers, resources available, and the pedagogical strategies surrounding them. On the other hand, the other GTAs also report recollection of their teachers using authentic materials and the presence of multimodal learning. Across cases, their foundational beliefs reflected both traditional and experiential influences being shaped by not only exposure to above mentioned stimulus but also through early vicarious reinforcement; they associated positive outcomes with certain teaching behaviours (for example, classroom

interaction being engaging or better marks in exams), which also legitimised those practices in their mental make-up.

Further, while they were acting as keen and not-so-keen observers, they received teacher training interventions at different phases individually. Inputs from the stage 2 point at them encountering theoretical frameworks challenging their inherited assumptions. Several facets of teaching in the form of lesson planning, creation and adaptation of teaching materials, child psychology, and teacher behaviour were introduced to them at this stage. It also marks the beginning of a shift in their naive epistemologies to intentional pedagogic reasoning, mediated by different cognitions of sense-making. The continuous trial and error methods, both in learning the mechanics of teaching as well as testing their earlier developed hypothesis, mark this to be a transition stage from epistemological certainty to pedagogical inquiry. The formation of TSOP begins here with teaching as a negotiation with possible tensions of classroom realities (pedagogical reflexivity), gaining theoretical grounding, which becomes visible in the later stages.

The insights for the stage 3 focused on their workplace reflux, too, and denote several observations, unexpected outcomes, as well as the effects of routines on the GTAs. While some GTAs noticed dissonance between curriculum prescriptions and varying learner backgrounds and motivation levels, others craved for more freedom and creativity in their classrooms. Similarly, while a lack of awareness about learners' cultures and previous backgrounds served as unexpected outcomes for some, others struggled with giving individual attention and including digital literacy for them. Amidst managing their own assignments, thesis presentations, and seeking peer support, this stage proves to be more transformative than disillusioning in hindsight. Such processes also indicate the functioning of Bandura’s reciprocal determinism, since they are not only getting triggered by their prior learning and experiences but are also informed by constant interaction between their personal beliefs, institutional norms, learner diversity, and classroom constraints. It has been essential for them to foster critical reflection, adaptive reasoning, and effective decision-making to produce an evolving understanding of their teaching. Evidently, the GTAs whose initial exposures were limited to traditional methods formed sense of plausibilities which emphasised meaning and goal-oriented teaching. For them, the ESL teaching should also be motivating and affordable. On the other hand, GTAs from creative yet innovative learning environments reflected critical thinking, imagination, inquiry, and motivation to be key features of their sense of plausibility about ESL teaching. They all view teaching as a process of constant negotiation with institutional and contextual constraints rather than merely being about reproducing knowledge.

Insights from stage 4, cascading knowledge represent action-based learnings of the GTAs and their ways to channelise these TSOPs both knowingly and unknowingly. The GTAs with the traditional pedagogic inclinations try to make learning simple for their students, mostly relying on traditional yet sustainable methods such as making the most of the blackboard or smartboard, whenever necessary. They also just keep their professional boundaries with students and work in the roles of facilitators by helping students with classroom tasks. GTAs with creative learning environments report working in the capacities of a guide, teacher, and mentor. They not only use innovative methods of using YouTube reels, movie trailers, and reviews, but also give freedom to students to explore concepts via presentations and classroom debates. Such behaviours are reflective of retention and reproduction of the earlier models they learnt, consistent with Bandura’s formulation of modelling processes. The insights at this stage mirror the

culmination of several elements of social learning theory in various forms of observational learning being refined through reflective cycles, contextual feedback, enabling agencies, and development of holistically performative, adaptive, and socio-culturally mediated pedagogic practices. These insights also mark the growth and development of the GTAs into becoming designers of their teaching-learning environments (Kalantiz & Cope, 2012). Unlike other stages, where they perceived theory and praxis as oppositional, they now integrate them dialectically, resulting in situated and performative TSOPs.

c) What did the numbers tell?

Further, to ensure the reliability the findings were triangulated with a senior GTA by adopting the NVivo analysis. Table 5 below presents the comparative matrix output of the codes emerged through inductive and deductive coding

Table 5: Distribution of code references as per GTA responses

TSOP Stage/ Inductive Theme	Professional Identity	Pedagogical Reasoning	Affective and Emotional Labour	Classroom Management	Student-Centric Orientation	Learning by Doing	Institutional Support	Total References
Stage 1	11	17	8	6	19	4	5	70
Stage 2	9	14	12	9	21	6	4	75
Stage 3	6	20	15	18	12	10	8	89
Stage 4	7	19	5	21	10	17	3	82
Total References	33	70	40	54	62	37	20	316

(Rows= TSOP Model Stages; Columns= Inductive Nodes, Numerical Values= Coding References)

The NVivo matrix output showed a clear developmental pattern across TSOP model stages. The early stages (Stage 1 & 2) demonstrated the highest concentration of references in the themes of student-centric orientation (including 19 and 21 references) and pedagogical reasoning (17 and 14 references). These values indicated that the GTAs initially anchored their reflections in how they were taught and what effective ESL teaching should look like. The theme of affective elements and emotional labour does appear but remains in the backgrounds during these formative phases. In contrast, stage 3 reflects the highest among the overall references (89 references), with a relevant increase in the affective and emotional labour theme (15 references) and classroom management (18 references). This suggests the pressures, constraints, and the emergent dilemmas which GTAs confront during actual classroom teaching. By the last stage, stage 4, references get stabilised as GTAs consolidate their practices through the themes of learning by doing (17 references) and a more aware pedagogical reasoning (19 references), suggesting the paradigm shift of experiential knowledge resulting into intentional yet context sensitive pedagogy. The total references column condoms that pedagogical reasoning (70) and student centric orientation (62) are most emergent across the dataset, reinforcing their central positionality in GTAs professional identity development.

RQ2: Do GTAs think that reflecting on TSOP is an effective reflective practice or not?

The insights, from the GTAs, reported in the Table 6 below, about whether reflecting on TSOP is an effective practice or not revealed many important considerations, workings of ideas and experiences, and shifts they demand. One of the emerging themes from the data is acknowledging the importance of TSOP in fostering metacognitive awareness. GTA3 observed while reflecting on it, it enabled her to become aware of the interpersonal influences she has had on her teaching. Likewise, GTA7 emphasised the necessity of reflective tasks in becoming more aware of existing habits and the need for a space that allows examination of such core implicit elements of GTA's cognitions. GTA6, too, emphasised the need for professional validation as well as the lack of awareness in their context about the GTA research, its scope, and importance. Despite the perceived benefits of reflecting on their TSOPs and trajectories of their professional identities, they also highlighted practical barriers to sustaining such reflective practices. GTA 1 expressed skepticism about maintaining reflective practices due to high workload, whereas GTA 2 reported administrative responsibilities precluding them from reflecting in a continuous fashion. Such a response underscores the well-known recurring challenge of movie teachers (GTAs in our case) often finding themselves juggling between junctions of expected outcomes and immediate realities.

Table 6: Responses from GTAs concerning articulation of their TSOPs

GTAs	Excerpts from their responses
GTA1	I mean…of course it helps to do a lot of self-reflection…but I doubt these reflections could be sustained and worked upon with the amount of work we get.
GTA2	One of my professors gave me similar advice to sometimes note down things that bother me about teaching. Eventually I try to deliver what I am assigned to and take care of managing my work.
GTA3	I think it's an interesting way to become more self-aware. This TSOP task does allow me to value more things and people which has shaped my teaching journey.
GTA4	In my view, we need such tasks in a regular manner like in our training. There is no such GTA training in India that I have heard of. Including them in such training sessions would be more enjoyable.
GTA5	I wish our university had a formal system for GTAs where we could hold these sessions or even a community helps us to grow. Because…ultimately all of us are just teaching combining the ways our professors want us and what we know about teaching.

GTA6	Honestly…I did not even know this term like GTA exists and there is a whole area of research around people like us who teach. It feels so validated that there is some interest in this nearly unrecognised field and people.
GTA7	These tasks and discussions helped me immensely to also reflect on my habits and find some space to think about how I teach. I think different people like HODs, professors and scholars can work together to create more communication about these pedagogies and the work involved.

Another theme of calling for institutional and training support provides ways to integrate reflections, such as TSOP, as an essential part of their training needs. GTA 5 highlights the need and benefits of a community formation to discuss their ideas, strategies, and challenges to come up with potential solutions. GTA7 extends on this response by suggesting a coming together of all institutional forces to work in sync and contribute to each other's development. In the times of writing centres coming up in India, the scope of providing opportunities in a well-coordinated manner with professors, admins, and GTAs lies ahead with great scope. It is especially valuable in countries where GTA research is still in its nascent stage and is often not even thought about. The research surrounding GTAs, undergraduate and postgraduate mentoring remains still in its nascent stage in India and needs urgent attention. The GTA responses carry the overall need for 'localised knowing' of their practices and in doing so, fixing the several barriers they face first. The findings of this section implies that GTAs' identity, culture, workload, and backgrounds to name a few key factors, do impact their professional identities. They are continuously surrounded with workload, meetings, pressures to publish and present and even fulfil their institutional duties with minimal to no support. This, especially in this context, just remains the tip of the iceberg. Several future investigations with an emphasis on multilingualism, gender, regional politics, identity politics, caste and class behaviours, and mental health support could provide many complex insights underlying GTAs' practices and identities.

7. Conclusion

This research paper reported a small-scale experiment of implementing the model of TSOP with seven GTAs. The underlying motivation to do so was inspired by the current trends of experimenting with teacher education frameworks in GTA research. Grounded in Bandura's theory of social learning, it reports on how GTAs form their TSOPs via social mediation of forces surrounding them. The framework of TSOP has been in its nascent stage and is rather 'marginalised' (Kumar, 2023), which also resonates with the nature of research around GTA in the present context of the Indian education system (and maybe many such countries).

Such testing was carried out by arriving at a four-staged theoretical model of TSOP and utilising two writing prompts consisting of a life history mapping task as well as a TSOP discussion sheet implemented through semi-structured interviews. The findings pointed out that GTAs possess a varied sense of plausibilities, formed by school and college memories, formalised training, mediation of contextual factors, and how they have been transmitting it in both traditional and creative pedagogic ways and means.

Another major finding was how GTAs agreed with TSOP being an effective reflective tool for professional development, but they will face hurdles with a lack of systematic training and institutional constraints to reflect through it regularly. A major lesson learnt through this experimentation is also GTAs asking educational stakeholders for a bottom-up approach: emphasising ‘how and what they teach’ rather than simply prescribing stipulated procedures around how and what to teach. Such interventions can result in further experimentations, which could involve:

1. Contextualising GTA experiences for Broader Frameworks: Future research can emphasise expanding qualitative investigations of GTA cognitions and experiences for more localised insights, which can feed towards the development of a glocalised framework for GTA identity formation. Localised explorations can emphasise discovering intuitions, identity formation, or any other observable and unobservable aspects of GTA’s cognitions and negotiations, both inside and outside the classrooms.

2. Accessing Mentoring, Peer Support, and Professional Communities: The findings suggest the dire need of mentoring in the Indian context for the GTAs. More research could focus on investigating mentoring needs, the effects and affect of peer support, and how GTA community groups can collaborate and support each other even with cultural differences and different academic orientations. Additionally, interest could also be contributed to know more about emotional resilience, institutional practices, workload, and fatigue, as well as supervisors’ impact on the GTAs.

3. (Re)conceptualising TSOP as a GTA Cognition Model: There remains significant scope to reframe or reconceptualise TSOP for GTAs. This proposed model could be tried out further or reinterpreted and alternate models could be created to know more about GTAs' identities. It could also be replicated to study differences between expert and novice GTAs to improve their institutional and training experiences. Intersectional approaches considering variables of gender, marginalisation, socio-cultural backgrounds, digital literacy, and disciplinary differences could also be adopted to carry out further investigations.

4. Integrating Intuition Research into GTA Research: Finally, incorporating different intuition models such as the traffic light model, recognition primed model etc. could be tried out, with other tasks such as lesson plan analysis, classroom teaching demonstrations & discussions around them. These would enable more insights about GTAs' conscious and subconscious mechanisms, negotiations, anxieties, and fears when it comes to teaching.

Finally, as Borg (2023) says, “we cannot make adequate sense of teachers’ experiences of learning to teach without examining the unobservable mental dimension of this learning process”, the evolving GTA research should keep moving in directions where we could reflect on what all lies within.

Ethical Statement

This study adhered to all ethical standards for research involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from all the participants prior to data collection. All the participants were informed about the study's objectives, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage was well conveyed and duly followed right through the process of data collection. Informed consent was obtained in writing, and participants' anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout conducting this research. In summary, the following ethical considerations were declared to and agreed to, by the participants involved:

● The information collected will not be shared with anyone except the author and their supervising team.	
● The collected data will be kept anonymous and be reported anonymously without revealing any personal information.	
● I have verified the supplied information and it does not possess any conflict of interest amongst the participant and the author.	
● The process of data collection has followed all the required research ethics and the practitioner code of conduct.	

The author declares no conflict of interest, and the manuscript represents original work being not submitted or published elsewhere.

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Appendix 1

TASK PROMPT- 1

My Life History of Teaching

Dear GTAs, this task requests you to write a short reflective essay summarising crucial experiences which you think have shaped your teaching.
Please write a detailed description (however much possible) indicating your responses to the following questions:

a) What do you think is the best method to teach/learn English?
b) How were you as a learner in the school and college/ university? What helped you learn English best in those years?
c) Who have been the key influences for you when it comes to teaching-learning English?
d) Did any sort of literature shaped your thinking about ESL teaching in any way?
e) Have you gotten any formal training in teaching? What have been major takeaways from it?
f) Was your transition to classrooms in a teaching role smooth? What changed or did not change?
g) What major factors affect you at your workplace while you navigate your doctoral journey?
h) What advice or suggestions will you give to other GTAs regarding teaching English specifically?

*Please feel free to decide the length of your responses and ensure you write them in your free time.

*If you do not have the time/ mood to write, you can also record your responses in audio and share them with me over WhatsApp or email, whatever is feasible.

*Do reach out to me in case you need any help or clarifications.

THE TSOP DISCUSSION SHEET

This Discussion sheet is designed to tap into the operations of TSOP about ESL teaching.

A. The Feel Wheel

The feel wheel enables us teachers to tap into our feelings or mood before, during or post classes. Please read the given options carefully and select the descriptors that you often feel concerning your English classes.

Source: Oxford CBT (2023)

B. The RPD Model of Intuitive Decision Making (Klein, 2003)

"Dear Former GTA-Self": Reflections from the Final Chapter of a Graduate Teaching Assistant Journey—from Novice to More Experienced Educator

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Abstract

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) are foundational to teaching practices in Higher Education (HE). Despite their widespread prevalence, academic discourse on GTA development remains largely outward facing, focusing on pedagogical practices and institutional outcomes over individual lived experiences. This article addresses that gap by proposing reflective letter writing as a methodological tool to document and facilitate the complex evolution of GTA experiences, drawing from a place of introspection.

The basis of the practice presented in the article is theoretically scaffolded by *Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle* (1984), *Gibbs' Reflective Cycle* (1988), and *Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection* (2017). The letter format offers a unique and creative medium for GTAs to express detailed insights, particularly engaging with the emotional and relational dimensions of their experiences. The practice is modelled through an illustrative example: a self-written, diary-like letter, addressed to the author's former GTA-self. This reflects on their GTA experiences at the end of a four-year role in UK HE.

The letter offers a personal account of the complexities encountered during the transition from a novice to a more experienced educator. The narrative is organised thematically, examining GTA experiences through the lenses of (i) identity construction, (ii) shifting perspectives on what is considered to be important, (iii) the role of intentional actions leading to self-growth, and (iv) the value of self-reflective practices for individual development. A critical discussion is provided, linking this to scholarly discourse.

The work offers insight for those navigating their own GTA journeys, inviting readers to reflect on their trajectories and recognise both shared and divergent experiences. This contributes to a more nuanced understanding of GTA development by championing reflective letter writing as tool for fostering self-awareness and agency, as individuals forge their own pathways and foster transformative impact both for themselves and those who surround them in HE and beyond.

Keywords: doctoral student; higher education; critical reflection; letter writing.

1 Introduction and Background: *Examination of Graduate Teaching Assistant Development*

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) serve a foundational role in supporting teaching practices within Higher Education (HE). Becoming a GTA acts as a foundational stepping stone in a person's academic journey, where an individual's disciplinary expertise begins to intersect with pedagogical practice, and the identity of being a student gradually shifts toward becoming that of an educator (Cayir, 2024; McLeod et al., 2025).

Despite the prevalence of GTA roles in HE, academic discourse exploring such roles remains largely outwards facing. Much of the research centres on how GTAs support student learning and focuses on the required competencies of being a good educator (Clark et al., 2021; McLeod et al., 2025; Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2018). This focus, however, comes at the expense of exploring GTAs' own developmental journeys, and how this shapes them as an individual. It is recognised that the emotional, relational, and personal dimensions of GTAs' experiences remain less well documented, despite playing a central part in an individual's development and overall progression (Salvo-Canlas et al., 2024; Strongylakou, 2022; Zhuo & Li, 2024).

Student-lead journals, such as the *Journal of PGR Pedagogic Practice* (published by the University of Warwick), and *Postgraduate Pedagogies* (published by University College London, and The London School of Economics and Political Science jointly), do however provide valuable opportunities for capturing such narratives. This is due to their flexible publication scope, of which many mainstream journals do not provide.

To address this underexplored area, reflective letter writing methodology is proposed as a tool to address this issue, specifically documenting and facilitating the complex evolution of GTA experiences amongst the HE community. The goal of this article is to explore how this can be implemented in practice. The article is structured into four parts. It begins by introducing theoretical frameworks and methodology to guide reflective processes. An example reflective letter addressed to the author's former GTA-self is presented in the Appendix of this article. This is then followed by a critical discussion of the themes examined in the letter, including that regarding reflective practices. Finally, the article concludes with the reader being encouraged to reflect on their own experiences, contributing to their own personal and professional growth, advancing the discourse on GTA development going forward.

2 Theoretical Frameworks and Methodology: *The Process of Reflective Practices*

This section is structured into: **(a)** Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, **(b)** Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, **(c)** Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection, and **(d)** Reflective Letter Writing Methodology and the Application of the Frameworks.

(a) *Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle*

When formally learning how to teach, it is common to encounter multiple frameworks describing how students learn (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Bloom et al., 1956; Kolb, 1984; Piaget & Cook, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). One of these seminal frameworks is *Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle* (1984); a foundational model that describes learning as a continuous, four-stage cyclical process based on experiences. This is illustrated in Figure 1 for reference.

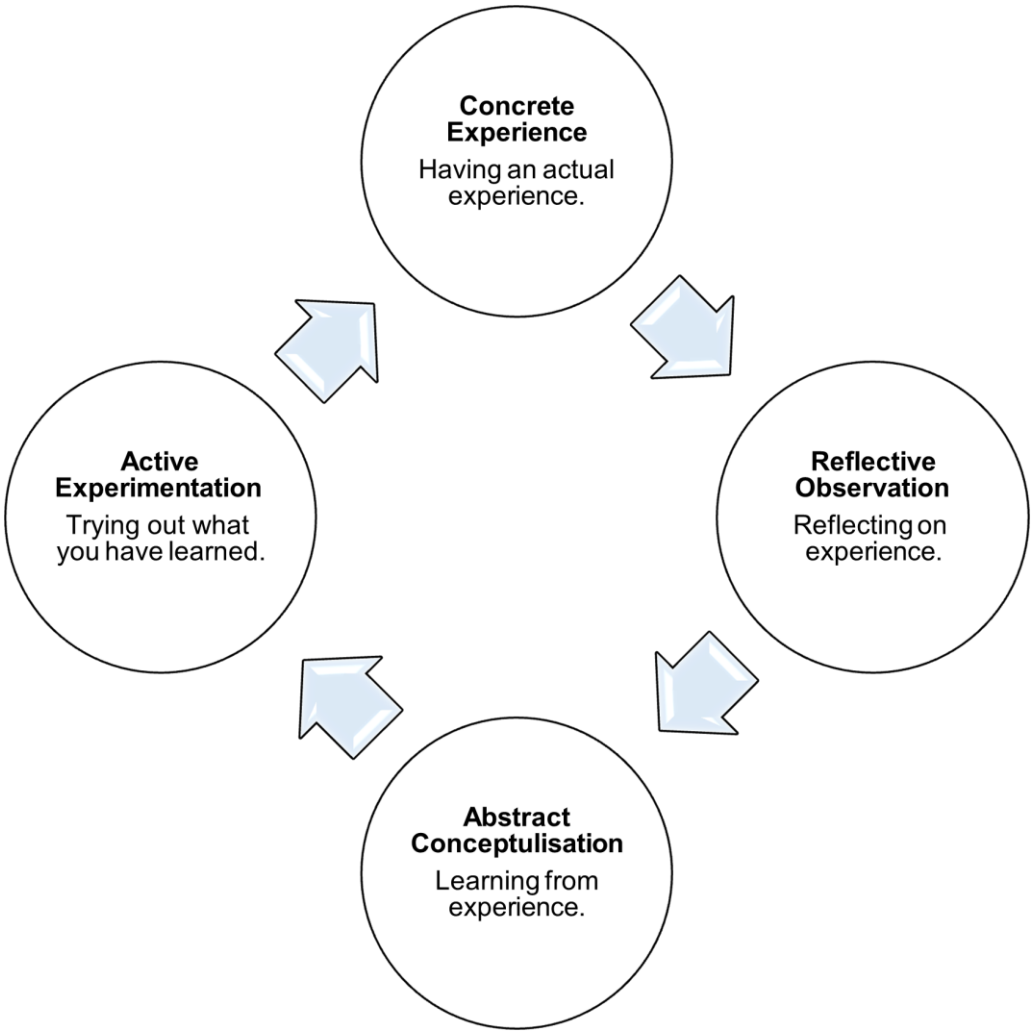

Figure 1: Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984). This describes learning through a four-stage cyclical process.

Although *Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle* is traditionally applied to student learning, it is suggested that its principles can be readily extended to the self-developmental process of *learning how to teach* and subsequently becoming an experienced educator. Learning to teach is considered to be a learning process *per se*; it is also an inherently experiential and iterative process, making the framework a robust fit for analysing GTA evolution and development. This is also particularly true emphasising that GTAs occupy a liminal space as both student and educator, so being able to apply

this both in the context of self and who they teach is particularly significant. The framework applies directly in the context of this article:

i. **Concrete Experience:** This refers to the experience of being a GTA, i.e., the raw experience from which reflection is drawn.

ii. **Reflective Observation:** This is the act of letter writing itself, a crucial stage where the GTA steps back to review and reflect on the experience.

iii. **Abstract Conceptualisation:** This stage is detailed within the letter, manifesting as the self-development and self-realisation—the translation of observation into generalised lessons and insights.

iv. **Active Experimentation:** This is subtly expressed by the letter's intent, providing gentle reminders and encouragement for future actions, thereby closing the loop and initiating the next cycle of learning.

The letter writing process itself particularly engages with the earlier stages of the cycle, emphasising engagement with stages (ii) and (iii).

(b) *Gibbs' Reflective Cycle*

While Kolb's framework establishes the cyclical nature of the learning process, *Gibbs' Reflective Cycle* (1988) provides a structure for more in-depth self-inquiry. This seminal model consists of six stages that guide reflection processes. This cycle is illustrated in Figure 2 for reference.

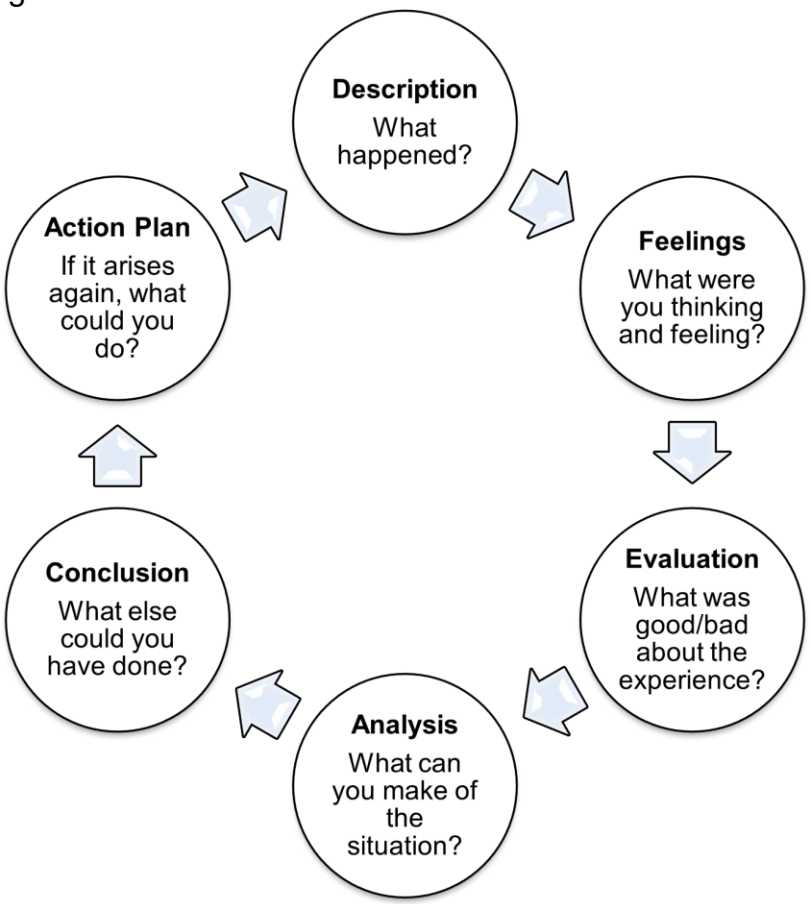

Figure 2: Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (1988). This describes reflective practice as a six-stage cyclical process.

The application of this model is particularly popular in educational and professional developmental contexts (Advance HE, 2020). This model guides reflection beyond description, ensuring that practices result in meaningful actionable insights, rather than remaining only surface-level reflections.

(c) *Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection*

An additional framework that can be used for extending and deepening reflection is *Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection* model, which provides four distinct perspectives for critical reflection on teaching practices (Brookfield, 2017).
This is illustrated in Figure 3 for reference.

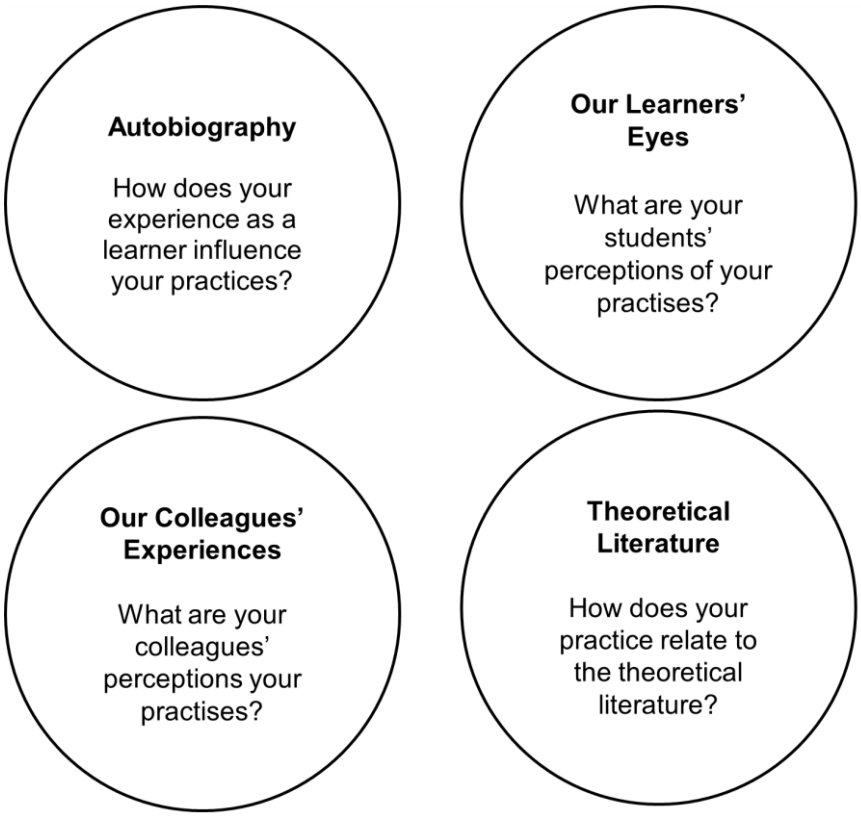

Figure 3: Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection (Brookfield, 2017). This describes four lenses for reflective practice.

The model is traditionally applied through actions such as seeking direct feedback from students or engaging with colleagues to explore alternative views and experiences. In the context of this article, the application is adapted for the reflective letter writing methodology. The letter-writing process *per se* directly addresses the autobiography lens. Engagement with the learners' and colleagues' lenses can be encouraged by imagining experiences from these alternative viewpoints. The scholarship lens is then explicitly applied later in this article through the critical discussion of the letter's themes, linking the personal reflections to wider academic literature.

(d) *Reflective Letter Writing Methodology and the Application of the Frameworks*

Reflective practice can be undertaken through many approaches (Advance HE, 2020). The focus presented here is to explore reflective letter writing: specifically addressed to an alternative version of oneself. The technique is widely used across various contexts to encourage introspection and gain perspective on particular situations; it may also be considered to be a therapeutic activity depending on context (Channa, 2017; Freedman et al., 2023; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012).
Despite, the specific origin of this method is not well documented. The act of self-reflective writing *per se* is however not new, tracing its philosophical origins to classical antiquity where figures like Marcus Aurelius used private notes (i.e., *Meditations*) for moral self-examination and self-guidance (Aurelius, 2015).

The described frameworks in parts **(a)**, **(b),** and **(c)** may be used to assist with the reflective letter writing process to enable *reflection-on-action* (Schön, 1983), referring to the critical thinking and reviewing of an event after it occurs. These frameworks serve as valuable tools for readers to guide their own detailed reflective practices. There is no strictly defined way to apply these frameworks to the reflective letter writing process. To provide practical guidance, the author followed a process that synthesised alternative elements of the frameworks together. The step-by-step process is detailed below describing the content formation. Readers are encouraged to adapt these steps for their own practises, particularly given their career stage.

Step 1: Brainstorming Experiences

Begin by brainstorming ideas about particular scenarios or points of significance, both positive and challenging, regarding experiences as a GTA. This captures the *Concrete Experience* (Kolb) and forms the foundation for the *Description* phase of reflection (Gibbs).

Step 2: Evaluating Scenarios

For each documented item, consider what feelings arose and what the initial evaluations of the event were. This engages with the *Reflective Observation* phase (Kolb) and directly addresses the *Feelings* and *Evaluation* stages of Gibbs' Reflective Cycle.

Step 3: Gaining Perspective Through Multiple Lenses

During content development, engagement with alternative perspectives, such as those described by *Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection*, is recommended to extend critical engagement. This may involve imagining experiences from the viewpoints of students and colleagues, or linking these experiences to scholarship where applicable. This may also include exploring relational dynamics, or reflecting on any feedback that you have received from others as a GTA.

Step 4: Thematic Structuring and Conceptualisation

The notes made should be reviewed, and related ideas or scenarios should be grouped into broader themes (e.g., identity, shifting perspectives, growth/challenges, reflective practices). Categorising these ideas provides the overall structure for the letter and begins the *Analysis* (Gibbs) necessary for *Abstract Conceptualisation* (Kolb). This is where higher-level learning points are derived from specific events.

Step 5: Synthesising Insights and Future Action

Translate the high-level learning points into gentle reminders, encouragement, and actionable advice addressed to your *"Former GTA-Self".* This completes the cycle by moving into *Active Experimentation* (Kolb). You may wish to provide an *Action Plan* (Gibbs) for future behaviour based on past learning.

To illustrate the outcomes of how such a methodology can be implemented in practice, the author has written a letter addressed to their *"former GTA-self".* **The reflective letter is presented in the Appendix of this article.** The reflection has been written at the end of the author's four-year journey assisting with undergraduate modules at a UK HE institution. The letter format itself is considered a form of autoethnographic inquiry (Ellis et al., 2011), enabling the surfacing of dimensions of lived GTA experiences that may be obscured in more conventional academic accounts.

Although the letter is addressed to the author's past self, it is written with a specific audience in mind for the purposes of this article: current and future GTAs, and those who support them. The letter utilises non-technical and accessible language throughout due to this. It is acknowledged that GTA experiences are varied and complex; shaped by individual identities, institutional cultures, and disciplinary contexts. The content contained in the letter is considered not to be prescriptive.
Readers are invited to recognise both shared and divergent elements of the content discussed in comparison to their own personal and professional trajectories.

3 Discussion: *Exploration of the Letter's Themes*

This section now provides a critical discussion of the broader concepts and themes detailed in this letter regarding GTA lived experiences. This has been structured into the four themes contained within the letter. The undertaking of this discussion extends the reflection process, which may be thought of as applying the *Theoretical Literature* lens from *Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection* model, linking the reflections to the wider findings contained in the academic literature. It is noted that this could have been integrated directly into the letter itself; however, given the publication requirements of this article, the author has decided to complete this separately.

Theme (I) - Reshaping Your Own Identity: *Navigating Liminality and Identity Reconstruction*

The first thematic reflection in the letter engages directly with a common discussion found in academic discourse regarding GTA identity (Cayir, 2024; Rao et al, 2021; Strongylakou, 2022; Winstone & Moore, 2017). The core of this literature centres on the topic of liminality, examining the transitional space that GTAs are positioned in that is often defined as the author puts it as being *"neither fully a student nor an educator".*

While this space is frequently described in the literature as ambiguous and/or challenging (Rao et al, 2021; Strongylakou, 2022), the author's personal experience reframes it not as a dilemma, but rather as an opportunity to explore and reshape their own personal and professional identify. It is suggested that this dual status gives GTAs a unique positionality that they can leverage effectively in practice. For instance, in the context of teaching, this allows them to intuitively understand the level of course content difficulty from the student vantage, leading to more nuanced scaffolding practices that supports learners within Vygotsky's *Zone of Proximal Development* (Vygotsky, 1978). Further, this positionality can facilitate the development of stronger relational interactions with students, as GTAs may be perceived as less 'distant' compared to traditional academic staff.

In the context of professional development, this unique space may be utilised as an act of agency, allowing the GTA to define their own educational values and develop a distinct teaching philosophy guiding their practices (Bowne, 2017).

Theme (II) - It's About the Journey: *From Achievement to Development*

The second thematic reflection in the letter offers a critique of the 'outcome-chasing' mentality prevalent in academic environments. As Becher & Trowler (2001) argue, in context of HE, the growing pressure to meet quantifiable performance targets can reshape disciplinary cultures and academic identities; this is often at the expense of intangible dimensions of personal and professional growth. Related to this in the context of this article, the reflection in the letter fundamentally redefines success away from this framing, asserting that *"the true outcome of your efforts is you"*, repositioning the process of development as being intrinsically motivated for the individual as opposed to extrinsically motivated relating to external demands.

From a more holistic vantage, the explicit encouragement to "*let yourself be present in the unfolding of the journey itself*" is a call from the author for mindfulness and self-compassion. This serves as an essential counter-narrative to the performance-driven culture faced in HE environments, which often lead to issues such as burnout amongst staff (Watts & Robertson, 2011). This issue is not limited only to staff and applies to all individuals navigating the pressures of HE. Research from a student perspective, for example, has shown that students who engaged more greatly with mindfulness and self-compassion were considerably more likely to achieve higher academic attainment (Egan et al., 2022). It is therefore suggested that encouraging such approaches would be mutually beneficial in teaching practices and amongst those who deliver them, sharing conceptual linkages with the principles of compassionate pedagogy (Killingback et al., 2025).

Theme (III) - Growth Beyond the Comfort Zone: *Experimenting with Opportunity though Discomfort*

The third thematic reflection in the letter explores the connection between taking opportunities that are associated with anticipated discomfort, and how this contributed to personal and professional development. It is not uncommon for discomfort to arise in GTA experiences as the situations faced may prove to be challenging at times (Thomas-Pickles, 2024). Nevertheless, the narrative reframes this discomfort, demonstrating that transformative growth often stems not from "*dramatic leaps*" but from an accumulation of small, consistent steps. By actively engaging with challenging activities beyond the author's comfort zone (e.g., delivering part of a lecture, etc.), the this takes advantage of on what Bandura (1997)

identifies as the most effective source of self-efficacy: engaging with mastery experiences. This is where each successful step made proves competence in an activity, directly contributing to an individual's self-confidence which drives growth.

Another theme explored in the letter related to this concerns the importance of relational interactions. The realisation that "*teaching isn't a solo act: it's relational, collaborative, and alive*" highlights the social dimension required in teaching practices. This relational aspect is foundational in the GTA experience in building *Communities of Practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This theory emphasises that learning is fundamentally situated within a social process. In the context of this narrative, the collective of fellow GTAs and teaching staff serve as a supportive network, whereby this community provides the belonging and support necessary to embrace opportunities that initially cause discomfort. From a learner's perspective, this type of social scaffolding is vital, as it allows GTAs to operate effectively within Vygotsky's *Zone of Proximal Development* (Vygotsky, 1978), pushing the individual to achieve tasks that would not be possible without it.

Theme (IV) - Self-Reflection is a Powerful Tool: *The Art of Reflective Practice*

The final thematic reflection in the letter champions self-reflection as a valuable tool for facilitating both personal and professional development. The letter's very form highlights its value for understanding transformation, particularly from a longitudinal perspective through engaging with such lens shift. The process helps to make sense of multiple experiences including examining alternative dimensions of engagement such as behavioural, cognitive, and emotional related to a situation (Fredricks et al., 2004), of which traditional discourse does not regularly capture. It has revealed that there are a lot of similarities shared between being a student and being an educator, and a distinct line cannot be directly drawn between the two.

Nonetheless despite its benefits, a critical discussion requires acknowledging that reflective practice is not without its limitations. Scholars sometimes critique reflection for risking superficiality, where there may be a tendency to be descriptive without achieving true *critical* analysis, or leading to future change (Harvey et al, 2025; Schön, 1983). This is why this article has been structured around multiple frameworks to guide such processes (Brookfield, 2017; Gibbs, 1998; Kolb, 1984).
Another limitation is the risk of navel-gazing or becoming overly self-absorbed, where the reflector focuses too much on personal feelings without sufficiently considering the external context or the perspectives of others (Harvey et al, 2025; Brookfield, 2017). Furthermore, the advice in the letter to not to "*force it*" emphasises a practical risk of turning reflection into a chore, driven by compliance rather than genuine curiosity and ability to facilitate self-improvement. It should also be recognised that self-reflection is not a solution for all challenges; reaching out to others for additional support may be vital for navigating difficult moments if needed.

4. Conclusion: *An Invitation to Pause and Reflect*

The core contribution of this work lies in modelling the practice of self- reflection and letter writing as a valuable tool for personal and professional development. This has been explored in the context of GTA development, though it is readily possible that this can be extended to alternative contexts. An example letter has been provided to illustrate

this process, drawing on the author's own accounts of being a GTA in UK HE. This has provided unique insights and has showcased a story of an individual's development. This reflective process was scaffolded utilising several established academic frameworks to guide effective practice (Brookfield, 2017; Gibbs, 1988; Schön, 1983). A discussion has been provided regarding the themes of the letter content showing that the experiences described by the author are not uncommon, extending such findings to the wider community.

The reader is now invited to pause, reflect on their own experiences, and engage in the reflective letter writing practice. This exercise may be directed toward a former or future self, or an alternative recipient, depending on current circumstances and needs. Guiding questions to facilitate this process include:

- What parts of your identity feel most present in your teaching? Which parts feel hidden or still emerging?
- How do you tend to yourself—emotionally, intellectually, relationally—through the messiness of growth?
- What does reflective practice look like for you right now? What might it become if you gave it more space?

Brainstorming answers is always a good idea. There is also space for experimentation and to be creative with the process. It does not necessarily need to be only limited to words. The practice could also be extended amongst the GTA community, where such letters might be shared or 'posted' among colleagues, creating a supportive environment for fostering communal reflection and supporting peer development in *Communities of Practice.*

As a final note to end this article, reflective practice is not seen to be a task to complete *per se*, but a space to return to when needed. May the reader keep returning, gently and often, and may what they find there continue to shape them in ways that feel meaning

Acknowledgments

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Ethical Statement

This article draws on personal reflection and professional experience within a GTA and doctoral context. No external participants were involved, and there are no conflicts of interest

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4 Appendix: *The Letter to The Author's "Former GTA-Self"*

Dear Former GTA-Self,

I'm writing this letter at the closing chapter of my role as a GTA in August 2025. This acts as an opportunity for me to reflect on the four years that have grounded and shaped me as a person. I would like to let you know that during this time, I have developed a lot as a person. I've gained experience, built relationships, and have also learned a lot about myself, including being able to find my own voice, not just as an educator, but as a person.

Four years may sound like a long time from where you stand now, though when you get there, you'll be surprised by how quickly it passes. I wanted to leave something behind for you. Not advice, exactly, but a series of gentle reminders and a handful of reflections; things I wish someone had told me when I was just starting at the beginning of my journey. I hope this offers you some comfort, clarity, and maybe even a little courage as you figure out your own path. Let me remind you that you won't need to have it all figured out. You don't need to be polished or prepared for everything, and don't try to carry it all at once. So, take a breath—step into this role with openness. What follows in this letter are a few reflections from the path I've walked, thoughts that I've gathered and pondered on over the years, in the hope they'll accompany you as you find your own footing along your journey.

Theme (I) - Reshaping Your Own Identity: *Navigating Liminality and Identity Reconstruction*

You've grown up in an environment where your identity has been defined by others: defined solely as being a student. I encourage you to begin to recognise that this has shaped how you've been seen and treated by others. But most importantly, I want you to recognise that this has influenced how you've come to see yourself, and there's so much more to you than just that. You'll come to realise that your identity isn't fixed. It is something that you get to shape and explore as you discover who you are, figuring out your likes and dislikes. By paying attention to this, you'll begin to carve out a sense of self which is not guided by other people's expectations, but by your own curiosity, interest, and emotions.

Becoming a GTA offers you a new space to do just that. Given the role's liminal nature, being a GTA is an experimental space where you can hold multiple perspectives at once: where you are neither fully a student nor an educator. For example, you carry the memory of what it feels like to be a student, such as feeling nervous to ask for help when things don't quite make sense. And now, as an educator, you're also learning to guide and teach others. These roles intertwine, offering a richer understanding of your own identity and where you stand, though it is noted that this can be often ambiguous, which is a not uncommon to experience as a GTA.

You'll begin to notice that your positionality is also uniquely valuable. Having once been an undergraduate in the modules you now support, you carry an intuitive

understanding of how students engage with the content. Use these insights to scaffold their learning, not just to help them get through the content, but to help them properly grasp the foundations that support them throughout their degree. In time, you'll find yourself carving out a teaching philosophy that feels distinctly yours; one rooted in curiosity, mindfulness, and trust. And as your research deepens in practice, especially with its educational focus, you'll start to see new perspectives regarding how students learn, and how you also learn alongside them, advancing your own development.

Theme (II) - It's About the Journey: *From Achievement to Development*

You've spent your life focusing on and chasing outcomes: achieving high grades, milestones, and the kind of success that others say matters. That's understandable, as we're conditioned to believe that such achievement is the ultimate measure of worth. For example, in your context, it may be easy to believe that the financial pay or the title validates the number of hours that you exert as a GTA, or that your thesis is the pinnacle of your doctoral degree. But here's what I wish someone had told me sooner: *the true outcome of your efforts is you.* The outcome is the version of yourself that emerges through the process of these efforts. The one shaped by late-night reflections, small breakthroughs, and small interactions that leave a lasting impact. The real reward isn't the degree certificate, the pay, or the job title. It's the confidence you build, the resilience you strengthen, the clarity that you gain about who you are and what you value.

I didn't come to this realisation all at once. It unfolded slowly, quietly, like something waiting patiently in the background until I was ready to notice that it was there. I recall facilitating focus groups as part of my doctoral research, which, perhaps unexpectedly, called upon many of the same skills I'd developed through my experiences as a GTA. I remember listening to undergraduates describe their early realisations of this with such clarity at the beginning of their degree. This is when this realisation really struck me. Over time, I came to realise that learning doesn't just happen only in the teaching space, but also outside of it. It happens in the quiet preparation, the moments of doubt, the unexpected questions that you receive that shift your perspective. It taught me that teaching is not about having all the answers, but rather about creating space for others to think, feel, and grow. I began to see that the real impact lies in the trust that we build—both with students, peers, and ourselves, making them feel seen—and the practices that we cultivate upon undertaking these acts.

So, if you're feeling unsure or weighed down by the pressure to perform, remember this: be gentle with yourself. You don't need to have all the answers, and you don't need to get everything right. What matters most is that you keep showing up with a willingness to grow and develop, and most importantly, let yourself be present in the unfolding of the journey itself.

Theme (III) - Growth Beyond the Comfort Zone: *Experimenting with Opportunity through Discomfort*

I know that you're reluctant to step outside your comfort zone; you like certainty, structure, and the safety of what's familiar to you—you always have. But here's something I've come to realise throughout my time: growth doesn't always occur in dramatic leaps; it often forms from an accumulation of small and consistent steps. Even if what you do doesn't feel transformative in the moment, when you look back, you'll see how far you've come. And here's also a reminder to celebrate both big and small wins, as they matter more than you think! And to convince you, let me give you a few examples of what you'll encounter during your journey.

You may sign up for a teaching-focused training course to gain professional accreditation as an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (AFHEA), perhaps with some hesitation, nudged gently by a supervisor who sees your potential more clearly than you do. You won't be sure at first, as you'll still be clinging to the idea that your thesis is the only thing that counts. But trust me: this experience will surprise you. You'll be welcomed into a warm, supportive community, and you'll also meet the academic course lead, who will later stop you around campus and ask about your houseplants (still alive, by the way). In moments like that, you'll feel seen—not just as a GTA or doctoral student, but as a person—and that's what really stays with you and feels meaningful.

As part of the teaching course, you will face your first teaching exercise. Your microteaching session—on meditation, of all things—which will make you slightly nervous in the lead up to it. But you'll step up, and you'll do it well. You'll receive feedback from others that's not just constructive but also deeply encouraging, and will build your self-confidence. You'll deliver a session that others will remember, not just for the content, but for the care and thoughtfulness you bring to your teaching. Someone you teach in that session may even take away something positive to implement into their own lives, and that's real impact.

Later, you'll spend a long time convincing yourself to deliver part of a lecture for a module that you support. You'll hesitate, rehearse, and doubt. But eventually, you'll volunteer yourself and say yes to the opportunity. And it will be good for you. It will boost your confidence more than you expect. The session will pass by quickly, much faster than you expect. And while hearing your voice through the microphone might feel strange, you'll manage it well and will be proud of yourself when it's over. Here's a tip: before you begin, imagine it going well. Let that picture settle in your body. And if it doesn't go perfectly? That's okay. You tried and you'll grow from the experience, and that matters more than flawless delivery.

Another realisation will come slowly: the importance of connection and community. You usually keep yourself to yourself, as that is how you've always been, though you'll start to notice how others shape and influence your own growth.

Teaching isn't a solo act: it's relational, collaborative, and alive. You'll work alongside fellow GTAs (who are mostly fuelled by coffee), where together you'll support students, work through complex challenges and programming errors, and learn from

each other, balancing responsibilities together. You'll learn from the students too—how to adapt, how to listen, how to teach with flexibility and care. You'll also find yourself supported by academic staff—those who offer guidance, share resources, and model different ways of being an educator. You can take notes and implement them into your own teaching activities.

Over time, you'll build networks that sustain you. Not just professionally, but personally. These connections will help you hold steady when things feel uncertain and difficult. They'll remind you that support is always nearby and will encourage you to reach out and say hello which will positively contribute to your wellbeing. They'll also help you develop empathy and compassion toward others, and perhaps more surprisingly, toward yourself. And when someone remembers your name, your research, or offers you a gesture of kindness, you'll feel it: the warmth of being seen. These are the moments that stay with you and feel meaningful. So don't be afraid to try something new. Say yes to the things that scare you a little. That's where transformative growth happens, so embrace it with fullness.

Theme (IV) - Self-Reflection is a Powerful Tool: *The Art of Reflective Writing*

One of the most unexpectedly valuable tools you'll take away from completing the teaching-focused training course is the art of reflective writing. I know, just the thought of it makes you cringe. The idea of putting your inner world on paper feels very exposing and vulnerable to you. You've never been one for journaling, but I will remind you that those pretty notebooks and fancy pens that you've collected over the years are still waiting for a version of you who feels ready. But here's the truth: reflective writing is a powerful tool that helps your self-development both personally and professionally. It helps you make sense of your teaching experiences, notice patterns in how you respond to students, and surface the values that quietly guide your practice. It allows you to explore ideas more deeply than you ever could by keeping them locked away in your head.

It's not about writing perfectly; it's about writing honestly and openly. And the format of how you do this doesn't matter. For example, whatever works best to help express and capture your thoughts: pen and paper, digital notes, voice recordings, sketches, etc. There's no right or wrong, and you also don't need to commit to just one format, so I encourage you to experiment. If you're feeling adventurous, you might even try using generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) to scaffold your ideas by allowing it to generate reflective prompts. Or if you're feeling brave, talk it through with another human being who can hold a safe and open space for you. You'll take more away from these practices than you expect. But here's one gentle piece of advice that I wish someone had told me earlier: don't force it. If you're not in the mood, let it be. Forcing reflection can turn it into a chore, and that's the last thing it should be.

With time, engaging with reflective writing will allow you to trace your progression. You'll begin to notice how your practice has shifted not only as an educator, but also as a person: how you hold space for others, how you respond to situations of uncertainty, how you navigate moments that you once felt daunting.

You'll see how your confidence in the teaching space has expanded and your sense of self has become more rooted. And when you look back, when some time has passed, you'll see your own transformation. Re-reading my own reflections is always a tender experience. I sometimes want to reach through the page and hug my past self. She was so timid, so unable to see her own potential. But she kept going, and slowly, she began to believe. It is honestly surprising what we forget over time, and even more surprising what we carry forward with us without realising. Reflective practices allow us to recognise and honour that. And in that noticing, may you find companionship with yourself—in your thoughts, your questions, and the quiet unfolding of who you're becoming.

Section (V) - To Finish: A Note of Care and Continuance

I believe that's all I have to say for now, and the rest is all for you to discover! I hope you allow yourself to find fun and joy in the process of becoming, and also don't take things too seriously, even when things can feel difficult at times—it's all part of the process, so embrace it with fullness. Maybe you could write a letter like this one addressed to your 'Future Self', that would always be interesting to reflect back on in some years' time. What questions would you like to ask your future self? What do you envisage yourself achieving? How have you changed as a person? And lastly, as a final note before I leave you to your future discoveries, here are a few reminders you don't hear nearly often enough: you are enough exactly as you are, I am proud of you, and you've got this! Until next time.

With warmth and belief,

Your Future Self *(August 2025)*

P.S. Growth isn't always dramatic. Sometimes it looks like a few small new leaves, a deeper root, a little more sunlight finding its way in (i.e., energy and warmth brightening your day). Keep tending to yourself gently. You're becoming something brilliant—truly.

Teaching unfamiliar content can lead to brilliant teaching: Data-led reflections

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Abstract

Unfamiliarity constitutes one of the major challenges faced by novice practitioners while constructing teacher identities. It is often associated with the perceived uncertainties and lack of ownership or autonomy in navigating pedagogical complexities. In practice, any module may entail a sense of unfamiliarity for PGR teachers because they are not involved in the content development processes, usually initiated by the senior module leaders. In writing this article, we seek to reflect on our teaching experiences in three academic departments/centres. As our data-led reflections will show, multiple situated complexities play out in our attempts to mitigate the initially perceived unfamiliarity and externally prescribed non-expert role.

The overarching aim is to shed light on strategic negotiation and construction of effective Higher Education professional identities while engaging in interdisciplinary practice. Following a qualitative methodological tradition, the data is generated from iterative reflective journaling and a series of peer dialogues, spanning two academic terms. We approach the data inductively via reflexive thematic analysis, highlighting three major themes in the two narrative reflections: 1) taking a humble stance to acknowledge the signature pedagogy of the unfamiliar field; 2) recognising the core threshold concepts from an etic perspective; and 3) fostering a bottom-up awareness of taking the students' perspectives as near-peers. The data analysis is based on concrete examples to foreground actionable pedagogical recommendations, which are tried and tested in our own professional development. As such, we will argue that teaching unfamiliar content can lead to brilliant teaching.

Keywords: Unfamiliarity, Identity Construction, Interdisciplinarity, Professional Development, Reflective Journaling, Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs)

Introduction

A sense of unfamiliarity can manifest as novice practitioners navigate pedagogical complexities while attempting to construct effective teacher identity in Higher Education (HE) contexts. This is especially so for practitioners who might not have been involved in the design phase of the curriculum, syllabus, and module development. Moreover, for graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), the interdisciplinary nature of teaching delivery and marking responsibilities has become increasingly salient across academic departments/centres, exacerbated by the lack of ownership or autonomy in decision-making processes (Muzaka, 2009; Park & Ramos, 2002; Song & Lu, 2023). To facilitate professional growth against uncertainties or even anxiety potentially associated with unfamiliarity, it is imperative for us to critically reflect on the challenges and the positive sides of teaching unfamiliar content.

This critical reflection brings together two data-led accounts to illustrate how and why teaching unfamiliar content can lead to brilliant teaching. The 'brilliance' here refers to positive evaluations from multiple perspectives, including that of ourselves (GTAs), the learners, and the module leaders, as partly evidenced by our data-led reflections. We will also demonstrate how such positively evaluated teaching may in turn enhance our adaptive confidence when teaching new modules or interdisciplinary content. The data are drawn from the reflective journaling along with a series of peer dialogues between the two authors, spanning two academic terms. Approaching the data inductively via reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), we would like to highlight three themes: 1) taking a humble stance to acknowledge the signature pedagogy of the unfamiliar field; 2) recognising the core threshold concepts from an etic perspective; 3) and fostering a bottom-up awareness of taking the students' perspectives as near-peers. To conclude, we seek to articulate actionable pedagogical recommendations based on the three themes above.

Literature review

GTAs: from deficiency to growth

Within the UK HE contexts, a GTA can be defined as any postgraduate research (PGR) student who is simultaneously employed by the department to teach part-time, alongside their own research studies. The term GTA is therefore sometimes used interchangeably with PGR teacher. Having reviewed relevant literature on GTA experiences in the UK, we have identified a deficiency-focused discourse, such as "donkeys in the department" due to their "heavy workload, sizeable responsibility and limited autonomy" in making pedagogical decisions (Bale & Anderson, 2024; Park & Ramos, 2002, p. 47). In practice, while GTAs often appear to exercise autonomy by applying for and competing over modules that align with their research interests, this autonomy is constrained by the fixed departmental module options and limited freedom in shaping the teaching. GTAs' role is often

perceived as non-expert or ambiguous in the department, despite their evident contributions. More recent scholarly attention is shifting to a growth-focused agenda, aiming at fostering professional development and recognising the unique and intrinsic value of GTAs (Gallego, 2014; Muzaka, 2009; Song & Lu, 2023). Yet, little is known about how GTAs themselves would perceive the pedagogical processes especially when it comes to dealing with unfamiliarity.

Unfamiliarity as a unique challenge

Teaching a new module can entail a sense of unfamiliarity in various aspects, such as the discipline-specific signature pedagogies and novel content in terms of the less-familiar threshold concepts (Meyer & Land, 2003; Shulman, 2005). First, this critical reflection defines signature pedagogies of the unfamiliar field as the salient forms of pedagogies that seemingly characterise the new module that we contribute to. These pedagogies are salient in that certain “characteristic forms of teaching and learning” can shape “the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new professions” (Shulman, 2005, p. 52). Existing literature has demonstrated that understanding the signature pedagogies is conducive to establishing professional identity and to reflecting on the GTA’s teaching philosophy (e.g., Zhuo & Li, 2024). In this regard, novice practitioners like GTAs can arguably benefit from making explicit what kind of signature pedagogies are involved in the new modules and how they contrast with one’s existing pedagogical repertoire.

Moving forward, another challenge associated with teaching unfamiliar content is to effectively identify and make sense of the threshold concepts. According to Meyer and Land (2003), threshold concepts refer to a conceptual gateway that helps unpack “previously inaccessible way of thinking about something”, therefore potentially leading to “a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress”. Meyer and Land (2003, 2006) further characterise them as ‘troublesome’ because the associated knowledge could appear counter-intuitive, alien or seemingly incoherent from a layman’s perspective. The disciplinary threshold concepts by no means only bear pedagogical significance for learners. Instead, it can be argued that GTAs must also utilise such conceptual tools to tailor their teaching practice when confronted with unfamiliar content.

Methodology

This study draws on two data-led narrative reflections written by the two authors to analyse how and why teaching unfamiliar content can lead to brilliant teaching. The reflective writings are extracted from our individual journaling, partly based on peer dialogues and professional development workshops spanning two academic terms. By no means rigidly structural, Figure 1 visually illustrates the reflective prompts that are utilised to scaffold our unfolding peer dialogues as we navigate the pedagogical unfamiliarity. It offers a starting point and flexible references for practitioners to consider relevant dimensions involved in

interdisciplinary teaching practice, yet without prescribing fixed or universal criteria for all contexts. Following a qualitative methodological tradition, the use of iterative journaling is justified by opportunities for peer scaffolding and its clear focus on the chronological timeline of events (Gallego, 2014; Li & Gong, 2025; Mann & Walsh, 2017; Sidaway et al., 2025).

The three dimensions of Signature Pedagogy, Threshold Concepts, and Near-peer Positioning, emerging from our pedagogical processes, also serve as conceptual stimulated recall devices throughout journaling. The textual data were approached inductively via reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). We started by familiarising ourselves with each other's reflective writings, treating the journaling texts as two separate cases. Code labels were assigned to capture significant extracts in relation to teaching unfamiliar content. We then collaboratively identified, reviewed, and clarified the patterned themes.

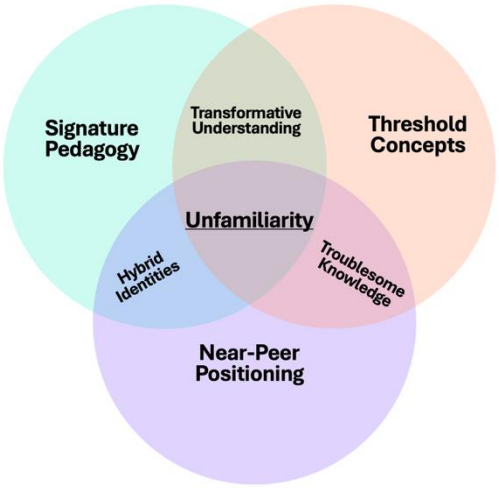

Figure 2 Visual representation of reflective prompts

The two reflections

Li's reflection

I taught three modules across two academic departments, mostly in Applied Linguistics. Here, I would like to highlight my unfamiliar topic area based on my recent teaching experience in a neighbouring department, Education Studies. Upon my first meeting with the module leader, a senior colleague specialising in Globalisation and Education, I was recommended essential readings about Sociological approaches to childhood studies beyond the Global North contexts. Despite my initial excitement about the new topics, the content appeared troublesome at first as I barely had any previous opportunity to immerse myself in the academic discourse permeating this new module. Meanwhile, I was simultaneously attending the APP PGR course (Appendix 1), where I learnt about useful conceptual tools for making sense of the troublesome knowledge and the

perceived unfamiliarity. The notions of threshold concepts and signature pedagogy turned out to be particularly insightful in this case.

There were three concepts that facilitated my transformative understandings of this new discipline, namely: (1) social justice, (2) the rights-based framework, and (3) the Global South childhoods. They potentially engendered thresholds given the previously inaccessible way of thinking about childhood equity issues in the Global South (Boyden et al., 2021). The three of them were closely interconnected in the field of child labour/ poverty in the least developed regions, e.g., Ethiopia in Africa (the context of seminar readings). Despite my existing background knowledge about childhood studies thanks to previous teaching and research experiences with young language learners, these concepts still appeared daunting as I perceived them to be highly value-laden and political. It should be noted that most of my academic training in Applied Linguistics tended to focus on the micro-level, everyday human interactions (e.g., in classrooms). I therefore felt the need to catch up on the wider Sociology literature on childhood inequality, but the core concepts above proved to be helpful when identifying worthwhile directions. The best strategy at that time was thus to do the readings from near-scratch just like every undergraduate student would, in a near-peer way.

Meanwhile, I noticed that the common ground of these three modules seemed to be a focus on the small-group seminar approach. Seminar delivery was a core responsibility of GTAs, following the weekly lectures led by module leaders. However, the nuanced differences manifested in teaching the new module were unfamiliar to me. My previous experience in the home department emphasised hands-on activities; it was crucial for the MA TESOL cohort (around 30 participants per seminar group) to closely observe the facilitation of pedagogical tasks encompassing poster presentations, motigraphs, mind maps, and PowerPoint slides. It used to echo what Kolb (1984, p. 38) would call experiential learning: “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”. In this vein, the pedagogical activities, as a form of experiential knowledge in itself, were constantly recreated and co-created with the student teachers at the master’s level.

But in contrast, my recent teaching experience in Education Studies was characterised by in-depth, case-based discussions with undergraduate students, with a seminar group typically comprised of fewer than 10 participants in each session. Such a cohort size made it extremely straightforward to observe students’ progress, seek feedback, and conduct formative assessment in real time. As a result, the positive evaluation of my teaching was in part evidenced by students’ expression of gratitude and growing interests in writing about that particular case study in their termly summative essay. This was followed by the written corroborations from the module leader, who generously completed a thorough teaching observation form after auditing our case-based discussions. These perspectives supplemented and reinforced my self-evaluation of the teaching quality. I also learnt from APP PGR colleagues that case study would typically be considered a signature pedagogy in certain disciplines such as Educational Psychology, Sociology, and Law School. It was through such interdisciplinary peer dialogues with other GTA teachers that I gained a comparative approach to consciously making sense of signature pedagogies when facilitating seminars.

In a word, I came to realise that unfamiliarity can be productive, given an acute awareness of signature pedagogies and threshold concepts in the host field. My experience of contributing to an unfamiliar module has hence been empowering in terms of effective GTA identity construction.

Gao's reflection

I worked as a GTA across three departments and centres. I will reflect on my teaching experiences in Natural Language Processing (NLP) at the Department of Computer Science (DCS) and focus on preparing and giving an interdisciplinary seminar titled "Language Variation in Natural Language Processing" to over 60 STEM postgraduate students.

When I first joined the module, I immediately realised the unique pedagogical approach in DCS, particularly in their emphasis on practical coding skills and algorithmic thinking that were unfamiliar to me. The module consisted of three main components: lectures led by the module leader, seminars, and lab sessions led by GTAs. Seminars were designed for more focused discussions on related concepts, and lab sessions provided hands-on coding practice as formative assessments. I learnt from fellow GTAs that DCS students would generally expect a more structured and instructor-led learning environment, while treating hands-on activities as independent practice opportunities, paralleling the content delivered in lectures and seminars. Such a parallel structure was quite different from the sociolinguistic pedagogy I was familiar with, which emphasised group discussions and reflections. This observation made me aware of the importance of understanding disciplinary signature pedagogy when teaching in an interdisciplinary context.

The seminar I led was the last one in the module, where I was given the freedom to choose a topic related to linguistics. The module leader and I agreed that I was not to position myself as an expert in the techniques of NLP, but rather to share my knowledge and linguistic perspective on language variation to broaden students' understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of NLP. Rather than embedding sociolinguistic pedagogy, I aimed to enclose the sociolinguistic interrogation within the students' established learning framework (Braßler, 2016). In other words, I would need to recognise the threshold concepts in sociolinguistics that were closely relevant to NLP and then present them in a way that aligned with the disciplinary norms. My session crafting began with observing the lecture delivery: Across the term I familiarised myself with the module leader's teaching styles and inspected the students' learning expectations. Taking advantage of an outsider stance, I identified myself as a "near-peer" of the students: trying to understand NLP from near-scratch, only with an additional sociolinguistic perspective. I also consulted the module leader to ensure that my seminar content was relevant and appropriate.

As a pedagogical objective, the core concept I attempted to introduce was "language variation is meaningful". To guarantee students' familiarity with the problem-solving structure, I employed sociolinguistic classification of language variations as a roadmap to guide them through the topic. Specifically, I started the seminar with a discussion on a social media post written in non-standard English that

could not be properly understood by an NLP model, usually trained on standard English only. This naturally led to the following questions on “variations” that NLP practitioners might be interested in: What are the variations in a language? How does natural language variations influence the performance of NLP models? How to tackle the challenges of incorporating language variations in NLP? To answer these questions, I introduced the sociolinguistic taxonomy of language variations (e.g., regional, social, stylistic, and contextual variations) with relevant examples. I also incorporated recent research as case studies to illustrate how certain algorithm designs can be adapted to better handle language variations.

This way, I was able to connect the sociolinguistic concepts with the technical aspects of NLP, making the content relatable and engaging for the students while respecting their disciplinary norms and existing expectations. My approach to interdisciplinarity was positively echoed and followed up by students’ insightful questions on applying sociolinguistic methods in their projects, along with extended discussions between myself and the module leader about overlapping and complementary concepts in NLP and sociolinguistics. It could be argued that the seminar has effectively stimulated intellectual engagement and showcased brilliant teaching from perspectives of multiple parties. Reflecting on this experience, I found that teaching in an interdisciplinary context requires a delicate balance between respecting the signature pedagogy of the host field and introducing threshold concepts from my own discipline. It is crucial to understand the students' existing knowledge base and learning styles to effectively communicate new concepts.

Analysis and implications

This section aims to make the insights directly applicable to postgraduate teaching practice. A reflexive thematic analysis on the two narrative reflections have drawn our attention to three pedagogical aspects that can benefit GTAs in dealing with unfamiliarity: 1) taking a humble stance to acknowledge the signature pedagogy of the unfamiliar field; 2) recognising the core threshold concepts from an etic perspective; 3) and fostering a bottom-up awareness of taking the students’ perspectives as near-peers. Referring back to the visual representation of our reflective prompts (Figure 1), the analysis has advanced an integrated, tripartite approach to tackling troublesome knowledge, gaining transformative understanding, and making use of GTAs’ hybrid identities. In the following, we base the actionable pedagogical recommendations on the three major themes.

A humble stance on acknowledging signature pedagogies

Both authors have highlighted the importance of making explicit the signature pedagogies when teaching an unfamiliar module. To enhance one’s teaching philosophy across disciplines, it is advisable for educators to take a humble stance to acknowledge distinct pedagogies in the host fields (Shulman, 2005; Zhuo & Li, 2024). This necessitates a step away from the pedagogical comfort zones of GTAs. A

contrastive view may be particularly fruitful in distinguishing and identifying the core features of interdisciplinary practices across academic departments. We have also explored a dialogical way of attempting reflective practice in collaborations with colleagues (Mann & Walsh, 2017). To sum up, the tried and tested strategies in dealing with unfamiliarity may involve peer dialogues in and outside professional development workshops, consultations with senior colleagues or the module leaders, and longitudinal 'apprenticeship of observation' as preparation for the seminar delivery.

The recognition of core threshold concepts

In both cases, teaching an unfamiliar module has entailed crossing boundaries of conventional disciplinary knowledge, which could appear 'troublesome' at first. A conceptual gateway is imperative for novice HE practitioners to access context-appropriate ways of engaging with unfamiliarity (Meyer & Land, 2003). We have construed our etic or outsider stance as advantageous when integrating unfamiliar concepts into teaching practice. The interrogation of threshold concepts proves to be conducive to facilitating a transformative understanding and interpretation of the pedagogical content, benefiting both the GTAs and the students. In this sense, the knowledge co-construction can be effectively achieved either via collaboratively learning from near-scratch, or through critical interrogation of discipline-specific meanings associated with the same core concept. It is therefore advocated that GTAs be aware of the core concepts as part of their pedagogical objectives so as to effectively scaffold students in crossing the 'threshold' of learning.

Awareness of GTA's near-peer perspectives

The hybrid identities of GTAs can mean much more than merely "donkey in the department" (Park & Ramos, 2002). Our two narrative reflections have attempted to justify the unique strengths of being interdisciplinary GTAs, who possess fresh eyes to take a near-peer perspective when engaging students in seminars. By near-peer perspective, it means that we could collaboratively develop deeper understanding and co-create knowledge in the teaching-learning enterprise, although certain unfamiliar puzzles do not seem to immediately make sense to us especially when taking on new modules. This novel near-peer positioning arguably enables us to negotiate what could also count as GTAs' pedagogical expertise and evaluate ourselves in a positive light. Echoing the shifting discourses of deficiency-focused to growth-focused literature, we would like to justify the agentic role of GTAs as being and becoming professional HE practitioners despite the hybrid identities of both research students and teachers.

Conclusion

Starting with unfamiliarity as a unique challenge, we have interrogated the taken-for-granted assumption of GTAs as non-expert or inexperienced in navigating interdisciplinary complexities. This reflective piece contributes to the understanding of unfamiliarity as a multifaceted phenomenon that can be productively approached if we can take a humble stance to acknowledge the signature pedagogies and recognise threshold concepts holistically. In addition, the two narrative reflections in this study have revealed that a unique strength of GTAs lies in their capabilities of taking a near-peer perspective to analyse learning needs of students from the bottom up. Li has reflected on the way teaching an unfamiliar module can be empowering for professional identity construction, while Gao's reflection has demonstrated how a GTA's disciplinary knowledge can be transferable to thrive interdisciplinary teaching.

Taken together, we argue that teaching unfamiliar content can lead to brilliant teaching, even if the content may be initially perceived as alien or associated with previously inaccessible way of understanding the discipline. This article hence concludes with a takeaway message for new GTAs to consciously draw on the visually illustrated reflective prompts (Figure 1) as reference points presented in Methodology when embarking on their journey of professional identity construction and interdisciplinary teaching. It is hoped that this strategic approach to reflective practice can enhance novice teachers' adaptive confidence when confronted with unfamiliarity. While one possible limitation of this study may be insufficient triangulation in dialogue with other stakeholders, we have attempted to incorporate alternative perspectives as complementary source into reflective journaling to see how our interpretations might be validated or challenged. A future direction can be to systematically seek feedback from the students and evaluations from module leaders. Looking forward, this critical reflection can be considered a sincere invitation for fellow practitioners and GTAs to engage critically in reflective journaling and peer dialogues about tackling unfamiliarity as they cross disciplinary boundaries.

Ethical claim

This critical reflection used data from the two authors and obtained their full consent to use the data. This study declares no conflict of interest.

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Appendix 1

APP PGR is the abbreviation of the Academic and Professional Pathway for Postgraduate Researchers who Teach at Warwick. It is a professional programme, externally accredited by Advance HE and leads to a recognised Higher Education teaching status, namely, the Associate Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (AFHEA): https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/academic-development/coursesandpathways/apppgr/. AFHEA candidates are encouraged to continuously self-assess their teaching practice with reference to the UK Professional Standards Framework (PSF) for teaching and supporting learning in higher education 2023 (Advance HE, 2023). To fulfill the partial requirement of the APP PGR assessment, the two authors teamed up as a pair to actively engage in a "Teaching Philosophy Dialogue" that inspired the subsequent series of continued peer dialogues, leading to this paper and a presentation at the inaugural Warwick PGR Teacher Conference. Despite lacking a rigid structure for the whole peer dialogue series, we would like to acknowledge the helpful prompts that structured the initial "Teaching Philosophy Dialogue" between us:

Prompt Number	**Detailed Instructions**
1. Perceived Importance in Teaching	**Describe what feels important to you in teaching** (e.g. the need for inclusion, enthusiasm in subject, good planning, dialogue with students)
2. Disciplinary Contexts	**Describe your disciplinary area and broadly what and who you teach** (e.g. School of Engineering, Fluid Dynamics, first year UG, large groups).
3. An Area of Activity (PSF)	**Choose an Area of Activity in your teaching work** (e.g. assessing lab reports demonstrating and supporting experiments).
4. Subject Knowledge	**Subject knowledge: what specific subject knowledge and/or skill is being learned?**
5. Teaching and Learning Techniques	**Teaching that knowledge : what specific teaching and learning techniques are used to enable this learning?**
6. Professional Values	**Professional values: how do you draw this into your teaching work** (e.g. thinking about inclusivity and diversity, encouraging equal participation, using an evidence base, drawing on the wider context)?

From Clicks to Connections: Applying Activity Theory to Multimodal Materials Design for GTA Development

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Abstract

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) often occupy a liminal space in higher education, tasked with delivering high-quality teaching while receiving limited formal training or pedagogical development. This uneven provision, often shaped by departmental discretion, intersects with the pressures GTAs face to progress in their research, develop their teaching practice, and manage time and wellbeing. In response to this gap, I designed a series of multimodal units, delivered asynchronously, to offer more accessible, flexible, and supportive professional learning opportunities. These units drew on the best principles of online learning (Nilson & Goodson, 2018) and were underpinned by a commitment to personalisation, accessibility, and community-building. To evaluate the impact and limitations of this intervention, I draw upon Carabantes' (2024) Activity Theory framework to critically analyse and design contextually relevant materials, moving beyond static curricular prescriptions toward dynamic, need-responsive pedagogies. In this reflection, I critically examine the contradictions and affordances, ranging from institutional constraints (limited training, time, and recognition) to the mediating tools employed (e.g., Rise, ChatGPT-generated visuals, Padlet). I argue that Activity Theory not only makes visible the tensions in GTA learning contexts but also supported design choices that enhanced engagement and agency through personalisation, accessibility, and community-oriented tasks. This reflection situates material development as a deeply relational and political act, one that demands awareness of power, equity, and evolving identities in higher education. By focusing on multimodal learning design as a third-space intervention (Whitchurch, 2008), I suggest that GTAs' professional learning can be enriched when self-study material design is treated not as an afterthought, but as a central, theory-informed element of pedagogical practice. I conclude with implications for the professionalisation of postgraduate teachers and a call to reimagine materials development training within GTA programmes.

Keywords: Activity Theory; Multimodal Learning Design; Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs); Third-Space Pedagogy; Professional Development in Higher Education.

Navigating the Liminal Space

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) inhabit a liminal space within Higher Education (HE) institutions as they are doctoral candidates, regulated by students' policies, and educators, regulated by staffs' policies. The dual nature of this reality positions GTAs as simultaneously delivering and receiving educational provision. This complexity is broadly situated within an uneven landscape where HE institutions provide different levels of initial teacher training and support. These differences can also occur across Schools within HE institutions, as is the case at St Andrews. In my home university, GTAs are expected to complete 6 hours of mandatory essential training distributed among 4 sessions organised and overseen by the Educational Development Division, part of the International Education and Lifelong Learning Institute (IELLI). This training includes two sessions, Introduction to Teaching at St Andrews, and Assessment and Misconduct at St Andrews, which can be taken synchronously online or face to face. These sessions are centrally designed and offer minimal space for differentiation or personalisation due to the generic nature of the provision and the institutional constraints it entails. Thus, reflecting tensions between a standardised provision which meets institutional requirements and individual learners' needs and preferences.

The essential training also includes a session designed and delivered by students' services which occurs either online synchronously or face to face, and a session on diversity at work delivered asynchronously. The departments are then expected to observe GTAs for developmental purposes and provide further training, more specific to the discipline they will be teaching. While both Introduction to Teaching, and Assessment and Misconduct offer learners a clear overview of what is expected of them using effective teacher-training techniques such as looped input (Woodward, 2003), there is scope for further support and training of GTAs. Crucially, this support is situated within the third space (Whitchurch, 2008) a hybrid domain that blurs the traditional boundaries between academic and professional roles. Specifically, in this case while this provision is overseen by the head of Educational Development, a role situated within teacher development, both Introduction to Teaching, and Assessment and Misconduct are delivered by a Lecturer in TESOL and International Education. Thus, our provision harnesses the expertise of both educational developers and academics to deliver an essential and meaningful provision for GTAs.

As highlighted, further support for GTAs has been identified as an area for further development. Following conversations across the university to address this exciting area of prospective provision two additional workshops were offered in the academic year 2023/2024. The first one, effective lecturing (Appendix I), aimed to prepare GTAs to step into delivering lectures, a beneficial skill in terms of future career development. The second one, linked directly to my area of research, explored effective ways of introducing technology in the classroom (Appendix II). Despite the sessions being well attended, one of the key priorities was making the training accessible. As explained, GTAs are balancing multiple responsibilities which may make engaging with continuous professional development more challenging due to

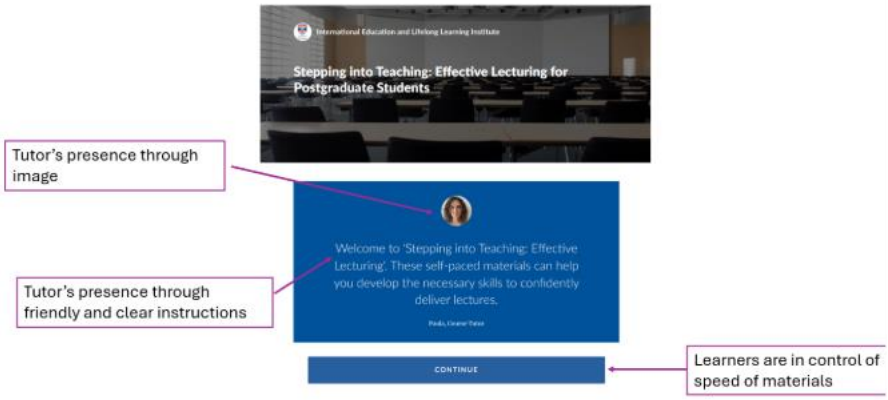
conflicting priorities. To facilitate engagement with CPD and providing a meaningful, flexible, and supportive professional learning opportunity; these workshops were translated into online self-study asynchronous units. These units drew on the best principles of online learning (Nilson & Goodson, 2018) and were underpinned by a commitment to personalisation, accessibility, and community-building.

In this paper, I analyse those resources through the lens of Carabante's (2024) Activity Theory framework providing a blueprint for similar practitioners to design contextually relevant materials, moving beyond static curricular prescriptions toward dynamic, need-responsive pedagogies. I start by discussing the role that GTAs play in our institution, followed by the rationale underpinning the design of the multimodal units. Drawing from Carabate's (2024) activity theory framework I analyse the units to conclude by advocating for materials design as relational artefacts. This critical reflection would be of interest to learning developers and teacher trainers aiming to develop their own suite of online materials to support GTAs development.

The Intervention: Designing for Flexibility and Belonging

The workshops were originally designed with student-centred principles in mind and closely aligned with course aims, thus, the shift to an online learning (OL) environment required careful adaptation to preserve their pedagogical foundation. The commercial platform *Articulate Rise 360* was chosen as the most suitable tool for this transition, given its proven effectiveness for delivering self-paced OL tasks. This approach aimed not only to translate existing content, but to harness the affordances of OL to enhance the GTAs experience. Firstly, *Articulate Rise 360* scroll-based structure enables logical progression while supporting bite-sized engagement. This was particularly effective for introducing complex concepts with clear scaffolding. By presenting the information in bite-size chunks, cognitive overload is avoided while aligning with the principle of learner control (Nilson & Goodson, 2018). This positions the GTAs in control of the amount and speed of material they engage with at any given time (Figure 1).

Figure 1. This figure shows the beginning of effective lecturing online materials



This mode of presenting the information makes it possible for GTAs to engage with the specific sections of the resources they are interested in or even do so around their schedules. The delivery of asynchronous materials not only reduces scheduling barriers but can also support learner autonomy. However, this approach may reduce the sense of community as learners are engaging with materials at their own pace, individually in their own spaces. This can also create a further distance between the lecturer and the GTAs as they are not simultaneously sharing the learning space. To address this, a conscious effort was made to make the lecturer the guiding voice throughout the units (Figure 1). The language used is clear, friendly and free of unnecessary jargon to help GTAs engage with the materials effectively. To facilitate the community building aspect of learning and foster interaction with the lecturer and the other GTAs, Padlet boards were also included. Through Padlet, GTAs could share their reflections, questions and advice to each other. Thus, encouraging the GTAs to see themselves not only as learners, but as part of a developing community, where their contributions are visible and valued.

It has been highlighted how looped input (Woodward, 2003), is a key element of the essential training which is warmly received by the learners. A participant commented in the form evaluation of the 2023/2024 introduction to teaching training "We didn't just hear about methods; we experienced them, creating 'Aha!' moments - so clever and engaging!" To bring this positive impact into the online environment, the multimodal selection of the input was carefully aligned with Nilson & Goodson's (2018) and Mayer's (2008) principles, which, in turn, were used to present best practices when including technology in the classroom (Figure 2). Therefore, these principles informed the design of the multimodal units which included a wide range of media such as interactive activities, drag and drop, audiovisual content and textual input in a scaffolded and coherent manner. Thus, providing the GTAs with the key information to develop their teaching toolkit in an engaging and accessible manner while modelling best practices.

Figure 2. This figure shows lopped input in the OL environment.

Analysing the Intervention: Activity Theory in Action

Activity Theory sees human activities as purposeful and object-oriented resulting from interactions among people, materials and their socio-cultural practices (Carabantes, 2024). In line with Activity Theory, Carabantes (2024) argues that materials should reflect the sociocultural realities of teachers' working environments and align with reflective teaching practices. This perspective positions teachers as materials developers who are "responsive to their socially situated teaching context" (Carabantes, 2024, p. 157), with the ability to evaluate, select, and adapt resources for their sessions. Although developed with language teachers in mind, this model can be extended to GTA training, where it helps to identify and analyse the complex educational realities of both trainers and, to some extent, trainees. In doing so, it enables interrogation of their roles within a form of peripheral provision that ultimately filters back into the core of the university. Carabantes' (2024) framework allows for a systematic analysis of the resources (Appendix I and Appendix II) while uncovering affordances and challenges underpinning their design. Drawing directly from Carabantes' (2024) model, figure 3 shows both multimodal units as activity systems.

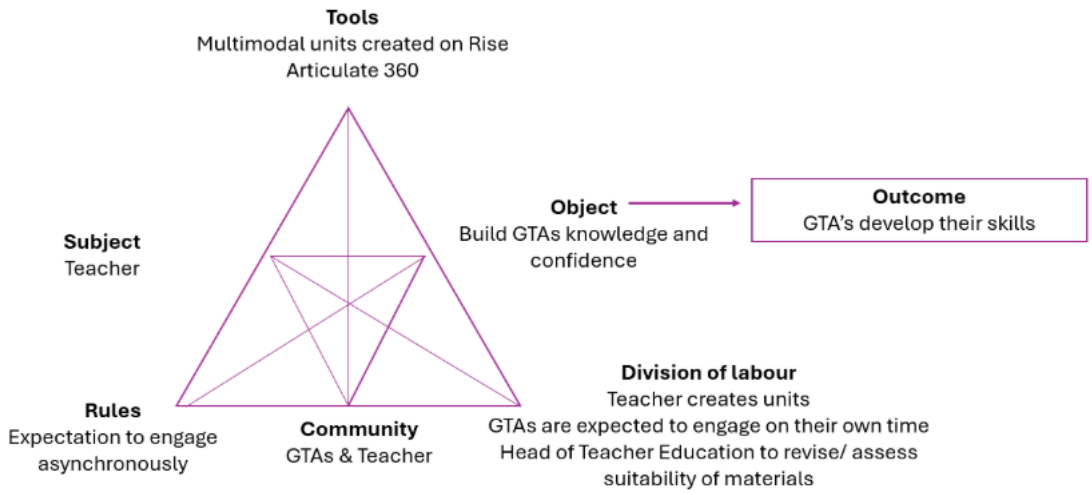


Figure 3. Multimodal resources as activity systems following Carabantes' (2024) model

Thus, following Carabantes' (2024) analytical model and guiding questions, the analysis of the resources can be seen in table 1.

Table 1. Analysis of the multimodal units following Carabantes' (2024) framework

Carabantes' Framework (2024)	Effective Lecturing	Using Technology Effectively
Subject	Tutor designs the unit with the pedagogical assumption that lectures can be interactive, reflective, and theoretically informed rather than transmissive.	Tutor acts as both designer and facilitator, drawing on pedagogical expertise and a commitment to integrating technology critically.
Tools	The unit employs Padlet, Rise-based interactivities, and slide decks (physical tools), alongside psychological tools such as Rosenshine's principles of instruction, levels of processing, and models of lecturer stance (King & Kirk, 2022).	The unit utilises digital platforms (Wordwall, videos, Moodle) as physical tools, and draws on Mayer's (2008) principles of cognitive load and Nilson & Goodson's (2018) models of effective online pedagogy as psychological tools

Rules	Learners are expected to engage with these materials asynchronously. When delivering their own lectures, they are expected to foster reflective engagement before, during, and after lectures. Expectations include integrating theory with practice and aligning delivery with learning outcomes.	Learners are expected to engage with these materials asynchronously. When developing their own OL content, they are expected to follow accessibility guidelines and prioritise simplicity to avoid cognitive overload. The institutional emphasis on digital competence underpins these rules.
Community	The immediate users are GTAs preparing to lecture, with peers functioning as a collaborative learning community. Stakeholders include teacher's supervisors and the institution requiring effective GTA training.	The immediate users are GTAs preparing to include technology in their sessions, with peers functioning as a collaborative learning community. Stakeholders include teacher's supervisors and the institution requiring effective GTA training.
Division of Labour	The tutor curates and structures the unit; learners assume responsibility for self-testing and reflective application.	The tutor curates and structures the unit; learners assume responsibility for self-testing and reflective application.
Object (Motive)	To foster confidence and competence in lecture delivery, moving beyond transmission towards inclusive, evidence-informed teaching.	The central aim is to build learners' confidence in selecting and deploying technology underpinned by strong pedagogical principles.
Outcome	GTAs acquire practical strategies for structuring lectures, engaging audiences, and applying theoretical principles to teaching practice.	An interactive module that raises critical awareness of technology enhanced learning, equipping GTAs to evaluate digital tools against strong pedagogical principles.
Contradictions	• Primary: Learners' potential prior assumptions (lectures as passive delivery) clash with the course's emphasis on interactivity. • Secondary: Tension between traditional institutional lecture	• Primary: Technology is framed as both enabler and risk factor, producing learner ambivalence. • Secondary: Societal drive for edtech innovation vs. learners' need for different modes to enhance their learning experience.

	norms and the interactive approaches encouraged here. • Tertiary: The introduction of flipped/active learning conflicts with dominant models of transmittal lecturing mode. • Quaternary: Potential misalignments between training (dialogic lecturing) and departmental cultures where GTAs are constrained by senior staff expectations.	• Tertiary: Emerging pedagogies of critical digital literacy vs. entrenched habits of "tech-for-tech's-sake." • Quaternary: Divergence between this unit and disciplinary practices where tech uptake may remain uneven.

As can be seen in Table 1, Carabantes' (2024) Activity Theory framework can be productively extended beyond language education to the design and analysis of GTA development resources. By analysing Effective Lecturing and Using Technology Effectively through the lens of the activity system, I was able to identify both affordances and systemic contradictions that shape GTAs' learning. Rather than treating such contradictions as weaknesses, Activity Theory foregrounds them as productive tensions that can potentially drive innovation. This is particularly clear in tensions arising between transmissive lecture traditions and dialogic practices, or between the promise of educational technology and the risk of cognitive overload.

Crucially, this analysis positions materials not as neutral carriers of information but as relational artefacts embedded within the sociocultural realities of HE. Designing GTA training through this lens highlights how peripheral provision, often marginalised or standardised, can in fact serve as a lever for cultural change within the institution. By modelling multimodal, theory-informed, and reflective practices, these units not only equip GTAs with practical strategies but also invite a rethinking of how universities conceptualise and support early-career teaching.

As highlighted, the reality of GTAs entails balancing multiple responsibilities. They are in the process of developing their researcher's toolkit by completing their doctorates while developing their teacher's toolkit by being GTAs. This duality is not only clear in the policies that constrains their students and staff identities but also in the demands on their time that developing both toolkits requires of them. A flexible learning space that harnesses the power of online learning while fostering a sense of community and modelling the reality of the contradictions within teaching and learning seems an effective way to address the need of further training while acknowledging the complex realities of GTAs. By embracing contradictions as catalysts for change, it is possible to move GTA provision from the periphery to the heart of institutional practice, reimagining it as a space where equity, belonging, and pedagogical innovation intersect.

Concluding Thoughts

Engaging with Carabantes' (2024) framework sharpened my own practice as a materials designer. It forced me to see contradictions as productive tensions that reveal the politics of higher education. Specifically, recognising GTAs' liminality made visible how institutional provision often reproduces inequities by treating their CPD as peripheral with limited opportunities for GTAs to explore how to continue developing their teaching toolkit in a way that acknowledges their complex realities and the expertise they already have. For me, designing multimodal units underpinned by Activity Theory was not just a pedagogical task but also an act of advocacy, a way of recognising how GTA development deserves the same theoretical grounding and institutional commitment as other forms of staff training. This critical reflection has also shown the importance of recognising GTAs as a professional learning community shaping institutional narratives that define what, and who, counts in teaching and how targeted interventions can foster the success of the next generation of teachers.

Ethical Claim

This paper is my reflection as a practitioner therefore not ethical approval is required. I designed the materials presented by myself and the framework used for analysis has been reference in line with good academic practice. Please note that there is an anonymised anecdotal comment collected as part of the evaluation of the service feedback, in line with UTRECT guidelines not ethical approval is needed as this was not part of a research project. Please note that learners who complete the evaluation of the service feedback do so anonymously and consent to have their quotes included in research and promotional materials.

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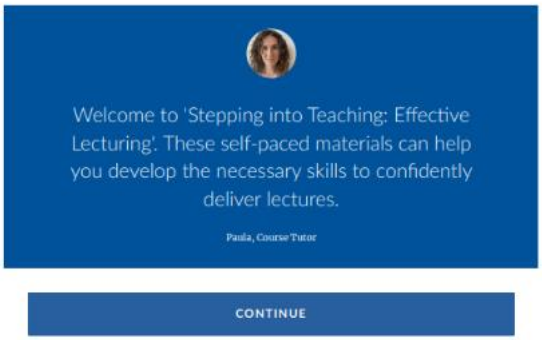
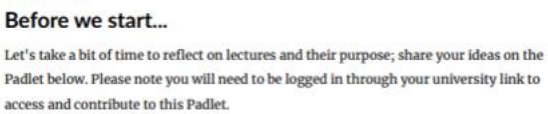
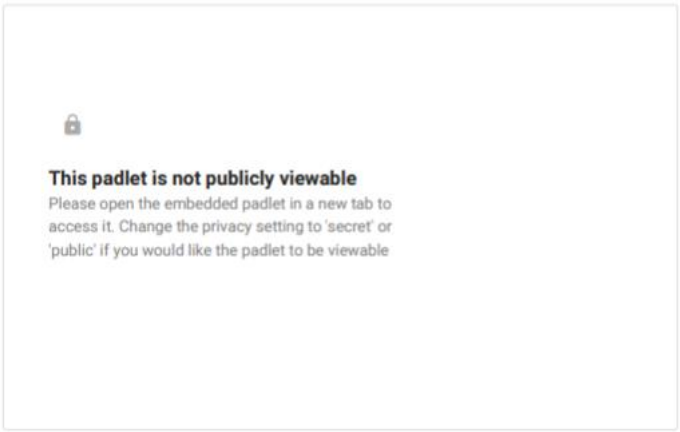
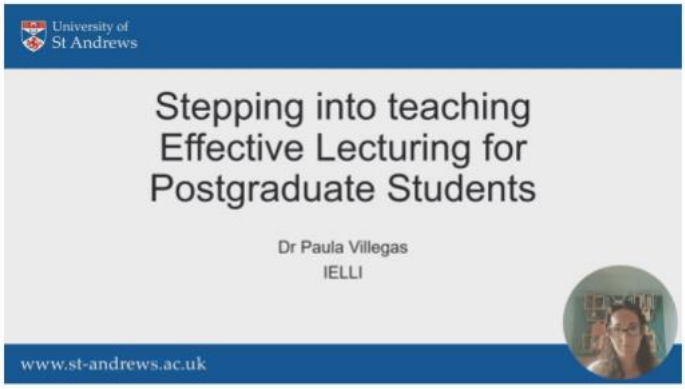
Appendix I Stepping into Teaching: Effective Lecturing for Postgraduate Students









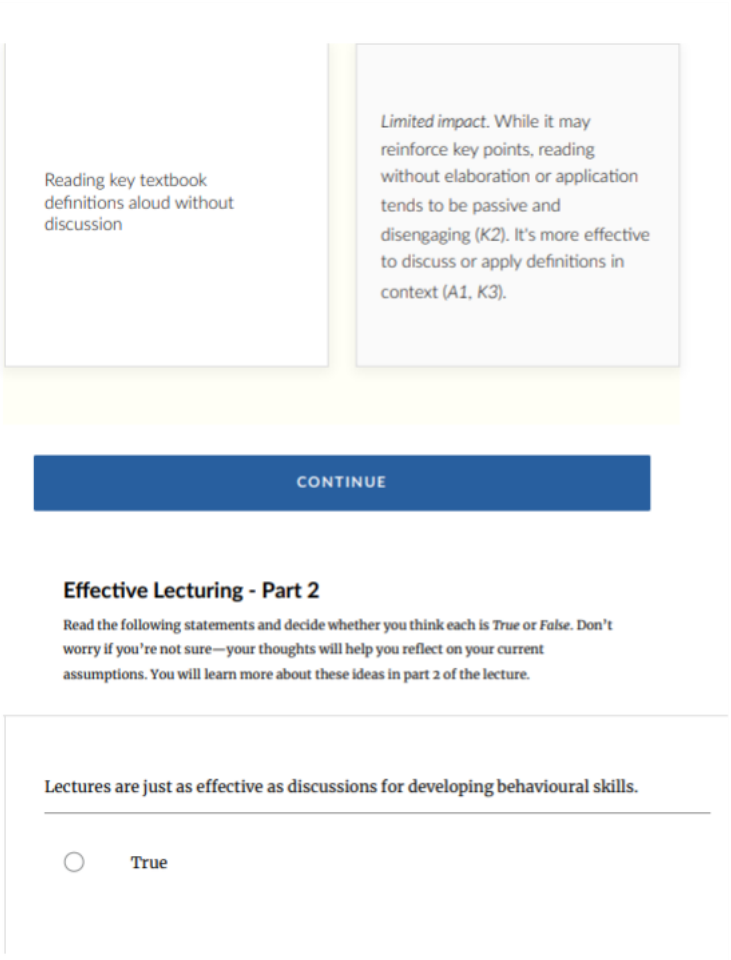
PPT **Stepping into teaching Effective Lecturing for Postgraduates PART 1.pptx**
10.2 MB

Spicing up a lecture?

Read the strategies below. Do they facilitate learning? Why? Once you are ready, flip the cards to compare your ideas with ours.

Telling a personal anecdote loosely related to the topic	*Potentially useful*, but only if clearly linked to the learning outcomes. Otherwise, it may distract or feel irrelevant. Personal stories can humanise the content and build rapport (*K3*, *V1*), but they must serve a pedagogical purpose.
Presenting 10 slides with detailed bullet points and no images	*Less effective*. Dense text can overwhelm learners and reduce engagement (*K2*). A more visual and minimal slide design supports cognitive processing and retention (*K3*).

Including a one-minute pause halfway through for students to jot down questions	*Highly effective*. Pauses promote active learning and reflection, helping students process and retain information (*A2*, *K2*). It also encourages inclusive participation (*V2*).
Giving a brief quiz using an interactive platform like Mentimeter or Qualtricks.	*Very effective*. Interactive quizzes boost engagement, provide instant feedback, and support formative assessment (*A3*, *K4*). They also offer low-stakes opportunities for students to check understanding (*V3*).


Reading key textbook definitions aloud without discussion
Limited impact. While it may reinforce key points, reading without elaboration or application tends to be passive and disengaging (*K2*). It's more effective to discuss or apply definitions in context (*A1*, *K3*).
CONTINUE
Effective Lecturing - Part 2
Read the following statements and decide whether you think each is *True* or *False*. Don't worry if you're not sure—your thoughts will help you reflect on your current assumptions. You will learn more about these ideas in part 2 of the lecture.
Lectures are just as effective as discussions for developing behavioural skills.
True

- ○ False

SUBMIT

Most people can hold around 7 pieces of information in their short-term memory.

- ○ True
- ○ False

SUBMIT

A distinctive or unusual item is more likely to be remembered.

- ○ True
- ○ False

SUBMIT

Students learn best when they are given large amounts of material at once.

- ○ True
- ○ False

SUBMIT

Flipped learning just means recording your lecture for students to watch.

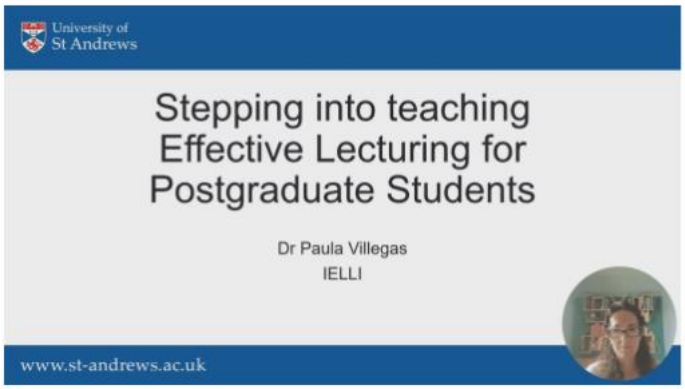
- ○ True
- ○ False

SUBMIT

CONTINUE

Effective Lecturing - Part 2

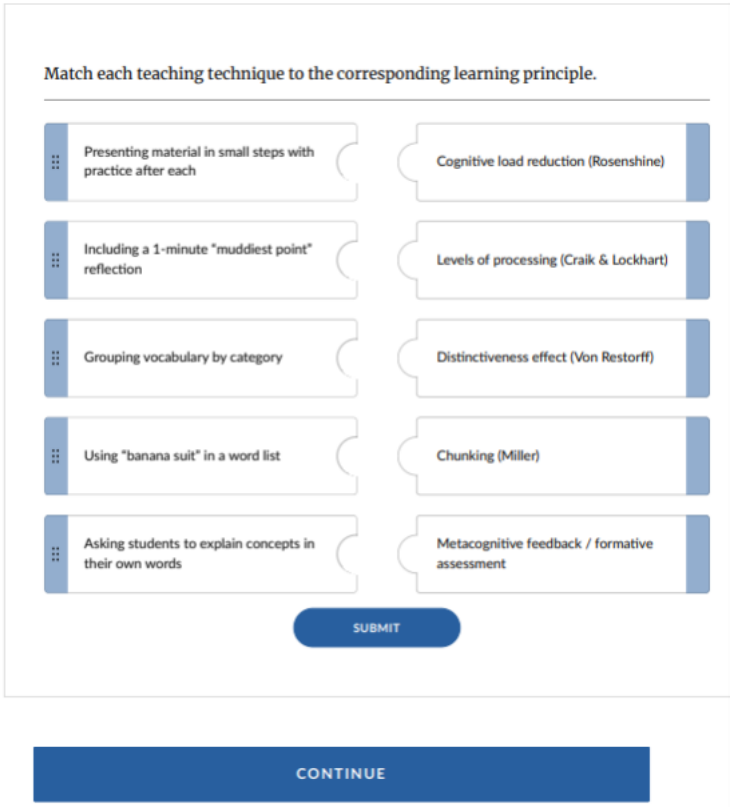
This is the second part of the session. You can follow the video and download the slides.



PPT **Stepping into teaching Effective Lecturing for Postgraduates - PART 2.pptx**
13.6 MB

Let's revise!

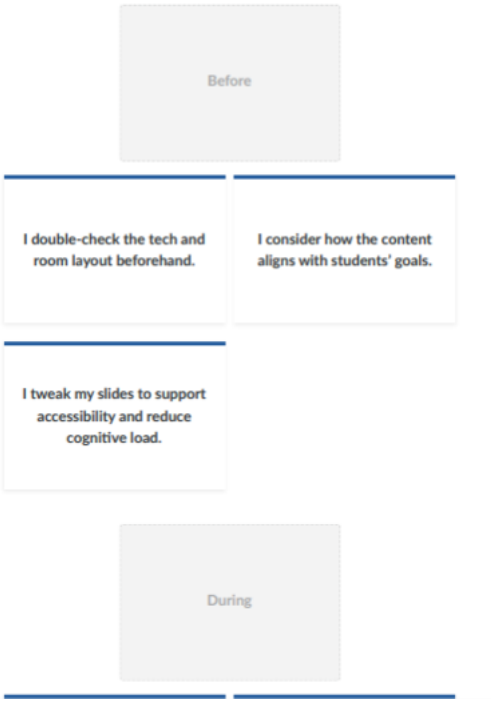
Match each teaching technique to the corresponding learning principle.

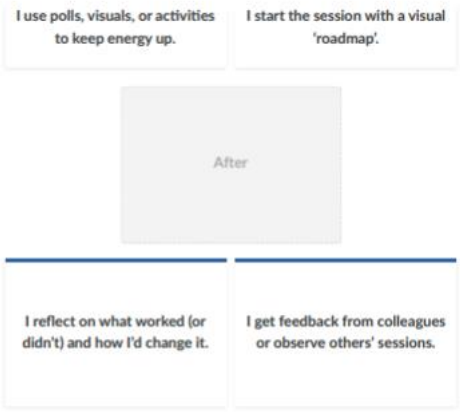


CONTINUE

Effective Lecturing - Part 3

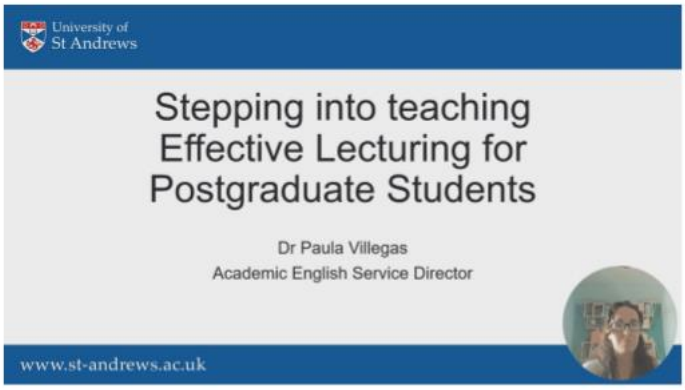
Think about a session you've taught (or supported). Which of the following do you *already* do at each stage—**Before**, **During**, and **After** the session? Drag each statement into the correct category.





Effective Lecturing - Part 3

This is the third part of the session. You can follow the video and download the slides.

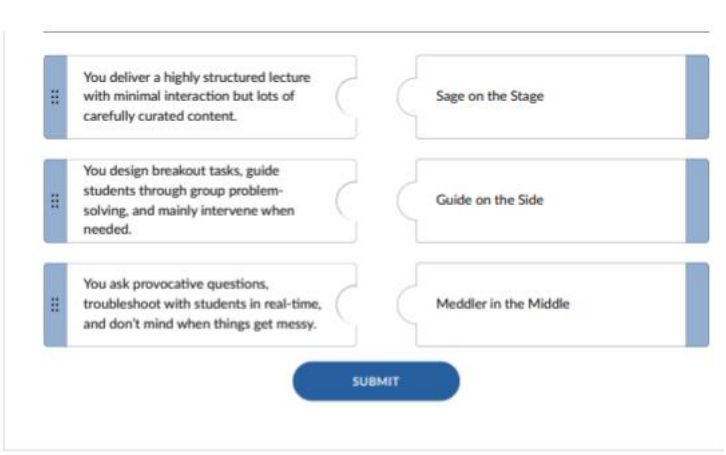


PPT **Stepping into teaching Effective Lecturing for Postgraduates PART 3.pptx**
14.5 MB

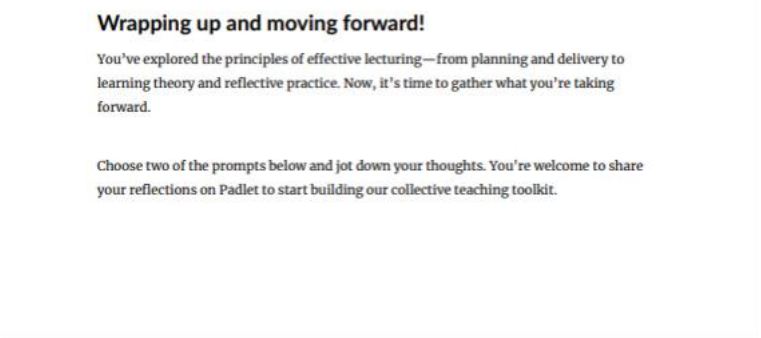
Let's revise

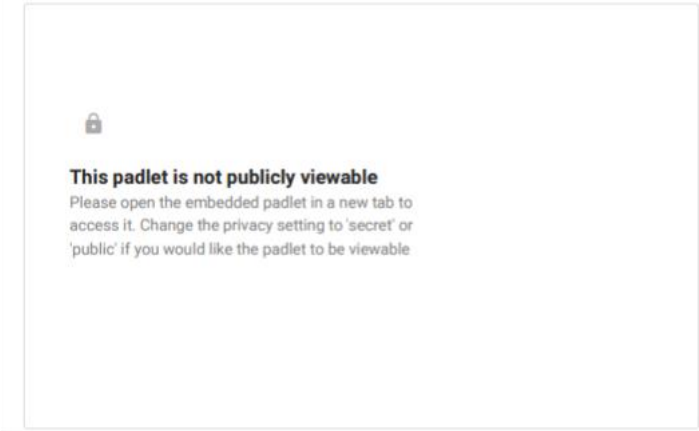
Match each lecturer's description to the metaphor it best fits. There's no one "right" way to teach, but recognising our teaching stance can help us adapt!

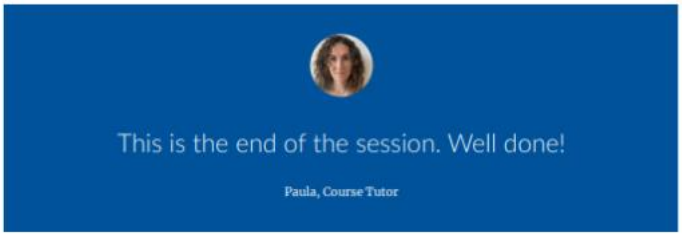
Match each lecturer description to the metaphor it best fits.


You deliver a highly structured lecture with minimal interaction but lots of carefully curated content.
Sage on the Stage
You design breakout tasks, guide students through group problem-solving, and mainly intervene when needed.
Guide on the Side
You ask provocative questions, troubleshoot with students in real-time, and don't mind when things get messy.
Meddler in the Middle
SUBMIT


CONTINUE


Wrapping up and moving forward!
You've explored the principles of effective lecturing—from planning and delivery to learning theory and reflective practice. Now, it's time to gather what you're taking forward.
Choose two of the prompts below and jot down your thoughts. You're welcome to share your reflections on Padlet to start building our collective teaching toolkit.


This padlet is not publicly viewable
Please open the embedded padlet in a new tab to access it. Change the privacy setting to 'secret' or 'public' if you would like the padlet to be viewable


This is the end of the session. Well done!
Paula, Course Tutor

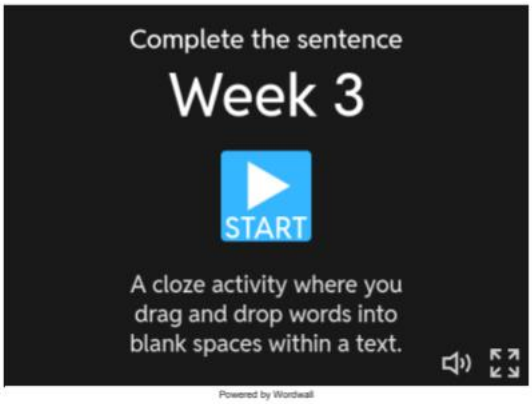
Appendix II Using Technology Effectively

What do we need to do when including technology in our sessions?

A reading that we highly recommend is Nilson and Goodson (2017), Online teaching at its best. It is available through the library and has practical tips alongside pedagogical principles to apply in your session.

Why don't you check your knowledge by completing the activity below?

Don't worry about getting them all right! Once you have engaged with the materials, you will have a much better idea!



Technology in the classroom

This video will help you develop your understanding of technology in education.

Too much of a good thing?

One of the key best things about technology can also be one of the main issues! Technology allows us to use multimodal channels to present and check information, but can it get too complex for our learners? Mayer (2008) proposes the following five evidence-based and theoretically grounded principles for reducing extraneous processing. Why don't you try to link the principle with the definition?

The Five Evidence-Based and Theoretically Grounded Principles for Reducing Extraneous Processing, as They Appear in Mayer (2008, p. 763)

Redundancy	Reduces extraneous materials.
Coherence	Highlights essential material.
Signalling	Avoids duplication (for instance not adding on-screen text to a narrated animation).
Spatial Contiguity	Presents printed words next to the corresponding graphics.
Temporal contiguity	Corresponding animation and narration are presented simultaneously.

SUBMIT


Make sure that technology works for you and your learners. Happy teaching!
Paula, Course Tutor

Pause, Reflect, Dialogue: AI as a Reflective Partner in GTA Teaching Practice

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Abstract

This paper explores how structured, intentional reflection can help Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) navigate fragmented teaching roles and develop stronger professional identities. Drawing on Schön's (1983) and Killion and Todnem's (1991) models of reflection, I adapted the Five-Minute Reflection Rule—brief, focused reflections before and after teaching sessions—to build sustainable habits that foster agency, confidence, and pedagogical intentionality. Extending Brookfield's (1995) four lenses, I incorporated generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as ChatGPT and Grok as dialogic partners. Rather than producing content, these tools acted as reflective scaffolds, prompting new questions, surfacing blind spots, and reframing teaching dilemmas. Through examples from my GTA experience, I show how combining structured reflection with AI-mediated dialogue produced tangible classroom changes while exposing the limitations and risks of algorithmic input. I propose a sociotechnical lens as an extension to existing reflective frameworks, emphasizing how human reflection and technological mediation co-construct reflective processes. Ethical concerns—including bias, data privacy, and institutional responsibility for AI literacy—are also addressed. I argue that when approached critically and complementarily, AI can lower barriers to reflection and enrich professional learning without replacing the relational and dialogic dimensions of human reflection. For GTAs and early-career educators, even five minutes of disciplined, critically informed reflection can transform teaching practice and identity formation.

Key words: Reflective Practice, Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), Five-Minute Reflection Rule, Micro-Reflection, Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Education, Professional Identity Development

1. The Need to Pause and Notice

Working as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) at Warwick offered valuable but fragmented teaching experiences. My role often involved episodic seminar support and marking responsibilities without the continuity of leading a full module. Balancing these duties with doctoral research and mentoring sometimes felt overwhelming and led to moments of self-doubt. I often felt reactive—moving from task to task with limited agency and visibility as a proactive educator.

Recognising the need to slow down and connect more intentionally with both students and teaching tasks, I turned to reflection as a means of making sense of my professional learning. In Schön's (1983) terms, I was caught up in action and risked missing opportunities to reflect in practice. Compared with previous teaching roles, this GTA position involved diverse student cohorts and pre-designed materials, which challenged my assumptions and prompted me to develop a more structured reflective routine to support identity formation and confidence.

This paper explores how I adapted the Five-Minute Reflection Rule to my GTA practice and extended it through dialogic engagement with artificial intelligence (AI) tools. Drawing on established reflective frameworks (Schön, 1983; Killion & Todnem, 1991; Brookfield, 1995), I argue that structured self-reflection, supported by AI as a reflective partner, can scaffold professional development for GTAs. While peer dialogue remains central, AI-supported reflection offers accessible, low-stakes opportunities for critical inquiry. The Five-Minute Reflection Rule builds on existing notions of micro-reflection (Ryan & Ryan, 2013) by operationalising them into a systematic, time-bounded routine that integrates reflection-for-action and reflection-on-action. Whereas micro-reflections typically occur informally, the Five-Minute Rule formalises these brief pauses into a repeatable structure explicitly linked to professional identity formation and iterative pedagogical design.

This paper contributes to scholarship on reflective practice and GTA professional development in two ways. First, it extends existing reflection models by integrating the Five-Minute Reflection Rule with Schön's and Killion and Todnem's frameworks, showing how brief, structured reflection before and after teaching can foster agency, confidence, and professional identity in roles often marked by fragmentation. Second, it expands current discussions on digital tools in reflective practice (e.g., Novoa-Echaurren et al., 2025; Sellnow , 2025; L'Enfant, 2024) by positioning generative AI as a sociotechnical reflective partner that complements, rather than replaces, human dialogue. While scholars such as Bearman, Ryan, and Ajjawi (2022) have explored how AI is reshaping higher education discourse, little attention has been paid to how GTAs specifically can mobilise such tools for structured, critical reflection. Addressing this gap, the paper offers a theoretically grounded yet practical model for supporting early-career educators' professional learning through the integration of self-reflection, dialogic inquiry, and emerging technologies. The Five-Minute Rule thus laid the groundwork for a more dialogic and transformative reflective process—one that I later expanded through engagement with AI partners and observed in the evolving dynamics of my teaching practice.

2. Developing a Reflective Routine

To reconnect with my teaching practice and make sense of my role as a GTA, I turned to the Five-Minute Reflection Rule, a technique I had first developed during my work as a teacher-research mentor. In that earlier context, I discovered that brief, disciplined pauses could transform otherwise fleeting experiences into learning opportunities. By allocating just five minutes before and after sessions to jot down thoughts, I created a structure that made reflection less daunting and more habitual.

Adapting this practice to my GTA work meant deliberately pausing before each seminar to set intentions and after each session to capture immediate impressions. I initially framed these as short notes—bullet points, keywords, and fragments rather than polished prose—so the practice remained manageable. This five-minute routine was sustained throughout the term, with pre- and post-seminar reflections written weekly. Before class, I wrote about my aims, possible challenges, and expectations of student engagement. After class, I noted observations, emotions, surprises, and critical incidents. Over time, I developed guiding questions that anchored this process:

- What am I aiming to achieve today?
- What concerns or challenges might arise?
- What surprised me during the session?
- What would I change for next time?

Although deceptively simple, these prompts shaped a rhythm that encouraged intentionality, observation, and iterative improvement. They also helped counter the fragmented nature of GTA work. Moving between multiple modules and groups often left me feeling like a temporary participant in other people's classrooms; these reflective pauses gave me a sense of ownership and continuity across disparate teaching episodes.

There were also emotional benefits. Writing even a few sentences before teaching gave me a moment to centre myself and manage the emotions experienced before entering a class. Recording reflections immediately afterwards captured raw impressions that might otherwise have been lost to memory. In this sense, the Five-Minute Rule acted both as a cognitive scaffold and an emotional checkpoint, helping me process the affective dimensions of teaching as well as the practical ones.

My use of the Five-Minute Rule aligns with what Ryan and Ryan (2013) describe as micro-reflections—short, intentional pauses that create "reflective spaces" in otherwise fast-paced academic contexts. However, the Rule extends this concept in two ways. First, it operationalises micro-reflection as a systematic before-and-after routine rather than an occasional pause, embedding reflection directly into the temporal rhythm of teaching. Second, it connects these brief moments to Schön's (1983) reflection-in/on/for-action cycle, transforming micro-reflection from a spontaneous act into a structured habit that supports ongoing identity formation. These small, structured interventions made reflection feasible amid competing demands. They also resonate with Larrivee's (2008) argument that reflective practice

is not just about “thinking back” but about cultivating habits of mind that transform teaching into ongoing inquiry.

In the GTA context, the Five-Minute Rule thus became more than a time-management strategy; for me it was a way to actively construct my newly developing professional identity as a GTA. Pausing before and after teaching enabled me to frame myself not simply as a deliverer of content, but as an educator engaged in inquiry, experimentation, and growth. This small, intentional practice seeded a shift from reactivity toward a more deliberate, agency-oriented stance as a GTA.

3. Extending Reflection: AI as a Reflective Partner

Alongside Brookfield’s lenses to explore my own reflections, I experimented with AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Grok) as reflective partners. I did not use them for teaching content or administration but positioned them as interlocutors to deepen reflection. Across a term, I engaged with AI approximately once or twice per week, typically spending 10–15 minutes per interaction. These exchanges often followed my written pre- and post-class notes- or at a later time- allowing me to extend or question my initial reflections while the experiences were still fresh. After writing my pre- and post-class notes, I shared selected excerpts with AI, inviting questions, theme spotting, and identification of potential blind spots.

This shifted my self-reflections from solitary journaling to conversational inquiry, similar to dialogue with a critical peer. For example, I prompted:

- What recurring themes, emotions, or behaviours do you notice across my reflections?
- What blind spots or biases might I be overlooking?
- What new reflection prompts could help me dig deeper?

One reflection noted my difficulty in transitioning from informal conversation to structured discussion. AI asked, “What helps you feel ready to shift from informal to structured teaching work?” This led me to introduce short check-in activities (e.g., asking students, “What’s one idea from the reading that caught your attention?”), which balanced rapport with focus.AI thus acted as a low-stakes reflective scaffold—not replacing peer dialogue but preparing me for more focused conversations with colleagues.

4. What Changed (and What Didn’t): Reflection in Action

Over time, these reflective practices did more than generate insights; they led to tangible shifts in my teaching. One notable change was how I approached moments of silence in seminars. Previously, I tended to rush to fill these pauses with content, interpreting them as disengagement. Through reflective dialogue with AI, I reconsidered silence as a potential space for processing and voluntary participation. I began intentionally extending wait times and framing silence as an active part of the learning process, which resulted in more thoughtful student contributions and deeper discussions. This represented a form of reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983), where in-the-moment awareness and adjustment became integral to my teaching decisions.

Similarly, by anticipating challenges identified in my pre-class reflections, I experimented with new facilitation techniques, such as using think-pair-share activities early in sessions to increase engagement. These anticipatory adjustments align with reflection-for-action, using prior insights to shape future practice. These changes, grounded in structured reflection, improved classroom dynamics and my confidence as a facilitator, demonstrating that the reflective process was not only analytical but transformative in shaping my practice.

Not all AI-supported reflections were productive, however. In one instance, I shared a reflection about students' reluctance to participate in group work. The AI suggested introducing competitive elements, such as awarding points for contributions, as a solution. While this seemed plausible, it clashed with the collaborative, low-pressure atmosphere I was trying to foster and risked alienating quieter students. Acting on this suggestion initially reduced participation and shifted the classroom dynamic in ways I found counterproductive. Reflecting on this misstep taught me an important lesson about the limits of AI-generated advice: while it can prompt creative ideas, these must always be critically evaluated against pedagogical aims, classroom context, and student needs. This stage of analysing outcomes after teaching corresponded to reflection-on-action, reinforcing the iterative cycle through which insight informed both immediate and future pedagogical choices. Ultimately, the experience underscored that critical reflection involves not only recognising successful strategies but also learning through misjudgements, which often yield the most enduring professional insights.

These instances illustrate the full spectrum of Schön's reflective framework: reflection-for-action (planning), reflection-in-action (adapting), and reflection-on-action (evaluating), each supported and deepened through structured and AI-mediated reflection. And most importantly this experience deepened my awareness that AI is best used as a question generator rather than a prescriptive source of solutions.

5. Theoretical Underpinnings

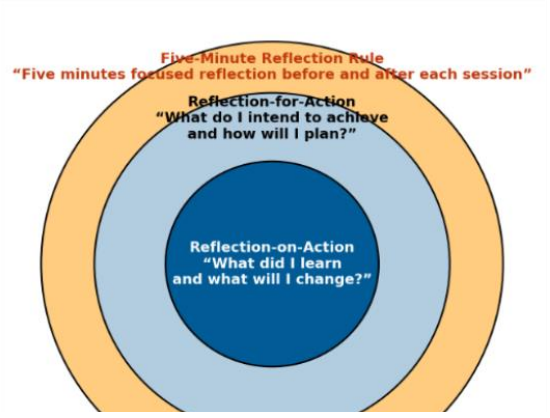

Figure 3The Five-Minute Reflection Rule integrating reflection-for-action and reflection-on-action.

This practice aligns with established reflection models. Schön (1983) distinguishes reflection-in-action (thinking on one's feet) and reflection-on-action (looking back afterwards). My post-class notes exemplified reflection-on-action, while pre-class notes introduced a proactive element resonating with reflection-for-action (Killion & Todnem, 1991). This forward-looking habit shifted me from task-oriented delivery toward mindful, intentional pedagogy.

Brookfield's (1995) four lenses of critical reflection offer complementary

perspectives for examining and improving teaching practice. They include the autobiographical lens (reflecting on one's own experiences and assumptions), the students' lens (considering how learners perceive and experience teaching), the colleagues' lens (drawing on peer feedback and dialogue), and the theoretical lens (using research and theory to interrogate practice). Engaging with all four helps teachers move beyond a single viewpoint, uncover hidden assumptions, and develop more responsive, informed, and critically grounded practices.

While my focused journaling foregrounded the autobiographical lens, I attempted to simulate the students' and colleagues' perspectives by using AI to pose critical questions and alternative interpretations. However, AI's contribution here is not unproblematic. Whereas the colleagues' lens is grounded in human relationships, shared contexts, and tacit pedagogical knowledge, AI-generated feedback lacks these relational and contextual dimensions. It may surface valuable alternative framings, but it can also obscure nuance or oversimplify complex dynamics, especially when reflective questions are shaped by training data rather than lived experience. This tension highlights both the potential and the limits of AI as an extension of the colleagues' lens: it can prompt new lines of inquiry but cannot replicate the trust, empathy, and situated understanding that underpin genuine collegial dialogue.

Building on Brookfield's (1995) foundational framework, I propose the concept of a sociotechnical lens as a tentative extension to reflective practice models in higher education. This lens foregrounds the dynamic interplay between human reflection and technological mediation, viewing generative AI tools as active participants that shape rather than merely mirror reflective processes. While the term "sociotechnical" has been widely used in fields such as information systems and human–technology interaction (e.g., Orlikowski & Iacono, 2001; Suchman, 2007; Dourish, 2001), it has not, to my knowledge, been systematically applied to reflective models in teacher development. I use the term here to describe a perspective that foregrounds the interplay between human reflection and technological mediation, in which generative AI tools do more than passively mirror human thinking — they actively shape the reflective process through their embedded biases, training data, design logics, and affordances. Unlike Brookfield's original lenses, which are rooted in human experience, relationships, and discourse, a sociotechnical lens highlights how reflection is increasingly co-constructed in interaction with algorithmic systems. For GTAs, this matters because it encourages not only the interrogation of their own assumptions but also a critical examination of the assumptions and power dynamics embedded in the technologies they use. I offer this lens as a conceptual provocation rather than a definitive addition to Brookfield's model, aiming to stimulate further inquiry into how emerging technologies might reconfigure reflective practice and professional learning in higher education.

Table 1.
Brookfield's (1995) Four Lenses and the Proposed Sociotechnical Lens

Lens	Focus	Source of Insight	Purpose in Reflection
Autobiographical	How do my experiences, values, and emotions shape my teaching?	Self-reflection on personal practice	To identify assumptions and patterns in one's own teaching
Students'	How do learners perceive and experience my teaching?	Student feedback, dialogue, and observation	To understand impact and responsiveness of teaching
Colleagues'	How might peers view or interpret my teaching practices?	Peer dialogue, observation, mentoring	To gain alternative perspectives and reduce blind spots
Theoretical	What can existing research and theory reveal about my practice?	Educational literature and reflective frameworks	To connect practice with broader pedagogical knowledge
Sociotechnical (proposed)	How do human–technology interactions shape reflection and practice?	Dialogues with generative AI tools and awareness of their affordances and biases	To examine how reflection is co-constructed with technological mediation and power dynamics

6. Ethical and Critical Considerations

My reflections with AI surfaced ethical and practical concerns. AI literacy proved critical: as Walter (2024) argues, effective engagement requires skill in crafting prompts and evaluating responses. At times, outputs were overwhelming or superficial, requiring careful filtering.

Generative AI also raises questions of bias, privacy, and epistemic authority. Yan et al. (2023) show how large language models reproduce biases from training data, aligning with my experience of occasionally generic or culturally insensitive outputs. Sharing classroom reflections with external systems also introduced data protection risks. Dotan et al. (2024) call for responsible adoption frameworks—

transparency, governance, and values-based principles—that I found necessary in deciding what to share.

AI also challenges ownership of reflection. Bauer's (2025) ISAR model warns against over-reliance that substitutes reflective labour. Francis et al. (2025) note that although generative AI may free cognitive capacity, there is a risk of diminished critical thinking or superficial engagement if it is used uncritically. For me, the danger lay in leaning on AI for questions rather than practising the discomfort of self-interrogation. Reflection, however, is ultimately relational and collective rather than solitary. As Novoa-Echaurren et al. (2025) remind us, collegial closeness remains essential. While AI provided a low-stakes space to test ideas, it cannot replace the empathy, trust, and solidarity of peer dialogue. My stance is that AI should act as a catalyst, not a substitute, embedded within broader reflective communities. At the same time, reflection on AI use cannot remain solely at the individual level; broader institutional responsibilities must also be addressed. Universities have a crucial role in supporting GTAs to engage with AI tools ethically and critically through clear policies, structured training, and ongoing dialogue about responsible use. As Dabis and Csáki (2024) argue, higher-education institutions are beginning to develop governance frameworks that address accountability, transparency, human oversight, and inclusiveness in AI use. Embedding such guidance into GTA development programmes is essential if reflective practice with AI is to remain ethical, equitable, and aligned with educational values. Without institutional support, GTAs risk navigating complex ethical terrain in isolation, which can undermine both the depth and safety of their reflective practices. Ultimately, my ethical stance is that AI should be approached as a reflective partner within a human-centred, values-driven practice—used critically, transparently, and always in service of pedagogical integrity.

7. Insights and practical implications

Drawing on my experiences, I identify three key insights that may resonate with other practitioners seeking to improve their teaching practice.
First, keep reflection simple and time-efficient. The Five-Minute Rule makes reflection sustainable and, over time, a manageable habit even under heavy workloads.

Second, aim to make reflection multidimensional by incorporating multiple perspectives. Combining Schön's, Brookfield's, and the sociotechnical lens broadened my own insights. However, caution is essential when inviting external perspectives—especially from AI—into your reflective process.

Finally, use AI as a complement, not a replacement. While AI supported my confidence and inquiry, its use must remain grounded in peer dialogue and ethical awareness.

8. Conclusion: Short Time, Big Influences

This paper traced my journey as a GTA navigating fragmented teaching roles alongside doctoral study. Integrating the Five-Minute Reflection Rule with Schön's and Brookfield's frameworks supported professional growth and identity formation. Extending this practice with AI illustrated how emerging technologies can scaffold reflection when used critically and complementarily.

The central insight is that AI can lower barriers to inquiry and help surface assumptions in a low-stakes space, yet credibility, empathy, and belonging still depend on human dialogue. Reflection is not optional but integral to professional practice. For GTAs, even five minutes of disciplined reflection can reshape teaching, sustain growth, and strengthen identity—especially when supported by both human and technological partners. Looking ahead, future research should examine how AI-mediated reflection can be tested and adapted across GTA cohorts and disciplines to foster more connected, sustainable reflective communities.

Ethical Statement: This paper is based on the author's own reflective and autoethnographic accounts of professional practice as a Graduate Teaching Assistant. It does not involve external participants or sensitive institutional data; therefore, formal ethical approval was not required. The author affirms that the work adheres to the ethical principles of integrity, transparency, and responsible self-representation, and that there are no conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, related to the conduct or publication of this research.

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Curriculum from the Margins: Experience of Building a Dalit-Feminist Business English Programme as an Untrained Facilitator

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Abstract

In September 2024, while working as a part-time Business English facilitator at a grassroots NGO in India, I was entrusted with a unique but revolutionary task- to design an English curriculum for Business and Job-readiness from a Dalit-Feminist standpoint. As a post-graduate student of Cultural Studies with no formal training in teaching, language education, or material development, I undertook the project with equal measure of self-doubt and ambition, and a need for steady income- a perfect specimen of a GTA. This paper offers a critical reflective account of my journey as a GTA over the course of two years of working with the NGO. Unlike a conventional academic setting, the NGO foregrounded socio-political sensitivity and learner autonomy. It forced me to draw upon and question my own past experiences as a student, which I unconsciously began to replicate as a facilitator. Working with young Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi women learners (ages 18-40), I found myself developing creative ways to translate critical theories like intersectional theory, critical pedagogy, and Dalit and feminist scholarship into accessible and context-sensitive content. These experiences highlighted how significant the role of a GTA can be, precisely because of our liminal positionality as both in and out of the rigid frameworks of academia. GTAs occupy a space of possibility and probabilities, not weighed down by institutionalised teacher training, where pedagogic methodologies can be reimagined in real time. This in-betweenness allows for experimentation that is messy, imperfect, but also deeply generative, and holds the power to lead us to a social justice-oriented pedagogy in praxis.

Keywords: Liminality, Language Education, Dalit-Feminist standpoint, Material Development, Socially-engaged pedagogy

Introduction

In 2023, during the first year of my PhD, I was looking for a flexible online job that I could manage alongside my research to ensure a steady income. After applying to several posts, I began working as a part-time Business English facilitator with a grassroots NGO in India. The learners were young Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi (DBA) women, between the ages of 18 to 40, who aspired to start their own businesses. After working with the NGO for more than a year and facilitating two such cohorts, I was entrusted with a task that was both daunting and exciting: to design an English curriculum for business and job readiness from a Dalit-Feminist standpoint.

At first, I felt entirely unqualified. I was a PhD scholar in Cultural Studies, had a background in Literature. I had no formal training in pedagogy, curriculum design, or language education. While I had some experience teaching adults (through tuition classes) and hoped to become a professor one day, designing a Business English curriculum that was also critical of caste, class, and gender seemed too complex for someone like me. But the NGO saw me differently. They valued my two years of experience with the learners and my lived experience as a Bahujan woman trained in critical caste and gender studies. They argued that these insights are more valuable than those of a professionally trained curriculum developer. So, with a mixture of self-doubt, ambition, and the pragmatic need for a steady income, I accepted the challenging task. In that sense, I am a perfect specimen of a GTA- undertrained and part-time, as they are always in need of money!

This paper offers a critical reflective account of my journey as a GTA over the course of these two years. The NGO is an important location here because, unlike a conventional academic setting, it foregrounds socio-political sensitivity, flexibility, and learner autonomy. The paper begins by situating the NGO and the learners to establish the pedagogical context. I then recount two pivotal early experiences that shaped my role as a facilitator and illustrate the beginning of my journey as a GTA. I then turn to the need of building the new curriculum and my learnings on this journey, which make me realise the possibilities of Graduate Teacher Assistantship.

Context and Learners

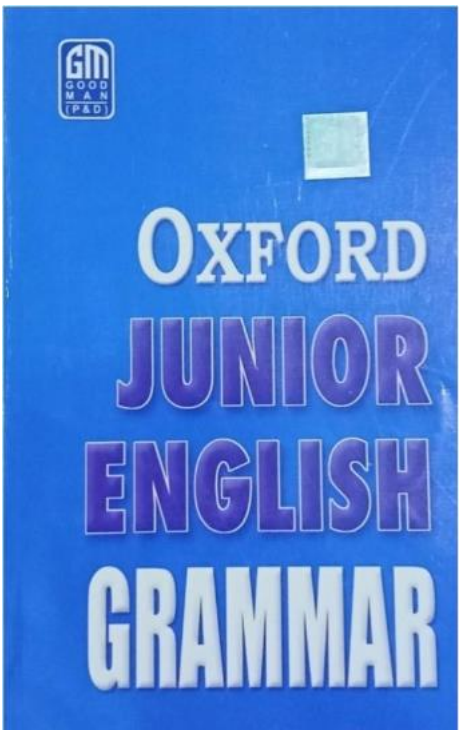
The NGO where I worked is based in New Delhi. One of its flagship initiatives is an incubator programme designed to create sustainable livelihood opportunities and spaces of social affirmation for DBA women and non-binary people. It trains participants who aspire to start businesses in entrepreneurial skills, financial literacy, digital literacy, personality development, and business communications in English. These learners come from diverse age groups and life stages. A few were enrolled in colleges, often distance-learning programmes, completing diplomas or

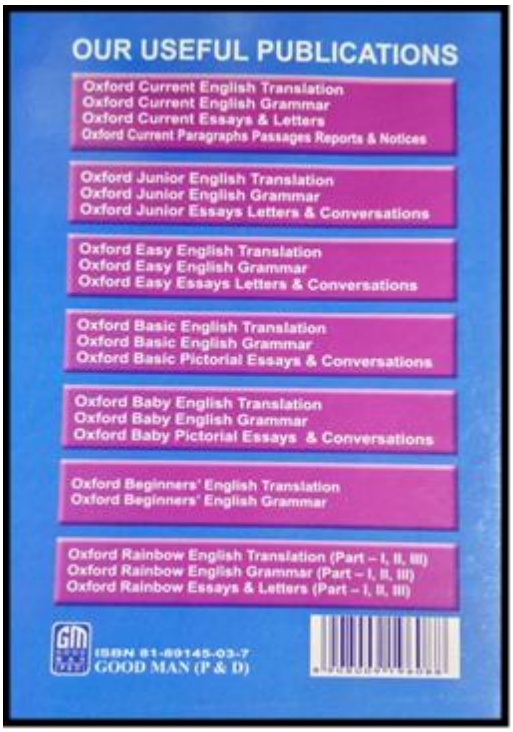
undergraduate degrees, but most came from non-rigorous academic backgrounds and had taken long breaks from formal education. Some were married and were responsible for domestic work and caregiving for children and elders.

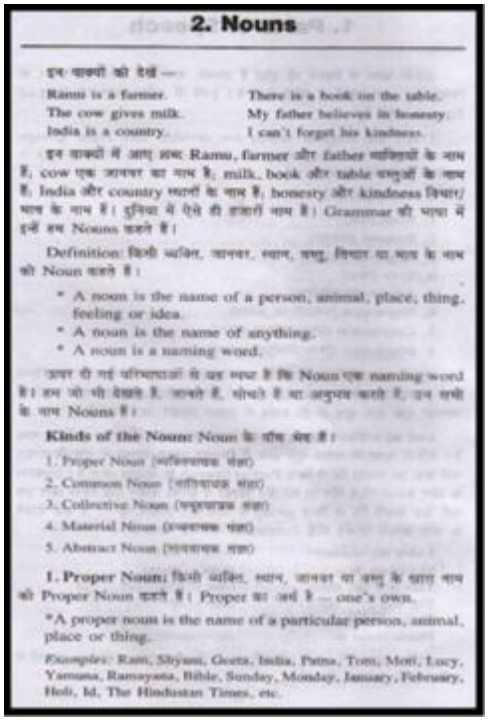
Early Experiences- Beginning as a GTA

Within the first week of joining the NGO, I had two significant learnings. The first came from the job description itself. I was to be a facilitator, not a teacher. The role of a facilitator is a clear shift away from an instructor or an educator who transmits knowledge; a facilitator is in the process *with* the learners. They might be subject-experts, but they walk alongside the learners, co-create conditions for their voices to emerge, and enable them to reach their potential. This role felt less hierarchical and offered greater freedom to experiment with class structures and more learner-centred pedagogies.

The second lesson came during my initiation into the NGO. The very next day of my job interview, I was asked to teach tenses in English as a demo-class for the current cohort of women, with the selection board present. This was a task I was confident that I would do well. I was all set- I knew all the rules to the T. Like most Indians, my introduction to English had been in translation from my first language, Hindi. The textbook I grew up with, *Oxford Junior English Grammar* (which was not an Oxford publication- it was only named that), and another for translation, by R.K. Singh, trained us to convert Hindi sentences into English, memorising rigid grammar rules.







2. Nouns

इन वाक्यों को देखें —

Ramu is a farmer. There is a book on the table.
The cow gives milk. My father believes in honesty.
India is a country. I can't forget his kindness.

इन वाक्यों में आए शब्द Ramu, farmer और father व्यक्तियों के नाम हैं, cow एक जानवर का नाम है, milk, book और table वस्तुओं के नाम हैं, India और country स्थानों के नाम हैं, honesty और kindness विचार/भाव के नाम हैं। दुनिया में ऐसे ही हजारों नाम हैं। Grammar की भाषा में इन्हें हम Nouns कहते हैं।

Definition: किसी व्यक्ति, जानवर, स्थान, वस्तु, विचार या भाव के नाम को Noun कहते हैं।

* A noun is the name of a person, animal, place, thing, feeling or idea.
* A noun is the name of anything.
* A noun is a naming word.

ऊपर दी गई परिभाषाओं से यह स्पष्ट है कि Noun एक naming word है। हम जो भी देखते हैं, जानते हैं, सोचते हैं या अनुभव करते हैं, उन सभी के नाम Nouns हैं।

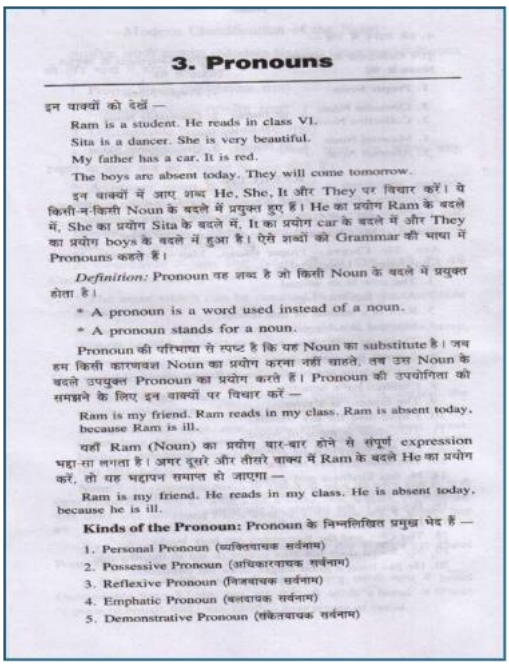
Kinds of the Noun: Noun के पाँच भेद हैं :

1. Proper Noun (व्यक्तिवाचक संज्ञा)
2. Common Noun (जातिवाचक संज्ञा)
3. Collective Noun (समूहवाचक संज्ञा)
4. Material Noun (द्रव्यवाचक संज्ञा)
5. Abstract Noun (भाववाचक संज्ञा)

1. Proper Noun: किसी व्यक्ति, स्थान, जानवर या वस्तु के खास नाम को Proper Noun कहते हैं। Proper का अर्थ है — one's own.

*A proper noun is the name of a particular person, animal, place or thing.

Examples: Ram, Shyam, Geeta, India, Patna, Tom, Moti, Lucy, Yamuna, Ramayana, Bible, Sunday, Monday, January, February, Holi, Id, The Hindustan Times, etc.



3. Pronouns

इन वाक्यों को देखें —

Ram is a student. He reads in class VI.
Sita is a dancer. She is very beautiful.
My father has a car. It is red.
The boys are absent today. They will come tomorrow.

इन वाक्यों में आए शब्द He, She, It और They पर विचार करें। ये किसी-न-किसी Noun के बदले में प्रयुक्त हुए हैं। He का प्रयोग Ram के बदले में, She का प्रयोग Sita के बदले में, It का प्रयोग car के बदले में और They का प्रयोग boys के बदले में हुआ है। ऐसे शब्दों को Grammar की भाषा में Pronouns कहते हैं।

Definition: Pronoun वह शब्द है जो किसी Noun के बदले में प्रयुक्त होता है।

* A pronoun is a word used instead of a noun.
* A pronoun stands for a noun.

Pronoun की परिभाषा से स्पष्ट है कि यह Noun का substitute है। जब हम किसी कारणवश Noun का प्रयोग करना नहीं चाहते, तब उस Noun के बदले उपयुक्त Pronoun का प्रयोग करते हैं। Pronoun की उपयोगिता को समझने के लिए इन वाक्यों पर विचार करें —

Ram is my friend. Ram reads in my class. Ram is absent today, because Ram is ill.

यहाँ Ram (Noun) का प्रयोग बार-बार होने से संपूर्ण expression भद्दा-सा लगता है। अगर दूसरे और तीसरे वाक्य में Ram के बदले He का प्रयोग करें, तो यह भद्दापन समाप्त हो जाएगा —

Ram is my friend. He reads in my class. He is absent today, because he is ill.

Kinds of the Pronoun: Pronoun के निम्नलिखित प्रमुख भेद हैं —

1. Personal Pronoun (व्यक्तिवाचक सर्वनाम)
2. Possessive Pronoun (अधिकारवाचक सर्वनाम)
3. Reflexive Pronoun (निजवाचक सर्वनाम)
4. Emphatic Pronoun (बलदायक सर्वनाम)
5. Demonstrative Pronoun (संकेतवाचक सर्वनाम)

Figure 1: R K Singh's *Oxford Junior English Grammar* (pp 2 & 8; 2000)

A few examples of the Hindi sentences would be –

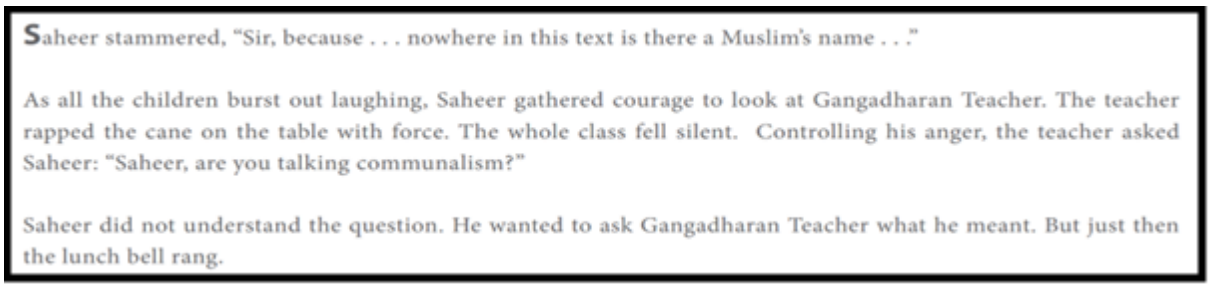
Ramu is a farmer.

Ram goes to school.

Sita is a dancer.

Shyam plays cricket. (Sinha, 2000)

Our vocabulary and sentence structures were limited to these Hindi sentences. So, in my demo class on the Simple Present Tense, I unconsciously reproduced similar examples. After class, the founder of the NGO asked me not to use these names, pointing out that they were drawn from Hindu mythology. By using these names in my examples, I was inadvertently participating in the politics of exclusion rampant in the majoritarian communalism in India currently. This affected me quite strongly. The lesson was reinforced when, later that week, I read a children's story titled “Textbook” by Nuaiman, translated as part of the *Different Tales* project by Anveshi Research Centre for Women’s Studies, India.



Saheer stammered, “Sir, because . . . nowhere in this text is there a Muslim’s name . . .”

As all the children burst out laughing, Saheer gathered courage to look at Gangadharan Teacher. The teacher rapped the cane on the table with force. The whole class fell silent. Controlling his anger, the teacher asked Saheer: “Saheer, are you talking communalism?”

Saheer did not understand the question. He wanted to ask Gangadharan Teacher what he meant. But just then the lunch bell rang.

Figure 2: “Textbook” by Nuaiman

The story follows Saheer, an 11-year-old Muslim boy searching for a Muslim name in his school textbook to feel a sense of belonging in the school and to relate his lived experiences with the stories in his textbook (Nuaiman, 2008). But he finds none. When he asks his teacher about this, he is accused of being communal- a term he does not even understand. This story sharpened my awareness of the world-making capabilities of the examples and stories we tell in classrooms. It also made me realise that learning flows better when the content is relatable. I also realised that despite the neutralizing language of ‘facilitation’, I was still in a position of power, and my unconscious biases carried real weight. I needed to be accountable for these biases.

Both these early experiences shifted how I thought about education. My role was not only to teach English but also to hold space. This is surprising to me, especially since I came from a Cultural Studies background where critical thinking and social justice are central. I should have known better. I myself belong to a backward caste and am trained in anti-caste politics. Yet, these issues had never felt urgent in practice, because they had been normalised. These experiences also made me reflect on the huge gap that exists between theoretical training and praxis. But once I saw them and recognised my biases, I could no longer unsee them.

Know Your Learner and What They Need

As I spent more time with the NGO, my scepticism grew. Despite our efforts and flexibility, I did not see much measurable progress in the learners' English proficiency, at least by conventional evaluation standards. I also began to doubt the usefulness of 'Business English' for their lives and businesses. Most learners came from rural and semi-urban socio-economic locations with little to no exposure to English in daily life. Running their local businesses would not require them to speak English regularly. What use, then, were the rules of converting active to passive voice?

And yet, I knew what English meant to people like us in the DBA community. English carries deep emotional and political weight. It offers us a sense of dignity and of self-worth. Learning and speaking English is a form of political and cultural assertion for Dalit selfhood- a symbolic protest against generations of systemic erasure. In 2010, a temple of Angrezi Devi (English Goddess) was erected by Chandra Bhan Prasad, a self-taught Dalit social psychologist and writer, who called the goddess "the symbol of Dalit Renaissance".

However, I knew there had to be a better way of working with English language education. The NGO's curriculum, though trauma-informed, was still built around grammar. The modules and chapters were titled after grammar topics. This reflected our collective training in English through a rigid grammar-first approach: memorise rules, convert sentences, avoid mistakes. My focus was on my learners who wanted to learn English, not necessarily for flawless grammar, but because the act of speaking even a few sentences made them feel visible, heard, and respected.

One class brought this home. That day, the learners were not paying attention and seemed tired. So, I stopped the formal class and initiated a visualisation activity with some deep breathing exercises. I asked them to vividly imagine themselves as businesswomen running their businesses: entering their store, engaging with their teams, and interacting with clients. Then, I asked them to write down their future dreams- their dream sentences. Afterwards, I used these sentences to explain the future tense. But rather than treating them merely as grammar exercises, I reminded the learners that their sentences were important in themselves, and in passing, I said- Look, they also happened to be in future tense.

This moment pushed me to rethink English language education altogether. I sat down with the people at the NGO to think about a different way of language literacy that centred around nurture, affirmation, and collective self-making, rather than grammar. What if English could be taught from a Dalit-Feminist standpoint as a means of care and agency, rather than correctness? To my surprise, the NGO encouraged me to turn this vision into a new curriculum book that spoke more directly to the lives and aspirations of our learners. When I hesitated, citing my lack of training, they reassured me that my deep understanding of the learner's positionalities was enough, and perhaps even more valuable than formal expertise.

When I began researching, I was taken aback by the complete absence of any substantial critical reflection of English language education in India. There was no template to follow, as there was no English language textbook, certainly not for Business English, that adopted a critical, justice-oriented lens. Language, especially English in today's context, is a very powerful tool through which we build our sense of self and make meaning of the world around us. And yet, no one seemed to be interrogating the politics of language education in this way. I began to see how revolutionary a marginalised perspective on curriculum-making could be. This raised the central question for me- *What would it mean to build a Business English curriculum from a Dalit-feminist perspective? And what role could I play in it?* I knew it had to be about *Choice, Agency, Dignity, Care and Kindness, and Critical thinking.* And my role was to put it into practice through creative problem-solving and experimentation.

Towards an Ethical Pedagogy- Putting Theory in Praxis

To incorporate care, choice, and critical thinking into the curriculum meant reimagining the very structure of a conventional textbook. A linear book that starts from one chapter to another offers little freedom for diverse learning styles and needs. I wanted the textbook to be purpose-driven, organised around functions of communication and situations of use. Further, the book should enable greater movement across topics based on the needs, interests, and motivation of the learners. Thus, I designed the book around thematic modules: *Meeting someone, Describing your day, Responding to others, Visiting a city,* and *Presenting your ideas*. The modules were, in turn, divided into sections that were internally hyperlinked, so a learner could move laterally across sections that resonated with them based on similarity or associations.

The content of the modules was colour-coded into four learning modes: *Discover*, *Understand*, *Reflect*, and *Practice.* Colour-coding immediately signals the kind of engagement expected from the learner. *Discover* introduces the topics with stories, dialogues, reading comprehensions, and short activities. *Understand* explains the grammar and structure, presented as just-in-time notes rather than full chapters. For example, as learners discover phrases for describing their day, a short note takes them through the rules of the simple past tense in English. In the *Reflect* section, learners interact with larger questions of caste, gender, and everyday realities, both in the politics of language and life. So, as we learn about genders in English grammar, we also reflect on the politics of pronouns in our lives. While learning phrases on navigating a city, we talk about the need for women to reclaim public spaces and political movements that ask women to walk through the night to make nights safe for women. Finally, the *Practice* section provides activities and exercises- roleplays, readings, writing tasks, and group discussions- to master these learnings.

Thus, a learner could start from Module 0, the introductory module, which lays down some fundamental concepts in the English language, like a launchpad, and

could jump across sections based on their motivation. A fellow might begin with “Introducing Yourself” and then leap to “Writing Emails” to understand how to introduce themselves over email, without worrying about whether she had completed “Daily Routines.” This non-linear structure, resembling a game of snakes and ladders, gave learners both **agency** and **flexibility**- crucial for the women of diverse age groups and social locations, balancing multiple roles at home and work. This also works for learners who struggle with long periods of attention. In addition, the book is full of digital resources- audio clips, videos, articles, games, and exercises, that the learner can access to help with their personal learning styles. It also suggests collaboration with other subject-facilitators- Digital Literacy, Personality Development, and the Entrepreneurship Training, so that learners can experience holistic growth.

Moreover, the book also provided room for storytelling, self-reflection, and emotional processing. Reading comprehensions drew excerpts from Dalit and feminist writings, allowing learned to engage with lived experiences of marginalisation. At the same time, I recognised that such texts can be triggering. Drawing from my own experience of instantly skipping any materials with “trigger warning”, I embedded choice differently. Instead of warnings, the book includes notes for facilitators and learners. The facilitator's note seeks the facilitator to come in, create a safe environment, and explain the intention of the comprehension. They are needed to explain to the learners why the comprehension is placed there and seek their consent to engage with the comprehension at the moment, or if not, give them a choice about what they would like to do instead. This gives learners genuine choice in deciding how and when to approach difficult material. These choices and deep engagements with the needs of the learner embody my commitment to caring, nurturing, and ethical pedagogic methods.

Recognizing that the position of the facilitator is nevertheless more powerful than the learner, I felt the need to train the facilitator as well. Therefore, I added short notes throughout the book to guide the facilitator, who, like me, may not come from teaching backgrounds, and who may or may not share the social and caste location of their learners. The book thus doubles as a small intervention into teacher education itself, highlighting the lack of inclusive, critical training in India as teachers are often unprepared for the emotional and structural labour this work demands.

The Broader Perspective- Reflections on GTA Positionality

My experience with the NGO led me to reflect on the possibilities that GTAship offers. The NGO definitely helped further because of its flexibility and commitment towards social change and equity. However, these reflections offer broader pedagogical implications for GTAs in diverse contexts.

Initially, without any formal training in language education and curriculum development, I felt like an imposter in a space that is ideally reserved for an expert. But as the work unfolded, I began to see my ‘untrained’ position as less of a weakness. I was free from conventional models that might have weighed me down, and I would have to unlearn them first to allow for my imagination and creativity towards developing a socially-engaged pedagogy. Similarly, positioned somewhere between students and formal faculty, GTAs occupy a liminal space, again, with no formal training. This ‘inbetweenness’ carries greater freedom as it takes one away from the authoritative posture of a ‘teacher’, and by being one step closer to a student, it allows a GTA to learn with the learner, rather than instructing over them. A GTA is also closer to the experiences and struggles of a learner and can thus engage with them better. Further, for a GTA, recognising this closeness of experience and stature by not projecting the conventional posture of a teacher can enable them to respond directly to the learner’s needs in real time with empathy and add nuance to classroom education, making it more inclusive. However, this recognition is not automatic. It requires constant introspection and self-checking, especially when our own unconscious biases surface and seep into our pedagogic practices. Self-reflection is key to breaking patterns that we unconsciously repeat as the authority of a ‘teacher’ creeps in subtly. GTAship carries the scope for rethinking and rewiring the fixed pedagogical models that institutions have traditionally been following, by not just transferring content but by questioning who education is for, whose voices it includes, and whose it excludes.

All of this can be very messy, time-consuming, and emotionally laborious for both parties- the GTA and the learners. Yet, it is necessary. These are very difficult, messy questions, but questions nonetheless. Answering them or trying to reach an answer takes a lot of courage and work from both the facilitator and the learner. Translating critical theories into accessible and context-sensitive practice is never seamless, but it forces us to confront uncomfortable truths. My central realisation is that curricula are always political documents. And the only way they can be justice-oriented is when we build our curricula from the margins, not for the margins. This requires someone willing to experiment and take risks, rather than someone weighed down by conventional pedagogical training. GTAs can be these risk-takers, and if they later move into formal academic positions, they will carry the spirit forward.

Ethical Claim

There is no conflict of interest. The NGO consents to the paper.

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Exploring the complexity of GTAs' co-teaching experience through zine-making: a collaborative self-study

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Suji Ko is a PhD student in Applied Linguistics, focusing on intercultural mediation and mentoring. Her research investigates how intercultural learning through mentoring can support migrants in new environments. Her research context involves navigating multiple roles and identities, and her thesis examines researchers' reflexivity in managing these complexities. She has co-taught select BA and MA dissertation writing sessions. She is passionate about fostering intercultural competence in both educational and non-educational contexts and supporting inclusive learning environments. She is also interested in how researchers perceive themselves in dynamic research settings and navigate the challenges of role complexity.

Abstract

GTAs bring their own educational values into their teaching (Robertson & Yazan, 2022), making it important to examine factors shaping their instructional decisions. While some studies addressed identity tensions or peer support among GTAs, research on their co-teaching experiences is limited.

This collaborative self-study investigates the evolving identities of two graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), one experienced, one novice, using zine-making as a data collection tool in a co-teaching context. Drawing on Zhuo's (2024) conceptualisation of zine-making as a narrative inquiry method, we created our personal zines to reflect on our co-teaching experiences. The experienced GTA focused on how her teaching strategies shifted with different co-teachers and how these shifts shaped her identity over time. The novice GTA's zine captured her first two co-teaching experiences, exploring how uncertainty, collaboration and mentorship shaped her emerging sense of self as a teacher. Upon completing our zines, we shared them through oral presentations, extending the narrative beyond the page and enabling dialogic engagement.

Qualitative content analysis, one of the analytic approaches demonstrated in Zhuo's (2024) study, was used to analyse both the visual-textual elements of the zines and the transcripts of our oral zine presentations. This process revealed four key themes in GTAs' co-teaching, including identity negotiation, relational dynamics, emotional trajectory and key factors for GTAs' learning. Specifically, it identifies trust, clear communication, mutual respect, and structured reflection as crucial factors in leveraging co-teaching for effective professional development of GTAs. The study concludes that zine-making offers a powerful, reflexive methodology for GTAs to articulate the complexity of their co-teaching experiences and the development of their professional identities. As such, this study adds to the emerging literature on GTA teaching and offers practical insights for programs seeking to optimise co-teaching models for GTAs' professional development. Additionally, it proposes and demonstrates zine-making as an effective approach to researching GTAs' experiences and identity.

Key words: GTAs; Co-teaching; Identity negotiation; Emotional trajectory; Power dynamics.

Introduction

Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) play a pivotal role in supporting teaching and learning in higher education institutions (HEIs) across the globe (McLeod et al., 2025; Zhuo & Li, 2024). As doctoral students employed to teach and support learning in HEIs, GTAs are juggling their multiple roles as students, teaching assistants, and researchers (Bale & Anderson, 2022). These multiple identities pose a central challenge for GTAs, as they are constantly involved in the process of identity work through negotiating an emerging professional identity (Winstone & Moore, 2016). Research has indicated that GTA teacher identities are strongly influenced by the behaviours and values of others, including students, other GTAs and course leaders, and the autonomy of the individual (Bale & Anderson, 2022). One of the scenarios where GTAs have direct interactions with their fellow GTAs or faculty members is co-teaching. According to Howlett and Nguyen (2020, p. 411), co-teaching is “an interdependent process of planning and sharing responsibilities”. As such, GTAs can face complex identity challenges in co-teaching contexts, particularly when they co-teach with faculty or more experienced GTAs, considering possible power differentials. However, to date, despite the growing amount of research on GTA’s identity (e.g., Bale & Anderson, 2022; Campbell et al., 2021; Slack & Pownall, 2023; Winstone & Moore, 2016); and on GTA’s co-teaching (e.g., Dyer, 2019; Harter & Jacobi, 2018; Howlett & Nguyen, 2020), no research to our knowledge has been conducted to explore how the complexities of GTAs’ co-teaching experiences influence the development of their identity.

This study, using the collaborative self-study design, investigates the co-teaching experiences of one experienced GTA (the first author of this article) and one novice GTA (the second author of this article) through zine-making (Zhuo, 2024), to uncover the complexities of their identity negotiation during co-teaching. Qualitative content analysis of the two zines and zine narratives reveals the four key themes in GTAs’ co-teaching, including identity negotiation, relational dynamics, emotional trajectory and key factors in GTAs’ learning. Specifically, it identifies trust, clear communication, mutual respect, and structured reflection as crucial factors in leveraging co-teaching for effective GTA professional development.

Therefore, this study not only fills the gap in the current literature but also offers in-depth and nuanced insights into GTA’s co-teaching and identity negotiation by providing the contrast between the experienced and novice GTA perspectives. Moreover, it adds to the emerging call for employing zine-making, a visual and narrative methodology, as a reflexive, emotionally resonant way for GTAs to articulate their personal experiences and emotional complexities (Li & Liu, 2025). Despite the limitation of a small sample size, this study highlights the identity tensions that GTAs experience in their co-teaching and strategies that they employ to navigate these tensions in different co-teaching contexts. These findings offer valuable insights for both GTA support systems and GTAs themselves to harness the full potential of the co-teaching partnerships for their professional development.

Literature review

GTA identity

Teachers, or those who aspire to become teachers- in this study, GTAs - are continually engaged in negotiating and constructing their identities within educational contexts (Lindahl & Yazan, 2019; Miller, 2009; Winstone & Moore, 2016). In particular, GTAs, who simultaneously inhabit multiple roles as students, teachers and researchers (Bale & Anderson, 2022; Robertson & Yazan, 2022), encounter the complexity of situated identity work.

Existing scholarship identifies a range of factors that shape GTAs' identities, contingent on specific contexts. Bale and Anderson's (2022) study demonstrated that GTAs' sense of being teachers was mediated by students' responses and by the extent to which course leads or lecturers articulated expectations and recognised their roles, shaping the legitimacy that GTAs attributed to their professional identities. The duration of teaching experience also played an important part: as GTAs accumulated more experience, their identification with the role of teacher became increasingly consolidated. Similarly, Robertson and Yazan (2022) highlighted that professional autonomy influenced GTAs' identity formation, as their participant often experienced internal tensions when institutional directives, particularly mandated teaching approaches, conflicted with her personal pedagogical beliefs and professional principles.

While these factors can complicate identity work, such tensions may also act as catalysts for growth, enabling GTAs to develop strategies for overcoming difficulties and strengthening their sense of professional self (Robertson & Yazan, 2022). One possible strategy here is reflection (Eick & Reed, 2002), as it can help mitigate the impact of role conflict on the formation of role identity and support the development of a resilient identity capable of withstanding differing expectations and demands.

Co-teaching: General opportunities and challenges

Co-teaching has been recognised as an instructional strategy that supports pedagogical development and has been implemented across diverse professional domains, including the education of teachers (e.g., Beach et al., 2008). While there are different types of co-teaching, depending on teaching models and responsibilities of participants (Colson et al., 2021), building on the conceptual framing of Haag et al. (2023), the present study defines co-teaching as a collaborative endeavour involving two instructors within the same disciplinary field, in which all participants are equally involved in the full range of teaching responsibilities such as lesson planning and classroom instruction.

Co-teaching offers multifaceted potential. Teachers can foster their professional development by expanding their instructional repertoires and enhancing their confidence in adopting innovative methods (Scherer et al., 2020). Especially, when a novice is paired with a more experienced teacher, they are able to incorporate elements of their colleagues' pedagogical approaches (Beach et al., 2008). Furthermore, observing and engaging with other teachers' teaching methods

encourages participants to critically evaluate their own practices and identify opportunities for refinement (Henderson et al., 2009). Camarao and Din (2023) provide empirical evidence of such potential benefits in the context of GTAs. Through ongoing interaction with other GTAs, the participants obtained sense of psychological safety as well as insights into alternative pedagogical practices. This indicates that peer interaction can enhance relational dynamics and collaborative teaching effectiveness.

While the benefits of co-teaching are widely acknowledged, research has also identified several potential drawbacks that complicate its implication. In co-teaching contexts, if teachers' roles are not clearly defined, or if one teacher assumes a dominant role, the other may struggle to exercise their professional expertise (Murawski & Lochner, 2011). Also, in order to manage potential tensions among co-teachers, they require not only competence to co-teach effectively but also communicative skills to navigate conflicts (Friend & Cook, 1992). In this regard, trust and mutual respect (Murawski & Lochner, 2011) and peer support (Camarao & Din, 2023) between teachers are essential to maximise the effectiveness of co-teaching. Indeed, empirical evidence from GTAs who participated in co-teaching indicates that such experiences can enhance interpersonal skills, suggesting that navigating these challenges may contribute to professional development (Howlett & Nguyen, 2020).

Navigating emotions and power in GTA co-Teaching

A prominent aspect of the GTA context is emotional work. GTAs may at times encounter cognitive dissonance or anxiety as they negotiate the dual demands of teaching and conducting their own research (Musgrove et al., 2021). Musgrove et al. (2021) found that GTAs' self-doubts about their ability to meet the expectations of both roles as a teacher and researcher as well as apprehensions regarding the consequences of their performance for students and peers can contribute to anxiety. These findings suggest that navigating dual roles can shape GTAs' emotional resilience and professional identity formation. To manage anxieties arising particularly from their teaching responsibilities, many GTAs engaged in cognitive restructuring, reframing stressful experiences as opportunities for development. For instance, feedback that might initially have been perceived as discouraging was instead interpreted as constructive input that could contribute to their pedagogical growth. Positive emotional outcomes are also evident. Li and Liu (2025) examined GTAs' reflections as researchers, teachers and students. Through teaching experiences, GTAs can find motivation by recognising transferable elements between their own research and their teaching practices, have a sense of accomplishment through interdisciplinary, develop self-efficacy and confidence through ongoing teaching experiences. Such experiences highlight how co-teaching can simultaneously support identity negotiation and professional learning.

In co-teaching settings, GTAs are likely to be engaged in more complex emotional work, particularly when the co-teaching constitutes power dynamics and puts GTAs in a vulnerable position. When GTAs co-teach with staff members, student-staff dynamics can result in a regression to an apprenticeship or supervisory model (Irarrazabal Elliott & Marie, 2021). Related to this perspective, within staff-GTA partnerships, GTAs may feel anxious because they perceive themselves as

less knowledgeable and not yet experts (Clark, 2021). GTAs may also experience tension in co-teaching contexts with peer GTAs. According to Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, individuals compare themselves with others when evaluating their own abilities, achievements, and emotions. Such comparisons influence motivation and self-evaluation. When GTAs work alongside peers who are at similar stages in their academic journey, invisible tensions and subtle competitive dynamics may arise.

Despite extensive research on GTA identity, co-teaching and emotional work, few studies have examined how these dimensions interact in practice, particularly within collaborative co-teaching contexts. Most existing studies have focused on either novice or experienced GTAs in isolated contexts, limiting understanding of relational and emotional dynamics in collaborative co-teaching partnerships. Specifically, the ways in which identity negotiation, relational dynamics, emotional trajectories and professional learning are shaped by enabling conditions remain underexplored, particularly in studies that consider both staff-GTA and peer-GTA co-teaching partnerships.

Addressing this gap, the present study, situated in a co-teaching context, investigates how the two GTAs, one novice and one experienced, interpreted their evolving teaching experiences, focusing on four key themes: identity negotiation, relational dynamics, emotional trajectory and professional learning. The study aims to identify the enabling conditions that support these processes and to understand how they interact with GTA experiences, thereby providing a comprehensive view of professional growth in collaborative teaching.

Research questions

Building on this review, this study asks the following three research questions.

1. How do co-teaching experiences shape the evolving professional identities of GTAs?
2. How do the two GTAs navigate power dynamics and emotional trajectories in their co-teaching experiences?
3. What factors contributed to their professional learning as GTAs in co-teaching settings?

Methodology

This study is a collaborative self-study using the narrative data contributed by both authors of this article, Meifang and Suji. Meifang is an experienced GTA with various co-teaching experiences, and Suji is a novice GTA with two co-teaching experiences. Collaborative self-study has been used to facilitate authentic conversations and develop identities and proves effective in creating a comfortable but critical collaborative space where experiences could be shared and debated (Hordvik et al., 2021). With this collaborative self-study design, we intend to not only

share our own co-teaching experiences but also make this sharing another learning experience for our roles as GTAs.

The narrative data of our co-teaching were collected by zine-making. According to Zhuo (2024), zine-making is a fun, ethical, reflexive, and empowering data collection tool in narrative inquiry. For a tool to articulate our co-teaching experiences, we appreciate zine-making's idea of reflecting while having fun and being empowered. As a way for reflective practice, zine-making has been used for GTAs to reflect on their experiences. For example, Li and Liu (2025) explore the use of zines as a creative medium to reflect on their multifaceted roles as teachers, researchers, and students in cross-disciplinary teaching. Their study highlights zine-making as a personalised and visual form of storytelling that enables GTAs to articulate their experiences and express emotional and pedagogical insights, which might be overlooked by traditional reflective practices. Therefore, the appropriateness of our choice of zine-making is also empirically evidenced.

Following Zhuo's (2024) detailed explanation of how zine-making could be used for collecting narrative data, we collected our zine-making narrative data by completing the following four steps. First, we prepared the zine-making materials as suggested, including zine-base materials (blank A4 papers), zine- content materials (Times Higher Education magazines, consumer lifestyle publications, marketing flyers and leaflets), zine decoration materials (art stickers, dry flowers, glitter glue pens, colouring pen sets, and pink self-adhesive gem stones) and supporting stationery (marker pens, scissors, glue sticks and double-sided sticky tapes) (see ***Figure 1***). Second, we sat down together to discuss and decide the time limit for making our zines (around one hour) and sharing our zines (around 5 minutes), as well as the expectations of the contents of both sets of data (co-teaching experience and its influence on our identity). This step was taken to provide essential orientation, ensuring that the data collected aligns with the study's objectives and could be gathered within a reasonable timeframe. Additionally, we agreed to allow flexibility in the design and size of the zines and to use MS Teams to record our oral presentations. Third, we used the zine-making materials to make our zine. Although we created our own zine independently, we shared the materials and kept up casual conversations to foster a relaxed atmosphere and support each other throughout the process. For the same purpose, we also played relaxing music in the background to create a calm and comfortable atmosphere during the zine-making process. Last, we each presented our zines to one another with a brief oral presentation lasting up to three minutes, and both presentations were recorded via MS Teams. This way, we collected the narrative data for this study, including the two zines and the two recorded oral zine presentations.

For data analysis, the recordings of two oral zine presentations were transcribed verbatim. To familiarise ourselves with each other's data, we transcribed each other's zine presentation. This was done by first generating the auto-transcripts from MS Teams and then revising them by listening to the original recordings. Then we confirmed the final versions of the two transcripts together.

Figure 1

Zine-making materials

Figure 2 shows the zine-making data contributed by Meifang, the experienced GTA and ***Figure 3*** presents the data by Suji, the novice GTA. Drawing on Zhuo's (2024) article, we adopted qualitative content analysis (Elo et al., 2014) to approach the data. To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, we first conducted the data analysis independently to generate themes in GTAs' co-teaching and identify any key factors in leveraging co-teaching for effective GTA professional development without the consultation with each other. Then we got together to compare our themes and factors and discuss any divergent opinions. Finally, through discussion and negotiation, we agreed on the final version of themes and key factors for this study.

Figure 2

Meifang' zine-making data (see **Appendix 1** for a clearer version of the zine)

Meifang's zine and zine presentation (around 9 minutes)

This is my Co-teaching experience as a GTA, and the zine I made reflecting about my co-teaching experiences. At the bottom you can see, this is my experience in a UK Higher Education institution. So, probably it cannot represent all others' experiences, but I would say that it probably can represent GTA's experiments in UK in general. As you can see, I have some very different kinds of co-teaching experiences. It's interesting because you said, 'like a baby', I literally put a baby here. So, this is in early stages when I was co-teaching, like dealing with senior PhD students. The first time of my teaching is also co-teaching experience, so I felt that "*I'm not ready. I come from China, and this is UK. I don't have very clear idea about UK higher education. How it should be taught?*" Of course, we experience(d) in seminar (as MA students), but when you transform yourself from a student to a teacher, this would be different. So, **I feel I'm not ready and I have some concerns like you that I felt worried**, if students would think my teaching is valuable but another concern is that if the senior PhD student, senior GTA would think my contribution is valuable. This is how I feel in the first stage. And I basically **look up to the senior PhD students and I followed their plans**. So usually in the very beginning, I asked like, *which part do you wanted to take. what suggestions do you have for my part*'. I followed their suggestions because they have experience. I think they know better.

Then, in the second stage, as you can see, like the baby grows into a teenager. That was the time when I co-teach with my peers literally like from the same cohort. We enjoy it. It's basically like **we accompany** each other in the classroom in the seminars. But I also have concerns because sometimes I feel that because we are peers and then there are kind of **some tensions** there. I was **worried** that if students would think his or her teaching is better than mine or thinking, "*OK, she does not seem so experienced as he is*", but actually we are peers, so kind of competition there and I was worried that students will compare us. But generally, I **enjoy** because we are peers. We don't need to look up to someone. You just show ideas. You just go with your plan.

For the other my co-teaching experiences as you can see here. I was like someone on the on the ground and then here is someone. It's actually when I co-taught with faculty members. Because they are experts and I think they have the best practises because they taught like for over like 10, or 20 years. I **have that pressure.** If I am creating trouble for them. As you can see here, this is some kind of scenario I imagine. I fell, but they are laughing. But laughing is not because they are laughing at me because they think everything is good and nothing to worry about. But I was kind of OK. I fell, something like that. You can see the power dynamics there.

For the last one is when I co-taught with junior GTAs, I feel like I wanted to hold them up like, to make their ideas a reality and to support them to try out their teaching ideas. Because I kind of feel like I know a little bit more about the context about how to teach, like a little bit more about know-how. My role like transformed it more into a guide. But as you can see here, the other arrows (from) different direction is not going directly from the baby, the teenagers. Sometimes I switch the roles and have other co-teaching experience, so this is not a linear way, but we have very different kind of experience. These experiences show my identity change. Like from a baby as a novice GTA, to a teenager co-teaching with peers, I feel like we are mutual support each other. For teaching with experts, professors, I'm afraid I will become a burden and then for teaching with less experienced GTA, I think I am more in a role as a guide, so this my identity change with my different status of being GTA.

But I also came across some challenges and I also put a picture here like put down like module leader because we were, we have a module leader there and they somehow oversee, oversee us from far away, so to avoid like some serious problems happen. So, there will be no serious problems, and I also put empowering here. I think all the GTA teaching experiences helped me to grow, to empower me to be better. And I also put hard like crystal hearts stones around GTA on both sides. Because I think it's variable experiences for me, particularly if in the future I wanted to pursue a faculty job like in the UK higher education. I have highlighted these parts. This is what I learned like from my various experience as GTA. Currently I learned that co-teaching is more like I need to treat it more like we are a team. Being supportive to each other is very important and then we need to communicate the goal that we wanted to achieve, and we need to have trust with each other. Not necessarily because I am more junior or I'm a senior. Then I have less to contribute, more to contribute. Everyone has something to contribute to. We need to also respect each other's opinions and exchange some ideas and then discuss if there are some like disputes about something. I also think reflection like this is very important, because then we can look back on our journey and then see how we can learn from each co-teaching experience. I'm also thinking that maybe that the narratives of our co-teaching experience could be recorded, so it could be shared with the wider community for people to learn. There are two tips also like based on what I learned from my experiences. The first one is about failure, not necessary failure, but mistakes. Or something that you think you do not do well, it can help us to grow. And then the second one is sometimes we have tough experiences, but do not let the hard days win. If we learn from mistakes, failures then, we can grow. As a conclusion here, I think a co-teaching experience is more about relationship. And that relationship can be about like navigating dilemmas but also can help you to get some pleasures. And I think it's a dynamic relationship that can be also very rewarding and valuable for us. So basically, this is my co-teaching experiences.

Figure 3

Suji's zine-making data (see **Appendix 1** for a clearer version of the zine)

Suji's zine and zine presentation (around 7 minutes)

This is my Zine that I made for the first time in my life, or maybe in my adulthood, as far as I remember. I divided my Zine into four sessions in the timely manner. So let me introduce the first section.

The first section is describing how I felt in the very early stage when I was assigned for a teaching session for the first time. My main thoughts in my mind was like "*but I am a baby, or I am a fresher*". Because I was a first year PhD student with nearly no teaching experience in higher education in the UK, so **I was getting anxious** because as you can see here, *I didn't know*. I thought *I didn't know enough about how to teach and then what to teach*. So that's why I brought these hashtags as ***challenges* and *anxiety-ridden* and then *self-doubt*** as well. And then I want to describe this doubt more specifically. **My doubt was divided into two sessions; one was for a student**. *What if they find they think my session was not useful*? *That's gonna be waste of their time* as I was worried about that. **Secondly, I was worried about me as co-teacher** because the co-teachers that I worked with for two times, they were senior year PhD students including you, and then they had more experience in teaching. **I was worried** about potential situation that I was becoming a burden to them, not rather than helping. **I was worried** about that situation. So that was my early stage.

And then the second section is describing how I felt when I just started conversation with my co-teachers. We became a team and then we had the first conversation, and we exchanged the ideas. So, this is how I felt. So even though my teaching co-teaching experiences with them were only for one-off sessions, so there were no like ongoing conversations much, **but I still could see there was trust between myself and the co-teachers**. And then **there were a lot of interactions**. And then of course peer reviews when we made our materials and then **it was very supportive**. So yeah, that's how my experience in co-teaching was.

But the third section, in this section I wanted to give some more specific examples and that I had with you. When I was working with you, you helped me in time management. Because I had hardly any experience, even though I made all the materials, I didn't know how long it was gonna take. But with your experience, you gave opinion that, *oh, that's gonna take too long, or I think it'll be OK*. So, you helped me in time management. And in relation to time management, you gave me some suggestions in making changes. So, if you remember, the first few slides that I made was more informative lecture like rather than seminar or we are pursuing interactive seminar, right? So I said, *OK, I can exclude those slides*, but you respected my work and then you said *you don't have to. You can make them make the content into a handout and then you can just distribute it to students*. Then we don't have to cover it, but they will review the content, so my content is not going to be wasted. That was a really good learning point for my future teaching because before that, before your suggestion, I had not thought about any handout from me. They were just given, but I'm not touching on them. Yeah, the students can just refer to them, but I had not thought about it somehow. So that was a new idea. These were practical examples. And then other than that, of course, I gained new perspectives. And then you also assumed like, *oh, students may think that way*… because you also had experience and that we exchanged ideas. So, in the process of preparation of the session, **I started feeling safe** that I had a co-teacher. So yeah.

And then in the end, in the last section, it's showing myself after the session. **I felt like** I had a personal growth. So, **I felt that myself, confidence** in education through a little bit. Of course, there's a long way to go, but I felt that my I gained independence a little bit more than at the beginning and then I believe the more I experience, the more my independence level will go up. And then also what's more important is that I learnt **the value of trust, like in mutual respect, and then how important the communication is**, because you and you and I had open communication. Like I said in this example like *why don't you keep it handed out*? That's where **I felt my work and then I was respected** by my co-teacher, which was from you. I wanted to become a teacher in future like you in the sense like so I can **respect** the junior colleagues as well. Thank you.

By adopting a self-study design, we were fully aware of our vulnerability and the issue of interpretative ambiguity. Regarding the ethical complexities caused by using ourselves as research subjects and putting ourselves directly under the spotlight, we familiarised ourselves with the six categories of ethical risks, including psychological or emotional, physical, privacy, social, career and economic, and integrity risks (Xue et al., 2025) that may be experienced by us and acted mindfully during our research to avoid these risks. In terms of interpretative ambiguity, instead of avoiding it, which is hardly possible in a qualitative study, we embraced it by using evocative storytelling through presenting the transcription of our oral zine presentation, by being transparent about our data analysis procedures and by enhancing the rigour of our data analysis process with the two-step analytical scheme shared above. Through these efforts, we mitigated the issue of researcher vulnerability and interpretative ambiguity and maintained the ethical practice and the credibility of the research.

Findings

Qualitative content analysis of the two sets of zine-making data reveals the four themes regarding the two GTAs' co-teaching experiences, including identity negotiation, relational dynamics, emotional trajectory and professional learning.

Identity negotiation

Both GTAs reported identity negotiation, which was reflected in three ways according to their zine-making data. First, both reported internal dialogues at the early stage of their co-teaching as novice GTAs, self-questioning of their capabilities to teach. Both had concerns about the value of their contributions to the students and to the teamwork. Nevertheless, Suji's worry was largely due to a generic lack of teaching experience and the possibility of becoming a burden to the teamwork. This is illustrated by two texts on her zine "*don't know enough about HOW*" and "*But, I AM a fresher?*". Meifang's worry was due to a more specific contextual unfamiliarity with the UK higher education, as she highlighted in her zine presentation, "*I come from China, and this is UK*".

Second, both experienced role changes, from an unconfident GTA to a GTA with more self-efficacy. Suji's transformation, which could be directly observed from two contrasting images in her zine, from a worried man lying face down on the sofa to a smiling girl standing confidently and looking straight into the camera. The one-directional arrow indicates the linear nature of her transformation. In contrast, Meifang's transformation is non-linear, represented by the multidirectional arrows in her zine. Despite the complexity and fluidity of Meifang's role changes, Meifang's zine illustrates her journey from a GTA who is "Not ready yet" with "concerns" to a GTA with "KNOW-HOW".

Third, both employed adaptive strategies, adopting behaviours that aligned with their perceived identities. Early in their co-teaching experiences as novice GTAs, both Suji and Meifang described themselves as babies. With this identity, they adopted a compliant role, placing trust in senior GTAs and readily accepting and valuing their plans, ideas, and suggestions. The adaptive strategies were further confirmed by Meifang's corresponding behaviours in other co-teaching experiences. Both her zine and zine presentation illustrated her flexibility of role shifts in different co-teaching scenarios: an accompanying role when co-teaching with peer GTAs, an apprentice role with faculty members, and a guiding role when working with junior GTAs.

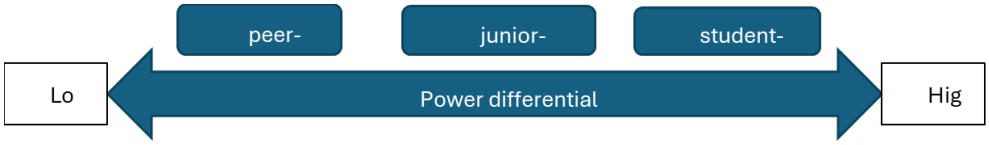
Relational dynamics

Overall, three types of relationships could be drawn from the co-teaching experiences of the two GTAs, including junior-senior relationship, peer-peer relationship, and student-staff relationship. The degree of power differential among the three types of relations is depicted in ***Figure 4***. Each of these relationships manifested itself in its own unique way and resulted in different experiences of co-teaching that the two GTAs experienced. Due to the limit of Suji's teaching experience, the junior-senior relation was the only type that was reflected in both Meifang's and suji's co-teaching stories. Due to the power differential between novice and senior GTAs, the novice GTAs usually looked up to the senior GTAs and desired the acknowledgement from them. In Meifang's case, she used the image of a baby looking upward in her zine to symbolise her perceived subordinate position in the junior-senior relationship. She also expressed concern during her zine presentation about whether *"the senior GTA would think my contribution is valuable*", highlighting her sense of vulnerability and dependence. Similarly, Suji expressed the worry of herself "*becoming a burden to them, rather than helping"* when co-taught with senior GTAs. Nevertheless, Suji perceived a smaller power differential in the junior-senior dynamic. She underscored the collaborative nature of their relationship that contributed to her teaching and learning. Specifically, Suji illustrated the relationship of "*US*" with an image of two equally sized creatures holding hands in her zine.

Interestingly, this image mirrors the depiction in Meifang's zine of two children arm in arm, symbolising the peer-peer relationship that she experienced in her co-teaching. For Meifang, this sense of equality brought joy and a greater sense of freedom in teaching, as she felt accompanied on the journey rather than needing to look up to someone. However, Meifang also expressed the concern that the harmonious dynamic might be disrupted by student comparisons between her and her co-teacher. The third type of student-staff relationship was also drawn from Meifang's experience of co-teaching with faculty members. Although she acknowledged that faculty members, who she considered to have the "best practices", were laid-back, she was still troubled by the power imbalance, expressing a persistent fear of "*creating trouble for them*". Her zine vividly illustrated this pressure through an image of a smiling man moving forward while dragging someone behind, highlighting the emotional weight of the unequal dynamic.

Figure 4

Three types of power differentials in GTAs' co-teaching



Emotional trajectory

While reflecting on their co-teaching journeys, both GTAs were found to have emotional experiences and feeling shifts throughout their co-teaching experiences. Due to her limited experiences in co-teaching, Suji's emotional trajectory was relatively straightforward, shifting from negative to positive emotions. As the texts in her zine indicate, she had "*doubts*" and was "*anxiety-ridden*" in the beginning of her co-teaching, to feel "*safe*" after interactions with her co-teacher and finally gained "*self-confidence*" and "*independence*" when she finished her two co-teaching experiences. In contrast, Meifang's emotional trajectory was more complex, reflecting the diversity of her co-teaching experiences. Similar to Suji, Meifang began as an unconfident novice GTA, feeling "*not ready*" and "*worried*". Her emotions lifted when co-teaching with peers, as she "*enjoy(ed) it"*. This feeling shifted again during her co-teaching with faculty members, where she was troubled by the recurring thought, "*I fell*". When co-teaching with junior GTAs, Meifang's emotions evolved once more, shifting towards a sense of responsibility and support, expressing a desire to "*hold them up like, to make their ideas a reality and to support them to try out their teaching idea*s".

One point worth mentioning is that Meifang's experiences of co-teaching with peers, faculty members, and junior GTAs could shift back and forth, as both her zine and her zine presentations indicate. As such, the fluidity of her co-teaching scenarios added to the complexity of her emotional trajectory.

Key factors for GTA's learning in co-teaching

Four key factors, including trust, clear communication, mutual respect, and structural reflection, were identified as crucial factors in contributing to the professional learning of the two GTAs in this study. Both zines have clear texts that support the first three key factors, including "trust", "respect" and "communication" in Suji's, and "trust", "respect" and "discussion" in Meifang's. Their elaborations of the zines in the presentations further confirmed the importance of the three key factors. For example, in her zine presentation, Suji highlighted that

> *I learned the value of trust, like in mutual respect, and then how important the communication is, because you and I had open communication. Like I said in this example, like, why don't you keep it handed out? That's where I felt my work and then I was respected by my co-teacher.*

Structural reflection is evident not only in the creation and presentation of the zines, but more significantly in the GTAs' systematic process, beginning with a description of what happened, followed by an analysis of personal learning, and concluding with forward-looking thoughts on what they might do differently in the future. For instance, based on her description of her two co-teaching experiences and the growing awareness of the importance of mutual respect in co-teaching, Suji had the forward-looking thought of becoming a GTA who respects her co-teacher in the future. In a similar vein, Meifang, reflecting on the key insights gained through describing and analysing her diverse co-teaching experiences, proposed an idea with potential impact beyond herself in the near future.

I also think reflection like this is very important, because then we can look back on our journey and then see how we can learn from each co-teaching experience. I'm also thinking that maybe that the narratives of our co-teaching experience could be recorded, so it could be shared with the wider community for people to learn.

Discussion

GTA identity negotiation

The findings of this study illustrate that the two GTAs experienced an ongoing negotiation of their professional identities, resonating with the existing literature that emphasises identity work as a dynamic process (Bale & Anderson, 2022; Robertson & Yazan, 2022).

Musgrove et al. (2021) highlight that GTAs' anxieties often stem from self-doubt regarding their capabilities and from apprehensions about the potential consequences of their performance for students and peers. Similarly, both GTAs reported self-doubt and concerns about their capacity to contribute meaningfully to the classroom and collaborative work in the early stages of co-teaching. The novice GTA's anxieties were largely rooted in her limited teaching experience, whereas the experienced GTA's concerns stemmed more specifically from her unfamiliarity with the UK higher education context. This contrast between the two GTAs' early perceptions aligns with Bale and Anderson's (2022) observation that GTAs' sense of teacher identity shaped by contextual factors.

Importantly, both GTAs employed adaptive strategies that facilitated their identity development. Initially adopting a compliant role, Suji and Meifang trusted senior GTAs and accepted their guidance, reflecting both the anxiety associated with perceived knowledge gaps in staff-GTA partnerships (Clark, 2021) and the early-stage dependence of typical of junior-senior co-teaching relationships. Over time, both GTAs demonstrated a transition towards greater self-efficacy and agency, with the novice GTA's trajectory appearing more linear and the experienced GTA's more complex and fluid, again reflecting the multifaceted nature of identity negotiation in situated teaching contexts (Bale & Anderson, 2022). These findings suggest that navigating early-stage uncertainty and role ambiguity can serve as a catalyst for

professional growth, highlighting the importance of adaptive strategies in GTA identity development.

Relational dynamics and power

Relational dynamics emerged as a crucial dimension shaping GTA identity development. As highlighted in the literature, power structures and social comparison processes are integral to professional learning contexts (Musgrove et al., 2021; Festinger, 1954). The findings further reveal that relational dynamics and power hierarchies significantly shaped the ways in which both GTAs positioned themselves and interpreted their teaching experiences.

In junior-senior interactions, both GTAs initially positioned themselves as dependent learners, which facilitated learning through guided participation. This resonates with Beach et al. (2008), who note that novice teachers can be provided with opportunities to incorporate elements of senior colleagues' pedagogical approaches in co-teaching contexts.

Peer-peer relationships, by contrast, offered a sense of equality, which contributed to the enjoyment of the experienced GTA's co-teaching. The observed relational dynamics indicated that balancing guidance and autonomy within co-teaching partnerships is critical for fostering both confidence and collaborative competence among GTAs (Bale & Anderson, 2022; Robertson & Yazan, 2022). However, working with peers also sometimes generated inner tension. Meifang sometimes worried about students' comparisons between her and other peer GTAs, reflecting Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, which suggests that individuals evaluate their abilities and achievements relative to others. This is also consistent with Bale and Anderson's (2022) argument that GTA's sense of being teachers is shaped by students' responses.

In student-staff relationships, although Irarrazabal Elliott and Marie (2021) note potential concerns regarding faculty authority, the faculty members with whom Meifang co-taught were not authoritative or overbearing. Nonetheless, she still experienced a power imbalance and worried about potentially making mistakes, which reflects Clark's (2021) observation that GTAs often perceive themselves as less knowledgeable and still in the process of developing expertise when working with staff.

Emotional trajectories in GTA identity development

These relational experiences, with their inherent tensions and opportunities, were closely tied to the GTAs' emotional trajectories. From the perspective of a novice GTA, although Suji initially experienced self-doubt and anxiety, these challenges were gradually replaced by self-confidence and independence through co-teaching with senior GTAs. This aligns with the findings of Camarao and Din (2023), who reported that interactions with other GTAs can provide a sense of emotional safety. Suji's growth in confidence and independence following her co-teaching experiences may also be related to Bale and Anderson's (2022) observation that the more GTAs

engage in teaching, the more consolidated their self-perceptions as teachers become.

As GTAs gain further teaching experience, their emotional trajectories become increasingly complex. Meifang's emotions varied depending on whom she was co-teaching with, highlighting that GTA identity manifests differently according to situational factors such as teaching partners and the degree of autonomy available (Bale & Anderson, 2022). Furthermore, as teaching contexts are cyclical, GTAs engage in identity negotiation across diverse educational environments, consistent with the dynamic processes described by Lindahl and Yazan (2019), Miller (2009), and Winstone and Moore (2016). The variation in emotional experiences across co-teaching contexts underscores the role of situational factors in shaping GTAs' professional identity and highlights the need for supportive peer and staff interactions.

Professional learning through co-teaching

The findings of the present study highlight the significance of co-teaching as both an opportunity and a challenge for GTAs, resonating with the arguments of Beach et al. (2008) and Camarao and Din (2023). Successful co-teaching was shown to rely on four key factors: trust, mutual respect, clear communication and structured reflection.

The first three factors have been emphasised in existing scholarship; for example, co-teaching requires not only the ability to teach together with someone else, but also communication skills (Friend & Cook, 1992), particularly trust and mutual respect between co-teachers (Murawski & Lochner, 2011). The finding that the novice GTA perceived co-teaching primarily as teamwork suggests that her positive experiences were grounded in mutual respect, rather than senior GTAs taking a dominant role (Murawski & Lochner, 2011). In addition, through ongoing communication, clear goals were shared in both GTAs' experiences, reflecting Bale and Anderson's (2022) point that clearly articulated roles and expectations from others contribute to GTAs' professional identity development.

Lastly, the reflective practices embedded in their zine-making and co-teaching interactions provided opportunities for critical self-analysis, supporting the internalisation of GTAs' teaching roles and strengthening their sense of professional self. These findings underscore the importance of reflection as a mediating tool in identity formation, consistent with Eick and Reed's (2002) argument that reflective processes help mitigate the impact of role conflict and support the development of resilient teacher identities. Importantly, such reflective engagement is not only valuable for GTAs' identity consolidation but also lays the groundwork for the development of pedagogical content knowledge, as Major and Palmer (2006) highlight that graduate students' teaching experiences significantly shape how they conceptualise and apply subject-specific pedagogy in the future. Co-teaching appears to facilitate professional learning by providing structured opportunities for reflection, mutual feedback, and the development of pedagogical strategies, suggesting its potential as a deliberate professional development approach for GTAs.

Conclusion

This collaborative self-study through zine-making demonstrates that GTA identity development is neither linear nor uniform but emerges through continuous negotiation shaped by relational, emotional and contextual factors. The experiences of Suji and Meifang illustrate how both novice and experienced GTAs employ adaptive strategies to navigate uncertainty, power dynamics and shifting levels of autonomy. Co-teaching, in particular, was found to serve as more than a pragmatic arrangement; it functioned as a strategic space for professional learning in which trust, respect and communication and reflection mediated professional growth.

This study makes three major contributions. First, this study addresses the gap in the literature regarding GTAs' identity complexities in co-teaching settings. Particularly, it provides empirical evidence of how relational dynamics and emotional trajectories can shape GTAs' identity in co-teaching contexts. Second, it provides insights into how co-teaching can be most effectively organised and enacted to support GTAs' professional growth in co-teaching settings, by highlighting the key enabling factors, including trust, clear communication, mutual respect, and structured reflection. Accordingly, one key takeaway for GTAs in co-teaching settings is to establish open communication and clear role expectations from the outset while engaging in regular structured reflections to process experiences and build trusting, reciprocal relationships with their co-teaching partners. Third, methodologically, echoing the work of Li and Liu (2025), this study provides further empirical evidence of the effectiveness of zine-making in prompting GTAs' reflection on their teaching experiences and in enhancing research transparency.

Having said this, this study is not without its limitations. First, by adopting a self-study design, this study risks our vulnerability and the issue of interpretative ambiguity, although measures have been taken to address these two concerns. Second, the power differential between the novice and the experienced GTA, combined with their shared co-teaching experience, may influence the authenticity of the perspectives and experiences reported by both GTAs. To address these limitations, researchers interested in investigating GTAs' co-teaching experiences could adopt a more objective stance by acting as researchers only and by working with two or more GTAs whose co-teaching experiences are independent of one another.

Ethical Claim:

This study only used the data from the two authors and received full consent from the two authors to use the data. There is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix 1

Meifang's zine

Suji's zine

From Burnout to Balance: Embedding Wellbeing in the Professional Trajectory of GTAs

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Nikita Goel is a PhD scholar at The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India. Her research focuses on employing feedback and self-regulatory strategies to develop “authorial voice” in professional writing, particularly among MA Foreign Language (FL) students. She has worked as a Teaching Assistant at EFLU, teaching English proficiency courses with the Department of Non-Formal Courses and Resources (NFCAR). She also served as a Language Buddy at the Centre for English Language Education (CELE), Ambedkar University, New Delhi, mentoring undergraduates in English proficiency. She earned her MA in English from the Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar, where she emerged as a gold medalist and the top student in her cohort, and her BA in English from Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD). She has published in reputed journals such as Journal of PGR Pedagogic Practice (University of Warwick), Fortell, and Language and Language Teaching, and has presented her work at leading academic forums, including the Asian Association of Language Assessment (AALA) and the International Conference on South Asian Perspectives. In her spare time, she loves indulging herself in the intricacies of mandala art and its therapeutic nature.

Abstract:

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) in higher education balance the dual demands of teaching and research, which can foster professional growth yet often lead to overwork and burnout. This reflective paper draws on my experience of teaching professional writing to MA Foreign Language (FL) students at The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU). It highlights stressors related to workload, mentoring, and balancing institutional expectations with research progress. In response, I implemented four wellbeing strategies: (1) structured feedback windows, (2) realistic goal-setting, (3) peer support networks, and (4) regular reflective practice. Drawing on pedagogical principles from feedback and self-regulated learning research, these strategies enhanced both teaching quality and research productivity. The analysis positions wellbeing not as a reactive response to burnout but as a proactive, integral practice essential for sustaining GTAs' professional and personal development in higher education.

Keywords: Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), burnout, wellbeing, professional growth, higher education

1. Introduction: The Role of GTAs in Higher Education

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) hold an essential, intermediary role in higher education. They support the teaching mission of universities (McLeod et al., 2025) while simultaneously advancing their own research (Bhamani & Hjelsvold, 2019). In their instructional capacity, GTAs design lessons, assess student work, provide feedback, and mentor learners (Parker et al., 2015). These experiences contribute to the formation of their academic identity and enhance professional competence, yet the breadth of responsibilities can also generate significant strain.

The strain experienced by GTAs reflects broader discussions of burnout in academia. Burnout, defined by Maslach and Jackson (1981, as cited in Berta & Pembridge, 2019) as a response to prolonged work stress involving emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced efficacy, has been widely examined among academics and professionals. It is recognized as a response to chronic workplace stressors with serious consequences for wellbeing and effectiveness (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Kinman & Wray, 2018). However, while this scholarship has deepened understanding of academic burnout in general, it has paid limited attention to early career academics situated in transitional roles such as GTAs (Berta & Pembridge, 2019). Existing studies on GTAs primarily address their pedagogical competence, professional training, and identity formation, but rarely consider how they sustain their wellbeing amid institutional expectations and workload pressures. This gap highlights the need for reflective inquiry into how wellbeing can be actively embedded in the lived realities of GTA work.

This paper addresses this gap through a reflective account of my experience as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) at The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad, India. In this role, I taught the development of “authorial voice” in professional writing to MA Foreign Language (FL) students. While this role provided valuable teaching experience, it also introduced stressors such as intensive lesson preparation, assessment loads, student mentoring, and the pressure of balancing teaching with research. These intersecting demands led to fatigue and early signs of burnout, which, in turn, encouraged a re-evaluation of my working practices. Drawing on reflective inquiry, I implemented four interconnected strategies—structured feedback windows, realistic goal-setting, peer support networks, and regular reflective practice—to create a more sustainable balance between wellbeing and professional performance.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to offer a situated account of how wellbeing practices can be embedded into the daily realities of GTA work, showing how they enhanced both teaching quality and research progress; and second, to situate this reflection within wider scholarly debates on the sustainability of academic careers, highlighting how wellbeing and professional growth are not opposing priorities but mutually reinforcing dimensions of the GTA role.

2. GTAs Navigating Dual Roles: Opportunities and Strain

The role of GTAs is undeniably demanding, as they must balance the responsibilities of both researcher and instructor. Despite their essential contribution to higher education, systematic research on their wellbeing remains limited. As Berta and Pembridge (2019) observe, “Research in burnout, particularly academic and higher education burnout, is without much examination of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) who occupy both the role of learner and emerging teaching professionals with various responsibilities relating to the education of students other than themselves.”

The broader literature, however, provides important context. Research on teacher burnout has been widely documented across educational levels and offers a useful framework for understanding GTA experiences. Kyriacou (2001) identified stress as a persistent feature of the profession, pointing to factors such as workload, classroom management, role conflict, and challenging working conditions. More recently, Reinke et al. (2025) described burnout in teaching as a “worldwide epidemic,” finding that 78% of teachers in a large post-pandemic survey reported considering leaving the field, with stress and emotional exhaustion as the strongest predictors of attrition. Burnout not only impacts teachers themselves but also negatively affects students, with high teacher stress linked to reduced motivation, engagement, and achievement (Nalipay et al., 2024).

Parallel to this, scholarship on graduate students has highlighted elevated rates of stress, anxiety, and depression. Levecque et al. (2017) reported that doctoral students are significantly more likely than the general population to experience common mental health problems, largely due to workload, financial pressures, and career uncertainty. Evans et al. (2018) similarly found widespread prevalence of mental-health challenges among graduate students, pointing to institutional and cultural pressures within academia. These studies suggest that graduate education itself can be a site of psychological strain, even before additional teaching responsibilities are considered.

Despite these two substantial literatures—on teacher burnout and on graduate-student mental health—the intersectional experiences of GTAs remain underexplored. Parker et al. (2015) note that GTAs frequently experience role conflict, as the demands of teaching and research are perceived as competing rather than complementary. Moreover, GTA responsibilities are particularly time-intensive and emotionally demanding, resonating with Hochschild’s (1983) notion of emotional labour. However, GTAs operate under distinct structural constraints compared to full-time faculty: they often have temporary contracts, limited financial stability, and minimal institutional authority. These systemic conditions can restrict autonomy and access to support, exacerbating stress while limiting opportunities for wellbeing.

This imbalance highlights a critical gap: while both teacher burnout and graduate-student mental health have been investigated extensively, the specific wellbeing of GTAs has received comparatively little attention. Given the reliance of

higher-education institutions on GTAs to deliver teaching, future research must examine their unique opportunities and strains, situating GTA wellbeing within broader debates on academic labour and sustainability. Addressing this gap requires attention to both individual agency and institutional structures, recognizing how wellbeing is shaped by their interaction. Figure 1 illustrates this relationship, conceptualizing GTA wellbeing as the dynamic intersection of personal strategies, role demands, and institutional supports that collectively enable sustainable professional growth.

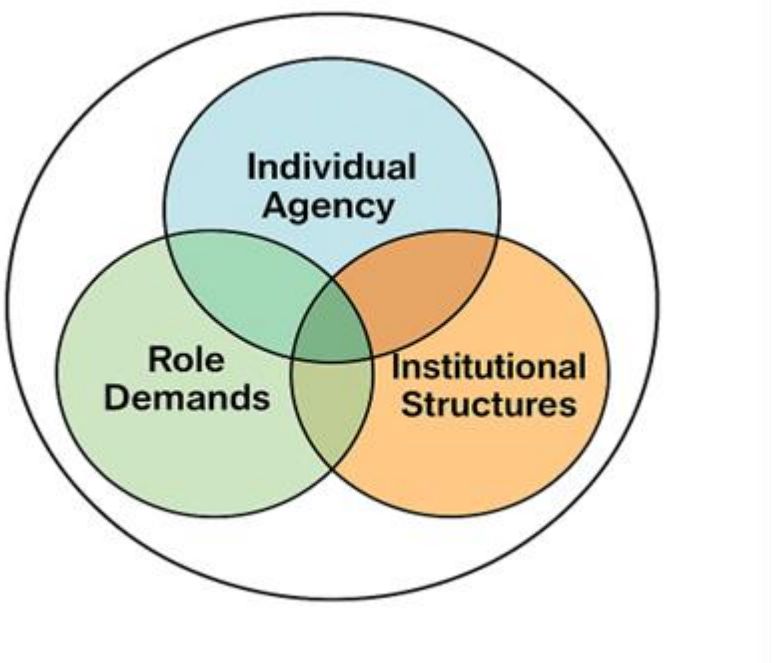

Figure 1 *Interconnected Dimensions of GTA Wellbeing in Higher Education.*

As a GTA myself, I directly encountered many of the tensions outlined in this literature. The next section situates these theoretical insights within my own teaching context, outlining how these pressures manifested in practice and prompted reflective strategies toward a more balanced professional approach.

3. Teaching Context: Authorial Voice at EFLU

As a Graduate Teaching Assistant at The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad, I taught MA Foreign Language (FL) students to develop “authorial voice” in professional writing. The course focused on high-stakes

genres such as emails, statements of purpose (SOPs), letters of recommendation (LORs), reports, and cover emails—texts directly tied to students' academic and career advancement. This made the instructional responsibility both meaningful and demanding.

Voice is an especially challenging construct to teach. Most scholarship defines it within academic writing, where it represents a writer's stance, identity, or presence in disciplinary discourse (Ivanic, 1998; Hyland, 2012; Canagarajah, 2015). Professional writing, however, has received less attention, despite distinct expectations across genres. A cover email requires persuasive brevity, an SOP blends personal narrative with academic aspiration, a report emphasizes clarity and neutrality, and a professional email demands tactful authority. In each case, students must construct a voice that is authentic yet contextually appropriate.

For ESL learners, this challenge is intensified by the pressure to conform to standardized conventions that privilege monolingual norms (Canagarajah, 2006). Many students struggled to gauge the appropriate degree of personal expression, formality, or authority within each genre. For example, they were often unsure about how much self-disclosure was acceptable in a statement of purpose or how to balance politeness and confidence in correspondence. These uncertainties underscored that voice in professional writing is not a fixed skill but a flexible, context-sensitive construct negotiated within linguistic and institutional constraints.

For me as a GTA, these complexities magnified the demands of teaching. Lesson planning required balancing genre instruction with opportunities for students to explore multiple rhetorical positions. Feedback involved guiding both linguistic accuracy and the nuanced expression of tone and stance. Individual mentoring supported students' identity negotiation but also added to the emotional and cognitive intensity of the role. At times, I reflected critically on whether my guidance was fostering authentic voice development or reinforcing restrictive academic norms.

Teaching professional writing thus proved both rewarding and exhausting. It deepened my pedagogical understanding and awareness of multilingual identity work, yet the sustained preparation and emotional labour also contributed to fatigue and early signs of burnout noted in the literature. The following section examines these stressors more closely and explores how reflective wellbeing strategies helped establish a more sustainable professional balance.

4. Key Stressors in the GTA Role

The combination of high expectations, heavy responsibilities, and limited institutional support shaped my early experience as a GTA at EFLU, where the high stakes of teaching professional writing to MA Foreign Language students intensified common challenges. Preparing lessons on genres such as emails, reports, and SOPs required tailoring examples to diverse backgrounds, making preparation time-

consuming and often encroaching on my research. This aligns with findings that early-career educators frequently “overprepare” to prove competence (Admiraal et al., 2023). The feedback load was similarly demanding, as students expected detailed, individualized comments on high-stakes drafts, with hours spent far exceeding my formal workload. Mentoring added further strain: students often sought broader academic and career guidance, requiring sustained emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), a hidden contributor to burnout that academics frequently underestimate (Kinman & Wray, 2018). Most persistently, balancing GTA duties with doctoral research produced role conflict (Katz & Kahn, 1978), a recognized predictor of burnout in higher education (Watts & Robertson, 2011). These stressors—lesson preparation, feedback, mentoring, and role conflict—generated fatigue and reduced self-efficacy, not as personal shortcomings but as structural features of the GTA role. Recognizing them became the first step toward developing strategies to restore balance, which I discuss in the next section.

5. From Burnout to Balance: Embedding Wellbeing Strategies

Recognizing the early signs of burnout in my GTA role at EFLU prompted me to reassess how I managed the competing demands of teaching and research. Rather than persisting with unsustainable routines, I began implementing strategies that could protect my wellbeing while supporting professional growth. Four approaches proved particularly effective: structured feedback windows, realistic goal-setting, peer support networks, and regular reflective practice. While these began as personal adjustments, they ultimately redefined how I approached academic work, demonstrating that wellbeing can be embedded in everyday professional practice rather than treated as an external concern.

5.1 Structured Feedback Windows

Feedback provision was among the most demanding aspects of my teaching. Students often submitted multiple drafts of high-stakes documents such as statements of purpose and recommendation letters, expecting detailed and rapid responses. This open-ended feedback cycle consumed disproportionate time and encroached on my research.

To address this, I introduced structured feedback windows, informing students of designated periods for draft reviews and limiting the number of revisions I would comment on. This practice reflected the principles of effective feedback, emphasizing clarity, timeliness, and learner self-regulation (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Establishing clear boundaries reduced the anxiety associated with an “always-on” teaching mode, improved feedback quality, and modeled for students the value of responsible time management.

5.2 Realistic Goal-Setting

At the start of my GTA experience, I set unattainably high expectations for myself—perfect lessons, exhaustive feedback, and uninterrupted research productivity. Over time, these ideals became unsustainable and fostered self-criticism.

Drawing on theories of self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2002), I began practicing realistic goal-setting. For teaching, this meant focusing on depth rather than breadth; for research, breaking large projects into achievable milestones. This pragmatic shift from perfectionism to progress improved motivation and reduced cognitive overload. As Locke and Latham (2002) suggest, setting specific, attainable goals enhances performance—a finding that resonated with my own sense of renewed balance and confidence.

5.3 Peer Support Networks

Teaching in a GTA role can be isolating, especially when workloads and expectations are high. To counter this, I initiated informal exchanges with fellow GTAs at EFLU, where we shared resources, lesson plans, and reflections on common challenges.

These peer support networks quickly became vital spaces for professional and emotional growth. Campbell et al. (2019) highlight how peer-supported faculty development fosters pedagogical improvement and resilience. My experience reflected this: discussions with peers transformed individual frustrations into collective problem-solving and helped normalize the pressures we faced. Beyond reassurance, the networks provided practical tools, such as more efficient feedback methods and shared classroom strategies.

5.4 Regular Reflective Practice

To sustain wellbeing, I also adopted regular reflective practice as a means of monitoring workload, teaching quality, and emotional state. Guided by Schön's (1983) concept of the "reflective practitioner," I maintained weekly journals documenting classroom experiences and stress levels.

This habit cultivated perspective and adaptability. Reflection allowed me to identify patterns—such as over-preparation or creeping fatigue—and to adjust strategies before burnout escalated. Echoing Kember et al. (2008), I found that

reflection enhanced self-awareness and resilience, reframing setbacks as opportunities for learning rather than as evidence of failure.

5.5 Synthesizing Strategies and Broader Support

Individually, each of these strategies addressed a specific stressor; collectively, they shifted my approach from reactive coping to proactive wellbeing. Table 1 summarizes how each strategy related to key stressors in the GTA role and the outcomes achieved.

Table 1 *Linking GTA Wellbeing Strategies to Key Stressors and Their Impacts*

Wellbeing Strategy	**Key Stressor Addressed**	**Implementation Example**	**Impact on Wellbeing and Professional Practice**
Structured Feedback Windows	Feedback—continuous student expectations for detailed, rapid comments on multiple drafts	Established fixed feedback periods; limited number of revisions per student	Reduced workload intensity; preserved research time; improved feedback quality; encouraged student independence
Realistic Goal-Setting	Role conflict—tension between teaching responsibilities and research progress	Set achievable weekly goals for both teaching and research; prioritized essential tasks	Enhanced focus and motivation; reduced cognitive strain; created sustainable balance between roles
Peer Support Networks	Mentoring—emotional labour from extensive student guidance and lack of collegial support	Formed informal GTA peer groups to exchange teaching materials and discuss challenges	Reduced isolation; provided emotional reassurance; normalized shared struggles; fostered collaborative resilience

Regular Reflective Practice	Lesson preparation — extensive planning demands leading to fatigue and self-doubt	Maintained weekly reflective journal; evaluated teaching load, fatigue, and areas for improvement	Increased self-awareness; improved adaptability; reframed over-preparation as learning rather than failure

While these strategies emerged from individual agency, their long-term success depends on institutional enablers. Universities can reinforce GTA wellbeing by formalizing mentoring structures, offering workload training, and recognizing the emotional labour inherent in teaching. Providing access to mental-health resources, structured feedback systems, and professional-development workshops can further integrate wellbeing into academic culture. When institutional and individual efforts align, the result is not merely burnout prevention but a sustainable model of professional growth for early-career academics.

6. Discussion: Wellbeing and Professional Growth as Interdependent

The strategies I adopted as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) at EFLU—structured feedback windows, realistic goal-setting, peer support networks, and reflective practice—did more than alleviate immediate stress. They revealed a deeper insight: wellbeing and professional growth are not opposing priorities but mutually reinforcing dimensions of academic life. This challenges the assumption, still prevalent in many academic cultures, that success requires personal sacrifice and overwork. Instead, my experience suggests that sustainability arises when wellbeing is embedded in professional practice.

6.1 Wellbeing as a Foundation for Effective Teaching

When I was fatigued, my teaching quality suffered. Feedback became rushed, lessons felt less focused, and I had less patience for student concerns. By contrast, after implementing strategies that safeguarded my energy, I found myself more engaged in the classroom. My feedback was sharper and more constructive, and my lessons were delivered with greater clarity and confidence. This aligns with research showing that educator wellbeing is positively linked to teaching effectiveness and student outcomes (Dreer, 2023). In this way, prioritizing wellbeing directly enhanced the professional dimension of my role.

6.2 Professional Growth as a Source of Wellbeing

At the same time, professional achievements strengthened my sense of wellbeing. Progress in my doctoral research provided reassurance that I was moving forward in my academic trajectory, while positive feedback from students reinforced my confidence as a teacher. These experiences cultivated a sense of self-efficacy which is a key determinant of motivation and resilience. In moments where I could see tangible progress in both teaching and research, stress was tempered by a renewed sense of purpose. This reciprocity underscores that professional growth itself can be a powerful resource for wellbeing when pursued sustainably.

6.3 Rethinking Wellbeing as Proactive Rather than Reactive

Another key insight from my reflection is that wellbeing must be understood as proactive rather than reactive. Too often, wellbeing is treated as a set of coping mechanisms deployed only once burnout has already occurred. My strategies, however, functioned best when implemented consistently, preventing crises rather than responding to them. For instance, reflective practice allowed me to identify early signs of fatigue, enabling adjustments before stress escalated. This echoes the argument of Kinman and Wray (2018), who stress the importance of resilience-building practices in higher education to counteract systemic stressors.

7. Conclusion

The experience of serving as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) at The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) offered both opportunities for growth and risks of imbalance. On the one hand, teaching high-stakes professional writing provided valuable pedagogical experience, deepened my understanding of feedback, and strengthened my confidence as an educator. On the other, the combination of extensive preparation, continuous feedback demands, mentoring responsibilities, and the need to progress my doctoral research created conditions that mirrored the early stages of burnout: fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and reduced accomplishment.

This reflective paper traced my trajectory from burnout to balance, highlighting the four strategies that enabled me to recalibrate: structured feedback windows, realistic goal-setting, peer support networks, and regular reflective practice. Collectively, these practices helped me protect my energy, manage workload more effectively, reduce isolation, and sustain adaptability. Importantly, they demonstrated that wellbeing is not a secondary concern to be addressed once professional goals

are met, but a foundation that actively enables effective teaching and focused research.

The central argument that emerged is that wellbeing and professional growth are not competing priorities but mutually reinforcing. When I prioritized wellbeing, my teaching quality improved, my research advanced more steadily, and my motivation was renewed. In turn, professional achievements strengthened my confidence and resilience, further supporting wellbeing. This interdependence suggests that sustainable academic trajectories depend on embedding wellbeing into professional practice rather than treating it as an optional or reactive measure.

Ultimately, the journey from burnout to balance is ongoing. Academic life will continue to present shifting demands, moments of overextension, and the need for recalibration. Yet my experience has shown that with intentional strategies and supportive communities, it is possible to navigate these challenges in ways that sustain both wellbeing and growth. For GTAs—and for institutions that rely on them—the lesson is clear: thriving in higher education requires not only professional competence but also the resilience and balance that come from embedding wellbeing at the heart of academic practice.

Ethical Claim: This paper is based solely on reflective self-analysis and does not involve human participants, data collection, interviews, or surveys and all the other ethical guidelines have been taken into consideration. I declare that there is no conflict of interest associated with the publication of this paper with any external organisation and I assume the full responsibility for the disclosure of any such conflict.

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Intentional Re-framing of Self-Care as an Institutional Priority in Postgraduate Teaching

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Abstract

The prioritization of self-care in postgraduate teaching has emerged as a critical yet often overlooked component of both personal and professional success. As the intensifying demands of the role continue to test the boundaries of mental wellness and professional sustainability, the absence of structured, institutionally supported mechanisms for educator well-being has become increasingly apparent. Rather than being embedded in formal support systems, self-care is often treated as an individual responsibility, managed informally or in isolation, leaving educators vulnerable to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and disengagement. This review synthesizes peer-reviewed studies using a critical approach to evaluate institutional practices regarding postgraduate teachers' well-being. It identifies key gaps in support systems, including the lack of integrated mental health frameworks and limited access to preventive wellness resources. In response, the paper proposes deliberate strategies such as the development and implementation of comprehensive institutional mental health policies and the establishment of ongoing preventive wellness programs tailored to academic staff, emphasizing stress management, resilience, and holistic well-being. These measures reconceptualize educators not merely as knowledge transmitters but as whole individuals navigating complex professional and emotional demands. By positioning mental wellness as an institutional responsibility rather than a personal afterthought, this shift redefines self-care from an isolated coping mechanism into a collective, strategic necessity for achieving sustainable excellence in academia.

Keywords: Institutional support, Mental wellness, Postgraduate teaching, Professional sustainability, Resilience, Self-care.

Introduction

Well-being is widely recognized as essential for effective teaching and learning across many education systems, and seen as a core component of teachers' professional competencies. (Campbell, Gray, Dey, Holt, & Mulholland, 2024). Higher education teaching, specifically postgraduate teaching has traditionally been defined by intellectual rigor, research productivity, and pedagogical competence, while the equally important dimension of the educator well-being has remained marginal. Postgraduate teaching is uniquely stressful compared to undergraduate instruction because it involves not only advanced content delivery and supervision of complex research projects but also the demanding scholarly expectations and roles that often blur the line between academic and personal life. The mental and emotional demands placed on postgraduate teachers are treated as personal matters, left to individual coping strategies. This privatization of self-care obscures the fact that sustained excellence in teaching and research is inseparable from the mental health of those responsible for advancing scholarship. As expectations around research output, administrative responsibilities, and student supervision continue to intensify, the absence of structured support systems threatens both individual resilience and institutional effectiveness.

Reducing self-care to an optional or personal undertaking overlooks its broader implications for academic culture. (Turner & Rankine, 2025) When educators contend with lingering stress, fatigue, and emotional exhaustion in isolation, the impact extends beyond personal well-being to diminished instructional quality, weakened mentorship, and strained collegial relations. (Deep, Ghosh, & Chen, 2025) Higher institutions that fail to integrate wellness into their operational frameworks inadvertently compromise the quality and sustainability of postgraduate education. Addressing this oversight requires a fundamental rethinking of self-care, repositioning it not as an optional and individual coping mechanism but as a strategic institutional priority embedded within the structures of academic life.
Reframing self-care in institutional terms necessitates policies and practices that treat the educator well-being as integral to academic success. This involves instituting comprehensive mental health frameworks, establishing preventive wellness initiatives, and creating environments that actively support resilience and psychological balance. Such measures move beyond temporary relief to cultivate enduring capacity for effective teaching and scholarship. This review paper argues that the intentional reframing of self-care as an institutional responsibility constitutes a necessary condition for safeguarding the sustainability of postgraduate education and ensuring its continued relevance in an increasingly demanding academic landscape.

Institutional Gaps in Supporting Postgraduate Teachers' Well-Being
Some higher education institutions, particularly in regions such as the United Kingdom-UK, have established general wellbeing services accessible to GTAs, however, some of these systems fall short of addressing the specific and compounded challenges of postgraduate teaching. Structured provisions for postgraduate teachers' well-being remain underdeveloped or insufficiently targeted, despite the toll that academic pressures exert on educators, (Howard-Hill, 2023) failing to address their unique challenges such as excessive workload, and limited

access to tailored mental health support, making it an optional or peripheral program. The burden of sustaining mental balance therefore falls squarely on the individual, who must manage stress, exhaustion, and competing obligations in isolation, which continue to be a problem among teachers, leading to anxiety and depression. (Agyapong Obuobi-Donkor, Burback, & Wei, 2022) This neglect of responsibility by institutions reveals a profound gap between commitments to academic excellence and the lived conditions of those who make it possible.

A comprehensive understanding of postgraduate teachers' well-being must also account for the economic and structural conditions that sustain academic burnout. Unsustainable employment conditions, low remuneration, and unstable funding environments intensify psychological strain and reduce access to institutional support. It disproportionately affects minoritized groups, including academics with disabilities and neurodivergent educators, who often encounter systemic barriers to well-being resources. Integrating these economic and equity dimensions is essential for developing inclusive and sustainable institutional strategies that genuinely promote educator resilience and mental health.

The consequences of such neglect are profound and multi-layered. Educators grappling with burnout may experience diminished enthusiasm in the lecture room, strain on personal relationships, decreased leisure time, and neglect of self-care leading to superficial rather than transformative engagement with students. (Oderinde, Akintunde, & Ajala, 2024; Urbina-Garcia, 2020). Supervisory relationships, which are central to postgraduate education, may also suffer when postgraduate teachers lack the emotional capacity to guide students through the uncertainties of advanced research. On a broader scale, institutions risk weakening their own intellectual vigor when their teaching staff are drained of energy and purpose, resulting in reduced research productivity and lowered morale.

This institutional silence normalizes stress and exhaustion as the price of academic commitment. Without visible acknowledgment of educators' struggles, those experiencing fatigue or emotional distress may internalize their challenges as personal inadequacies rather than systemic shortcomings. This not only perpetuates cycles of self-blame but also deters educators from seeking help, reinforcing isolation and deepening disengagement. This neglect not only isolates individuals but sustains a system where institutional accountability for well-being is overlooked. The very individuals (postgraduate teachers) whose works develop student engagement and belonging are often those who lack adequate support themselves. Postgraduate teachers cannot be expected to "run on empty." (Hattersley, 2022). If higher institutions are to build compassionate learning environments, they must move beyond offering generic wellbeing services that often fail to meet the specific needs of postgraduate teachers. While such services may exist within student support structures, they are typically not tailored to the dual pressures GTAs face as both learners and educators. Likewise, the burden of care cannot simply be transferred to already overburdened professional staff, who themselves experience similar strains. Institutions must therefore develop targeted structures that address these overlapping vulnerabilities, integrating care as a shared, structural responsibility rather than an individual or informal one. Recognizing these systemic

gaps is the first step toward reshaping the ethos of postgraduate education into one that is both sustainable and humane.

Institutional Gap	Description
Insufficient integrated mental health frameworks	Absence or weakness of comprehensive, institution-wide systems that embed mental health support within the everyday structures, policies, and practices of higher education institutions
Non-targeted wellbeing interventions	Such as generic counseling services or campus-wide stress management workshops, that often fail to accommodate the distinct pressures faced by postgraduate GTAs under constrained economic and temporal conditions.
Weak institutional accountability	Limited or inadequate responsibility that higher education institutions assume to systematically assess, monitor, and respond to wellbeing challenges.

Table 1 Key Institutional Gaps in Supporting Postgraduate Teachers' Well-Being

Repositioning the Educator as a Whole Person

Teaching is challenging and yet one of the most rewarding professions. (Agyapong, Obuobi-Donkor, Burback, & Wei, 2022). The role of the teacher in higher education has often been narrowly defined, emphasizing cognitive expertise and the efficient transmission of disciplinary knowledge. This reductionist and mechanistic view strips teaching of its depth, portraying educators as functionaries whose value lies in the delivery of content rather than in the cultivation of intellectual and relational growth. Repositioning the educator as a whole person calls for a deliberate re-examination of this framing, urging a shift from mechanistic model of teaching toward more humane, relational, and transformative understandings of pedagogy. This perspective insists that the educator's intellectual, emotional, and personal dimensions must be recognized as integral to the teaching enterprise if postgraduate education is to remain both rigorous and meaningful. This new way of seeing postgraduate teachers is not only timely but current. (Hattersley, 2022)

Beyond viewing educators solely as transmitters of knowledge Puoti, Latino, and Tafuri (2025) critique traditional conceptions of teaching that construct educators as mere conduits of intellectual content, whose primary responsibility is the precise and authoritative transmission of information to students. This narrow conception reduces teaching to a technical exercise, privileging cognitive output while disregarding the personhood of the educator. To reposition the educator as a whole person is to move beyond this mechanistic view and to acknowledge that teaching is not merely the communication of disciplinary expertise but the enactment of a deeply situated, reflective, and responsive practice. This approach resists the commodification of knowledge and asserts that educators are not interchangeable

components of an educational machine but a living, thinking and feeling person in an intellectual and emotional ecosystem.

This expanded view reclaims the teacher's identity as one whose professional, personal, and emotional parts in teaching are intertwined. Every lecture, seminar, and mentoring session is imbued with the educator's lived experience, value system, and affective investments. The recognition of this interplay invites a paradigm shift where the personal is not viewed as a distraction from academic rigor but as a legitimate and powerful source of pedagogical depth. The fusion of the professional, personal and emotional elements, humanizes and makes teaching a generative act that cultivates human connection rather than merely transmitting information. To humanize postgraduate teaching is to recognize that education is fundamentally a relationship-driven enterprise, where the quality of interaction between educator, colleagues and students profoundly shapes learning outcomes, because teachers' mental health impacts not only their personal well-being but also the overall quality of education and student performance. (Emeljanovas, Sabaliauskas, Meziene, & Istomina, 2023) This holistic approach to teaching acknowledges that educators inhabit an intellectual and emotional ecosystem, where wellness is essential. This reorientation challenges neutral structures in institutions, emphasizing instead the designing of spaces that support the emotional well-being and honour the dignity of postgraduate teachers. In this space, education becomes not just a site of knowledge acquisition but a transformative process that nurtures the mind, strengthens community, and affirms the humanity of teachers involved.

Institutional Response to Mental Well-being: A Duty of Care

Mental Health Policies

Findings reported by Einav, Confino, Geva, and Margalit (2024) indicate that the presence of institutional support is significantly associated with reduced teacher burnout and improved overall well-being. This finding lends support to the argument advanced by Crook et al. (2021), who contend that higher education institutions should play a more active role in creating supportive environments that safeguard staff well-being and mitigate burnout. According to Taja-on and Vergara (2025), a meaningful response to the mental health challenges faced by postgraduate educators begins with embedding mental health policies within the formal structures of academic governance. These policies must transcend their symbolic presence in institutional handbooks to become part of the institution's operational ethos, explicitly framing mental health as central to staff welfare in statutes and quality assurance frameworks. This response to mental health concerns further lays the groundwork for sustainable and inclusive institutional support. Embedding mental well-being into evaluations, workload policies, and promotion criteria reflects a shift from a purely productivity-driven model to one that affirms institutional duty of care. In some parts around the world, GTAs currently lack basic protections such as paid sick leave, access to confidential counseling, or contractual occupational health rights, often bearing the burden of finding cover when unwell. Enforceable measures like mandated breaks, institutional counseling services, and formal mental health leave

would therefore reframe wellness as a collective institutional responsibility rather than an individual choice.

Postgraduate teachers face distinctive pressures such as the burden of supervising complex research and the expectation to produce scholarship at a competitive pace, heavy teaching loads, and balancing administrative duties with their own academic growth, just to mention a few. Without designing robust and responsive mental health frameworks, these pressures can lead to burnout, diminished teaching quality, and a gradual erosion of intellectual creativity that undermines both staff well-being and institutional excellence.

Preventive Wellness Programs

Ross, Scanes, and Locke (2024) argue that, for academics, particularly postgraduate educators to adapt and recover in the current era of heightened stress, and thereby sustain educational quality and student learning, preventive wellness programs must explicitly target the specific stressors these educators face on a daily basis. Such programs might include stress-management interventions tailored to the cyclical demands of teaching, supervision, and research deadlines. Examples include resilience training delivered through interactive, practice-oriented workshops rather than purely theoretical seminars designed to equip postgraduate educators with strategies for responding constructively to criticism, rejection, setbacks, and the inevitable disruptions inherent in academic life.

Peer support networks also deserve institutional investment. They can provide a confidential space for postgraduate teachers to share coping strategies and affirm the validity of their struggles without fear of professional stigma. (Filippou, Acquah, & Bengs, 2025) These measures are not indulgences but pragmatic tools for sustaining intellectual vigor and pedagogical excellence within the institution. Some examples of effective preventive wellness initiatives can be observed across UK higher education institutions. University of Warwick's Wellbeing Strategy 2020–24 adopts a comprehensive approach that integrates prevention and wellbeing within institutional structures for both students and staff. Similarly, at University College London (UCL), the Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan establishes a whole-university framework aimed at ensuring psychological health among employees. The University of Bath's Work-related Stress and Wellbeing Policy further exemplifies institutional commitment to preventive action, explicitly applying to all university employees and outlining proactive measures to minimize the risk of work-related ill-health and stress.

It should be noted that the success of preventive programs mentioned above lies in their ability to integrate seamlessly into the working lives of teaching staff. If wellness programs demand additional hours from already overburdened teachers, they risk becoming counterproductive. Higher education institutions should therefore seek to integrate well-being programs into existing professional development structures where feasible, ensuring participation remains flexible rather than burdensome. Instead of mandating attendance which could inadvertently contribute to workload stress institutions might embed wellness-focused peer networks and reflective practices within ongoing academic activities. This approach reframes well-being not as an additional obligation but as a supportive, voluntary resource in higher

education, reinforcing institutions' commitment to a compassionate and sustainable academic culture.

Leadership Modeling

Institutional leaders hold the symbolic and practical power to make wellness a normative aspect of academic culture in any higher institution. When deans, heads of department, and senior faculty openly acknowledge their own engagement with mental health resources or participate in wellness activities, they dismantle the pervasive culture of silence. Leadership that engages openly and authentically with wellness issues demonstrates that self-care is not a marker of weakness but a professional responsibility.

Normalization further necessitates that institutional leadership embed wellness within the broader narrative of organizational success. Instead of framing staff well-being as a solely individual responsibility, it should be positioned as a core driver of research productivity, student learning outcomes, and the institution's reputation. Consistent communication about wellness initiatives and the integration of wellness indicators into annual institutional reports can gradually reshape collective attitudes. Over time, these practices reposition wellness from a discretionary benefit to a core characteristic of the academic environment, signaling a progressive institution that regards its staff not only as intellectual contributors but as whole persons deserving of care and support. (Love et al., 2024)

Implications of Institutionalizing Self-Care for Academic Excellence and Institutional Sustainability

Enhanced Teaching Effectiveness and Research Productivity

As evidenced by initiatives such as University of Warwick's Wellbeing Strategy 2020–24 and UCL's Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan, which integrate wellness into institutional practice. Such examples show that when higher education institutions prioritize holistic support, they guarantee sustainable academic cultures that safeguard both human well-being and long-term excellence. Institutionalized self-care is not an indulgent enterprise but a structural necessity for sustaining academic rigor and productivity. When postgraduate educators are supported through formal mechanisms that prioritize mental health and emotional resilience, their capacity for pedagogical engagement expands. As argued above, that teaching is not a mechanical transfer of knowledge but a process that demands intellectual presence, patience, and empathy. A teacher burdened by unmitigated stress, lingering fatigue, limited resources and time constraints cannot consistently sustain the energy required to animate the classroom, (Einav, Confino, Geva, & Margalit, 2024) and this may lead to reduced job satisfaction, burnout, and poor work performance. (Seo, Wei, Qin, Kim, Yan, & Greengard, 2017) In contrast, higher institutions that integrate self-care within their governance structures encourage a pedagogical space that enables educators to engage with their teaching both effectively and sustainably. Such an environment does more than alleviate immediate stressors, it equips postgraduate teachers with the emotional and cognitive range to plan, deliver, and assess learning with depth and creativity. In this

way, teaching becomes not merely a contractual obligation but a deliberate and life-giving intellectual endeavour, reinforcing the institution's reputation as a place where excellence is nurtured rather than extracted at the expense of human well-being.

Long-Term Relevance of Postgraduate Education

Postgraduate education occupies a unique place in society, serving as the crucible for advanced research, innovation, and thought leadership. Its continued relevance rests upon those who teach and supervise within it. White et al. (2024) suggest that the extent to which higher education institutions assume responsibility for the well-being of postgraduate educators is a critical determinant of the sustained relevance and effectiveness of postgraduate education. Institutions compete not only for students but also for the brightest educators and researchers. Institutions that fail to create conditions for mental and emotional flourishing risk losing talent to more supportive environments. A culture of stress and neglect undermines institutional continuity and drives talent from academia, with marginalized groups, especially academics with disabilities and neurodivergent educators who are disproportionately affected due to inadequate support and accessibility (Preece & Howley, 2018). Sustained investment in wellness is therefore not only an ethical obligation but a strategic necessity for safeguarding the intellectual capital upon which the institution's competitiveness and continuity depend. In doing so, institutions ensure that postgraduate education remains relevant and serves the broader project of societal advancement.

The academic space has long been characterized by a culture in which exhaustion is valorized, where working to the point of depletion is treated as evidence of commitment and intellectual seriousness. Postgraduate educators are often celebrated for keeping demanding schedules or sacrificing weekends to research and grading, as though such practices were markers of professional excellence rather than symptoms of systemic overreach. This cycle leaves little room for rest or reflection. Perpetuating this cycle of overwork is not only unsustainable but ultimately detrimental to teaching quality, research innovation, and the well-being of the very individuals on whom the academic enterprise depends. (Cadena-Povea, Hernandez-Martinez, Bastidas-Amador, & Torres-Andrade, 2025).

Institutionalizing self-care initiates a cultural shift that challenges the longstanding mythology of academic overwork as a badge of honour. When wellness practices are normalized, the academy evolves from a space where exhaustion is valorized to one where balance is seen as conducive to excellence. This transformation destabilizes the cycle of guilt and self-neglect that often characterizes postgraduate teaching, inviting a new brand of educators to embrace sustainable work habits without fear of being perceived as less committed. By centering self-care within academic culture, universities affirm that no group should have to sacrifice well-being for legitimacy. This not only creates a more compassionate workplace but also one that aligns the academy with the ethical imperatives of justice and equity that underpin its social contract.

Institutionalizing self-care enhances teaching quality, research productivity, and staff retention while promoting equity and sustainability. Embedding wellness in

academic culture safeguards intellectual capital and affirms the academy's commitment to both human well-being and long-term academic excellence.

Conclusion

This review underscores that self-care in postgraduate teaching should extend beyond individual efforts, highlighting the need for a systemic, institution-wide approach to staff wellbeing, not limited to GTAs alone. The growing pressures of postgraduate education call for policies that embed psychological health and preventive wellness into academic structures. By addressing gaps such as limited mental health frameworks and inadequate access to support resources, institutions can ensure resilience, reduce stress, and nurture holistic development. Reimagining educators as whole individuals rather than solely as knowledge transmitters ensures a more humane and sustainable academic environment. Moving forward, higher education institutions must make self-care a strategic priority, positioning well-being as essential to both academic excellence and the enduring progress of education.

Ethical Claim

This review, titled "Intentional Re-framing of Self-Care as an Institutional Priority in Postgraduate Teaching," did not involve human participants or interventions requiring formal institutional or supervisory approval.

Conflicts of Interest

None.

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Building Resilience: Promoting Mental Well-being in Graduate Teaching Assistants Through Structured Institutional Support

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My research interest spans several areas, including mental health, behavioural science, patient and public involvement in research, trauma-informed care, and education development.

Abstract

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) occupy a unique and demanding space within academia, balancing the simultaneous roles of student and instructor. Their dual responsibilities expose them to heightened stress and social isolation, which together compromise their mental health and efficacy as educators. Yet, when institutions adopt a comprehensive, intentional approach that combines structured mentorship, robust pedagogical training, and policy-driven support systems, the narrative can be transformed from one of vulnerability to one of resilience and empowerment.

Effective mentorship not only fosters psychological safety and professional identity among GTAs but also cultivates a collegial culture where challenges are shared, feedback is constructive, and personal growth is prioritised. Complementary to this is the role of compulsory and well-tailored teaching development programmes, which provide the emotional and practical tools necessary for confident, reflective teaching. However, support must extend beyond the classroom; equitable policies around workload, leave, and recognition are essential to creating a sustainable academic experience for GTAs, particularly when informed by global best practices.

Embedding mental well-being into every facet of institutional support, whether through peer networks, supervisor relationships, or formal training, promotes resilience and prevents burnout. As universities increasingly allow GTAs to deliver core teaching responsibilities, they must commit to providing an ecosystem that values, nurtures, and equips them not only as temporary instructional staff but as future leaders in education.

Through a shift from reactive to preventive mental health strategies and from fragmented initiatives to cohesive institutional cultures of care, higher education can unlock the full potential of GTAs while advancing student learning, faculty development, and academic excellence.

Keywords: Graduate Teaching Assistants, mental health, mentorship, coping, teaching, development.

Introduction

The complex experience of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) is shaped by the dual pressures of research responsibilities and teaching commitments. GTAs are typically postgraduate students who engage in their studies while performing instructional roles in undergraduate courses (Jordan and Howe 2017). Balancing these two significant aspects of their lives often results in a challenging experience characterised by competing demands on their time and energy. Research suggests that academic and teaching roles can create a conflict that impacts GTAs' efficacy and well-being, as they are frequently required to prioritise their teaching duties amidst their academic pursuits (Barr and Wright 2018; Christiaens et al. 2024). This duality is especially pronounced in research-intensive institutions where GTAs play a crucial role in facilitating undergraduate learning through lab sessions, discussions, and grading (Alicea-Muñoz et al. 2018). As a result, they navigate the complexities of being both learners and educators, which can heighten stress and anxiety levels.

Mental health challenges are prevalent among GTAs, often exacerbated by feelings of isolation, job insecurity, and overwhelming workloads. Reports indicate that many GTAs face significant mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, primarily due to insufficient social support and the pressure to excel in both their studies and teaching roles (Ely et al. 2022; Suart et al. 2021). The unique nature of their positions can isolate GTAs from their peers in graduate programs and the undergraduate students they teach, creating a sense of loneliness that compounds already challenging academic demands (Musgrove et al. 2021). Additionally, the precariousness of employment as a GTA, tied to funding availability and performance evaluations, fuels job insecurity, contributing to stress that can negatively affect both their teaching performance and personal lives (Suart et al. 2021). The cumulative impact of these factors can lead to a cycle of stress that threatens their academic success and mental well-being (Ely et al. 2022).

Institutional intervention is essential to address the myriad struggles faced by GTAs. Universities and departments must recognise the importance of providing adequate training, professional development, and mental health support resources tailored specifically to the needs of GTAs (Fantone et al. 2023; Parker et al. 2015). Programmes that aim to enhance pedagogical skills through focused training can equip GTAs with effective teaching strategies, helping them feel more competent and confident in their teaching roles and reducing anxiety related to performance (Doucette, Clark, and Singh 2020; Nguyen et al. 2019). Furthermore, creating a supportive environment that promotes open communication and community among GTAs can mitigate feelings of isolation and ensure they have access to necessary mental health resources (Goodwin, Cary, and Shortlidge 2021; Sadera et al. 2024).

Professional development programs that emphasise not just teaching methodologies but also self-care and stress management strategies are crucial for creating a sustainable teaching environment for GTAs. Initiatives that integrate feedback from GTAs on their training experiences can lead to improved onboarding processes and ongoing support structures (Reeves et al. 2018; Tinker, Greenhough, and Caldwell 2018). Establishing mentorship opportunities, where experienced faculty or advanced GTAs guide newcomers, can also play a vital role in easing the transition

into these dual roles, ultimately enhancing both faculty and student experiences (DeChenne et al. 2015).

Mentorship and Supervision: Foundations for Psychological Safety

Effective mentorship plays a pivotal role in creating supportive environments for Graduate Teaching Assistants, significantly impacting their confidence, professional identity, and stress levels. Mentorship programmes designed specifically for GTAs can foster environments conducive to learning and psychological well-being. By facilitating constructive supervisory relationships, institutions can empower GTAs to navigate their dual roles of student and educator effectively.

The dynamics of supervisory relationships are particularly integral in shaping the confidence and identity of GTAs. Research underscores that positive supervisory experiences correlate strongly with increased self-efficacy among graduate students (Brock et al. 2024). The presence of a supportive mentor can mitigate the stress often associated with the transition into teaching roles, allowing GTAs to develop a sense of belonging and professional identity. For instance, studies have suggested that structured mentorship initiatives contribute to higher retention rates and enhanced student-teacher interactions in educational settings (Paolucci et al. 2021). Such relationships cultivate an atmosphere where GTAs can openly discuss teaching challenges, share resources, and gain instructional strategies from more experienced peers or faculty members.

Structured mentorship programmes vary in their implementation but share common goals of improving supportive relationships and enhancing teaching effectiveness. Initiatives like peer mentorship among GTAs have revealed that relationships built through shared experiences foster not only emotional support but also professional growth (Camarao and Din 2023). These peer relationships are particularly beneficial as they reduce feelings of isolation, promote motivation, and build a community of practice within the academic environment.

Moreover, mentorship programmes that incorporate experiential learning elements further enhance the efficacy of GTAs (Brock et al. 2024). For instance, GTAs who participate in pedagogical training workshops report heightened confidence levels and a clearer understanding of their teaching roles. This experiential approach allows them to practice innovative teaching methods in a supportive environment, thereby enhancing their readiness to effectively engage undergraduate students. Such programmes instil a sense of ownership and agency in GTAs regarding their teaching practices, ultimately leading to improved student outcomes (Camarao and Din 2023).

The implementation of mentorship programs must be intentional to maximise their effectiveness. Institutions are encouraged to incorporate regular feedback mechanisms where GTAs can express their experiences and suggest improvements in mentorship practices (Tinker et al., 2018). Such practices ensure that mentorship

remains relevant and responsive to the evolving needs of GTAs. Initiatives like regular peer reflection sessions bolster community building and foster a shared commitment to professional development among GTAs (Camarao & Din, 2023). The emphasis on collaborative learning draws attention to the collective experience of navigating teaching and research responsibilities, facilitating a sense of solidarity and teamwork.

Teaching Development Programs: Empowering GTAs for Pedagogical and Emotional Success

Well-designed teaching training programmes play a crucial role in enhancing the effectiveness of GTAs, significantly boosting their confidence, reducing the potential for burnout, and improving resilience. These training programmes equip GTAs with the necessary pedagogical skills and emotional support, thereby promoting successful instructional practices that ultimately benefit both GTAs and the students they teach.

Research indicates that GTA training programmes that are structured effectively can instill a sense of confidence in participants by providing them with a comprehensive understanding of teaching methodologies. Well-designed curricula often include workshops on active learning, classroom management techniques, and assessment practices (Roden et al. 2018). For instance, a study found that GTAs who received intensive training focused on active learning techniques reported increased confidence in their teaching abilities and were more likely to implement these strategies successfully (Richards-Babb, Penn, and Withers 2014). Conversely, the absence of structured training is often associated with feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty among GTAs, contributing to burnout as they struggle to meet teaching expectations without adequate preparation (Nagy et al. 2019).

Additionally, the design of teaching training programmes can significantly influence the stress levels experienced by GTAs. Programmes that explicitly address the emotional and psychological challenges of teaching help GTAs develop coping strategies, ultimately reducing feelings of anxiety (Alicea-Muñoz et al. 2018; Musgrove et al. 2021). For example, including components that focus on wellness and resilience in training courses can create an atmosphere where GTAs feel supported in both their teaching responsibilities and personal well-being (DeChenne et al. 2015). These components prepare GTAs for the pressures associated with teaching and instill in them a mindset of growth and adaptability, vital for their long-term success in both academic and professional settings.

The format of these training programmes is also critical to their effectiveness. Evidence suggests that compulsory training programs are more beneficial than optional ones (Parker et al. 2015). Mandatory participation ensures that all GTAs receive foundational training, which fosters a department-wide culture of teaching excellence. In contrast, optional programmes risk leaving some GTAs unequipped to handle the complexities of their teaching roles. A study showed that GTAs who participated in compulsory training exhibited greater instructional effectiveness and felt

more integrated into their departments compared to those who attended optional sessions (Gardner and Parrish 2018; Nguyen et al. 2021). This highlights the importance of institutional commitment to comprehensive, mandatory training arrangements for GTAs.

Successful frameworks for GTA training often include a blend of initial instruction followed by ongoing support through mentorship and peer observations. Such models enable GTAs to practice their skills in a safe environment, receive constructive feedback, and continuously improve their pedagogical methods (Burmila 2010; Schussler et al. 2015; Smith and Delgado 2021). One notable example is the Graduate Teaching Scholars Programme, which not only focuses on advanced teaching training but also mentors GTAs by pairing them with experienced faculty who provide guidance throughout their teaching assignments (Lockwood, Miller, and Cromie 2014).

Despite the evident benefits of structured teaching training, many institutions still face challenges in implementing high-quality programmes consistently. A comparative analysis of various professional development initiatives underscores the need for localised approaches that consider departmental resources and faculty engagement (Batterton et al. 2024; Reeves et al. 2018; Sadera et al. 2024). Establishing a culture of continuous improvement within teaching training frameworks is paramount; collecting and analysing feedback from GTAs about their experiences can help refine and adapt programmes to better meet the needs of future educators (Sadera et al. 2024).

Overall, the emphasis on structured, compulsory teaching training for GTAs demonstrates an essential shift towards valuing educational practice within graduate education. By creating environments that prioritise pedagogical training alongside emotional and professional support, institutions not only empower GTAs but also enhance the overall educational experience for undergraduates. Cultivating resilience, confidence, and teaching effectiveness ultimately supports the development of future educators who are better prepared to meet the demands of academia.

Institutional Policies and Global Variations in Support

In recent years, the increasing reliance on GTAs in higher education institutions across various regions has prompted significant discussions regarding the effectiveness of university policies related to workload management, leave entitlements, and recognition systems. The comparative analysis of university policies in the UK, US, Australia, and other countries sheds light on both the strengths and gaps within these frameworks that influence GTAs' experiences and development.

One notable strength in Australian universities is the emphasis on workload regulations which are explicitly stated in several collective agreements. These agreements frequently define the maximum number of hours that GTAs can be required to work, ensuring a balanced workload that allows them to manage both

teaching and research responsibilities effectively (Hughes and Ellefson 2013). In contrast, institutions in the US often lack standardised workload regulations across various departments, leading to inconsistencies in how GTAs experience their teaching duties. Many GTAs may find themselves overworked, particularly in fields with high student enrollment, which can exacerbate stress and anxiety (Shortlidge and Eddy 2018).

Additionally, policies relating to leave entitlements for GTAs vary significantly. In the UK, there is a growing recognition of the need for appropriate leave policies, including provisions for parental leave and sickness absence specific to GTAs. While this is not universally applied, universities that implement such policies can alleviate some of the pressures that GTAs face (Lane et al. 2018). Conversely, US institutions typically have less structured leave policies for research and teaching assistants, which can contribute to job insecurity and reduced job satisfaction. GTAs may feel compelled to forgo personal or family time to meet the demands of their positions, which can adversely affect their mental health and academic performance (Hardré and Burris 2010; Nemerever and Rubalcava 2022).

Recognition systems for GTAs also illustrate a divergence in approaches. In the US, acknowledgment of GTAs' contributions to teaching remains inconsistent, often overshadowed by a greater focus on research output (Smith and Smith 2012). Recognition programmes are part of some HEIs: in one example from Australia, there has been a concerted effort to recognise the teaching contributions of GTAs, including awards and formal recognition programmes that celebrate excellence in teaching (Hughes and Ellefson 2013). Such systems not only validate the efforts of GTAs but also promote a culture of teaching excellence, encouraging GTAs to invest more deeply in their pedagogical growth (Tinker et al. 2018).

Furthermore, within these frameworks, mental well-being has emerged as a critical area that institutions must address in conjunction with academic development. Best practice models integrating mental well-being with academic support are beginning to emerge in various contexts. For example, some Canadian institutions have instituted programs that prioritise wellness within their GTA training courses, incorporating strategies that foster community building and resilience (Justice, Zieffler, and Garfield 2017; Winter et al. 2014). These initiatives emphasise the importance of collegiality and peer support, providing GTAs with a network that can help mitigate feelings of isolation.

Similarly, there is evidence in the literature which points to the value of mentorship programmes that explicitly integrate mental health and well-being into their teaching training models. For instance, in a study highlighting the practical implementation of mentoring structures, GTAs reported feeling significantly less stressed and more confident in their teaching roles when supported by experienced mentors (Flaherty et al. 2017; Richards-Babb et al. 2014). These mentoring frameworks not only aid in skill development but also nurture emotional and mental health, which can enhance overall job satisfaction and retention rates among GTAs (Tinker et al. 2018).

On an international scale, it is crucial for universities to leverage best practices from various contexts in designing supportive environments for GTAs. For instance,

universities in the UK could benefit from looking at Australia's structured workload policies, while US institutions might glean insights from Canadian approaches to mentorship and mental well-being integration (Sandí-Ureña, Cooper, and Gatlin 2011; Smollin and Arluke 2013). Creating an environment that holistically supports GTAs through effective policies, comprehensive training, and targeted recognition will ultimately lead to better educational outcomes for both graduate instructors and their students.

The cross-regional comparison reveals that while some university policies are commendable, significant gaps remain in workload regulation, leave policies, and recognition systems for GTAs. Institutions must prioritise the integration of mental well-being within academic development practices, as doing so not only strengthens the experience for GTAs but can also enhance the effectiveness of teaching within higher education.

Conclusion: Toward a Culture of Care in Academia

The need for cohesive, structured institutional support for Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) is increasingly apparent in light of the common challenges they face, including high workloads, emotional exhaustion, and a lack of adequate recognition and mental health resources. Effectively addressing these issues requires a systemic change that is driven by both evidence and equity, ensuring that GTAs are supported in their professional development as well as their mental health and well-being.

Institutional support plays a critical role in shaping the experiences of GTAs. Evidence suggests that poorly structured teaching environments can contribute to high levels of stress and burnout, as GTAs often navigate complex expectations and responsibilities without sufficient guidance or assistance (Sum, Chew, and Sim 2019). Programmes that integrate proactive strategies for preventing burnout, such as training on stress management and emotional regulation, are essential (Kranak 2022; Szigeti 2024). A cohesive support system would involve deliberate policies that monitor workload, foster community among GTAs, and ensure equitable access to mental health resources. This would help mitigate feelings of isolation and anxiety that often affect teaching assistants who are predominantly student-researchers (Kijima, Tomihara, and Tagawa 2020).

Crucially, systemic changes must prioritise preventive mental health strategies rather than merely reactive solutions. Reactive mental health programs that respond to crises, while crucial, are often insufficient to address the underlying factors contributing to burnout and low morale among GTAs (Velando-Soriano et al. 2023). For example, Chun-Yan and Liao emphasise the importance of proactive interventions designed to enhance teaching enjoyment and reduce burnout (Chun-Yan and Liao 2024). Institutions should implement structured interventions that integrate evidence-based practices into the support offered to GTAs, including sustained mental health

awareness campaigns, stress management workshops, and mentorship programs that provide consistent emotional support (Zheng 2022).

A call to action for universities is imperative: they must shift from traditional approaches that often emphasise mere compliance with academic standards and workload to more holistic models that prioritise the overall well-being of GTAs. Universities can learn from models across various fields by providing integrated training that combines pedagogical skills with mental health resources (Finamore et al. 2020). For instance, well-structured training programs that emphasize emotional intelligence and coping strategies are increasingly necessary for preventing burnout among educational staff (Mahali and Sevigny 2021).

Furthermore, best practices in institutional support include supervision systems that offer both professional development and personal growth opportunities for GTAs. By providing environments where GTAs feel valued, supported, and recognised for their contributions, institutions can promote positive outcomes across the board, including reduced burnout rates and increased student engagement (Yilmaz et al. 2023). Such frameworks should facilitate constructive feedback and recognition of GTAs as integral members of the educational community, rather than merely adjunct support staff.

The commitment of university administrations to these initiatives can lead to substantial improvements in the retention of teaching assistants while enhancing the overall educational experience for students. Engaging in continuous assessment of these programs and adapting them based on feedback from GTAs will help create a robust support system that is both responsive and forward-thinking (Salazar et al. 2022). This approach embodies a preventive framework that aligns with equity and efficacy for all students and instructors involved.

In conclusion, the need for cohesive, structured institutional support for GTAs is evident. Emphasising systemic change driven by both evidence and equity is paramount to ensuring that GTAs receive the necessary mental health support and professional development they deserve. Transitioning from reactive to preventive mental health strategies is essential for providing resilient and effective teaching environments. Universities are encouraged to take immediate action in implementing these changes, ultimately contributing to the well-being and professional growth of their graduate teaching assistants.

Ethical Claim

This critical reflection did not involve the collection of new human data. Institutional and supervisory approval were obtained as part of the author’s ongoing doctoral research programme. No individual participant data are presented, and therefore formal participant consent was not required. The author declares no conflicts of

interest related to the development or publication of this manuscript. All views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the affiliated institution.

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Counting and mattering: bringing GTA visibility to the fore in data, at a time of sector change

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Abstract

UK Higher Education faces mounting pressures from financial instability, rising student numbers, and increasing regulatory demands. In this context, Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) play a critical role in sustaining teaching and learning during these challenging times. Despite their continued and growing presence, GTAs often remain absent or unseen in national datasets, institutional metrics and reporting, and quality assurance frameworks, leaving their contributions under-recognised and their professional status unclear.

This paper considers GTAs in relation to sector bodies and national datasets, examining the implications of their relative invisibility for strategic planning, accountability, and student outcomes, particularly in light of growing sector-wide emphasis on compliance and performance indicators. Drawing on institutional knowledge, experience and sector data, it advocates for a more rigorous approach to counting and representing GTAs both locally and nationally, positioning visibility as essential for equity, recognition, and the future resilience of our work. It argues that by 'counting better', we might also, at last, move towards liberating GTAs from the ubiquitous and well-document liminal space which they occupy.

Keywords: GTA, PGR, teaching, data, metrics, HESA, OfS, NSS

Where we find ourselves now

Five issues and 67 papers later and we are here: the conference special issue of the JPPP. I want to start by acknowledging the work of the editorial team and to take my place once again, in the time-honoured tradition, of closing this issue of the journal. I have written four Afterwords now for the JPPP, each one reflecting a contemporary theme, but I somehow find myself back in familiar territory this time. Back in 2021, when we first published the JPPP, we were still caught up in the global pandemic. Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) were an invaluable source of expertise at Warwick, when the HE world pivoted to online learning, supporting the emergency provision, guiding our 6000 first year undergraduates and adapting their own practice in immediate and noticeable ways. *"Now more than ever, as we emerge into new ways of working as an institution, we will need a range of colleagues, who can work in nuanced ways and adapt to changing times",* I mused (Hattersley, 2021, p.68). The thing is, I could have written that yesterday…

It is no secret that Higher Education in the UK is experiencing testing times. Nearly half of UK HEIs are facing financial deficits in 2025-6, a combination of volatility in student numbers (particularly postgraduates); increase in employer national insurance contributions; below-inflation tuition fees and a loss of direct government funding over time (Office for Students, 2025). In spite of student recruitment rises in some research-intensive Universities, long-term sustainability and cost-saving measures are manifesting themselves in a variety of ways, here, and with colleagues and departments elsewhere, as the Union voice once again grows (Norden, 2025). Student wellbeing is a huge concern, with cost-of-living pressures meaning more of our students, around 68%, are now working in termtime, reducing the time they are spending on independent study (Neves et al., 2025). Alongside financial challenges, our students report loneliness, and lack of confidence and self-efficacy in study, which particularly affects minoritised groups (Unite Students, HEPI., 2025). And then the hot, ubiquitous topic of AI in HE: both celebrated as the enabler we need and the threat we don't, depending on who you talk to. Student adoption of AI is growing, whilst staff training and confidence lags behind and over half of students now state a preference for online or hybrid approaches (JISC, 2025). "*We're beholden to meet students where they are."* said our colleague Prof Sarah MacDonald, Monash University earlier this year (Karp, 2025) and the growth in interest in stackable learning and the age of the microcredential and lifelong learning entitlement do point to shifts in our habits and practices which seem very different and perhaps, like the disruption of 2020, sector-changing.

It was in this context that Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community held its first PGR Teacher Conference this summer, with a theme which reflected the shifts

and challenges of the sector: *Evolving Experiences in Postgraduate Teaching: Navigating Changing Landscapes, Practices, and Technologies.* This special issue of the JPPP is an extension of the thoughts, positions and arguments made on the day.

I was proud that we had hosted a PGR Teacher Conference, small and perfectly formed as it was. I wondered how many other such conferences there had been. I didn't know of any. After a bit of research into this, it seems that you can count the number of PGR teacher conferences on the fingers of one hand…

Counting colleagues…or colleagues who 'count'?

While we are counting things, it's 10 years this term since I began working with PGR teachers at Warwick, in the professional learning space, and what a privilege it's been! Our programme the *Academic and Professional Pathway for PGR Teachers* (APPPGR) has seen over 500 Warwick GTAs engage with us and the programme continues to be popular….maybe too popular? Something else I have noticed lately is the size of our waiting lists for the programme: we have many more applicants than we can accommodate annually. The value of CPD to our GTAs, and the issues of equality of opportunity in accessing it are well known (McLeod, 2025; Sadera et al, 2024; Peng et al, 2022). While PGRs patiently await their turn, in a large institution like ours it's not always possible to see the full picture (just how many *might* come?), so I have been tenaciously pursuing institutional data. In short, we have a lot of GTAs at Warwick. I know this is reflected more widely in the sector. There is also an uneven disciplinary distribution with a large proportion of our GTAs working in our Faculty of Science Engineering and Medicine. Science-based signature pedagogies (Schulman, 2005) are distinct, but nevertheless, we know that these colleagues also benefit from coming together with others, from across the faculties. A teaching philosophy dialogue I assessed recently for AFHEA, between GTAs from Life Sciences and History, provided illuminating insight into ways of seeing across the disciplines.

But back to the figures. What does the picture look like more broadly? Well, there are no specific, nationally available statistics on the number of GTAs working in the sector. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), the go-to body for sector data, does not have a coding for GTAs specifically, who instead, will fall into both student and/or staff categories, and in the latter are probably classified (alongside others) as 'fixed term' or 'atypical staff' (HESA, 2016). These colleagues will have a contract of employment (Warwick GTAs have such a contract…so far so good) but anyone employed through temping agencies (as postgraduates sometimes are) won't be counted. Tracking back, HESA adopts Office for National Statistics (ONS) 'Standard Occupational Coding', where 'Higher education teaching professionals'

(code 2113, number fans!) describes colleagues at level of qualification, including 'skill level 4' *lecturers, senior lecturers, assistant professors, and teaching fellows.* Again, no specific mention of GTAs.

One reason why GTAs are hard to capture in data, of course, is that their work is for a (albeit hugely varied) fixed duration: the lifespan, or less, of their PhD. However, even in HESA's latest, more agile, 'real-time' and granular data collection approach 'Data Futures' (HESA 2023-4), it is still unclear to me whether GTA visibility will actually surface.

(Coincidentally, HESA was established in 1993, the year I embarked upon my own undergraduate degree…does this mean that GTAs have never been counted properly in over 30 years…more..?)

More broadly there has been extraordinary growth in the number of teaching-only contracts in UK Higher Education: over 80% between 2005 and 2019, described as "*not a component in a well-considered strategic plan, but something which occurred in a more haphazard way"* (Jenkins and Wolf, 2023). Although the GTA role in universities is much longer established, they are clearly dwelling in this same space, often indistinguishable from other colleagues in the data. Contract types and varied job titles ('tutor', 'demonstrator', 'sessional staff', 'associate tutors', 'graduate students', 'casual academics', 'temporary worker' are a few I have come across) make it very difficult to search for GTA presence in any datasets, or to understand the nature of their work. Research councils cannot help us either, not surprisingly, with bodies like UKRI not keeping any sort of data relating to teaching. And the international picture is much the same. OK, it's time to stop looking….

Turning to professional learning, then, truly my business, and it is also unclear how many of our GTA colleagues have received professional recognition. The 'typical' category of fellowship awarded to GTAs is Associate Fellow (AFHEA), although some achieve Fellowship, depending on teaching experience. In 2023-4, Advance HE reported 4,643 awards of AFHEA status through accredited provision (that residing within institutions, like ours) but note that *"this is the most diverse category of fellowship",* with a range of colleagues represented, including postgraduates (Advance HE, 2024, p.11). Last year at Warwick, the vast majority of those colleagues awarded AFHEA status were GTAs, graduating as they did from the APPPGR programme. This is a common model, and in many cases, AFHEA status is an outcome of such programmes designed to support GTA teaching practice. Other CPD opportunities exist for GTAs to gain a fellowship status too, and 85% HEIs report that access to accredited status is available to GTAs in their organisations (Quirke and Standen, 2024, p.14).

It's an unclear picture, then, nationally. Does it matter? Much of the decision-making around GTA work is left to individual institutions to manage and in part there is sense in this. At Warwick, our SEM-strong space means that some decentralised

arrangements regarding CPD (e.g. specialist in-department approaches to the teaching of mathematics) suit the pedagogical requirements of the department. But challenges remain. We do know from the WPTC survey that devolved approaches lead to disparities (Lewis et al, 2021) so when we scale that up, nationally (and internationally), there is a danger that more of our earliest career, most vulnerable colleagues will fall outside of policy frameworks, work-place protections and opportunities for professional learning. By not counting, we are not accountable.

GTAs and performance metrics

But it's not only our responsibility to GTAs as early career colleagues, that a better eye on numbers would support. Flipping to the institutional and strategic lens, the lack of benchmarking and data visibility means that policymakers and educational leaders are unable to properly account for the contribution of GTAs to teaching quality and student outcomes, particularly in relation to current sector measures.

To illustrate this, I recently tried to understand the impact of GTAs in Warwick's National Student Survey (NSS) returns, and in doing so, I hit upon more problems. I am not sure 'GTA' is a term that is habitually understood by our undergraduates. Instead, when looking at the qualitative feedback data, a range of descriptions from *'The PhD student teacher in my class..'* (pretty obvious who that is) to *'the seminar tutor…'* (much more ambiguous) are probably being used to acknowledge the presence, practice and impact of our GTAs which means it is impossible to be certain who is doing the work. I realised I needed to use around half a dozen search terms to yield results (positive and negative) which *could* be referring to our GTAs. And maybe I missed some? NSS is administered by the Office for Students (OfS); you'll be unsurprised to hear that GTAs have no place in their regulatory framework or data either (mostly because it integrates HESA data: see above). Although OfS focuses on student outcomes, which GTAs can undoubtedly influence, there has been no reporting mechanism for institutions to share the contribution of GTAs specifically, other than, perhaps, Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) narratives, where categories of staff, their contributions and their teaching status could be made visible if institutions choose to make them so (we did, albeit briefly..). However, the OfS's renewed strategy for TEF (currently under consultation) seems to suggest a reduction of the 'narrative' element, perhaps squeezing the space where the GTA story could be told, nationally. And if there is to be more of an emphasis on quantitative indicators, and GTAs are not meaningfully represented in this data, their somewhat invisible status seems destined to continue.

Under TEF's current 'B conditions of registration' (the minimum quality standards required of institutions) I can *really see* the spaces in which GTAs contribute to the quality or learning and teaching*; "..support to help students with course content…to identify and address knowledge or skills gaps…"* is but one of them.

Something else that interests me is the section on staff containing expectations which, seen through the GTA lens, demonstrate their importance in this context. That is, that teachers should be 'appropriately qualified' meaning: "*individuals hold a teaching qualification"* (so our GTAs should have access to AFHEA); teaching teams are "(not) *comprised solely of inexperienced teachers"* (our GTAs should work alongside more senior colleagues and not be left with the burden of responsibility); emphasis on *"research at the forefront of relevant disciplines"* (our GTA's current dual role as researchers has credence) and "(not) *over-reliant on visiting teachers"* (perhaps pointing to a need for recognition of our GTAs as more established colleagues). (OfS, 2022, p.15). There's a flavour of a holistic 'teaching team', so whilst our earliest career teachers are not named explicitly, their visibility as part of a programme ecosystem is surely something we must shore up when we think about institutional reporting.

Whilst it is unclear what the details of the revised TEF will be, with the seeming shift towards regulatory compliance, changed 'minimum standards' and metric-based evidence (Dickinson, 2025), it seems incongruent that we should not have a handle on data around one of the biggest contributors to teaching in our sector institutions: GTAs. Moreover, for institutions to not consider the impact of GTA work represented within our current datasets like NSS, could be both a huge omission and a risk.

A moment for GTAs to matter

At this year's Warwick Inclusion Conference, Binna Kandola, a specialist and prominent figure in workplace diversity, talked about numbers-driven approaches to equality, diversity and inclusion, inviting the audience to consider whether, in diversifying our workforces, we are interested in 'opportunities' or simply 'measurable outcomes' (e.g. reporting gender, ethnicity data etc). *"What gets measured gets done; what doesn't gets ignored"* he purported (I wrote it in my notebook). Whilst I am no fan of data for data's sake (I have seen plenty of impenetrable tables of institutional data presented in meetings, only to be filed away shortly afterwards), I do think GTAs have mattered less because they remain unseen in so many places in our data. Plenty of publications, including papers in the JPPP and sister journal, *Postgraduate Pedagogies*, have platformed and championed PGR teacher work,

along with the national GTA Developer Network. But there is something compelling about numbers.

Forthcoming changes to TEF will sharpen the focus for what is measured, with all eyes on themes like assessment and feedback, habitually lower scoring in undergraduate evaluation, especially 'how feedback helps students to improve their work' (OfS, 2025). This is a key area of influence for GTAs: recent UKCGE reporting noted that in the 21 HEIs represented, 93% said marking was a GTA responsibility in their organisation. However, marking was also associated with workload management problems, and lack of expertise and opportunities for calibration (Quirke and Standen, 2024). If we allow these challenges to persist, what impact will that have on our GTAs, but also our undergraduate students…and on our increasingly scrutinised data? To note: I am not blaming GTAs for poor student outcomes here, but I am challenging more senior colleagues to consider whether or not support and mentoring for GTAs is adequate, in key areas of work like this.

Returning to the start of this piece, I reflected on the need for adaptable colleagues in challenging times. What the papers in this issue show is that we are already blessed with such colleagues. Our GTAs are engaging in reflective, active, compassionate and imaginative practices with self-awareness and resilience. They form an indispensable part of our educational ecosystem, and they are doing their bit. So I'll conclude this paper with a call to educational leaders and to the sector. First of all, institutions should interrogate their own data, fully understand GTA numbers, their teaching contributions and professional learning needs, building this into strategic planning. They should ensure their visibility, to both department staff and students, so as recognisable, distinct colleagues their work is foregrounded (and 'findable' in data): good practice acknowledged and support needs noticed. Secondly, changes to national datasets to explicitly include GTAs, intersected with existing demographics, will give us a clearer picture of their work across the disciplines and support accountability and benchmarking related to workload, professional status and impact on learning and teaching.

This year I came across a sector article (even older than me!) claiming *"the number of teaching assistants had increased significantly since the 1960s* (with)…*assistants substituting for professors in teaching undergraduates as their enrolment increased, especially in public universities."* Sound familiar? It also described the student-staff dual role as *"incompatible"* (Dubin et al, 1967, p.521), foregrounding the discussion around GTA identity which has persisted in our discourse ever since. In my community, of GTA developers, we have shouted about the good practice of these early career colleagues for a long time; spoken of their specific challenges and precarity and acknowledged institutional barriers and opportunities, and yet they remain relatively unseen. Maybe such stories are not enough? Perhaps alongside this, positioning GTAs in national datasets and reporting *is* the key to visibility, a shoring up of their professional role and, at last, maybe,

emergence from the liminal state. However, we should do this not just to create more data or please regulators, but as an active tool for change: because it's the right thing to do. We count on our GTAs. We should 'count' them and be accountable to them. And in doing so, we will ensure that they, as our colleagues, do count and do matter.

Ethical claim

This represents my own writing and thinking, but I acknowledge the use of CoPilot to help me locate specific sections and pages in national data spaces (HESA, OfS) and in the ordering of my list of references, a job I hate (I did say thank you).

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