

Editorial: PGR Teachers and the (Post) Pandemic World

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Abstract

In this editorial, we introduce our second issue, centred around the theme of "Virtual, physical, or somewhere in between". We outline some of the challenges that PGR teachers have faced over the past few years, as well as the increasing attention being paid to their innovative and important work. We explore the evolving nature of the journal and discuss what we would like to see in future issues.

Keywords: Graduate Teaching Assistant, Postgraduate teachers, online teaching, pedagogy, community

Hello again!

Welcome to the second issue of the Journal of PGR Pedagogic Practice (JPPP)! The editorial team are so pleased to be able to continue the excellent work of the pilot issue of the JPPP with a second issue (and hopefully many more to come). We return this year with over a dozen articles which speak to the JPPP core aim of shedding light on the perspectives and practices of PGRs who teach, also known as Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs). We hope that you will find what follows thought-provoking, and helpful for your own reflection and teaching practice.

When the three of us got involved in the Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community (PTC), we knew we wanted to build on the success of the first issue of the journal, which was released in autumn 2021 bearing the theme "Postgraduate pandemic pedagogies". This second issue builds on this focus and reflects the shifting landscape over the past academic year. We present issue two - "Virtual, physical, or somewhere in between: postgraduate pedagogies in the wake of the pandemic". We were impressed with the number and quality of submissions in response to this theme, with authors in this issue exploring topics and issues from technology enhanced teaching and learning to the challenges of teaching online, and from classroom experiences

to teacher identities. The journal is based at the University of Warwick, but we are delighted to present, for the first time for the JPPP, contributions from authors from the University of Bristol, King's College London, and the University of Leeds.

Us editors have all been inspired to try out new things by opportunities at Warwick such as the teacher development programme [APP PGR](#), and a variety of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities. The environment created through the APP PGR has led several of us to continue our teacher development through a [Postgraduate Award](#). Sophie's involvement in the Engineering department's Student Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC) and experience as a GTA made her aware of the issues faced by PGR teachers. Having also been involved in the editing process for the first issue of the journal, she saw the journal as an opportunity to develop existing networks for PGR teachers and extend the platform for GTAs to address the challenges they face. Imogen had been similarly engaged in the History department SSLC alongside her teaching and was looking for opportunities for the voices of GTAs to be heard, and the word about their excellent work to be spread. Shakira is particularly passionate about the value of reflective practice for PGR teachers and saw the journal as a means to support and encourage this important

activity. We wholeheartedly endorse the aims of the inaugural issue of the JPPP to “provide a space maintained by PGRs, for PGRs” (Patel, 2021), and have sought to develop this platform through which GTAs can showcase the innovative and exciting work they are engaged in.

In this way, the JPPP seeks to contribute to the increasing turn in pedagogic literature to writing about the GTA experience from the point of view of GTAs themselves. Earlier literature discussing GTAs tended to highlight the risks that inexperienced (or uninterested) teachers present to undergraduate learning (Zehnder, 2016; Park & Ramos, 2002; Nasser-Abu Alhija Fresko 2020), or to portray the GTA role as merely a stepping stone to a full-time position (Pezzella, 2014). In recent years, scholarship has pivoted, with increasing recognition of the essential part GTAs play within Higher Education and featuring GTAs describing and reflecting on their own experiences, as much as a form of peer dialogue as engagement with the wider scholarship of pedagogy (Clark et al, 2021; Chiu & Corrigan, 2019). Similar efforts to provide a platform for PGRs who teach are being made by the journal *Postgraduate Pedagogies*, who recently published their second volume. Our second issue includes original studies conducted by PGR teachers, personal reflections, and accounts of the innovative teaching practices being used by GTAs.

PGR (post) pandemic pedagogies

It goes without saying that the pandemic was disruptive. However, it is worth observing the unique challenges the past few years have levelled at PGRs who teach.

When lockdown was announced in spring 2020, all learning pivoted to online delivery. The academic year

2020/21 began with several weeks of in person classes, before the UK’s second lockdown heralded a return to online teaching. This situation largely endured until the start of the 2021 autumn term, when the university returned to (some) in person teaching, albeit with social distancing and masks. “Hybrid” teaching was another format offered by some departments during this time. In spring 2022 nearly all teaching returned to in person, and the social distancing requirement was relaxed. By the summer, masks were “advised” rather than mandated. All signs point to the 2022/23 academic year proceeding with “normal” face-to-face delivery.

GTAs have been forced to adapt to this shifting landscape, often with little notice regarding the form their teaching would take, or changes to the means of delivery. The stress this ever-evolving situation caused for full time teaching staff, who had no choice but to redesign courses and produce swathes of online material, has been often remarked upon ([particularly in the context of the fee dispute that emerged during the pandemic](#)). Yet the ways this impacted on GTAs has seen little recognition. For one, GTAs have little time to prepare for their teaching in normal circumstances; at Warwick, contracts are typically only formally confirmed towards the end of September, with teaching beginning in early October. The disruption of the pandemic meant that GTAs often had little warning of the need to shift their delivery method, and therefore even less time to adapt their preparation.

An important strand in pedagogical literature is how to make learning engaging for students (Frederick, 1999; Lowe & El Hakim, 2020; Woolmer et al, 2020). The pandemic, and the varied delivery methods it resulted in, brought this issue of engagement to the fore. We are all surely aware of the challenges of delivering online teaching in an engaging way, to students who may be

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reluctant to turn their cameras on, or even to contribute to the class (Botcherby, 2021). The in person teaching that took place during this time, though the more traditional form of delivery for which GTAs were prepared, presented its own challenges. Social distancing and mask requirements made small group activities, which are often presented as pivotal in improving student participation and confidence (Race, 2020; Strawson et al, 2013), nearly impossible. Compounding this were issues of accessibility, and the fact that the burden of maintaining these rules was often left to GTAs. Hybrid delivery was another format that many GTAs had to contend with, which requires involving both those physically present and those joining online, and manufacturing opportunities for the two groups to interact. Though GTAs could adapt to these new modes of teaching, it was entirely possible that the format could change at the last minute; at Warwick, if a certain percentage of a group reported non-attendance due to illness, then the class would be moved online. Though GTAs were encouraged not to host individual catch up sessions, providing additional support was sometimes unavoidable.

GTAs (and PGRs) have faced other stressors over the past few years. A recent [workload report](#) from the University and College Union (UCU) revealed that GTAs are working on average almost double the hours they are paid for (UCU, 2022). The cost of living crisis, and the initial refusal of UKRI to increase UK PhD stipends in line with inflation, produced the grass-roots campaign "[PGRs against low-pay](#)".

There is light at the end of the tunnel. Increasing attention is being paid to the position (and essential nature) of GTAs within HE (Fung, 2021; Chiu & Corrigan, 2019). Partly, this is due to the growing GTA voice in pedagogic literature and

the wider conversation surrounding university level teaching. Institutions themselves are also paying greater mind to the contributions of GTAs, without whom undergraduate teaching in its current form would be impossible. At Warwick, the [2021 PGR Teacher Survey](#) captured the experiences of GTAs, from which a number of recommendations were made to the central university to improve the lot of PGR teachers. In the past few months UKRI agreed to adjust the stipend in line with campaign demands, and efforts have now pivoted to additional support for self-funded PGRs.

Many of the articles in this issue address the challenges GTAs have been confronted with in their teaching and as a part of their wider identity as postgraduate researchers. Our authors address issues of engagement through online teaching, and the innovative methods they have adopted to facilitate learning. Others engage in the important work of decolonising the classroom, address GTA identity and wellbeing, and draw on lessons from beyond the undergraduate classroom.

The overwhelmingly positive tone of these articles speaks to the ways in which GTAs have embraced, and learned from, the difficulties of the pandemic. This issue highlights GTAs as flexible, resilient, and motivated to deliver the best possible learning outcomes for their students. Though we certainly hope we are now post pandemic, we will take these lessons and experiences forward with us in our teaching.

Virtual, physical, or somewhere in between

It made sense to theme the second issue around this shifting landscape, to shine a light on the adaptability of GTAs as they navigate this evolving situation. This year we have received a wide range

of fascinating articles, which fall into three overarching themes: GTA identity and positionality, Innovative teaching methods and Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL), and GTAs beyond the classroom. These themes include articles from a variety of disciplines and across varied contexts, and we hope that because of this range everyone will find something they can connect with in what follows.

This issue follows a tripartite structure, beginning with articles which centre the unique position of GTAs within the Higher Education institution. This collection of articles addresses both how GTAs are seen by others and by themselves. We begin with a research article from **Victoria Palumbo** and **Christopher Cammies** who interrogate the relationship between the perceptions of lab demonstrators and their students about the teaching these demonstrators provide, in the context of the Biology department at the University of Bristol. We are particularly pleased to include this research driven piece, which analyses original survey data, which contributes towards the JPPP goal of presenting original research done by GTAs, about GTAs. From student-demonstrator relationships, we move to a reflective piece by **Fran Morris** who considers the “near-peer” teaching typical in the interactions between many GTAs and their students and the integral role of empathy in this relationship. Next, **Francis K. Poitier** offers his reflections and experiences of decolonising the classroom through thoughtful module design, teaching practice, and student feedback. **Evelyn Strongylakou** explores GTA identity by posing to us a series of questions which she has found herself asking throughout her teaching journey, while emphasising the mutability of teacher identity. Closing this first section is **Nur Aminatun Naemah binti Md Noor** who addresses the pressures GTAs felt

during the pandemic, trying to balance their research work, their teaching, and their own wellbeing. These different perspectives all address the important question of GTA identity and positionality and offer important reflections on how and why we do this work.

The second section of this issue focuses on examples of innovative teaching methods and the incorporation of technology enhanced learning. We start with a reflection from **Shakiratul Hanany Abd Rahman** and **Nicole Berríos Ortega** on the challenges and opportunities they found when using drama to facilitate online language teaching. We then move on to a series of articles introducing teaching practices, such as the work led by **Yiduo Wang** on the impact of storytelling and using personal stories as a means to convey technical concepts to students and increase engagement. **Christoffer Guldberg** discusses his use of Google Images and Google Earth to embed critical thinking within his teaching of law and international relations, sharing key examples which other teachers can employ. The final two articles in this section consider two distinct aspects of digital learning. A group of GTAs led by **Di Wang** provide a perspective on the digital learning experience of engineering students during the initial stages of the pandemic, sharing guidance on how digital tools can be incorporated in order to improve the digital literacy of students. Finally, **Zhizhuo Su** and co-authors discuss the use of Learning Management Systems such as Moodle within Higher Education, acknowledging the benefits and limitations of such resources whilst identifying potential improvements, which we hope can prove informative to other teachers. Though many of these articles centre on practices adopted in response to the pandemic, they bear important lessons for teaching and

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learning as we move into the post pandemic world.

The third and final part addressed the roles and activities of GTAs beyond the confines of the HE classroom. **Youn Affejee** explores the lessons from sports coaching which can be drawn upon to support GTA work and teaching practice more broadly. **Tobias Slade-Harajda** reflects on his online tutoring of secondary school students during the pandemic, and how this experience informed his practice as a GTA. **Ben Sinclair** and **Bing Lu** capture the process of setting up and delivering a series of student-led workshops centred around the PGR-supervisor relationship. This section emphasises how GTA work can both apply to and be informed by other experiences and reminds us of the many different 'hats' PGR teachers wear during their time in HE.

We finish with an afterword from **Sara Hattersley** who reflects on the changing context of HE, and the role of GTAs within it. She ends with a powerful call to action, which chimes perfectly with the aims of this journal: that HE affords PGR teachers a special status which acknowledges their critical role.

An evolving journal

The JPPP began as an experimental foray into GTA pedagogies at Warwick. Since the premier issue, interest in the JPPP has grown beyond our own institution, and we hope that future issues will continue to provide fresh perspectives on the wider experiences, interactions, and practices of PGR teachers within Higher Education.

Our primary innovation as editors of this year's journal issue was to host a [workshop for journal authors](#) to meet, present their articles, and to gain feedback on their work. Ten PGRs from the University of Warwick and beyond joined us for a full day workshop, discussing their articles and engaging in

breakout discussions about Technology Enhanced Learning, and GTA Identities. What really came out of the workshop was how much GTAs care, and how much GTAs are doing, to build towards a positive experience for those we teach. Throughout the workshop everybody acknowledged or were at least aware of the unique challenges of and issues with being a GTA, but many of our speakers turned this around to focus on the positives and the unique opportunities we have to engage with students and try out new methods. We think this also speaks to the resilience and enthusiasm of GTAs which is so important in our teaching.

Beyond the JPPP, the PTC have focused on bringing GTAs together in different ways, such as through monthly knowledge-sharing "[Tips and Tricks](#)" workshops, which have reached nearly 100 PGRs across Warwick over the last few months. These workshops were developed and shaped based on suggestions and questions from the PGR teacher community at Warwick and beyond, providing a space for GTAs at all stages of their teaching journey to come together. Feedback from attendees demonstrated that these informal sessions were particularly valued by GTAs at the start of their journey, with specific requests for more opportunities for newer GTAs to learn from more experienced ones and allow handover of knowledge and best practice. Future PTC members will be taking up the mantle of hosting these sessions, and we look forward to seeing how the "Tips and Tricks" workshops develop.

There are a number of directions in which we would like to see the journal grow in its future iterations. We have been fortunate to include an original research piece in each issue of the journal thus far, and this is an area we would particularly like to see more of. This issue has also seen consideration

of PGR led initiatives beyond the typical confines of the GTA role, which would be valuable to give more consideration to. We also hope that, with the increased attention being given to the work and practices of GTAs, that we will begin to see changes based on the recommendations made in such pieces of work. We encourage the future editorial team to take the journal in the direction they feel fit, and to continue to build on the experimental, community building spirit of the JPPP. Above all else, it is our hope that future issues of the JPPP continue to elevate GTA voices.

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