Editorial: “GTAs’ (Re/De) Constructing the Learning and Teaching Space Piece By Piece”

Group Bio:







This year’s editorial team consists of seven GTAs (From left to right: Youn Affejee, Irsa Ajmal, Farzan Dar, Yanyan Li, Adam Read, Yvette Wang, Meifang Zhuo) from across five departments at the University of Warwick. Everyone on the team is passionate about supporting PGR teachers within and beyond Warwick.

Abstract

This editorial introduces our fourth issue- “GTAs’ (Re/De) Constructing the learning and teaching space piece by piece.” First, we outline how we continue to build upon the successes that previous JPPP issues have already achieved. Following this, we explain what we mean by the theme and how the nine articles in this issue contribute to this theme. Finally, we conclude the editorial by reflecting on the journal's fourth year and offering some thoughts for future JPPP issues.

Key word: GTAs, Wellbeing and Support, Innovations, Challenges, Interdisciplinarity

Hello!

Building on the excellent work of the previous three JPPP issues, the editorial team of JPPP Issue 4 are delighted to present you with the fourth issue of the Journal of PGR Pedagogic Practice (JPPP)! Like its predecessors, this issue continuously manifests the amazing work of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) and the wider postgraduate community. We hope this issue will provide valuable insights into the teaching and learning in Higher Education in and beyond the UK, for current GTAs and those who aspire to take this role soon.

With this issue- GTAs' (Re/De) Constructing the learning and teaching space piece by piece", we not only maintain but also extend the aspiration of the founders of JPPP. In the editorial of our pilot launch issue, Patel (2021) emphasized JPPP as a tool for GTAs to share their work, exchange and learn from each other, and pursue ongoing professional development. To achieve this, we listed the following four aspects as part of our key sub-themes for Issue 4, including *Innovations in teaching and learning practices*, *Overcoming the GTA Challenges*, *Well-being and Support*, and *Professional Development*. In addition to our endeavor to continue the core values of JPPP, we also hope to use this journal to keep GTAs up with emerging technologies and the latest trends in educational settings. To achieve this, we also included the *Impact* of *AI and Crossing Disciplinary Boundaries as* the other two key themes of this issue. The reasons why these two key themes were specifically highlighted are as follows:

In respect of the theme of AI, the release of the large language model ChatGPT in November 2022 has transformed how we use AI-generated information in our day-to-day lives (Neumann et al., 2023). GTAs, with their critical role in assuring the overall quality of Higher Education (HE), should be involved in the discourse of AI in higher education, considering the potential of AI-driven transformations in HE (Saaida, 2023).

The second theme of interdisciplinarity aligns with the growing focus on interdisciplinary education by research universities (Schijf et al., 2022). It has been argued that interdisciplinary collaboration can contribute to the achievement of sustainable development goals in HE (Podgórska & Zdonek, 2024). Moreover, interdisciplinary education has been found effective in enhancing students' awareness of inequalities

and implicated biases. Interdisciplinarity is considered essential in addressing needs and challenges in HE today (James Jacob, 2015). Considering all these, GTAs, who hold significant teaching roles in HE, should be encouraged to enhance their understanding of interdisciplinarity by reflecting on their work.

Issue 4 of JPPP includes five research articles and four critical reflections, covering all the themes mentioned above except for *Impact of AI* (although we did receive an abstract on Generative AI for this issue, no complete article was submitted). Compared to Issue 3, we have fewer articles. However, we significantly increased the proportion of international contributors to 30%, with one from Malaysia and two from India. This, in turn, contributes to our aim of continuing to make JPPP a platform for PGRs beyond the University of Warwick and beyond the border of the UK. The research articles and critical reflections received in each of the sub-themes for this year's JPPP issue are briefly discussed below.

Subtheme 1: Wellbeing and Support

Two research articles below this sub-theme address a core question about Wellbeing and Support offered by GTA's in their teaching spaces. Both articles really focus on the importance of being a relationship between postgraduates who teach and their students. **Catherine Lillie, Brenda Grant, Dr Michelle Smith** and **Amy Tomlinson**, colleagues from the University of Hull bring a fresh perspective on how postgraduates who teach help to give their students a sense of belonging due to working in small and more intimate groups. This article is a partnership between staff and students with Brenda being a master's student in the school of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences, Catherine and Michelle who are both teaching enhancement advisors and Amy a senior lecturer in Sport Rehabilitation. This perspective exemplifies the impact of GTA's on student experience and how it goes beyond purely academic ability. Our second research article for this theme is from **Shakiratul Hanany Abd Rahman**, a senior lecturer from Universiti Malaysia Sabah with an interesting discussion about cultivating care in the classroom. Her recent doctoral research focused on innovating teaching methods in English language education in Malaysia, specifically investigating virtual drama as a potential alternative pedagogy for ESL learners. Something unique

about this article is that the students were taught in online classes which normally create additional barriers to developing a sense of care within the classroom. Shakiratul makes it very clear that creating a sense of fun within her online classes helped her to develop a sense of trust and care with her students that ultimately led to greater enjoyment of the class. From both research articles it is clear that postgraduates who teach have much more to offer beyond just teaching, they are able to offer and create safe spaces for students so that they can feel a part of something greater. Ultimately, a large part of the educational system stems from having a sense of unity with peers, therefore working towards creating these safe spaces where students can feel confident is vital and the work of GTA's is paramount to ensuring these spaces.

Subtheme 2: Innovations in teaching and learning

For this year's issue of the JPPP, a key sub-theme in deconstructing and reconstructing GTA's teaching and learning space is that of innovations in teaching and learning. Under this sub-theme, we received two critical reflection and two research articles. **Farzan Bashir Dar**, PhD candidate and GTA at the Law School, University of Warwick provides a detailed exploration of development of effective teaching strategies within legal education, emphasizing personalized teaching, interactive learning techniques, and continuous professional development (CPD) using personalised approaches such as correct pronunciation of students' names and providing tailored feedback. He also suggests the implementation of mock courtroom scenarios and technology-enhanced learning tools like VEVOX and Padlet for promoting higher-order thinking and inclusivity. The findings of his critical reflection highlight the importance of integrating personalised attention, interactive methods, and CPD to enhance student engagement and well-being alongside creation of equitable learning environments.

In addition, **Hande Cayir**, PhD candidate and GTA in Film and TV Studies at the University of Warwick, suggests designing seminars fostering inclusivity and belonging given the challenges faced by GTAs when teaching in a liminal space; some of these challenges being understanding diverse student needs, including, learning difficulties, age, neurodiversity, LGBTQIA+ identities, ethnicity, language, socio-economic backgrounds. Based on her own interdisciplinary PhD research of co-creating films with

participants facing mental health challenges and her experience as a Staff-Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) representative, she explains how students can be co-creators and how GTA's identity and expertise affect the classroom atmosphere. With practical implications such as using anonymous student feedback to tailor the teaching content and offering audio-visuals and interactive material to promote participation among (quieter) students.

Furthermore, **Nikita Goel**, PhD candidate at The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India suggests integrating self-regulatory strategies, such as the use of reflective journals, peer assessments, and technology-enhanced learning tools, into their teaching practices for GTAs, thereby balancing their research commitments and effective teaching practices. She also discusses how such self-regulatory strategies empower students to take control of their own learning by setting goals, self-monitoring progress, and adjusting their approaches based on feedback; helping students develop critical thinking skills, improving their academic performance, and enhancing their resilience in the face of challenges.

Similarly, **Virginia Thomas-Pickles**, GTA and PhD candidate in the department of Global Sustainable Development, University of Warwick critically reflects on her experiences as an introverted GTA trying to 'tackle the tumbleweed' (i.e., seminar silences). She discusses the challenges of verbal engagement of students in seminars with her and their peers. Drawing on her reflective practice, she considers the varied definitions of 'student engagement' within the seminar context, focussing on the verbal dimensions of engagement and reflects on some techniques to encourage verbal engagement (e.g., assigning smaller group-based tasks to students) and non-verbal engagement (e.g., Kahoot!). She also alludes to various external factors impacting engagement that lie beyond GTA control (e.g., massification of HE) and suggests peer-discussions for GTAs to feel less alone and discuss ideas to get conversations flowing in a classroom setting.

Subtheme 3: Overcoming GTA challenges

The sub-theme of Overcoming GTA challenges serves as an opportunity for GTAs to discuss perspectives and solutions to challenges they have faced. The two research

articles we received within this sub-theme are focused on self-improvement through self and peer reflection. Our first article for this theme is a research article by **Meifang Zhuo** and **Yanyan Li** who are both PhD students in the school of Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick. Meifang's research aims to support language teachers' professional development and wellbeing by teacher research, and she is passionate about innovative learning and teaching methods and believes in the significance of supporting inclusive and empowering education in every possible way. Yanyan's research centres on group work and social interaction in classrooms and other institutional settings, with a focus on understanding how people collaborate and communicate. Through her work, she aims to improve group dynamics and support the development of individuals' social competencies within collaborative environments. Meifang and Yanyan's article focuses on the benefits of peer dialogue between GTA's. This article offers a fresh approach to GTA development as it is often thought as something that a GTA either has to think and work on themselves or seek guidance from more senior colleagues. The approach of working with other GTA's to enhance professional development is an area where research is severely lacking. Our second article is a critical reflection by **Akshay Kumar**, a Doctoral Fellow in the school of English Language at The English and Foreign Languages University Hyderabad. His current research includes undergraduate and postgraduate mentoring, language teacher cognition, English as a Second Language research writing and materials development. Akshay's reflection focuses on GTA intuition and mentoring and how this can influence a student's success or failure. The article also outlines GTA intuition in relation to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, an innovative approach is then taken towards creating a scaffold for GTA mentors to work on their own skills and intuition with regards to advising students. Each article offers a new and unique approach where challenges faced by GTAs are tackled. This theme acts as a reminder that challenges hit by GTAs offer up new opportunities for growth and reflection.

Subtheme 4: Crossing disciplinary boundaries

For the sub-theme of crossing disciplinary boundaries in the process of deconstructing and reconstructing the teaching and learning space by the GTAs, we received one

critical reflection. Under this theme, **Grace Kamanga**, a PhD student and senior GTA at the Global Sustainable Development department, University of Warwick shares her experience of teaching a research project module for a diverse classroom with students belonging to various disciplines such as economics, health, education, sociology, and business studies. In her critical reflection based on the theme of crossing disciplinary boundaries, she discusses how challenges in interdisciplinary pedagogy persist, especially in classroom preparation, delivery, assessment, and feedback and highlights how disciplinary distance and varying degrees of disciplinarity—from intradisciplinary to transdisciplinary effect interdisciplinary teaching and learning. Finally, she discusses some of the interdisciplinary dilemmas from her own experience of teaching and learning as a GTA at Warwick and presents practical implications of her reflection by suggesting epistemological and pedagogical practices, such as developing adaptable pedagogical strategies, to navigate these interdisciplinary dilemmas.

JPPP in its fourth year

Beginning as a platform for GTAs at the University of Warwick to exchange their work and pursue professional development, JPPP has grown into a welcoming space for GTAs both from and beyond the University of Warwick to share their voices. In its fourth year, JPPP has become more inclusive and international, attracting the highest number of international contributors ever. Furthermore, JPPP has indicated its ability to sustain itself by involving some authors of previous issues as reviewers for this issue.

Like last year, we intended to organize a pre-submission workshop in late August 2024, aiming to bring together all the authors who had been invited to submit full papers and provide an interactive space for networking. This workshop was also intended to support authors during their preparation of the full articles, by answering their questions and offering feedback on their planned writings. However, due to increased international interest in the journal we have moved to an online drop-in session to allow for greater author participation during this session. This flexibility reduced the burden on our JPPP members in charge of this workshop and provided much-needed support for some authors more efficiently.

One interesting question regarding research ethics came up during the drop-in session. This question was related to one of our author guidelines for Issue 4 required authors who used data from human participants to obtain ethical clearance. This implied that authors should ensure both macroethics in obtaining institutional approval and microethics in receiving full informed consent from the human participants in the research (check Zhuo, 2024, for more information regarding macroethics and microethics in research). One author asked us the question: *where am I supposed to get institutional ethical approval for my research when my institution does not have an ethical review board*? Hearing this question, we realized that it was wrong for us to take it for granted that every institution has an ethics review board for research. Nevertheless, we believed it was essential that research by our contributors practiced a form of macroethics. Therefore, we suggested that the author obtainethics approval for his research from his supervisor instead. Overall, articles submitted to the JPPP are suggested to get some form of ethical approval either from an institutional board of ethics or from direct supervisors, as this is a key part of the JPPP core values.

A specific highlight associated with this issue is that we are going to hold a launch event for JPPP Issue 4 around mid-November 2024, after its online publication in early November. For this event, we will invite all the contributors to JPPP 4 to showcase their work to the wider community of GTAs at Warwick and beyond. To accommodate international authors/participants who might not be able to travel to the event, this event will be hybrid, welcoming both in-person and online attendees. In addition, we will also include some other activities for GTAs' networking and professional development at this event to enrich the experiences of our event participants. We believe this event will be a great opportunity for authors to showcase their wonderful work, for us to formally express our appreciation for their contribution, for WPTC to receive feedback, and advice and attract new members and potential contributors for JPPP Issue 5 next year.

Checking the future directions for JPPP specified in the editorial of Issue 3 of JPPP (Affejee et al., 2023), we are delighted to share that we have realized most of the visions. These visions include attracting more international contributors and having reviewers beyond Warwick. All the nine articles included in Issue 4 went through two

rounds of anonymous peer review, thanks to the kind support by members of JPPP editorial team and our internal and external reviewers. Looking ahead, we hope that the next editorial team will continue the endeavor to increase the visibility of JPPP among GTAs in different contexts across the globe to continuously attract external contributors, within and outside of the UK. Regarding the vision of seeking editors beyond Warwick, we consider having an issue edited by guest editors as a possible way forward. As a journal to enable and amplify GTAs' voices, we feel it essential that we continuously work towards GTAs' needs and interests. Therefore, it might also be a good idea to involve the wider community of GTAs in deciding on the key themes for our future issues, through a survey or some mapping events.

Acknowledgement

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Exploring the value of PGRs who teach (PGWT) in supporting undergraduate students' sense of belonging: A Student Staff Partnership Project

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to explore the impact of interactions between undergraduate students (‘students’) and the postgraduate researchers (‘PGWT’) who teach them, on students’ sense of belonging. Meaningful interactions between staff and students have been identified as a key aspect of students’ sense of belonging. The unique space that postgraduates who teach occupy- both student and teacher- is widely recognized in the literature and through this dual role PGWT can provide a valuable bridge between students and academic staff. Due to the nature of their teaching - which is typically small group teaching characterised by proximity and informality - opportunities can arise for discussion of matters from the wider student experience beyond the curriculum. Activity-oriented focus groups were conducted with module leaders, PGWT and their students in the School of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences at the University of Hull to explore each groups’ perspectives, and the results were thematically analysed. Findings show that whilst students didn’t explicitly recognize or use the term ‘belonging’, through resonance, rapport and academic enrichment PGWT created environments which aligned with definitions of belonging, including building meaningful relationships, contributing to the student experience, and creating informal spaces where students discussed both learning and personal matters. PGWT were relatable, providing authentic examples and being role models. Our findings suggest that being a teacher enables PGWT themselves to feel part of, and that they belong in, the University community. This research adds to the literature on students’ perceptions of PGWT and provides recommendations for future practice.

Keywords:

Belonging; postgraduate teachers; staff-student interactions; small group teaching; student perceptions

Background

Students belonging

Belonging is considered a vague and indefinable concept (Blake et al., 2022) of which there is no single definition (Garden et al., 2024). However, there are common themes in the conceptualisation of belonging which suggest that it is a process which is built and developed across a student's university journey, it is relational and dependent on the quality of relationships between peers and staff, and it is shaped by demographic factors and how students view their own identities (Garden et al., 2024). Belonging is unlikely to be uniform among students (Garden et al., 2024) and, along with confidence and sense of identity, is not static but likely to rise and fall over time (Blake et al., 2022).

Recent research by WonkHE and Pearson suggests there are four areas which form the basis for belonging: connection, inclusion, support and autonomy (Blake et al., 2022) with Advance HE's Student Needs Framework (Peck, 2023) highlighting that belonging and a sense of community are based on:

- Communal settings and community building
- Meaningful peer relationships
- Meaningful staff relationships
- Identifying with interests and institution
- Space and place

Key to both these conceptualisations are relationships between staff and students.

Staff-student interactions

In a sector-wide study of belonging and engagement, Thomas (2012) identified meaningful interactions between staff and students as one of the key aspects of students' belonging which could improve their retention and success. Higher education (HE) teaching requires 'constant exchanges and the dynamic interactions between staff and students' (Matos et al., 2022) and Gillespie (2005) described these interactions as a 'place of possibility' where students can be 'affirmed, gain insight into their potential and

grow toward fulfilling personal or professional capacities'. Other studies, including those involving PGWT, have found interactions can support students' learning, confidence, enjoyment and overall experience (Ball et al., 2020; Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2018; Revell & Wainwright, 2009). In exploring students' sense of belonging through building relationships with teachers, these interactions are therefore significant and warrant further exploration.

The role of PGWT

Small group teaching or practical sessions which are characterised by proximity and informality are spaces which can provide opportunities for undergraduate students to interact with their teachers and discuss matters from both within and beyond the curriculum (Cassidy et al., 2014). Commonly, postgraduate students who teach (PGWT) are employed to facilitate or lead such teaching sessions.

It is widely recognised that as part-student, part-teacher, and often with a proximity of age to their students, PGWT occupy a 'unique niche' or 'liminal space' (Muzaka, 2009; Winstone & Moore, 2017). This can mean that they are better able to identify with their students' position and engage in 'approachability and advocacy' with and for their students (Slack & Pownall, 2023), especially in the types of interactive teaching setting they are often involved with. PGWT are however often ill-equipped to deal with such interactions (Cassidy et al., 2014), as training and development typically focusses on pedagogical approaches and teaching skills (Muzaka, 2009; Park, 2004; Young & Bippus, 2008).

Whilst the benefits and challenges associated with PGWT have been explored over a number of years (Cho et al., 2011; Jordan & Howe, 2018; Muzaka, 2009; Park, 2002) there is a tendency to focus on the perceptions of PGWT and their employers. There is however a growing body of literature drawing from students' perceptions of PGWT (e.g. Ball et al., 2020; Dillard et al., 2024; Kendall & Schussler, 2012; Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2018). This study aims to add to this by exploring and comparing the perceptions of PGWT, their students and their academic colleagues.

Purpose of the study

Through exploring the nature of these interactions, we aimed to explore if there is a value in this 'intangible aspect' of PGWT's practice (Robertson et al., 2019), which can be developed or enhanced to support undergraduates' sense of belonging. Through recognising the value of their role, PGWT may also themselves experience an enhanced sense of belonging. The aim of this study was therefore to explore the role and value of PGWT to the undergraduate student experience, beyond their teaching of the curriculum. We aimed to answer three main research questions:

- What role and impact do PGWT have in supporting undergraduate students' sense of belonging?
- How do PGWT see their role in relation to their students?
- How can Module Leaders support PGWT in their interactions with students?

In doing so, we aimed to create a set of recommendations to support PGWT to handle these conversations and provide guidance for those who work with and support PGWT. Throughout, the term 'students' will refer to undergraduate students.

Method

Study Design and Context

This exploratory qualitative study used focus group interviews with three interrelated groups, PGWT, leaders of modules involving PGWT, and students on modules taught by PGWT. Focus groups have been described as a tool to provide deep insight into an under researched area and were considered the most appropriate methodology given their collaborative dynamic, promoting social interaction and discussion that can elicit powerful insights unlikely to occur through individual interviews (Akyıldız & Ahmed, 2021; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005).

The study was developed as part of a student staff partnership project, a university-wide initiative aimed at empowering students and staff to improve their own experience and that of others through collaboration. During the year of data collection, the student staff

partnership scheme invited projects concerned with fostering a sense of belonging through the student experience. The project proposal was approved in November 2023, and ethical approval granted by the University of Hull in March 2024. The research team consisted of three staff members and one Masters student who worked together to develop and run the project. Having a student partner who was neither an undergraduate student or PGWT, reduced the risk of bias during data collection and analysis.

Participants

Participants for three focus groups were recruited from the School of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences (SSERS) at the University of Hull where small group teaching sessions are commonly taught by PGWT. Participants were purposively sampled due to being either: a student who had completed a module taught by a PGWT within the SSERS during trimester one of the 2023/2024 academic year, a PGWT who had taught a minimum of fortnightly on a module within the SSERS during trimester one of the 2023/2024 academic year, or the leader of a module taught by a PGWT within the SSERS during trimester one of the 2023/2024 academic year.

Student participants were verbally invited to participate by a member of the research team during a scheduled teaching session. Module Leaders and PGWT were invited to participate via email. Those who expressed interest received a participant information sheet at least one week prior to the focus group for their consideration. Student participants were made aware that their involvement would not affect their module or programme grades in any way.

Data Collection

Data were collected through face-to-face, semi-structured focus groups lasting up to 1 hour. Focus groups took place in a university teaching space and were facilitated by two members of the research team, including the student partner. For convenience, the student focus group took place at a time and date they were already on campus for

scheduled teaching, and the PGWT and Module Leader focus groups took place at a time/date that was convenient to both the participants and research team.

Each focus group began by reiterating the purpose to participants, followed by obtaining both written and verbal confirmation of their consent to partake. Next, participants completed an anonymous free listing activity using the interactive digital presentation tool, Mentimeter, in order to promote engagement, guide discussion, and provide participants with the opportunity to think about a topic broadly before having to provide specific verbal responses (Colucci, 2007). Participants were asked to list the types of student-PGWT interactions they had been involved in or were aware of, and the perceived impact of these interactions on students. Following this, the research team facilitated a discussion based around the Mentimeter responses.

Focus groups were audio recorded using the video management platform, Panopto, which allowed for both anonymous verbal responses and Mentimeter responses to be recorded. Panopto was selected due to its compatibility with university imaged computers, its transcription capabilities, and the ability to save recordings directly to the University approved, password protected cloud software accessible only by the research team. All transcriptions were crosschecked with focus group recordings for accuracy by the research team before data analysis.

Ethical Considerations

One member of the research team was a lecturer within the SSERS, and therefore was not involved with the student focus groups in order to reduce the impact of the potential student/lecturer power dynamic on focus group responses. Another member of the research team was a recent graduate from the SSERS and had crossed paths with some of the student focus group participants during their undergraduate study. This was considered a positive, as participants may have felt more comfortable sharing experiences. To reduce the risk of bias and maintain professional balance, at least two members of the research team were present at each focus group.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted on data from each individual focus group using NVivo software. Braun and Clarke's six phase process was employed in order to ensure a rigorous approach to analysis, which involved data familiarisation, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Clarke & Braun, 2021). This method was chosen for its flexibility as it is not tied to a specific epistemological or theoretical perspective, which makes it suitable for an under researched area and is considered an advantage within the diversity of pedagogic research (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Phase one, data familiarisation, involved an iterative process of reading and re-reading the data whilst noting down ideas for coding. Phase two, generating initial codes, involved organising data from each focus group into meaningful and coherent groups. Phase three, searching for themes, involved combining codes from across the three data sets to form potential themes. Phase four, reviewing themes, involved quality checking to ensure that data was accurately represented within the themes and examining for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. Phase five, defining and naming themes, involved ensuring that themes have a clear focus and developing theme names that accurately represented the data within. And phase six, producing the report, involved telling the story of the data in an analytical way with specific relation to the research question. All authors were involved in this process.

Results

A total of 11 participants were recruited for three focus groups, including one group of students who had been taught by a PGWT (n=4), one group of PGWT (n=3), and one group of Module Leaders who had regular PGWT involvement in their modules (n=4). The PGWT recruited here were mainly involved in small group (<20) practical teaching on modules within the SSERS, but did occasionally contribute towards seminars and

assessments. Teaching responsibilities varied from assisting Module Leaders, leading individual tasks within a session, and leading full sessions.

Following thematic analysis, three themes were identified and developed relating to the impact of PGWT on students' sense of belonging: resonance, rapport, and academic enrichment. Student, PGWT, and Module Leader perspectives relating to each theme are presented separately. Compelling verbatim quotes that accurately represent the data are included to add authenticity.

Resonance

This theme reflects the perception of resonance between students and PGWT, particularly feelings of relatability and inspiration that may improve students' sense of belonging within the learning community.

Students perceived PGWT to be more relatable than traditional lecturers, as although they have teaching responsibilities, they are still engaged in formal learning, with one student stating *'it's almost like we're more equal'*. Students found it inspiring that someone who they considered relatable was able to answer questions and help them, providing confidence that knowledge acquisition was achievable. It was suggested that PGWT may be better able to see both sides of learning and teaching, and may be more understanding of and compassionate towards current learning challenges given their more recent undergraduate experience than most lecturers:
'I think they're a bit more relatable to me because they're only one step or two steps ahead of me, whereas lecturers may have graduated a long time ago' (Student).

PGWT also commented on the relatability of being a recent undergraduate, and suggested that this may help students interpret challenging topics:
'I only went through that same module about four or five years ago, so I kind of knew the content from there and how I interpreted it, which meant I could relay that to students in more of a student manner' (PGWT).

As many PGWT engage in part time work within the profession alongside their studies and/or have extensive placement experience, students valued the chance to discuss career pathways and receive insights applicable to current practice. They particularly valued being able to have these conversations informally whilst completing tasks in a teaching session, rather than at an organised careers talk. There was a sense that PGWT were more empathetic to undergraduate student career concerns and provided more career inspiration than lecturers given their close proximity in academic journey.

PGWT reported that sharing examples of times in which they hadn't been particularly successful seemed to be relatable for students, who engaged well in these discussions and were keen to question PGWT on ways to avoid or overcome these situations. They also commented on the inspiration students seemed to gain from discussions around research activity. PGWT reported having discussions about their undergraduate dissertation projects and current postgraduate research with students, recalling that students felt comfortable to ask for guidance and supervision support having been able to relate to interest in a similar topic at a similar level.

Module Leaders noted that students are often interested in and inspired by the academic journey of PGWT, specifically how and why they pursued advanced degrees. They explained that this interest helps students to better understand the pathways available to them and the potential benefits of continued education:
'Some of them are interested in the journey in terms of progressing from undergrad right the way through to a PhD and then maybe working as a staff member here' (Student).
Module Leaders also highlighted the value of PGWT as relatable role models, making students feel that achieving similar success is possible:
'I think it gets them thinking, if they could do it, potentially I can do it. So that's really good, you know, it breaks down a lot of barriers' (Module Leader).
This was reported to be particularly valuable for local students, where module leaders have noticed that seeing someone from a similar background succeed in the field motivates students to believe in their own potential and take their studies seriously.

'You can see a bit of a light switch go on in their head. They're like right, so this guy was where I was a few years ago, and now, he's teaching at university, or doing a PhD' (Module Leader).

Rapport

This theme reflects the perception of rapport between students and PGWT, particularly the building of relationships and comfort in a learning setting, which may improve students' sense of belonging within the community.

Students reported finding it easier to discuss course-related content with a PGWT, suggesting that these conversations helped to increase confidence in their theoretical knowledge. They discussed being able to talk to the PGWT about topics that they may not want to discuss with the module leader, with one student stating *'You can have that educated conversation a bit easier with the postgrad than you can with the lecturer'*. This was confirmed by the PGWT, who also reported feeling that students were more comfortable asking them questions about certain topics:

'It's almost that they didn't feel comfortable enough to ask the actual lecturer, because they didn't want to indirectly oppose what the lecturer was saying' (PGWT).

Module Leaders also agreed, suggesting that students may find PGWT less intimidating, and may also be more comfortable with the closer age gap between PGWT and students compared to Module Leaders and students:

'I suppose that as the PGWT are a lot younger than me, you maybe would expect that the students would be a bit more comfortable and a lot more likely to ask somebody who is only a few years older than them' (Module Leader).

Students valued the opportunity to converse with PGWT in different environments such as on placement, and suggested that this allowed them to build a better rapport by getting to know them on a personal level. Students also reported that building the relationship in a different environment made it easier for them when returning to the classroom.

PGWT highlighted the significance of interactions taking place in between formal teaching sessions, noting that conversations within these gaps are '*some of the best'*. They also explained that their interactions with students can be more informal without the Module Leader present, and feel more like student-student conversations than PGWT-student:

'I feel like it depends what relationship the students have with the lecturer that's there and how they act, because sometimes it can be a little bit more formal, and then if it's just me on my own, it can be a bit more informal' (PGWT).

Module leaders explained how student-PGWT interactions increase in frequency across the trimester as students become more familiar with the PGWT. This results in an increased number of questions being directed towards the PGWT and engagement in more informal conversations, particularly at the start and end of teaching sessions:

'As the students are warming up, once the PGWT knows them it might be, what have you been up to? What did you do this weekend? How are you? That kind of thing. And then a little bit of friendly banter about what they're doing, you know' (Module Leader).

In addition to benefitting students, the rapport developed between students and PGWT also benefits the PGWT themselves, who reported an increased sense of belonging within the institution:

'You walk around campus and know the sport staff but that's about it. Whereas when you end up seeing maybe a second-year student that you taught, you can just say hi as you're passing by, and it's just a bit more of a familiar face in the department around campus' (PGWT).

Academic Enrichment

This theme reflects the perceived academic enrichment experienced as a result of student- PGWT interactions. Specifically, the additional support received, improved engagement, and overall enhanced academic experience which may improve students' sense of belonging within the community.

Both students and Module Leaders described how the presence of PGWT within practical sessions allowed for additional support and interactivity. Students valued the ability to ask more questions, have more regular discussions, and have more opportunities to '*bounce ideas off*' an individual with subject knowledge, which they felt had helped them to engage with creative tasks and gain deeper understanding. Module leaders noted that having PGWT present doubled the amount of one-to-one time students received and meant that there was more interaction more of the time, which they found particularly beneficial when teaching complex topics.

'If it's just one lecturer, it can be hard for them to split their time between the groups, so yeah, I found them [PGWT] beneficial' (student).

'I can only spend so much time with them, I was on my own with 20 students on a difficult module to teach practically and theoretically. A lot of students in the past said that they had to spend time waiting for someone to answer a question, but with the help of the PGWT that was 100% better' (Module Leader).

Students also discussed the increased amount of personalised feedback received when PGWT were in their sessions, which helped them to correct mistakes, gain confidence, and improve their overall performance.

Both students and Module Leaders commented on how PGWT provide learning reinforcement by offering additional explanations and perspectives on the material being taught. Students felt that this helped them to better understand theoretical content and apply it in practical settings and real-world scenarios. Module leaders noticed how the variation in language, teaching style and methods helped to reach students who may struggle with the lecturer's approach, and suggested that this improved overall engagement. They reported that previously disengaged students had demonstrated significant improvement, particularly by engaging in extracurricular activities and preparing more effectively for assessments.

Although students and Module Leaders commented on the positive impact of PGWT on engagement, PGWT themselves discussed the challenges around achieving this. They explained how it can be exhausting to create and maintain an engaging atmosphere

with some groups, particularly when attendance is poor. They also explained how it can often be hard to '*break the silence'* at the start of sessions, but once engagement starts, students are usually happy to contribute answers to questions even if they may be incorrect. PGWT felt that engagement was largely driven by them, and commented that '*they [students] wouldn't go out of their way to engage unless we were pulling them in'.*

Module leaders felt that PGWT enhanced the quality of teaching sessions overall, leading to greater student enjoyment and a better learning experience. They described student-PGWT interactions as '*universally positive'* with one Module Leader commenting:
'There's not been a single negative interaction, a single situation where a PGWT has made the job harder or made the teaching environment less effective' (Module Leader).

Interestingly, students were clear that they had found it valuable to have a PGWT within their teaching sessions overall, however commented that they hadn't thought of this as directly impacting their feelings of belonging.

Discussion

This exploratory study aimed to explore the role and impact of PGWT for undergraduate students' sense of belonging. Whilst students themselves didn't explicitly use the term 'belonging', the findings identified three areas - resonance, rapport and academic enrichment - where PGWT's contributions create teaching and learning environments which align with Peck's (2023) aspects of belonging.

Approachability and relatability are commonly cited attributes of PGWT (e.g. Ball et al., 2020; Muzaka, 2009; Slack & Pownall, 2023) and findings from this study indicate that PGWT were able to use these benefits to create rapport and resonance with their students, which increased over the trimester. The nature of the teaching PGWT were conducting, including placements and practical sessions, enabled PGWT to get to know their students on a personal level which then continued into the more formal classroom

environment. Through creating and sustaining these meaningful relationships with and between students (Peck, 2023), PGWT could support students' learning by creating environments where students felt more comfortable to contribute their thoughts and discuss both academic and non-academic topics.

Students, PGWT and Module Leaders all recognised that students found it easier to have conversations about course-related content with PGWT than with academic staff due to their near-peer status and the opportunities for conversation afforded by the teaching setting. PGWT saw their role in relation to their students as providing a bridge between them and academic staff, a view which was shared by both groups. The 'unique niche' or 'liminal space' (Muzaka, 2009; Winstone & Moore, 2017) which PGWT occupy, being both teacher and student, enabled them to relate to their students and to inspire them, which had clear benefits for students and Module Leaders in terms of motivation, engagement and learning. Their sharing of their academic journey (including study successes and challenges) and their role modelling of career options contributed to students being able to identify with their interests (Peck, 2023), providing further motivation for their studies. The contributions PGWT made to taught sessions also benefitted Module Leaders through spreading the workload and enabling more students to have 1-1 input. Through this PGWT contributed to creating communal settings and community building (Peck, 2023) for and between both groups.

Whilst this study was focussed on undergraduate students' belonging, an emergent theme was that being involved in teaching supported PGWT's own sense of belonging in the institution. Being a PhD student can feel like a lonely and isolated time (Cantor, 2020) but having a teaching role gave the PGWT in our study an identity and purpose beyond their research, and enabled them to build meaningful relationships with others, through which they felt part of a campus and departmental community, aligning with Peck's (2023) conceptions of belonging.

Recommendations

The findings from this and other studies (e.g. Ball et al., 2020; Goodwin et al., 2023) show that there can be value for all parties in providing supported teaching opportunities which enable PGWT to work closely with students. We recommend that training and development for PGWT should include how to manage interactions with students and their role in supporting learning so that the benefits of these encounters are maximised. Our findings relating to the role that teaching has in supporting PGWT's own sense of belonging could also be explored further with the potential to contribute to the body of work on the benefits that PGWT's work with students has.

Building on previous calls to 'treat GTAs as colleagues' (Slack & Pownall, 2023), Module Leaders can support PGWT in their interactions with students by actively involving them in the design and delivery of the module over a sustained period of time. Providing guidance to PGWT on how to escalate and discuss any sensitive issues which might be divulged by students during informal interactions would ensure that interactions are handled appropriately. This has the potential to enhance the value of these interactions, thereby further supporting students' sense of belonging and community, whilst also capitalising on the unique position which PGWT occupy.

Whilst this was a small-scale study, it could be repeated across other academic disciplines and teaching settings to further explore perceptions of PGWT and highlight the value and role they have in students' - and their own - sense of belonging.

Declaration of Interests

The authors declare that this study was conducted in the absence of any relationships that could be considered conflict of interest.

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Cultivating Care in the Classroom: Bridging Cultural Approaches in Malaysian and UK Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of care in the classroom by examining the impact of a care-infused virtual drama approach on English as a Second Language (ESL) learners at two Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), incorporating teacher reflections and insights from student interviews. Due to the prevalence of power imbalances (Nawi, 2014) and authoritarian practices (Tee et al., 2018) in Malaysia, this paper further explores the perspectives of three Malaysian Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) at the University of Warwick to understand their experiences and understanding of the notion of care within the context of a UK higher education institution. Through one-on-one semi-structured and pair interviews conducted online via Microsoft Teams, these GTAs shared how they manifest care and provide support for their learners at the University of Warwick. The insights from Malaysia and the UK accentuate the significance of fostering care in diverse educational environments, revealing its potential to enhance students' engagement and well-being across cultural and institutional settings.

Keywords:

Drama, Virtual drama, Ethics of care, ESL learners, GTA

Overview of My Virtual Drama Project

I commenced my doctoral studies at the University of Warwick in 2019. However, during the planning phase of my research, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a reassessment of my methodological approach. Initially, my research design involved conducting drama sessions in person; however, the global lockdowns and restrictions imposed because of the pandemic required a transition to a virtual format. Therefore, I had to adapt conventional drama strategies to a virtual platform as it was essential for ensuring the feasibility of drama activities in the online context. In this study, Microsoft Teams was utilised as our main platform for the virtual drama. The study was conducted across two cycles in two HEIs in Malaysia, involving low-proficiency ESL learners as participants. Each cycle lasted for six weeks; each week, a 90-minute virtual drama session was conducted with student participants who volunteered to take part.

My rationale for employing virtual drama as an alternative for low-proficiency ESL learners was to counter the teacher-centered methodology ubiquitous in Malaysia (Abdul Samat, 2016; Pandian, 2002) and to address the learners' communication difficulties and apprehension towards language learning. Despite eleven years of English language education, Malaysian students still demonstrate insufficient English literacy skills (Che Musa et al., 2012). This issue is not unique to Malaysia but is prevalent in various contexts where English is spoken as a second or foreign language. As Chang (2012) notes, it can be challenging for teachers to elicit responsiveness from students in the classroom, often leading some teachers to compensate for the silence by filling it with their own talk due to students' lack of participation.

Therefore, I sought to address this issue and uncover solutions for enhanced language learning. Amid the global COVID-19 outbreak, I delved into virtual drama pedagogy, thoughtfully aligning the module design to cater to the needs of ESL learners Malaysian HEIs, and part of this was conducting a Needs Analysis. In this effort, I

attempted to establish a 'safe' space for the students, in which the 'ethics of care' (Freebody & Finneran, 2021; Gallagher & Turner-King, 2020; Gkonou & Miller, 2019; Held, 2006; Nicholson, 2002; Noddings, 2013; Thompson, 2020; Turner-King, 2019) were central. Thompson (2020:41) defines the ‘ethics of care’ as valuing genuine connections between individuals and groups, characterised by a sense of responsibility for others and a corresponding commitment to helping them. Freebody and Finneran (2021:15) advise us that the key to governing ideas in drama in these unprecedented times are ‘play, fun, hope and love’, and further assert that:

> These philosophical discourses can be seen to intersect with drama work in these times in particular ways; hope as resistance, the aesthetic affect, the importance of imagination and fun and an ethic of care.

Freebody and Finneran's assertion highlights a profound connection between drama and key philosophical concepts—play, fun, hope, and love—that become particularly significant in unprecedented times, such as during the recent COVID-19 crisis. The ethics of care they mentioned reinforce the idea that drama, especially during challenging times, must be rooted in empathy and emotional support. This ensures that students feel valued and supported, which is crucial for their emotional well-being. When integrated into drama pedagogy, ethics of care can create a more compassionate classroom environment, empowering students to actively engage in their learning while also addressing their emotional needs.

Because the learners were geographically dispersed during the pandemic, the question of whether it was possible to be caring in these circumstances arose. However, Held (2006:18) reminds us that even when participants are more distant, the same qualities of ‘attentiveness, responsiveness to needs, and understanding situations from the points of view of others’ should define caring. This necessitates a commitment to understanding and also a willingness to invest diverse efforts.

Implementation and Impacts of Care Ethics in the Virtual Drama Classroom

In the context of virtual drama, which was a novel and potentially risky experience for ESL learners in Malaysia, cultivating care ethics was vital for providing a supportive learning environment. By prioritising care ethics, I aimed to create a space that promotes care, trust, collaboration, and engagement. Therefore, in this section, I will detail part of the practices adopted in this study, alongside the impacts on the ESL learners. This section highlights the importance of care ethics within the context of virtual drama education in Malaysia, offering valuable insights for those who may find these practices applicable to their own institutional settings.

It is important to note that my virtual drama participants provided consent for the use of screenshots containing their images, and I also explicitly stated in the consent form that the data collected would be used in future work arising from my PhD.

Implementing the Care Ethics

In essence, to implement the care ethics, I emphasised on understanding the students' needs and building relationship with the students. For me, this was a crucial step in reforming educational practices within this context. In a study by Tee and Samuel (2017:93) on teacher practices in Malaysia, the empirical evidence demonstrates that:

> The relationship between teachers and students is more respectful than warm. Most teachers seem to make attempts at connecting with individual students' learning needs, interest and personality but mostly at a superficial level.

In my view, although respect is fundamental to a productive environment in teaching and learning, the lack of warmth can inhibit students from fully engaging in the process. A more profound emotional connection between teachers and students is essential for fostering a sense of belonging and engagement. Hence, in my study, understanding students' needs and building relationship were central to my pedagogical practice.

Firstly, a Needs Analysis was conducted prior to designing my virtual drama module; this was part of my commitment to care, aligning with the idea that care advocates are typically 'concerned with caring attitudes that have the right kind of relation to persons' needs', signifying that we ought to focus on 'need-fulfilment' (Collins, 2015:55). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ESL learners and instructors in various Malaysian HEIs to understand the students' needs from two perspectives. Through the Needs Analysis, I was also able to identify the challenges these students faced with virtual learning during the pandemic, which became fundamental in my lesson planning. Since drama is unfamiliar to the ESL learners in my context, I also had to carefully consider how to scaffold the drama activities, especially when they were conducted fully virtually. Nicholson (2002:85) advises that the concepts of 'care' and 'trust' are often intertwined, and that 'providing appropriate support and intervention allows students to build trust gradually'. Therefore, part of my strategy was implementing a structured approach in order to support and scaffold learners' participation. This involved progressively introducing strategies from simple to more complex as the lessons advanced, coupled with demonstrations to familiarise them with the new approach. The objective was to reduce their inhibitions and enhance engagement throughout the drama course.

In terms of building relationship with the learners, part of the considerations was focusing on reducing power imbalances, and actively co-participating in the drama activities. These approaches will be further explained in the following section, where I will also outline the impacts of my care ethics on the ESL learners.

The Impacts of My Care Ethics

In this section, I will discuss the impacts of my care ethics within the context of Malaysian ESL learners. Before going into the discussion, I will provide a brief reflection on my teaching identity.

Prior to commencing my PhD studies at the University of Warwick, I had been teaching English in Malaysia since 2011. Upon arriving in the UK, I experienced a sense

of disconnection from my teaching identity, as I was not a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) and therefore had limited opportunities to engage with students in a teaching capacity. The Department of Education Studies had chosen me to deliver tutorials to undergraduate students, for which I was grateful, but this was a one-off occasion which occurred in Week 9 of a previous term.

Nonetheless, as I embarked on this research journey, I was able to reconnect with students again—this time, surprisingly, in a much deeper way. This deeper connection was likely a result of my use of drama as a pedagogy and the deliberate adoption of care ethics. Students were apparently open with me and willing to share their personal experiences. Upon reflection, this level of openness was not something I had encountered with my previous students while in Malaysia. For instance, one student in the study has openly shared with me about the depression she was facing by reaching out to me personally via WhatsApp.

In my view, discussing the issue of depression requires a significant level of trust in the individual with whom one is sharing. Another student, when interviewed in the focus group, only revealed *assignment load* as the stressor, but when we had our personal interview, she was more open to talk about her situation that was apparently far worse than she had described in the focus group, revealing other stressors including *family problems* and *unconducive learning environment* as she is living in a long house. In Malaysia, a traditional longhouse refers to a house that can accommodate a maximum of thirty families (Sarawak Tourism, n.d.). In a study conducted by Brown (2020), he found that students perceive teachers as having a significant role in reducing stressors in their learning environment, not only through their teaching methods but also through their *attitudes* towards teaching and students. In this sense, I suggest that the adoption of care ethics helped to foster a trusting environment where the learners were more open to share their feelings.

As mentioned in the previous section, part of my care ethics involved cultivating positive relationships with students. One of the key things I did was consciously reducing the power imbalance between myself and the students. However, in my view, having a

degree of authority and not *totally* relinquishing it was helpful for me to manage both the drama and the students, especially when everything was done virtually. This aligns with Neelands' (2009:183) suggestion that successful collaboration in 'ensemble-based' learning, such as drama, often involves the uncrowning of the power of the director/teacher' indicating that teachers should relinquish some of their authority in the classroom.

When I attempted to embrace this approach, it developed a close bond between me and the students. This close bond, as indicated by the learners, made it easier for them to communicate with me, and they felt more comfortable opening up about themselves. Significantly, this also afforded them the confidence to speak up in English, which is their second language (L2). Moreover, the students evidently felt empowered to express themselves without fear of judgment. It was noteworthy that students talked about how they became more spontaneous in the virtual drama sessions. For instance, in an interview, one student commented:

> Before attending surely I'm not too confident […] because in English class I will just write on paper and talk. I'm not the spontaneous person. So after the session I will be like okay, just talk when you feel confident, yeah. I just talk. [S1]

The above excerpt illustrates the connection between spontaneity and confidence, affording her the courage to articulate her ideas in an impromptu manner. Her comment resonated with the comment made by another student, where she described that even if students make mistakes in my class, they felt supported, and this encourages continued participation. In contrast, in other classes, this student mentioned that mistakes are often met with immediate reprimands, resulting in her feeling overwhelmed, hindering her ability to process information and proceed with the task at hand. Her comment illustrates authoritarian practices, which is prevalent in Malaysia. Tee et al. (2018:137) explain the cyclical nature of these authoritarian practices within the context:

> Many of the teachers who went through the same education system in Malaysia were once students who also viewed teachers as the authority and deferred to this

> control. Nonetheless when stepping into the other side of the hierarchy, from being students to being teachers, teachers displayed few difficulties in assuming authoritarian characteristics during classroom discourse. Interestingly, at different time or settings, one can dutifully be an obedient student or also comfortably be an authoritarian, monologic teacher. This reflects the cyclic set roles and expectations for each hierarchy level, and more importantly the faithful submission to and execution of this structure.

My exposure to drama pedagogy, combined with my experience in the UK education system which is more student-centered and non-authoritarian, compelled me to break this cycle. Nonetheless, student-centered approaches, having originated in the West and align with the Western emphasis on the individual, raise important questions regarding their applicability and relevance in the contexts of developing countries where the learning cultures are different (O'Sullivan, 2004). Consequently, it was essential to implement this approach to assess its impact on students in a developing country, such as Malaysia. hooks (2003) provides another important justification for my argument, as she posits that authoritarian practices can dehumanise learners, stifling the creative and transformative potential that emerges from active engagement in learning.

Furthermore, Noddings (2013:67) posits that 'the recognition of caring by the cared-for is necessary to the caring relation'. In this study, it was noteworthy that the students indeed acknowledged my efforts to demonstrate care. For instance, one student commented:

> It's so hard because lecturer or teacher before this they are so serious. And when I learn I feel not confident in English. [...] Your communication with others are different *like* (from) teachers and lecturers before this. [S2]

Another student commented:

> Translation:
>
> ...normally for English classes […] I have never attended a class like this, where the lecturer is always supportive of the students... [S3]

The students' excerpts above also highlight the teacher-student power imbalance prevalent in our culture, which, in my view, needs to be transformed. As noted by the students above, they felt that my approach differed from what they were used to in their classroom. Relinquishing some of my authority and stepping away from traditional teacher roles has notably transformed me into a more approachable, friendly, and engaging teacher, rather than one perceived as overly serious. This shift has also turned me into a supportive teacher rather than a detached one. This aligns with hooks' (2003:44) critique of authoritarian approach, where the seriousness of the teacher renders the learning experience 'repressive and oppressive' by stripping away elements of fun. I suggest that removing the elements of enjoyment and playfulness from the learning process can hinder learners' engagement, which can ultimately diminish their motivation to participate.

In addition, my openness to engage as an active co-participant and maintain a playful demeanour in the virtual drama also fosters a positive relationship with the students, thereby establishing trust. Shown in Figure 1 is the screenshot from one of the virtual drama activities in which I was an active co-participant, who was about to throw an 'imaginary ball' to a student:

Figure 1: Screenshot of the 'Topic Tag' activity (adapted from Trefor-Jones, 2020)

There was evidence of student engagement when I actively co-participated in the drama activities, and the impact it had on the students seemed promising. For instance, one student commented in the chat box on my willingness to exhibit a ‘silly’ expression, in-role, in front of the screen:

> You were so into the character and *kami terdorong untuk* (we were inspired to) be free with our expression too. We were feeling comfortable to go on with our characters. It was fun and not awkward. [S4]

This aligns with Delahunty et al.’s (2014:250) assertion that accessing others’ ideas requires a willingness to disclose, which is contingent on the presence of trust, which can only be developed interpersonally over time. However, in this context, our trust-building was established relatively rapid. Building trust and relationship were crucial in encouraging the ESL students—particularly those who felt insecure and anxious—to engage in both in-role and out-of-role virtual drama activities. This was important considering the students were not familiar with the drama approach, and for most of them, this was their first encounter with drama. The fact that they needed to do drama virtually in English which is their L2, heightened the need for easing their apprehension. Therefore, when I actively co-participated in the virtual drama activities, there was evidence of learner engagement, thereby easing their apprehension and motivating them to perform.

The empirical data from my study also indicates that by providing students with opportunities to practise social interactions both in and out of role, and by emphasising strong bonding and trust, we also collaboratively cultivated and sustained an ‘ecology of care’ (Gallagher & Turner-King, 2020:142). This fostered positive relationships and a sense of belonging, with some students even remarking that it felt less like a class and more like being with family. Many students expressed their sadness during our final session, leaving heartfelt messages in the Team's chat box and voicing their sadness in the focus group that the programme was coming to an end.

In summary, with the right approaches, it is indeed possible for educators to be caring in virtual environments. Through intentional strategies that prioritise relationship

building, communication, engagement, and student well-being, educators can create nurturing environments that foster meaningful connections, even at a distance.

Reflections of Malaysian GTAs at Warwick

Following my recent experience with ESL learners in Malaysia during my doctoral studies in the UK, I spoke with three Malaysian PhD students (Fiza, Sheeda, and Naemah), who are GTAs at the University of Warwick, to gain their perspectives on the notion of care. Sheeda had one year of experience as a GTA at Warwick Business School (WBS), along with 15 years of combined teaching experience in higher education institutions (HEIs) in both Malaysia and the UK. In contrast, Fiza and Naemah had three and two years of experience as GTAs in the Department of Law and the Department of Chemistry, respectively. Prior to becoming a lawyer in Malaysia in 2016, Fiza had been tutoring in Malaysia since 2011. Naemah, on the other hand, taught for one year at a Malaysian HEI before transitioning to industry in 2013. In sum, all three GTAs had prior teaching experience in Malaysia before coming to the UK to pursue their PhDs. A one-on-one semi-structured interview was conducted with Sheeda, while Fiza and Naemah participated in a paired interview, both of which were held via Microsoft Teams. The interviews were video-recorded, and they also provided consent for their real names to be used.

The reasons why I chose to interview them were twofold. First, having not had the opportunity to be a GTA, I was curious about their experiences and wanted to learn more about them first hand. Second, coming from Malaysia, where there exists a power imbalance (Nawi, 2014) and authoritarian practices are prevalent (Tee et al., 2018), I was interested in their perspectives on student-centered and caring approaches. This is particularly noteworthy given their experiences in both the Malaysian and UK education systems, which could provide unique insights into the subject matter. As mentioned earlier, based on my own experience doing my PhD in the UK, the education system reflects a non-authoritarian and student-centered approaches, which are ubiquitous in the West (O'Sullivan, 2004). Moreover, Malaysian educational practices are often influenced by cultural values that emphasise discipline, as well as respect for elders and

those of higher social status. For instance, in a traditional Malay context, questioning what individuals with higher social status say is deemed inappropriate (Jeannot & Khairil Anuar, 2012; Mahfooz et al., 2004, as cited in Nawi, 2014) and confrontation is often avoided (Jeannot & Khairil Anuar, 2012, as cited in Nawi, 2014). This may lead to an emphasis on obedience and compliance among students. In contrast, in the UK, Zhang (2021:239) notes that the education system 'encourages students to be authority-challengers, facilitating students to rationalize and focus on the precision and accuracy of information', which resonates well with what I experienced. Being a PhD student in the UK, I felt valued, respected, and supported, and this has ultimately contributed to my overall personal growth.

Significantly, in my interviews with them, it was apparent that they indeed had distinctive ways to manifest care for the students, and even went above and beyond in supporting their students' learning at the University of Warwick. It is important to note that these GTAs had their sessions in person, rather than virtually. Nonetheless, it was remarkable that most of their experiences corroborated with what I had practised in my care ethics in my recent study. Just as my exposure to drama pedagogy and the UK education system has influenced my perspective on teaching approaches, I believe these Malaysian GTAs' experiences here may also have some impact on their pedagogical methods.

The interviews have uncovered their significant experiences regarding the notion of care in their context of being GTAs, which could potentially be something that other GTAs and educators could learn from, and replicate (if applicable) in their practice to foster a more supportive learning environment for their students. In the following sections, I will highlight the ways in which these three Malaysian GTAs manifest care towards their students at the University of Warwick. This will be presented under three sub-headings: *Leveraging the Unique Position of the GTA, Supporting Students and Exhibiting Empathy,* and *Building Positive Relationships.* These sections will be followed by a concluding section, *Cultivating Care in the Classroom: A Practical Guide*, offering

insights for those interested in implementing similar approaches in their own classrooms.

Leveraging the Unique Position of GTA

In our interviews, they shared the view that GTAs hold a unique position, being closer in status to students compared to module leaders. For instance, Fiza commented:

> …for GTA, they know who is their student. They know their weaknesses. They know who is the most brilliant in class. They know who speak the most, who keep quiet the most. So they are very personal to the student. They have the personal touch to each of the students…

This unique position allows GTAs to have more open and trusting relationships with students, closely connect with and support their holistic experiences rather than just their academic performance. It is significant that Sheeda's comment also resonates with what Fiza mentioned. She commented:

> …probably because we are GTA, […] so we can be more approachable in terms of […] the relationship wise, between the GTA and the students, because sometimes they have a gap between them and the module leader, because the module leaders like high in the ranking. […] they feel like they are more closer [sic] to us […] because GTA is student as well. So probably we can share experiences in terms of studying in the UK […] experiences in you have, like, common, common values there, because you're a student as well, other than just being a GTA itself.

Sheeda's comment above highlights the ways in which GTAs can leverage their position due to their closer proximity to students as being fellow students themselves, which include sharing of experiences and common values. Additionally, Fiza also mentioned that because GTAs generally know and recognise each and every student in the class due to leading smaller seminar groups (only around 15 students for the Department of Law where she is based), this affords her the opportunity to personalise her support. For instance, Fiza shared how she provided personalised guidance and accommodate diverse learning needs, such as adjusting deadlines and presentation requirements for students with disabilities or other special needs. In her words:

> …in lecture, it will normally be 300 students, 400 students. So the lecturer […] cannot see one by one, but we as a GTA, we can see them personally, 15 people in class. […] So we know everyone by name. We know what happened to them. We know why they don't come to class, and especially for neurodiverse student […] like the ones that have disability. So we need […] to know what kind of disability that they have to make sure that we can tailor our way of teaching. Okay, for example, one of my students who is autism [sic], what I need to do, is not to allow or not to ask her to present in front of the class, because it will be over stimulating for her. And for my ADHD student, I will not give him the due date in the class, for example. Okay, guys, you have 10 minutes for discussion, but for that person, you are allowed to […] do your thing for as much as you can.

While previous research indicates that the dual nature of GTAs' roles as both researchers and teachers can create tension and uncertainty about their responsibilities (Clark et al., 2021), Fiza's comment above accentuates the significance of this unique position of GTAs in fostering a nurturing and supportive learning environment for the students. As they often lead smaller seminar groups, GTAs can develop a more intimate relationship with their students. In Muzaka's (2009) research, many students found it advantageous to have GTAs lead small group seminars, as their recent university experience provides them with added insight and understanding of what approaches are most effective in this context, which aligns well with Fiza's comment. Moreover,

GTAs can also provide one-on-one assistance, addressing students' specific concerns. In Fiza's case, she goes out of her way to help students with diverse needs. This personalised approach will in turn help students feel more valued and supported in their academic journey at the University of Warwick.

Supporting Students and Exhibiting Empathy

The unique role of GTAs also allows them to empathise with their students, enabling them to patiently support and guide them both in the classroom and the lab. For instance, Naemah, a GTA at the Department of Chemistry, highlighted the value of drawing on her own experiences as student to better understand and relate to the challenges faced by her students. In her experience doing laboratory demonstrations, she endeavoured to build confidence in students, especially the international students who always seemed rather more nervous about handling lab equipment. Citing her background as an Asian, where being 'spoonfed' is culturally common, she explains how this ostensibly negative connotation translates into her being protective of her students during laboratory demonstrations:

> …we have usually three people at one lab experiment. So most of my friends usually ask [sic] me, you don't need to teach them everything. So they usually let the student do on their own, but then on my side, because we are usually being taught on every little detail, […] spoon feed, yeah […] But then I think it's matter of safety also, because I don't want to let them get accident, then I teach them. It's better I teach you before you get into accidents.

Fiza corroborated Naemah's point by commenting on something similar. She recounted how her students appreciated and recognised her efforts to ensure they truly understand her lessons and enjoy her class. Her efforts include providing small gestures like giving out little presents and also doing a Kahoot! quiz at the end of the seminar. On

top of that, Fiza also talked about her efforts to ensure her students truly understand her lessons, which contrasts the approach of some other GTAs whom she has previously observed:

> I have seen my friend, my peer when I did observation to my peer teaching. I can see that when they teach, they don't really care whether the student understand or not, but that is not my style. I will make sure they really understand. So for example, for complex legal principle, I will make a table in front of them. So this is how we demonstrate the law that, and this is the exception. So in that way, when they see the law is being tabled, one by one, it becomes more structured, and it is not like big idea for them.

The comments from the GTAs highlight their strong sense of empathy and a sincere commitment to supporting their students' learning and well-being. Their willingness to go beyond conventional GTA teaching responsibilities reflects a deep understanding of their students' needs, both academically and emotionally. These GTAs' approaches to empathising with students and addressing their needs resonate well with my own adoption of care ethics in my virtual drama, which involves recognising students' needs to ensure they align with my pedagogical approaches. These caring approaches can foster a more supportive and engaging learning environment; when learners feel supported, this will help improve their well-being. Baik et al. (2019) argue that there is limited knowledge about the measures universities can implement to support students' mental wellbeing. This poses a problem as research indicates that a significant proportion of higher education students are facing well-being challenges, including 'psychological and emotional distress, feelings of anxiety and depression, and an increased risk of burnout' (Backhaus et al. 2020; Baik et al., 2019; Dopmeijer, 2021, as cited in Douwes et al., 2023:1). Remarkably, insights from these GTAs go on to show that GTAs can play a significant role in addressing this issue.

Building Positive Relationships

In my interview with Sheeda, she highlighted several strategies and approaches that GTAs could adopt to foster positive relationships with students. Sheeda contrasts her approachable and friendly demeanour with the more rigid methods she has observed among her colleagues back in Malaysia, where they tend to be more serious and maintain a clear barrier between themselves and their students. She emphasised the importance of GTAs having a positive and close relationship with their students, so they can pinpoint when students may be struggling, as rigid instructors may miss these signs. By establishing this kind of relationship, which involved her opening up to them, encouraged her students to do the same. Sheeda commented:

> I think that […] the students open up more with the GTA because probably it depends on the approach of the GTA itself, […] like, my approach is more of […] a friendlier approach to the students. So, […] when in class, usually what I do is I, I share, like real experiences, my experiences, so they appreciate that. So […] when I open up, they open up as well. So I think that's, that's one of the relationship that I think I created between me and the students.

This approach Sheeda adopted is similar to what I practised in my care ethics. As mentioned earlier, my friendly and approachable demeanour in my virtual drama sessions encouraged students to open up about themselves, allowing me to learn about the issues they were facing, such as depression, which undoubtedly affected their well-being.

Furthermore, Sheeda also highlighted the ways in which GTAs can build relationships with the students in order to better support them by replicating the systems that she was used to back when she was in Malaysia, and also here in the UK. In Malaysia, she had a “mentor-mentee” system, where students would have a Personal Academic Advisor who would be looking after the students from Year 1 until they

graduate, which she thinks could be a good practice to replicate. She described the "mentor-mentee" system as one where the mentor (the personal advisor) and the mentee (the student) meet every fortnight to discuss anything related to academic or personal matters, including any challenges they face at university. This role, I believe, is similar to the role of a personal tutor at the University of Warwick, except that a mentor would meet their mentee more regularly (once every fortnight), as Sheeda described. Moreover, Sheeda also recommended GTAs to replicate the coffee sessions her module leader practices here in the UK. In her words:

> …back in Malaysia […] we have […] the mentor-mentee, the personal, *Penasihat* Academic (Personal Academic Advisor). Here, we don't, I don't see that. But then what, what the module leader does that I see that […] we can replicate that is, he will, he will dedicate one, I think, two hours in a week, like they would put, like a day and time that he will sit in the cafe, and any students of his class can come and, you know, come and sit and talk to him about anything.

Sheeda's comment suggests the importance of creating informal opportunities for students to express themselves, especially for those who may not feel confident speaking up in class. She mentioned that casual interactions, such as having coffee or engaging in a relaxed conversation as practised by her module leader, provide a valuable space for students to open up and share their thoughts and concerns. She further highlighted the value of GTAs replicating the "mentor-mentee" system, or even the weekly coffee session, as these moments of informal dialogue can help GTAs better understand their students' needs and challenges, allowing for deeper connections and more personalised support. For her, this approach encourages GTAs to be more approachable, where students feel comfortable communicating outside the formal classroom setting.

Sheeda's suggestion to engage students in informal conversations resonated well with my own approach. When teaching the ESL learners through virtual drama, part of my strategy to build relationships was by having a WhatsApp group specifically set up

for the students to engage in informal conversations, and significantly they also utilised other platforms such as Microsoft Team's chat platform for this purpose. This approach aligns with Beins' (2016:157) contention that 'informal communication enables students to be thinking and feeling beings', thereby contributing to the development of a robust learning community. Beins (2016:161) further highlights the value of informal communication online as we can make use of punctuation and emojis 'to communicate positive affect', apart from sharing personal stories. Significantly, this resonated well with what my students and I experienced. For instance, through informal communication such as WhatsApp, there was evidence of students connecting with one another to share their personal stories; it was also through this medium that one of my students expressed her issues with depression to me.

Therefore, engaging in informal conversations, whether in person or virtually, plays a crucial role in enhancing relationship building among students and educators. These interactions create a relaxed atmosphere where individuals feel comfortable expressing themselves, sharing personal experiences and stories, and developing trust. As a result, this informal communication fosters a supportive learning environment that encourages engagement and a deeper connection between educators and students.

Cultivating Care in the Classroom: A Practical Guide

Based on my own insights and that of the three GTAs presented in this article, I would like to propose a practical guide on *how* care can be cultivated in the classrooms across cultural and institutional settings:

1. Understanding students' needs (formally and/or informally)
    a. Formally: Conducting a Needs Analysis
    b. Informally: Creating informal communication spaces

2. Building positive relationships
3. Scaffolding our teaching
4. Providing *personalised* support wherever possible
5. Exhibiting empathy for students
6. Reducing power imbalances

Drawing from the above guide, cultivating care in the classroom requires a nuanced approach, yet is entirely feasible to implement. At the core, this approach involves understanding students' needs, whether through formal mechanisms like a Needs Analysis or by fostering informal spaces for communication. Building positive relationships is equally essential, as trust and rapport form the foundation of a caring environment. By scaffolding instruction and providing personalised support, we can guide students through challenges while respecting their individual learning capabilities.

Furthermore, the insights from this article also highlight the crucial role of empathy in teaching and learning. In environments where authoritarian practices dominate, making a conscious effort to reduce power imbalances not only nurtures a more caring and supportive atmosphere but also gives students a voice. I suggest that this requires a change not only in long-held perspectives but also in practices. Ultimately, this caring and supportive environment can foster both student engagement and personal well-being, ensuring that students are supported academically and emotionally.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the integration of care ethics in virtual drama pedagogy has proven to be an effective approach in enhancing the language learning experience of low-proficiency ESL learners in Malaysia. Additionally, insights from Malaysian GTAs at the University of Warwick further emphasise the unique and impactful role of GTAs in establishing

caring atmosphere for students. As intermediaries between students and faculty, GTAs are positioned to build closer, empathetic relationships with students, enabling them to offer personalised support for their students. These findings highlight the transformative potential of care-centered teaching methods to create supportive learning environments, promoting not only learner engagement but also student well-being.

Looking ahead, these findings could have a significant impact on teaching and learning. In contexts where authoritarian practices are prevalent, educators might reflect on embracing care ethics as a means to enhance and transform existing teaching practices. Moreover, educators across different contexts, subjects and educational levels should consider embedding care ethics into their pedagogical approaches to promote a more caring form of education. By doing so, educators can create more welcoming and supportive environments, giving students a voice and thereby enabling them to actively participate in their learning journey. For future research, it would be valuable to explore how care-centered pedagogical practices can be scaled and adapted in diverse educational contexts, including those outside language learning and HEIs. Finally, further exploration into the role of technology in facilitating care-infused learning environments could provide deeper insights into how digital tools can enhance student engagement in remote or hybrid learning environments.

Ethical Claim

The study (virtual drama) has been granted approval by the Department of Education Studies, ensuring that it meets the university's ethical standards. Informed consent has been obtained from all participants (virtual drama participants and the GTAs), guaranteeing that they are fully aware of the nature, purpose, and potential impacts and outcomes of the research, and have voluntarily agreed to participate. I confirm that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this research.

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Enhancing Student Engagement and Belonging in Legal Education: The Impact of Personalized Teaching and Continuous Professional Development

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Abstract

This paper explores the development of effective teaching strategies within legal education, specifically in the UK, emphasizing personalized teaching, interactive learning techniques, and continuous professional development (CPD) of the teacher. Drawing on reflective teaching practices, this study investigates how personalized approaches—such as the correct pronunciation of students' names and tailored feedback—foster student engagement and a sense of belonging. Additionally, the implementation of mock courtroom scenarios and technology-enhanced learning tools like VEVOX and Padlet are analysed for their role in promoting higher-order thinking and inclusivity. Continuous professional development informed the decolonization of the curriculum, challenging systemic inequalities in legal education. The findings highlight the importance of integrating personalized attention, interactive methods, and CPD to enhance student engagement, well-being, and the creation of equitable learning environments.

Introduction

Legal education has long been recognized as a demanding field, not only due to the complexity of its content but also because of the unique challenges students face in mastering critical reasoning, analytical skills, and applying legal principles to practical situations. As legal education evolves, there is increasing recognition of the need to foster inclusive, supportive, and engaging learning environments to address both academic challenges and the mental health stressors disproportionately affecting law students (Skead & Rogers, 2015; Flynn et al., 2019). This paper examines how personalized teaching approaches and continuous professional development (CPD) can enhance student engagement, belonging, and overall well-being within the context of legal education, with a focus on first-year undergraduate law students.

Teaching law in a diverse classroom presents unique challenges, especially when students come from varying backgrounds and academic experiences (Pokorny & Warren, 2021). As Brookfield (2002) points out, reflective teaching is a critical tool for educators to adapt their methods in ways that not only meet academic goals but also support students' personal development. In this paper, I explore the importance of reflective teaching by drawing on my experience as a seminar instructor for the "Law State and Individual" module at the University of Warwick. This first-year module, which covers key elements of the UK's constitutional framework, provides a backdrop for broader pedagogical discussions on student engagement and support.

One of the key challenges facing legal educators today is the mental health crisis among law students, who experience higher levels of psychological stress compared to their peers in other academic fields (Fines 1998; Larcombe & Malkin 2011; Skead & Rogers 2015). Research suggests that the competitive, high-stakes environment of law schools contributes significantly to this issue (Flynn et al., 2019). To counteract these stressors, it is critical for educators to cultivate a classroom environment where students feel acknowledged, valued, and supported.

Personalized teaching, which involves understanding students' unique needs and aspirations, can play a vital role in achieving this. Scholars such as Cureton and Gravestock (2018) have emphasized that student engagement is deeply influenced by the personal connection between students and their teachers. Therefore, in my practice, I place particular emphasis on learning and using students' names correctly, as a small but significant step towards creating a sense of belonging.

This paper also examines the role of continuous professional development in improving legal education. In recent years, there has been a growing call to decolonize the curriculum and address systemic inequalities that persist within higher education, including legal studies (Heleta, 2016; Saini & Begum, 2020). Engaging with CPD opportunities has enabled me to reflect critically on my own teaching practices and consider how they contribute to broader efforts to create a more equitable and inclusive legal education. By incorporating insights from CPD sessions on decolonization and inclusive teaching, I aim to develop a teaching approach that not only enhances student learning but also challenges traditional power dynamics within the classroom.

In this paper, I reflect on the outcomes of implementing personalized and interactive teaching methods, such as dividing students into groups for mock courtroom scenarios and utilizing technology-enhanced learning tools. By critically assessing these strategies, I aim to contribute to the growing discourse on how personalized attention, continuous professional development, and reflective teaching practices can enhance the educational experience of law students and promote a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Methodology and Reflection

This study adopts a reflective teaching methodology, rooted in the framework of **critical reflection** as outlined by Brookfield (2017), which posits that educators must critically

examine their own assumptions and practices to foster more inclusive and effective learning environments. Reflective teaching involves the continuous evaluation of one's teaching strategies through direct feedback, peer observations, and self-assessment, allowing for iterative improvement in pedagogical approaches (Brookfield, 2002). In this paper, I engage with my experiences as a seminar instructor for the *Law, State, and Individual* module at the University of Warwick, examining the impact of personalized teaching and continuous professional development (CPD) on student engagement and learning outcomes.

Research Setting and Participants

The context for this study is the *Law, State, and Individual* module, a first-year undergraduate law course that introduces students to the foundational principles of the UK's constitutional framework, including Parliamentary Sovereignty, Judicial Review, and Public Interest Litigation. Over the course of two academic years, I have taught approximately 80 students over the two academic years of 2022 – 23 and 2023 – 24, divided into seminar groups of 19-22 students each. The cohort of students represented a diverse mix of backgrounds, both domestically and internationally, including individuals from various ethnic, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was primarily qualitative and involved three main sources: ***self-reflection, peer observations,*** and ***student feedback***. I gathered student feedback through formal anonymous surveys distributed by Warwick Law School, ensuring comprehensive and honest insights into my teaching methods. These surveys were distributed in hard copy form at the end of term 2 seminars, with all 45 students from that academic year participating. Physical copies of the survey were issued, and students were asked to complete them during the class before returning them to me, ensuring a high response rate. The surveys did not collect personal data, and anonymity was maintained throughout, which encouraged students to provide candid feedback on their learning experiences.

The survey questions were designed to evaluate various aspects of teaching, including clarity of explanations, the usefulness of personalized teaching approaches, engagement with the material, and the perceived effectiveness of interactive learning methods such as mock courtroom scenarios. Student feedback was analysed qualitatively to identify recurring themes related to engagement, inclusivity, and the effectiveness of specific teaching methods.

In addition to student feedback, I engaged in **peer observation**, where colleagues observed my seminars and provided constructive criticism on my teaching approach. The most important comment made in the first year was to try and speak more slowly, allowing students more time to process the information which is quite new for a lot of them. This I believe laid a very strong foundation for me to build my CPD from. In the second year, the comments were more centred around letting the students do more thinking to solve a question that I pose, before providing help. This process of peer evaluation has been instrumental in refining my techniques, particularly in balancing interactive methods with content delivery.

Personalized Teaching Strategies

One of the core strategies I implemented was **personalized teaching**, which focused on recognizing and valuing the individual identities and needs of each student. This approach was inspired by Cureton and Gravestock's (2018) work on student-teacher relationships, which underscores the importance of acknowledging students as individuals to foster deeper learning connections. At the beginning of each term, I made a concerted effort to learn each student's name and the correct pronunciation by having direct conversations with each individual. I introduced this process during the first seminar, setting aside a few minutes for informal one-on-one interactions. In these short discussions, I asked students not only for their names but also for their preferred pronunciation, and I inquired about their personal motivations for studying law. This approach allowed me to build a more personal rapport with each student and helped create an inclusive atmosphere from the outset.

In some cases, I encouraged students to share their motivations with the group, fostering a sense of community where peers could also engage with and learn about each other. However, I was mindful that some students might prefer to keep this information private, so I respected their choice to share only during one-on-one interactions. By balancing group engagement with individual attention, I was able to make each student feel valued and supported, as evidenced by their positive feedback regarding this personalized approach. Several students explicitly mentioned feeling more engaged and valued when addressed personally, reinforcing the importance of creating an inclusive environment.

I also divided students into **mock courtroom groups**—a dynamic approach to seminar discussions aimed at fostering **higher-order thinking skills** in line with Bloom's Taxonomy (Hmelo & Ferrari, 1997). By assigning students roles as either appellants or defendants, I encouraged them to actively apply legal concepts to real-world scenarios, promoting critical thinking and engagement. However, the initial response to this exercise varied. While some students embraced the challenge and performed well in crafting legal arguments, others appeared hesitant, likely due to their transition to university life or discomfort with group dynamics. Reflecting on this variation, I adapted my approach by offering additional guidance and clarifying expectations in subsequent sessions, incorporating the concept of scaffolding to better support student learning. Scaffolding, as defined by educational theorist Jerome Bruner, involves providing students with structured support when they encounter new or challenging material, and gradually removing that support as they become more confident and independent learners. In this case, I began by offering more detailed explanations, providing step-by-step guidance for activities such as mock courtroom exercises, and setting clear expectations for participation and collaboration.

As students gained familiarity with these tasks, I gradually reduced the level of direct instruction, encouraging them to take more ownership of their learning and engage more independently with the material. This approach ensured that students who were initially hesitant or struggled with group dynamics had the necessary support to participate fully, while those who became more confident could challenge themselves further, thereby fostering an inclusive and progressive learning environment.

Technology-Enhanced Learning

In response to the growing integration of technology in education, I incorporated **technology-enhanced learning (TEL)** tools such as VEVOX and Padlet into my seminars. These tools allowed for real-time polling, quizzes, and anonymous feedback, which aligned with **Turner's (n.d.)** suggestion of using technology to engage large groups and encourage participation from introverted students. Additionally, TEL tools helped me gather immediate insights into student comprehension, allowing me to adjust my teaching methods on the fly. This approach is consistent with Petty's (2002) recommendation of using interactive methods to promote student engagement, particularly in large group settings.

The **anonymity** offered by these platforms was particularly beneficial in addressing sensitive topics. For instance, during the analysis of cases involving LGBTQ+ issues, such as a case involving a homosexual couple facing legal repercussions under the *Rents Act*, some students expressed discomfort with the language used in the case. I reassured students that they could opt out of discussions that caused distress by contacting me privately, fostering a more inclusive classroom environment. This strategy aligns with the recommendations of **Ayres (2019)**, who advocates for **Queer Pedagogy** as a means of ensuring that educational spaces are welcoming and supportive of diverse identities.

Reflection on Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

A critical element of my reflective practice has been my participation in **Continuous Professional Development (CPD)** sessions, which have significantly influenced my teaching philosophy. The largest influence on my personal pedagogy has been of the APP PGR program offered by the Academic Development Council of the University of Warwick. CPD in general and APP PGR has enabled me to engage with contemporary pedagogical theories, including the **decolonization of legal education** (Heleta, 2016; Saini & Begum, 2020). These sessions have highlighted the systemic inequalities embedded within legal curricula, particularly the Eurocentric focus that can alienate students from marginalized backgrounds. These sessions have highlighted the systemic inequalities embedded within legal curricula, particularly the Eurocentric focus that can alienate students from marginalised backgrounds. For instance, in teaching constitutional law, I supplemented the standard discussions of UK constitutional principles with comparative examples from non-Western legal systems, such as the Indian and Pakistani constitutions. This allowed students, particularly those from South Asian backgrounds, to see their own legal traditions represented in the curriculum. It also prompted all students to critically reflect on the limitations of a purely Eurocentric legal framework and consider how different legal systems approach fundamental principles like human rights and democracy. By integrating these perspectives, I have sought to create a more inclusive and critical approach to legal education, ensuring that my teaching materials reflect diverse perspectives and challenge dominant narratives.

Through CPD, I have also become increasingly aware of the ‘hidden curriculum’—the implicit, often unspoken, messages conveyed through educational practices that can perpetuate social hierarchies and disadvantage minority students (Cotton et al., 2013; Kentli, 2009). These messages often include cultural biases that are embedded in seemingly neutral classroom practices, such as the assumption that students’ names or pronouns will conform to the dominant culture.

By critically reflecting on these insights, I recognized that mispronouncing students' names or assuming their pronouns can reinforce feelings of exclusion and 'otherness'—a key aspect of the hidden curriculum. To counteract this, I have implemented practices such as inviting students to correct my pronunciation of their names and inquiring about their preferred pronouns. These practices directly challenge the hidden curriculum by disrupting the implicit assumptions about identity, language, and cultural norms that often disadvantage students from minority backgrounds. Although these actions may seem minor, they help dismantle the unspoken hierarchies present in educational settings, creating a classroom atmosphere that values each student's identity and promotes greater inclusion.

Discussion and Results

The findings of this reflective study reveal that **personalized teaching**, **interactive learning techniques**, and **continuous professional development (CPD)** have a significant impact on enhancing student engagement, promoting inclusivity, and addressing systemic inequalities in legal education. This section discusses how these strategies influenced the learning environment in my *Law, State, and Individual* seminars at the University of Warwick and reflects on the broader implications for legal education.

1. Enhancing Engagement through Personalized Teaching

A key finding from this study is the positive correlation between personalised teaching and increased student engagement, which can be observed across multiple dimensions: behavioural, affective, and cognitive.

Behavioural engagement was reflected in the increased participation in class activities and discussions. When students felt personally acknowledged, they were more willing

to contribute to seminar discussions and engage in collaborative exercises such as group presentations or mock courtroom scenarios.

Affective engagement—the emotional investment in learning—was evidenced by students expressing a greater sense of belonging and motivation. By addressing students by name and acknowledging their personal motivations, I noticed that they exhibited more enthusiasm for the subject matter, which created a more positive classroom atmosphere overall.

Cognitive engagement, which refers to the intellectual investment in learning, was also enhanced. Students demonstrated deeper critical thinking when given personalized feedback tailored to their strengths and weaknesses. This type of feedback allowed them to focus on areas where they could improve, encouraging a more active and reflective approach to their own learning. This supports the work of **Cureton and Gravestock (2018)**, who argue that students are more likely to engage with learning when they feel acknowledged as individuals. By fostering all three types of engagement—behavioural, affective, and cognitive—personalized teaching contributed to a richer, more dynamic learning environment.

Student feedback also reinforced this observation. Several students noted that being addressed by name made them feel more connected to the learning environment, reducing the psychological distance between student and teacher. This is particularly important in legal education, where the hierarchical structure of law schools often exacerbates student anxiety (Skead & Rogers, 2015). By breaking down these barriers through personalized attention, I was able to create a more supportive and inclusive classroom environment, aligning with **Brookfield's (2017)** concept of critically reflective

teaching, which emphasizes the need for educators to adjust their methods to create a humanized learning experience.

The use of personalized quizzes based on topics that interested individual students also proved effective in maintaining engagement. The quizzes allowed students to showcase their knowledge in areas where they felt confident, thereby fostering a sense of competence. This aligns with **Petty's (2002)** findings that using varied assessment methods can enhance student motivation and help them recognize their own progress in learning.

2. Interactive Learning and Critical Thinking

The use of **interactive learning techniques**, particularly the division of students into mock courtroom groups (appellants and defendants), contributed significantly to the development of **higher-order thinking skills**. Students were encouraged to critically apply legal concepts such as Parliamentary Sovereignty and Judicial Review to real-world scenarios. This aligns with **Bloom's Taxonomy**, which highlights the importance of moving beyond basic knowledge acquisition to encourage analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Hmelo & Ferrari, 1997).

However, the effectiveness of this approach varied. While some students thrived in this interactive environment, others appeared overwhelmed, especially during the early stages of their university experience. This finding resonates with **Flynn et al. (2019)**, who highlight the stress that law students experience during their transition to higher education. To mitigate this, I adapted the structure of the mock courtroom exercises by providing clearer instructions and offering additional support for students who were hesitant to participate. Over time, even students who initially struggled with group dynamics demonstrated improved confidence and engagement.

Moreover, the use of real-world legal scenarios as the basis for discussion fostered **critical thinking** by prompting students to evaluate the applicability of legal principles in varied contexts. This finding supports **Brookfield's (2002)** view that reflective teaching should involve challenging students' assumptions and encouraging them to think critically about the material.

3. Addressing Student Mental Health through Inclusive Practices

A significant challenge in legal education is the high level of stress and mental health issues among law students. According to **Skead and Rogers (2015)**, law students face greater psychological stress than their peers in other disciplines, often due to the competitive nature of legal education. My findings corroborate this, as several students expressed feelings of anxiety, particularly when dealing with sensitive case materials, such as the analysis of LGBTQ+ legal issues.

In response, I implemented strategies to create a **psychologically safe** learning environment. For example, I allowed students to opt out of discussions that they found distressing by sending an email under the subject line "Distressing Content." This approach aligns with the **Queer Pedagogy** framework proposed by **Ayres (2019)**, which advocates for creating inclusive spaces where students can engage with difficult content at their own pace. By normalizing the process of opting out without fear of judgment, I fostered an environment where students felt safe to engage with the material on their own terms.

Moreover, the **anonymity** provided by technology-enhanced tools like VEVOX and Padlet enabled students to express their concerns without fear of public scrutiny. This proved particularly useful when discussing cases involving sensitive social issues, further supporting the idea that technology can enhance inclusivity in the classroom (Turner, n.d.).

4. Continuous Professional Development and Decolonizing the Curriculum

Participation in **CPD sessions** played a crucial role in shaping my approach to teaching, particularly in the context of **decolonizing legal education**. Engaging with scholarship on **decolonization** and systemic inequalities in higher education (Heleta, 2016; Saini & Begum, 2020) allowed me to critically reflect on the implicit biases embedded in traditional legal curricula. As **McGregor and Sang-Ah Park (2019)** argue, the dominance of Eurocentric perspectives in higher education often marginalizes students from diverse backgrounds.

In response, I made deliberate efforts to **incorporate diverse perspectives** into seminar discussions. For example, when discussing UK constitutional law, I drew parallels with the Indian constitutional structure, which resonated with students from South Asian backgrounds. This approach helped to challenge the hegemony of Western legal thought and encouraged students to critically examine the global implications of legal doctrines. These efforts are in line with **Warren's (2021)** call for a more inclusive and anti-hierarchical approach to teaching that recognizes the diverse experiences and identities of students.

Additionally, CPD sessions on student well-being informed my approach to addressing the **hidden curriculum**, which perpetuates inequalities based on race, gender, and class (Cotton et al., 2013). By fostering open discussions about students' personal experiences and acknowledging their struggles, I was able to create a more inclusive and empathetic learning environment. As a result, student feedback indicated a greater sense of belonging, with one student noting, "I feel like I can bring my whole self to class."

5. Impact of Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL)

The use of **technology-enhanced learning (TEL)** tools was another key factor in promoting student engagement and inclusivity. Tools such as VEVOX and Padlet allowed students to participate anonymously in polls, quizzes, and discussions, which helped bridge the gap between more vocal students and those who were less comfortable speaking in class. **Turner (n.d.)** notes that TEL can significantly increase participation by offering students alternative modes of engagement, particularly in large-group settings.

My findings confirm this, as even the most introverted students were able to contribute their ideas via the anonymous platforms. Furthermore, the immediate feedback provided by these tools allowed me to gauge student comprehension in real-time, enabling me to adjust my teaching methods on the spot. This aligns with **Petty's (2002)** argument that interactive learning techniques enhance student engagement and lead to better educational outcomes.

Conclusion

Personalised teaching, interactive learning, and continuous professional development (CPD) are important tools in enhancing student engagement and promoting inclusivity in legal education. Through reflective teaching practices, educators can adapt their methods to create a supportive and engaging learning environment that responds to students' unique needs, particularly in challenging fields such as law. Critically reflecting on teaching practices is essential for developing inclusive and effective pedagogical strategies.

One of the key observations is that personalised teaching, such as addressing students by name and considering their individual motivations, significantly improves student

engagement. As emphasised by Cureton and Gravestock (2018), acknowledging students as individuals strengthens their connection to the learning process, fostering a sense of belonging that can alleviate the stress associated with legal studies (Skead & Rogers, 2015). This paper demonstrates that even small acts can have a profound impact on the classroom atmosphere.

Educators across the legal education field can adopt similar personalised approaches to foster engagement and inclusivity in their own classrooms. Simple practices such as learning students' names, providing tailored feedback, and engaging with their individual learning motivations can make a significant difference in creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. By actively considering the unique needs of each student, educators can enhance both student well-being and academic performance.

In addition, the use of interactive learning techniques—such as mock courtroom exercises—was found to enhance higher-order thinking skills in line with Bloom’s Taxonomy (Hmelo & Ferrari, 1997). However, this approach requires careful adaptation to ensure that all students feel supported, particularly during their transition to university life. By providing additional guidance and adjusting the structure of group activities, educators can foster critical thinking and engagement even among students who may initially feel overwhelmed. Institutions and educators alike should consider integrating interactive learning tools to help students develop analytical and problem-solving skills in a more engaging and supportive environment.

The integration of technology-enhanced learning (TEL) tools, such as VEVOX and Padlet, was another key factor in promoting inclusivity and engagement. These tools provided an avenue for students to participate anonymously, helping to bridge the gap between more vocal students and those less comfortable contributing in traditional

classroom settings. As Turner (n.d.) notes, TEL offers alternative modes of engagement, which can be particularly beneficial in large-group settings, allowing educators to cater to diverse learning styles. Educators should explore the potential of these tools to diversify participation methods and ensure that all students, regardless of their learning preferences, have the opportunity to contribute meaningfully.

Finally, continuous professional development (CPD) played a crucial role in shaping the decolonising efforts within this study. Engaging with CPD sessions on decolonising legal education (Heleta, 2016; Saini & Begum, 2020) enabled a critical reflection on how traditional curricula can marginalise students from diverse backgrounds. This study demonstrated that by incorporating a broader range of perspectives and challenging dominant narratives, educators can create more inclusive and equitable learning environments, as urged by Warren (2021). Legal educators should consider how CPD can help them challenge systemic inequalities in their curricula and develop more inclusive pedagogical practices that reflect the diversity of student experiences.

As legal education continues to evolve, it is vital for educators to engage in reflective practice and seek out professional development opportunities that allow them to address the systemic inequalities embedded within traditional educational frameworks. By doing so, educators can not only improve student engagement and well-being but also contribute to the broader efforts to decolonise and democratise legal education. Legal educators reading this study can adopt similar strategies in their own practice, tailoring them to their specific contexts, to foster a more inclusive, reflective, and engaging learning environment that meets the needs of all students.

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Navigating the liminal space: Enhancing film teaching through anonymous feedback, digital collages, and advocacy

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Abstract:

This reflective piece focuses on the strategies of designing seminars that foster inclusivity and belonging, mainly when teaching in a liminal space as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA). It requires a commitment to understanding diverse student needs, including A-level subjects, learning difficulties, neurodiversity, LGBTQIA+ identities, ethnicity, socio-economic backgrounds, and more. Alongside the module convenor's guidance and departmental procedures, a GTA's identity and expertise play a crucial role in shaping the classroom atmosphere. My interdisciplinary PhD research, which focuses on co-creating films with participants facing mental health challenges, informs my view of students as co-creators. As a Staff-Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) representative, I am dedicated to upholding students' dignity, autonomy, and contributions to the university and society while aiming to provide them with the ethical understanding needed to navigate complex 21st-century challenges. After each seminar, I value anonymous student feedback to tailor my content, listening to their needs and questions, and incorporating audiovisual and interactive material to promote participation, especially among quieter students. With this piece, by sharing my lived experiences as a GTA, I intend to contribute to a collective knowledge base and foster dialogue and collaboration among my peers.

Keywords:

advocacy, anonymous feedback, co-creativity, inclusivity, liminal space

I recently completed the *Foundations of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging* training on LinkedIn, where I encountered an analogy by Vernā Myers (2015) that captures the distinction between diversity and inclusion: ‘Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance.’ This metaphor highlights the insufficiency of diversity without active engagement, illustrating that true inclusion goes beyond representation to ensure active participation and belonging. This perspective aligns with the University of Warwick’s *Social Inclusion Strategy*, which aims to ‘increase the diversity of Warwick’s staff and students to maximise creativity and innovation’ while fostering a supportive culture that enables all individuals to achieve their potential. Furthermore, scholars such as Dewsbury and Brame (2019) and Mitchell and Sutherland (2020) reinforce the importance of inclusive teaching, emphasising the value of fostering rapport between staff and students to create environments where everyone can thrive.

Metaphorically inviting students to ‘dance’ signifies actively engaging them in the learning process. However, Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) may operate within institutional constraints that can limit their autonomy (Muzaka, 2009: 10; Strongylakou, 2022: 39). For instance, as GTAs, our primary responsibility typically involves facilitating discussions around the seminar questions provided. Therefore, any unconventional initiatives we might wish to pursue usually need to be discussed and negotiated with the module convenor. Earning the trust of the module convenor and, at times, persuading them within the constraints of a fast-paced, neoliberal academic environment requires a distinct set of skills and motivation. Introducing a GTA’s authentic voice, particularly regarding perspectives on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), often necessitates ongoing dialogue, contingent upon the flexibility afforded by the role. This dynamic is not unique to academia but is common across many professions—newcomers must consistently prove themselves and build trust through their actions. In this article, I aim to share five key takeaways from my experiences as a GTA, reflecting on the creative

and passionate strategies I have found effective in fostering inclusion within the classroom.

1- Accept the liminal space as an opportunity

We, the GTAs, occupy a liminal space: neither entirely student nor tutor (Lee et al., 2004; Mansaray, 2006; Young & Bippus, 2008). Sara Hattersley (2022: 119) characterises the positionality of a mid-space PGR (Postgraduate Research) teacher as 'both an asset and a curse,' highlighting the dual nature of navigating both student and teaching roles within the academic environment. This liminal position presents a challenge because GTAs may lack agency in decision-making processes or be underestimated. Since the primary responsibility rests with the module convenor, their approach—whether they trust, support, and show care for our work—directly impacts our performance. Danielle Jacobson and Nida Mustafa's (2019: 1) 'social identity map' helped me to understand my positionality in relation to my students and colleagues. This map can be used as a 'flexible starting point,' serving to enhance the 'understanding of the role of power, privilege, and visibility' (Ibid). According to this social identity map, 'a young [GTA] may have less experience and feel self-conscious due to this position, whereas an older [GTA] may be more experienced but could feel the stigma of ageing' (Ibid.: 2). Factors such as 'class, citizenship, ability, age, race, sexual orientation, cis/trans status, and gender' (Ibid.: 3) influence how we perceive the world. Therefore, how do my interactions with students and the module convenor differ due to these aspects within my liminal space?

In the first week of the *Academic and Professional Pathway for Postgraduate Researchers who Teach* (APP PGR) programme at Warwick, the theme of 'teacher role and identity' laid the groundwork for examining both personal and professional development. This focus encouraged us to reflect on our evolving roles as educators within the academic context. During this time, I/we focused on identifying my values and

priorities, using reflective journaling as a tool for meaningful introspection. Revisiting this journal has deepened my understanding of students and actively strengthened my ability to be a supportive colleague, allowing me to uncover valuable insights about myself in the process (Bain et al., 1999). I understand that GTAs bring fresh perspectives that can act as catalysts for innovation. Engaging with module content through this novel lens allows GTAs to offer valuable suggestions for improvement, provided we have the 'confidence' to do so (Morss, K., and Rowena, 2005). It is essential to acknowledge that GTAs do not always have the autonomy to design their seminars, often required to deliver pre-existing content. In such cases, GTAs can embrace the situation and adopt a research-oriented approach, introducing students to research practices (what research looks like, how we write the bibliography) and offering support. Furthermore, GTAs can focus on the 'how' of teaching—breaking down complex topics into more manageable parts or transforming dry content into an engaging and interactive experience. We must remember that we are partners in education, just as our students are. Establishing clear communication and agreeing on how to meet departmental standards while integrating our unique personalities into the teaching process is essential. Developing this skill takes time and practice but is key to becoming a more masterful educator (Kelchtermans, 2009).

2- Advocate for yourself, your students, and your peers

Advocating for ourselves and our students/peers is essential to sustaining our learning and teaching environment (Adams & Holland, 2006; Caroll & Ryan, 2007; Jensen & Bennett 2016). According to People First, London, self-advocacy is 'speaking for yourself, standing up for your rights, making choices, being independent, taking responsibility for yourself' (Gray and Jackson, 2001). When I first encountered the term 'self-advocacy,' it brought a sense of relief, as it not only affirmed that self-advocacy is possible but also provided me with the necessary tools, guidance, and language to articulate and pursue it. It felt like, 'Oh, there is this option; I can speak for myself as a GTA.'[1]

[1] It sounds funny as I write it now here.

Similarly, fostering self-advocacy in students is one of our vital yet understated responsibilities. For example, when a student expresses concerns about their final essay, I escalate these issues to the module convenor and implement targeted exercises to assist students in structuring their essays in alignment with the module content. This targeted intervention assists effectively support students. In addition to self-advocacy, I emphasise the importance of professional networking and broadening horizons. I encourage students to engage in opportunities such as *The British Conference of Undergraduate Research* and our department's writing blog, fostering their academic growth and preparing them for future professional environments.

Supporting peers and being a critical friend is integral to fostering an environment of self-advocacy and collective development. As Paulo Freire (2007: 73) eloquently states, 'I make myself with others, and with others, I can do things,' underscoring the importance of collaboration in personal and professional growth. Initiatives such as *Active Bystander* training further strengthen our capacity to advocate for one another, enhancing our ability to create a supportive academic community. This training equips individuals with the skills and confidence to address issues such as sexual violence, misconduct, and abuse, allowing us to actively contribute to a safer, more inclusive environment that embodies our shared values. By empowering ourselves and our peers through such initiatives, we reinforce the culture of advocacy essential to sustaining our academic and social communities (See Active Bystander Intervention Course).

3- Do not just perform the task; seek training to enhance your skills

My participation in the APP PGR programme at Warwick, accredited by Advance HE, has significantly enhanced my teaching practice. This programme has not only boosted my confidence but also provided peer support and emphasised the broader academic context in which teaching takes place. Covering key themes such as the teacher's role and identity, inclusive learning, engaging with learners, assessment and feedback, and professional development, the programme has demonstrated that learning and teaching are ongoing processes, continuously evolving rather than one-

time events (Jarvis, 2010). GTAs have the opportunity to adapt these training methods in their teaching practice. By implementing strategies from the APP PGR programme—such as fostering inclusive environments, refining assessment techniques, and actively engaging students—GTAs can more effectively address diverse student needs. This approach bridges theoretical pedagogy with practical application, creating a dynamic and responsive learning environment. In addition to this, my participation in workshops like *Evaluating Teaching and Learning in HE Forum*, *Active Bystander*, and *Decolonising Education* further equipped me with tools and perspectives that enhanced my understanding of my role as both a learner and a facilitator. This training is vital for GTAs, as it contributes to a more inclusive, reflective, and student-centred learning experience.

Informed by my interdisciplinary PhD research, where I co-create films with participants facing mental health challenges, I view students as co-creators in the learning process. The safeguarding and ethics training I received shaped my approach to engaging with participants/students, respecting boundaries and promoting a supportive environment (Hargreaves, 2001; Brookfield, 2015). Just as the 'experts by experience' in my research contribute their lived experience/knowledge (McLaughlin, 2009; Beresford, 2019), students, too, bring years of classroom experience and insight into how they learn best. Recognising their expertise fosters a collaborative atmosphere that enhances learning outcomes. For example, in my research, listening to participants' perspectives on the project's benefits led to unexpected insights, such as allyship and public education, demonstrating the importance of openness and adaptability in teaching.

Serving as a Staff-Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) representative has further enriched my skills in fostering inclusivity and supporting students. I see this position as a part of my training. This role has provided invaluable experience in advocating for students' dignity and autonomy, equipping me with skills in mediation and ethical leadership. As an SSLC representative, I have developed my ability to empower students, helping them articulate their needs and ensuring their perspectives are valued. I aim to convey that although GTAs have PhD responsibilities and other life

commitments, focusing on their education and training as much as possible will ultimately benefit their teaching practices, enhancing classroom discussions and making them more enjoyable.

4- Challenge text-based learning environments by incorporating audiovisual

Richard Mayer's research (2009) on multimedia learning emphasises the benefits of integrating both visual and auditory resources, which enhance engagement and comprehension, particularly for diverse learners. Many students, especially those with diverse learning styles, neurodivergent conditions, or disabilities, may struggle to engage with purely text-based materials. By integrating audiovisual resources, educators can offer alternative ways to access and process information, catering to a broader range of student needs. Therefore, I promote participation and curiosity using multimedia tools such as a real-time audience engagement app, doodling, and polls. For example, one of our seminar questions asks about the various Harvey Pekars in the film *American Splendor* (Dir. Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini, 2003) and their relationships with one another.[2] To assist students in exploring the question, I designed the collage (Figure 1) below, keeping in mind that 'a well-prepared [GTA] is another important factor that increases the student motivation which can bring better achievements of students' (Danko et al., 2016: 7610).

[2] *American Splendor* is a 2003 biographical film that blends live-action and animated sequences to tell the story of Harvey Pekar, an everyman who worked as a file clerk in a Cleveland hospital and gained fame through his autobiographical comic series *American Splendor*. The film, directed by Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini, captures Pekar's life, including his struggles with work, relationships, and cancer, and how he transformed these everyday experiences into compelling comic book narratives. Over the years, many different artists contributed to illustrating Pekar's stories, with each artist bringing their own distinctive style to the portrayal of Pekar himself. This variance in artistic interpretation is a central theme in both the comics and the film adaptation.

Figure 1. As a GTA, I prepared a visual aid to facilitate student discussions and explore seminar questions.

Without the visual aid, comprehending the various iterations of Harvey within the confines of a one-hour seminar would have been challenging, particularly given the breadth of other questions we needed to address. We began by discussing and recalling the different portrayals of Harvey in the film, which inspired students to explore the topic more freely. Following this, I introduced the collage. Some students had not noticed the presence of ‘the puppet Harvey’ until they saw the image, underscoring the visual’s role in deepening their understanding. In a broader context, each portrayal of Harvey is crucial for understanding the (mis)representation in cinema, a theme that aligns with my research focus and enhances my ability to deliver this material proficiently. The collage sparked student-led discussions, with one student asking, ‘How can Harvey appear different every time he is on the Letterman Show— isn’t he the same person?’ Recognising that some students had studied philosophy at the A-level, I facilitated interdisciplinary dialogue by introducing Heraclitus’ aphorism, ‘You cannot step into the same river twice.’ This metaphor underscores the fluid and ever-changing nature of ‘reality,’ suggesting that it evolves with every encounter. By drawing on the students’ Philosophy background, we were able to foster an insightful discussion, further

building a sense of intellectual community in the classroom. This example also illustrates the importance of GTAs finding ways to assess and tap into existing knowledge within the classroom. Doing so enables them to facilitate richer, more dynamic conversations that resonate with students' prior learning and experiences.

While guiding students through seminar questions, I encourage them to explore their interpretations of Harvey through doodling, drawing inspiration from the different artistic renditions of the characters in the comics. I make it clear that this is not a mandatory activity (see Figures 2 & 3 below), but rather an optional exercise that can be both enjoyable and provide deeper insight into the theoretical framework being discussed. This approach acknowledges the diverse cognitive and temporal experiences of learners, allowing them to engage with the material at their own pace and in a way that aligns with their unique learning styles. Similarly, the *Evaluating Teaching and Learning in HE Forum* held in February 2024 emphasised the value of visual, hands-on activities as powerful learning tools. By integrating such exercises into the seminar structure, we not only address the core questions but also cultivate a participatory environment where many students, including those who tend to remain quiet, can actively contribute to the intellectual discourse. It is important to note that silence does not necessarily indicate disengagement; GTAs can gauge student involvement by observing non-verbal cues, such as body language, to assess the room's atmosphere. The resulting mini-exhibition of student doodles is rich in self-reflection and promotes what Schön (1987: 25) refers to as 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-action,' encouraging students to critically examine both their immediate responses and the broader implications of their learning experiences. This process fosters a deeper engagement with the material and enhances students' understanding of complex concepts through creative, participatory methods.

At the end of the term, I recommend giving students the opportunity to create their own comic strip, enabling them 'to think, to perform, and to act with integrity' (Shulman, 2005: 52) by using module content to explore topics they are passionate about. One of my peers found this approach inspiring, which encouraged them to

engage more openly and creatively with their module convenor to enhance students' agency, authorship, and ownership. Ultimately, research and teaching should resonate with students' lives and inspire meaningful change. Teaching and learning are transformative processes, and it is essential to connect the theoretical and practical aspects of the course to students' lived experiences, ensuring that the material is relevant and impactful.

Figure 2 & 3. Students' drawings of various Harvey Pekar depictions contribute to the discussions.

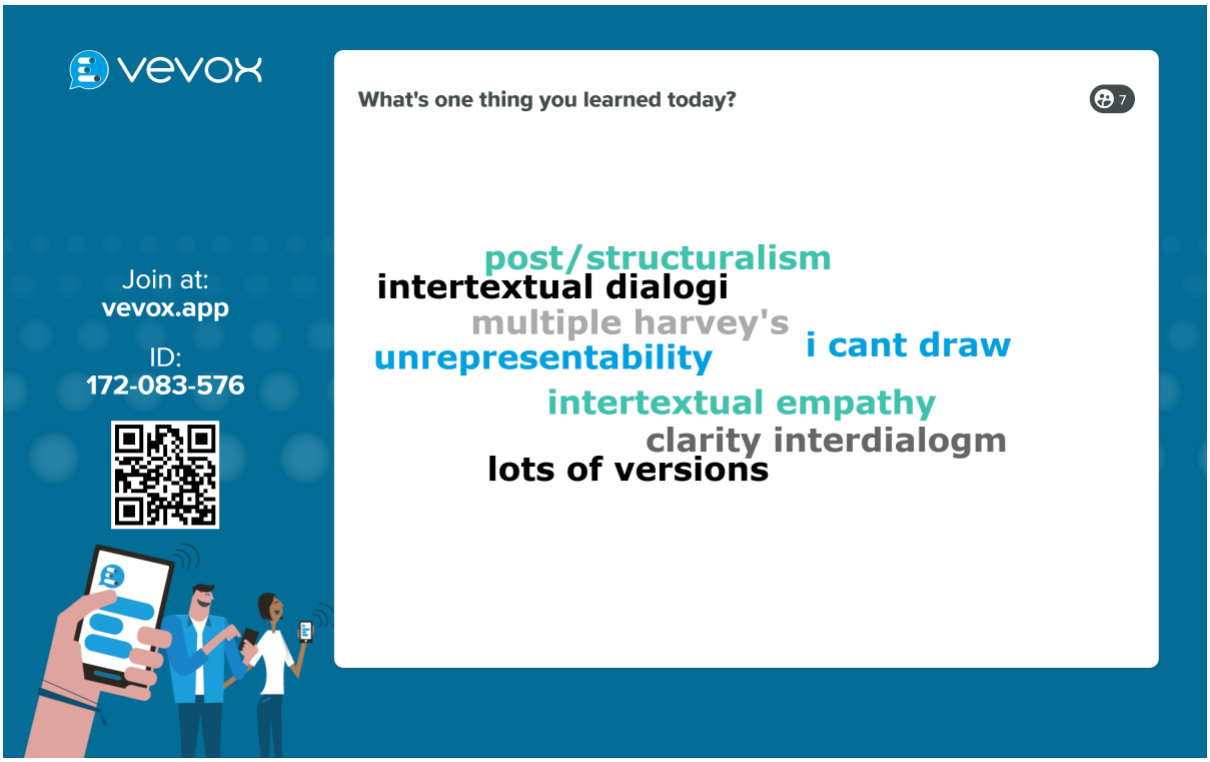
5- Prioritise listening to and responding to student feedback

Student feedback serves as a compass, guiding the refinement of my teaching practices and fostering a dynamic learning environment (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Brookfield, 2017). In one-on-one interactions, such as informal conversations in the corridor, students tend to ask more questions, suggesting that some may find it challenging to voice inquiries in front of their peers. For instance, Ellie Middleton (2023), in her book *Unmasked*, which discusses autism and ADHD, suggests that some individuals prefer to ask questions away from the attention of others. To address this, I implement anonymous feedback techniques after each seminar using

Vevox, a real-time audience engagement app.[3] Based on the anonymous feedback collected through Vevox, I adjust my support to incorporate student agency into my teaching practice, creating a safe, meaningful, and engaging learning environment.

After each seminar, I recommend that GTAs dedicate a few minutes to ask students to identify one key concept they learned and one area they needed clarification on rather than waiting for formal midterm feedback. Similarly, Race (2015) argues for continuous, formative feedback to keep students engaged and improve communication between teachers and students, allowing students to reflect on their understanding of key concepts. This technique was introduced by the Academic Development Centre at Warwick at the outset of our roles, and its value lies in how effectively it is implemented. In other words, cultivating an environment where students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts may take time. Furthermore, incorporating online tools (see Figures 4 & 5 below) to anonymise feedback has, in my experience, encouraged more honest and constructive responses. Following up on these conversations via email has further enriched our dialogue and strengthened the feedback loop.

[3] I would like to acknowledge the valuable insights gained from observing the classes of Oliver Turner, SFHEA, which significantly contributed to my understanding of the positive effects of this application.



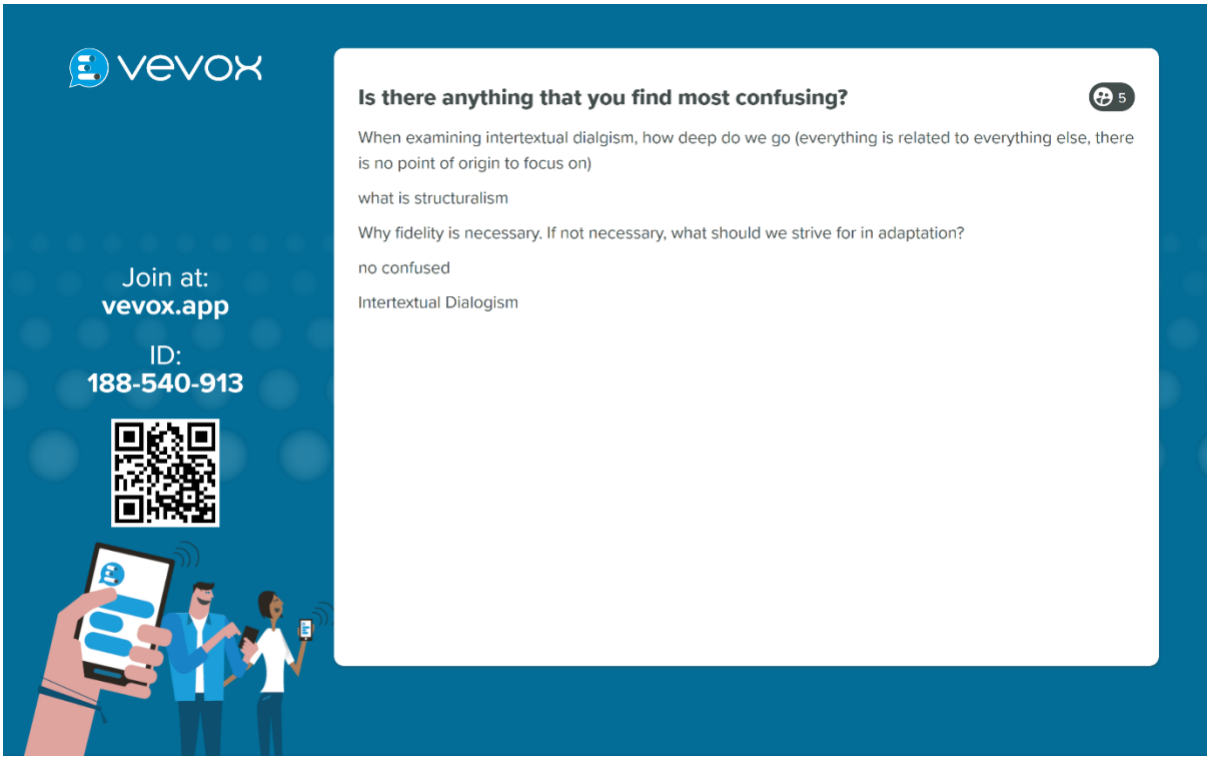


Figure 4 & 5. Anonymous student feedback collected after seminars to make them more accessible and student-centred.

Through the National Student Survey (NSS)[4], anyone can learn how well universities and departments perform by listening to student feedback. However, we must go beyond mere statistics. For example, organising zine-making sessions where students can express themselves and co-create knowledge in a relaxed environment can offer deeper insights. In these sessions, students can discuss what worked well and identify areas for improvement, fostering a collaborative approach to curriculum development. This method amplifies students' voices and strengthens human connections, moving away from a transactional 'I have done my job' mindset toward one rooted in care. As Ken Blanchard (2022) states, 'none of us is smarter than all of us,' together, we can effect meaningful change. Listening to student feedback is central to student-centred teaching, which involves 'knowing how your students experience learning so you can build bridges that take them from where they are now to a new destination' (Brookfield, 2017: 62). And this is what I strive for.

Conclusion

In this reflective piece, I shared my strategies for navigating the liminal space as a GTA in film education. My experiences have highlighted the importance of fostering inclusivity and belonging by tailoring seminars to meet the diverse needs of students, incorporating tools such as anonymous feedback, digital collages, and active advocacy. Through my journey, I have learned to accept the liminal space as an opportunity for growth rather than a limitation, allowing me to explore new teaching methods and perspectives. It is essential to advocate for yourself and your students and peers, ensuring that their voices are heard, and their needs are met. Moreover, I have found that success in this role goes beyond merely performing tasks—seeking ongoing training and development is key to enhancing teaching skills. Challenging traditional, text-based learning environments by integrating audiovisual materials has proven to be an efficient way to engage students, particularly those who may be quieter or face learning difficulties. Prioritising listening and responding to student feedback has been

[4] You can find the most recent data here: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/student-choice-and-flexible-learning/national-student-survey-nss/ (Accessed 30 September 2024).

fundamental to creating a dynamic and responsive classroom environment. By viewing students as co-creators, informed by my interdisciplinary PhD research, and actively engaging in peer dialogue, I have found that creating an open, responsive, and inclusive learning environment is essential. The integration of these strategies has enhanced my teaching and enriched the classroom experience for students, promoting active participation. Through this reflection, I hope to contribute to a broader understanding of how GTAs can navigate their roles effectively and inspire further peer dialogue on cultivating more inclusive and collaborative educational spaces.

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Merging Self-Regulatory Strategies with GTA Pedagogical Practices: Enhancing Student Autonomy and Engagement

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Abstract

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) play a dual role in higher education, balancing their research responsibilities with teaching duties. This dual identity provides a unique vantage point for GTAs to implement innovative teaching practices that encourage students to utilize self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies. This paper explores how GTAs can adopt teaching practices centered on promoting SRL among students. Drawing on data from focus groups and surveys conducted with five GTAs, the study identifies key techniques—such as reflective journals, peer assessments, and technology-enhanced learning tools—that GTAs can incorporate into their teaching. The intervention was conducted over one semester in an English proficiency course tailored for students with low English proficiency. Findings indicate that these strategies not only enhance student engagement and motivation but also improve critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The paper underscores the positive impact of SRL on student learning outcomes and discusses how GTAs can effectively integrate and promote these strategies in their pedagogical practices.

Keywords: GTAs, self-regulation, student autonomy, engagement, motivation.

GTAs Navigating Dual Roles

'Our GTAs filled several roles in this course: each taught at least one workshop session and assisted in our computer labs. Thus they experienced teaching in two distinct environments. The GTAs were expected to attend all lectures, participate in several labs each week, conduct one or two workshops, and hold regular office hours. They also monitored and graded tests.'

(Richards, 2000, p. 14)

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) play a crucial role in higher education. Their position involves several responsibilities (as evident from the above quote) that they need to fulfill as teaching assistants apart from their own research which in itself is highly demanding as it involves continuous learning, deep engagement with the field of study, and the generation of new knowledge. Reflecting on my own experience as a postgraduate teaching assistant, I manage a range of responsibilities, including planning lessons, conducting tutorials and discussion sessions, designing and grading assignments, and offering support and feedback to my learners besides my own research commitments. Juggling the dual role of an educator and researcher can be challenging and overwhelming as it demands creating a fine balance between teaching responsibilities and advancing one's own research.

Initially, time management was a significant challenge for me. However, early in my teaching assistantship, I realized the importance of effective time management and organizational skills. Implementing innovative teaching practices was key to maximizing my efficiency and effectiveness in the classroom. It was during this period that my research on self-regulated learners, combined with my reading of Teng's (2022) book *Self-regulated Learning and Second Language Writing: Fostering Strategic Language*

Learners, profoundly influenced my approach. Teng emphasizes that a key educational objective is to teach students to become self-regulated learners—individuals who manage their own learning by employing various self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies in the process of acquiring knowledge (Zimmerman, 2002). This insight significantly informed my teaching methods, leading to more effective and autonomous student learning.

The integration of self-regulatory strategies into teaching practices offers a promising avenue for enhancing student engagement and autonomy. This approach not only addresses the diverse needs of students but also complements the demanding schedules of GTAs. By fostering self-regulation, GTAs can create a learning environment where students are empowered to take charge of their own educational journeys. This can lead to improved academic outcomes (Lavasani, Mirhosseini, Hejazi, & Davoodi, 2011), increased motivation, and student engagement (Mmassy, 2024).

The concept of self-regulation can be seamlessly integrated into various pedagogical approaches, benefiting both students and GTAs. Reflective journals, for example, encourage students to engage in metacognition and self-assessment, while peer assessments promote collaborative learning and critical thinking. Technology-enhanced learning tools offer innovative ways for students to track their progress and receive real-time feedback. Similarly, encouraging students to use reflective journals and peer assessment practices reduces the frequency and intensity of individual feedback sessions, as students learn to self-assess and monitor their own progress. Moreover, utilising technology-enhanced tools, such as learning management systems (LMS) and educational apps, helps GTAs streamline administrative tasks like tracking the progress of students.

Within this context, this paper will explore how GTAs can effectively promote SRL strategies in their pedagogical practices. It will examine the specific techniques employed, review relevant literature on SRL, and discuss the implications for student

learning outcomes based on the findings from focus groups and surveys. Through this exploration, the aim is to provide practical insights and recommendations for GTAs seeking to enhance their teaching effectiveness and support the development of self-regulated learners in higher education.

The GTA Workload and the Need for Self-Regulatory Strategies

GTAs occupy a unique and often challenging position within academia. In this regard, Bahmani and Hjelsvold (2019) emphasized the dual identities of Teaching Assistants (TAs) as both students and teachers. Their study highlighted that this dual role often results in ambiguity and strain. TAs frequently face challenges in balancing their responsibilities, such as completing their own coursework and research while fulfilling their teaching duties. This dual burden can lead to conflicting priorities and increased stress, ultimately affecting their performance in both capacities.

Moreover, the mental health of postgraduate students, especially those who work alongside their studies as teaching assistants, has been increasingly scrutinized. For instance, Mounsey et al. (2013) in their study emphasized that students often suffer from depression, burnout, and acute anxiety. This is compounded by the significant pressure to balance their academic responsibilities with work commitments. The high levels of stress associated with these dual roles can have detrimental effects on their mental health and overall well-being.

Furthermore, in a study conducted in Australia, Devlin et al. (2008) found that the demands of work as teaching assistants significantly impact the academic engagement of postgraduate students. Many working postgraduates struggle to attend classes regularly and become disengaged from university resources and activities that could enhance their academic success. This disengagement not only affects their learning experience but also limits their access to vital support systems within the university.

Hovdhaugen (2015) further explored the impact of these stressors on postgraduate students' academic performance. The study revealed that the negative effects of stress, such as depression and anxiety, can lead to poor academic outcomes. In some cases,

the strain becomes so overwhelming that students ultimately drop out of formal education. This dropout phenomenon highlights the urgent need for institutions to address the challenges faced by working postgraduates.

Despite the extensive research on the challenges faced by GTAs, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding solutions that address these dual roles' inherent stress and workload. While studies like those by Bahmani and Hjelsvold (2019), Mounsey et al. (2013), Devlin et al. (2008), and Hovdhaugen (2015) have detailed the mental health issues, academic disengagement, and overall strain experienced by GTAs, none have explored the potential of integrating self-regulatory strategies into their teaching practices. The current body of research lacks a comprehensive examination of how self-regulation can empower GTAs to manage their dual responsibilities more effectively and foster a more autonomous and motivated student body. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating how reflective journals, peer assessments, and technology-enhanced tools can be used to incorporate self-regulatory strategies into GTA teaching methods, thereby addressing their unique challenges and enhancing both GTA and student outcomes.

Self-Regulatory Strategies: An Overview

Self-regulated learning (SRL) involves a range of skills and processes that enable learners to manage their own learning effectively. According to Zimmerman’s (2002) cyclical model of SRL (see Figure 1), learners move through three interconnected phases: Forethought, Performance, and Self-Reflection. These phases guide the learning process and are critical to improving academic outcomes. Importantly, collaborative learning is also intertwined with SRL, as it provides opportunities for students to engage with peers, share knowledge, and enhance their self-regulation skills (Järvelä & Hadwin, 2013).

In the Forethought Phase, learners set specific proximal goals, creating clear, achievable objectives that align closely with their current abilities and immediate tasks. This phase also involves strategic planning, where learners adopt targeted study methods or problem-solving techniques tailored to achieving these goals. Collaborative

learning during this phase can enhance goal setting and strategic planning, as students work together to clarify objectives and share effective strategies. Successful collaboration requires each group member to take responsibility for their own self-regulated learning while also supporting fellow group members in regulating their learning (co-regulated learning). This planning stage is key to keeping learners motivated, particularly through self-efficacy, where learners believe in their capacity to succeed.

In the Performance Phase, learners apply the strategies they developed during the Forethought Phase. They engage in self-control techniques, such as focusing attention or using time management strategies to maintain progress. Simultaneously, learners may engage in collaborative activities, allowing them to monitor their performance through peer interactions. Self-monitoring includes assessing their performance and identifying areas needing improvement, often facilitated by feedback from peers. This collaborative environment can enhance self-regulation, as group members provide support and accountability to one another. Learners may also restructure their context by adjusting physical and social environments—such as creating a conducive study space or collaborating with peers—to further support goal attainment.

After completing the task, learners move into the Self-Reflection Phase. Here, they engage in self-evaluation, critically assessing the effectiveness of their strategies and learning methods. Collaboration can also play a role in this phase, as discussing their experiences with peers can provide valuable insights. Learners attribute causation, reflecting on reasons for their successes or failures, which shapes their future learning strategies and influences their self-belief. Successful collaboration continues in this phase, with the group coming together to collectively regulate their learning processes in a synchronized and productive manner (shared regulation of learning). Finally, learners adapt future methods, modifying their strategies and approaches based on these evaluations to improve their overall learning outcomes. These interconnected skills form the core of self-regulation, empowering learners to take control of their educational journey and continuously refine their approach to learning.

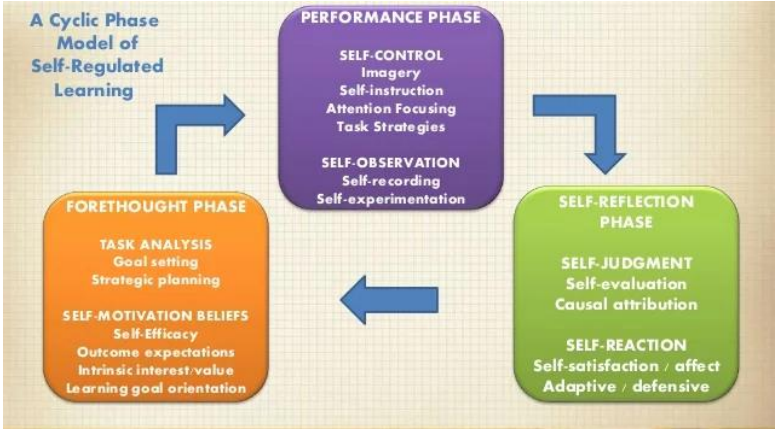

Figure 1: Adapted from Zimmerman's (2002) Cyclical Model of SRL

The impact of self-regulatory strategies has been recognized across various academic disciplines. Research consistently shows that students who implement SRL strategies achieve higher academic success. Pedrosa et al. (2017) demonstrated that students who employed SRL strategies, such as organization, planning, and time management, were able to overcome difficulties in programming tasks more effectively. These strategies helped them structure their approach to solving complex problems, which is essential in courses like programming where challenges are often multifaceted. Similarly, Lin et al. (2022) highlighted the benefits of self-regulatory strategies in higher education, particularly in the transition period from secondary school to university. The study emphasizes that students who adopt self-regulatory strategies, such as goal-setting, planning, and self-monitoring, perform better academically than those who struggle with regulation. Self-efficacy and self-regulation strategies positively predicted students' GPAs, showing that self-regulation fosters better academic results.

Main Study

Implemented Intervention: Integrating Self-Regulatory Strategies in GTA-Led English Proficiency Courses

The intervention aimed to enhance student autonomy, engagement, and academic performance in English proficiency courses taught by Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) for students with low proficiency levels. Over the course of one semester, five GTAs participated in this initiative, focusing on integrating self-regulatory learning (SRL) strategies into their pedagogical practices.

Preparation Phase

Prior to the implementation, I conducted a preparatory phase where I provided the GTAs with training on self-regulatory learning strategies, emphasizing the importance of fostering student autonomy and engagement. This included a review of the relevant literature on SRL, including Zimmerman's (2002) cyclical model and practical examples of how to integrate SRL strategies in the classroom. The training sessions covered:

- **Reflective Journals**: Techniques for encouraging students to document their learning experiences, set personal goals, and self-assess their progress.
- **Peer Assessments**: Methods for structuring peer feedback sessions, where students could provide and receive constructive critiques on their work, thereby promoting co-regulation and collaborative learning.
- **Technology-Enhanced Learning Tools**: Introduction to various platforms and apps that could aid students in tracking their learning progress and facilitate interaction, such as Learning Management Systems (LMS) and educational apps.

Implementation of Self-Regulatory Strategies

Once the GTAs were prepared, the intervention commenced. Each GTA integrated self-regulatory strategies into their English proficiency courses through the following methods:

Integrating Self-Regulatory Strategies into GTA Pedagogical Practices

The integration of self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies into Graduate Teaching Assistants' (GTAs) pedagogical practices offers an effective way to enhance student autonomy and engagement while also addressing the unique challenges that GTAs face in balancing teaching and research. By embedding SRL strategies such as reflective journals, peer assessments, and technology-enhanced learning tools into their teaching, GTAs can create a more student-centered, flexible, and efficient learning environment. This section explores practical techniques that GTAs employed to implement these strategies effectively.

1. Reflective Journals

GTAs encouraged the use of reflective journals to foster metacognition, allowing students to monitor and evaluate their learning processes. In alignment with Zimmerman's focus on self-evaluation and strategy adaptation, GTAs introduced reflective journals at the beginning of the course. They assigned periodic prompts that guided students to critically assess their learning patterns. For instance, GTAs asked students to reflect on:

- Their understanding of the course material.
- Strategies they employed to overcome learning challenges.
- Adjustments they plan to make for future tasks based on past performance.

According to Moon (1999), reflective journals help students to engage in metacognitive processes, critically review their learning materials, and empower themselves as learners. GTAs emphasized the importance of integrating reflection throughout the course, as noted by Bowers (2003), suggesting that reflective questions should progressively increase in complexity to challenge students further. To support effective reflection, GTAs clearly outlined criteria for successful journaling, following the recommendations of Smith and Yancey (2000). They also ensured that reflection was a consistent part of the course, allowing for open discussions about students' responses, as advocated by Conway (1994).

Through regular journaling, GTAs enabled students to document their learning goals, strategies, challenges, and progress, fostering self-awareness essential for self-regulation. This practice also allowed GTAs to gauge student progress and identify areas needing additional support without the need for constant one-on-one feedback. As a result, reflective journals became a valuable tool for both formative assessment and personal growth, empowering students to take ownership of their learning journey.

2. Peer Assessment

GTAs implemented peer assessment as an effective strategy for promoting self-regulation and collaborative learning. This approach encouraged students to engage in critical evaluation and provide constructive feedback while learning from the diverse perspectives of their peers. By structuring peer assessment activities around major assignments, GTAs facilitated a sense of community in the classroom and helped students develop critical thinking and self-assessment skills.

During peer assessment sessions, GTAs provided clear rubrics and guidelines to ensure that feedback was constructive and focused on key learning outcomes. For example, students participated in peer reviews of essays and presentations, where they were required to evaluate each other’s work based on predetermined criteria. Research supports that peer assessment significantly enhances learners' metacognitive skills (Zariski, 1996) and boosts self-esteem and motivation (Biri, 2014). GTAs noted that students who engaged in peer assessments were more likely to take responsibility for their learning, striving for continuous improvement. Additionally, by distributing the responsibility of feedback among students, GTAs found that peer assessments reduced their grading workload, making the process more collaborative and efficient.

3. Technology-Enhanced Learning Tools

GTAs effectively utilized technology-enhanced learning tools to support self-regulation in their courses. Learning management systems (LMS) and educational apps offered features such as real-time feedback, progress monitoring, and interactive learning experiences. GTAs demonstrated how these technological tools could simplify

administrative tasks, improve communication, and provide students with prompt feedback on their performance. This immediate feedback helped students track their progress, set goals, and adjust their learning strategies based on real-time data.

Zimmerman (2002) emphasizes that incorporating technology into learning enables students to access a wide range of resources and engage in interactive activities. GTAs leveraged these benefits by introducing tools like Moodle and Blackboard, creating self-paced learning environments where students could complete modules, receive instant feedback on quizzes, and monitor their progress over time. Additionally, digital tools such as Trello and Google Calendar were introduced to help students manage their time effectively by setting deadlines and prioritizing tasks.

For example, GTAs set up LMS modules that allowed students to navigate at their own pace, integrating quizzes with auto-grading features to provide immediate feedback. They also encouraged the use of mindfulness apps or Pomodoro timers to help students manage distractions and stay on track during study sessions. For a quick overview of how GTAs implemented self-regulatory strategies into their pedagogical practices, refer to the table below (Table 1).

Table 1: How GTAs Integrated Self-Regulatory Strategies into Their Pedagogical Practices?

Strategy	How GTAs Implemented	Practical Steps	Tools/Platforms	Benefits
Reflective Journals	Introduced at the start of the course, with clear prompts.	● Assigned weekly reflections. ● Provided prompts related to course	● LMS (Moodle, Blackboard). ● Google Docs for collaborativ	● Encourages self-awareness and metacognitive reflection. ● Tracks

		objectives.	e reflection.	student progress over time.
	Used for self-assessment and formative feedback.	● Set clear expectations for regular reflection. ● Gave occasional feedback on journal entries.	● Google Keep (digital journaling).	● Reduces the need for frequent individual feedback. ● Helps students self-assess and monitor progress.
Peer Assessments	Incorporated Structured peer review sessions around major assignments.	● Created clear rubrics for assessment. ● Provided training on constructive feedback.	● Google Docs for sharing and reviewing assignments. ● Rubrics in LMS or Google Forms.	● Promotes critical thinking and collaboration. ● Reduces the GTA's grading workload.
	Used in small groups for in-depth reviews.	● Divided students into small peer groups for	● LMS forums for discussion. ● Padlet or	● Develops evaluative skills and deeper

		reviewing assignments. ● Held feedback training.	Slack for peer feedback and collaboration.	learning through peer interaction.
Technology-Enhanced Learning Tools	Used tools to help students track progress and manage time.	● Introduced tools like Trello or Google Calendar for time management. ● Demonstrated how to use them.	● Trello or Asana for task management. ● Pomodoro apps (Focus Booster).	● Encourages better time management and self-discipline. ● Increases accountability.
	Leveraged LMS for self-paced learning and automated feedback.	● Set up self-paced modules in the LMS with quizzes and assignments. ● Used auto-grading features.	● Moodle or Blackboard for self-paced modules. ● Kahoot for quizzes.	● Provides instant feedback and reduces grading time. ● Helps students monitor their learning.

Feedback Collection: Questionnaire and Focus Group Discussions

After implementing these strategies, a questionnaire (see appendix for questionnaire) was distributed to the five GTAs who participated in the study to gather their feedback on the benefits, challenges, and overall effectiveness of the approach. The questionnaire was divided into four sections namely: General Experience, Observed Benefits, Challenges, and Overall Effectiveness, and contained a mix of question types. The questionnaire mostly had Likert scale questions, multiple-choice questions, and checkboxes. It was administered online using Google Forms to facilitate easy access and efficient data collection.

Later, focus-group discussions were also done with the GTAs to know their responses to primarily 3 questions:

1) What do you believe were the most significant benefits of using self-regulatory strategies with students who have low English proficiency?
2) What were the biggest challenges you encountered while implementing these strategies, and how did you address them?
3) Do you have any suggestions for improving the implementation of self-regulatory strategies in GTA-led courses?

Findings from the Questionnaire

Based on the responses from five Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), the following findings highlight the impact, challenges, and effectiveness of integrating self-regulatory strategies (SRL) into English proficiency courses.

1. Familiarity with Self-Regulatory Learning Strategies

Out of the five GTAs, three were *somewhat familiar* with SRL strategies before the intervention, one was *very familiar*, and one was *not familiar*. This range indicates that the GTAs had diverse levels of experience with SRL before the intervention. The

presence of varying familiarity levels suggests that while some GTAs entered the intervention with confidence in their understanding of SRL, others needed more foundational support. This variation may have influenced their ability to implement the strategies seamlessly and could highlight the need for more tailored training that accounts for differences in baseline knowledge. GTAs who were less familiar with SRL may have experienced more initial challenges, particularly in guiding students through the reflective process and facilitating peer assessments.

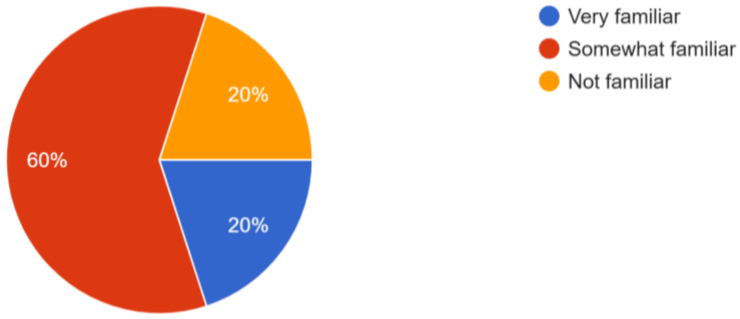

Figure 2: Familiarity with SRL Strategies Before the Intervention

Improvement in Student Engagement

Four out of five GTAs *agreed* that the use of SRL strategies improved student engagement, with two *strongly agreeing*. This indicates that SRL strategies were generally effective in encouraging students to actively participate in their learning processes. The positive impact on engagement suggests that tools like reflective journals and peer assessments helped students become more involved in their own learning. However, the varying degrees of agreement may indicate that some GTAs observed more immediate or pronounced effects, while others may have faced challenges that tempered the impact. This variance could be attributed to the students' different levels of familiarity with independent learning, as those more accustomed to

traditional teacher-led instruction might have taken longer to adapt to self-regulatory practices.

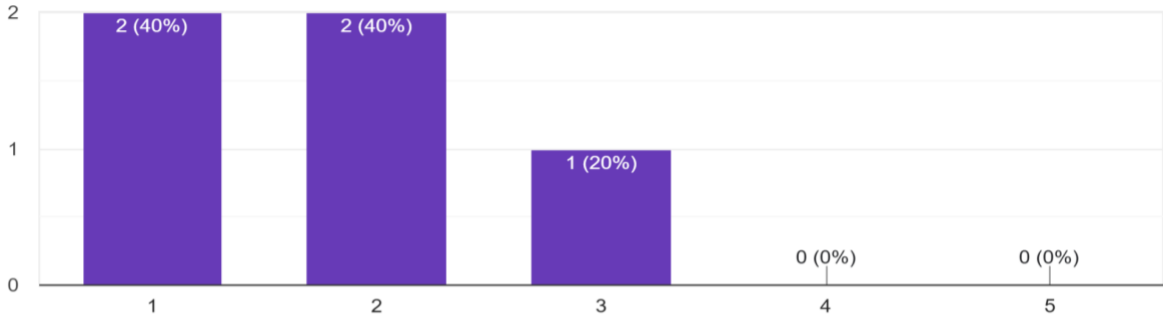

Figure 3: Improvement in Student Engagement Due to SRL Strategies

Challenges in Implementing SRL Strategies

The main challenges reported by GTAs included:

- Difficulty in guiding students through reflective journaling *(reported by all 5 GTAs)*
- Student resistance to peer assessment activities *(reported by 3 GTAs)*
- Technological issues with the tools used *(reported by all 5 GTAs)*
- Monitoring student progress across different strategies *(reported by 2 GTAs)*

While the integration of SRL strategies presents significant benefits for student learning, the integration of SRL strategies did not come without challenges. All five GTAs reported difficulty in guiding students through reflective journaling. This widespread challenge suggests that students may not have been adequately prepared to engage in deep reflection about their learning processes, a skill that requires both guidance and practice. To address this, GTAs may need more resources and structured prompts to scaffold students' reflective skills, ensuring that they can connect their reflections to tangible learning outcomes.

Additionally, three GTAs mentioned student resistance to peer assessments. This resistance may stem from students' discomfort with evaluating their peers or receiving

critiques from classmates, especially in a low English proficiency context. This points to the need for a classroom culture that fosters trust and emphasizes the constructive value of peer feedback, potentially through peer assessment training early in the course.

Technological issues were another key challenge, reported by all five GTAs. The reliance on technology for SRL strategies, such as using Learning Management Systems (LMS) and educational apps, requires students and instructors to be proficient with these tools. The widespread reporting of technical difficulties underscores the importance of providing technical support and training for both GTAs and students to ensure smooth integration of digital tools.

Two GTAs also highlighted difficulties in monitoring student progress across different SRL strategies, indicating that the lack of a centralized system to track students' work in reflective journals, peer assessments, and technology tools created challenges. Developing a more unified approach to tracking student progress could help GTAs identify students who need more support and ensure that SRL strategies are effectively integrated.

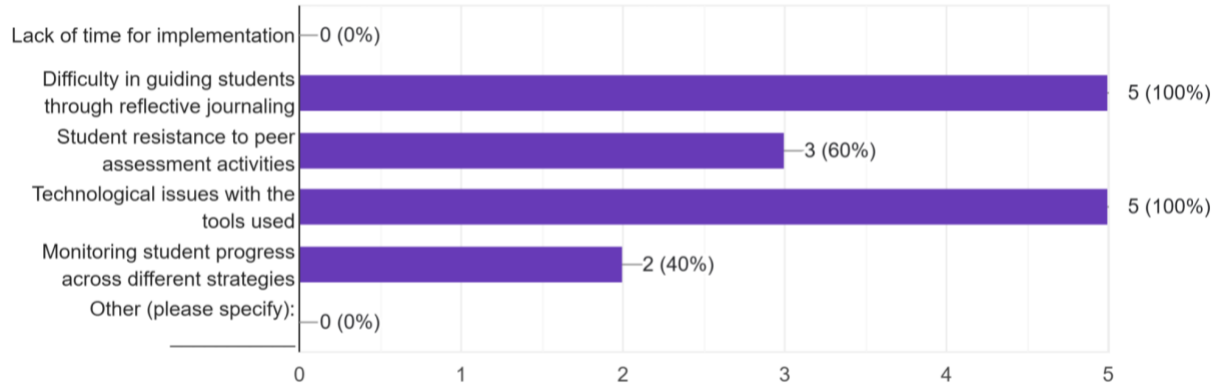

Figure 4: Challenges GTAs Faced in Implementing SRL Strategies

Effectiveness of SRL Strategies on Student Outcomes

Four GTAs reported that the SRL strategies were *very effective* in improving student outcomes, particularly in promoting critical thinking and academic engagement. The combination of reflective journals, peer assessments, and technology-enhanced tools appeared to contribute positively to these outcomes. The one *neutral* response suggests that not all GTAs saw the same level of effectiveness, potentially due to variability in student engagement or the aforementioned challenges. Despite this, the overall positive response indicates that SRL strategies can be powerful tools for improving student autonomy and learning outcomes, particularly when effectively implemented and supported.

This finding aligns with existing research on SRL, which emphasizes that strategies like goal-setting, self-monitoring, and reflection can significantly enhance student learning, especially when they are guided by educators who are well-prepared to facilitate these processes. However, to further maximize the effectiveness of SRL, ongoing support, particularly in areas like reflective journaling and peer assessments, will be crucial for both students and instructors.

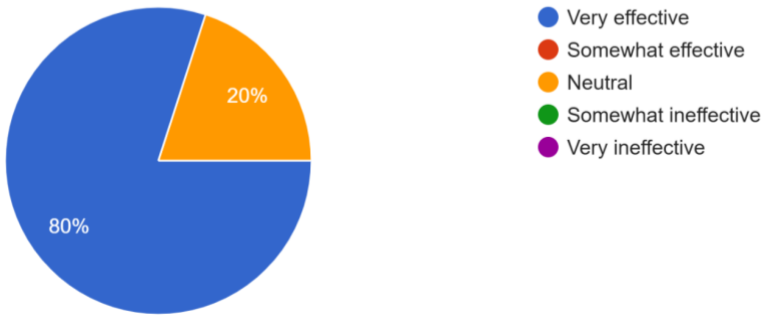

Figure 5: Overall Effectiveness of SRL Strategies on Student Outcomes

Reduction in GTAs' Teaching Workload

Three GTAs reported that promoting the use of self-regulatory in their classes *significantly reduced* their workload. On the other hand, two GTAs mentioned that their workload was *somewhat reduced*. Overall, self-regulatory strategies were effective in reducing the need for direct individual feedback, particularly when students fully embraced reflective practices and peer assessments. However, the varying levels of workload reduction highlight that the success of these strategies depends on factors such as student engagement, technological ease, and the GTAs' familiarity with SRL tools.

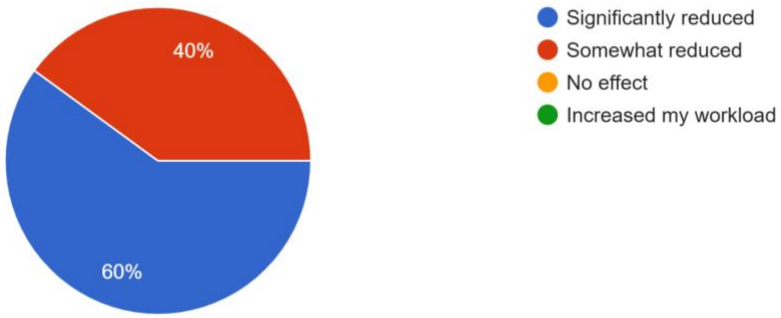

Figure 6: Reduction in GTAs' Teaching Workload

The findings from the questionnaire highlight both the strengths and challenges of implementing SRL strategies in a real-world classroom context. While the GTAs recognized the potential of SRL strategies to improve student engagement and outcomes, the challenges they faced suggest that more attention needs to be given to scaffolding these strategies. In particular, ensuring students are well-prepared to engage in reflective practices and peer assessments is essential for these strategies to be effective. Furthermore, the reliance on technology for monitoring progress and facilitating learning indicates the need for robust technical support systems to prevent technological barriers from impeding the implementation of SRL.

Future interventions should consider providing GTAs with ongoing professional development, additional training on SRL strategies, and resources that can help them manage the more challenging aspects of implementation. By addressing these areas, the effectiveness of SRL strategies can be enhanced, ultimately leading to improved student autonomy, critical thinking, and engagement.

Findings from Focus Groups

Impact of Self-Regulation on Student Learning Outcomes

Based on feedback from focus-group discussions, the integration of self-regulatory strategies into GTA-led English proficiency courses had a noticeable impact on student learning outcomes. GTAs reported several key benefits:

- **Increased Student Autonomy**: One GTA mentioned, *'Students began taking more control over their learning, especially when setting goals and tracking their own progress in the reflective journals. They were more proactive in seeking resources and asking questions.'* This aligns with the goal of fostering autonomy, as students were able to identify their learning needs and take steps to address them without constant guidance from the GTAs.

- **Improved Engagement**: *'I noticed a significant increase in student engagement, particularly during peer assessments. They were more invested in both giving and receiving feedback, which helped them improve their speaking and writing skills,'* noted another GTA. Students were actively involved in the learning process, both individually and through collaborative activities like peer assessments, which enhanced their overall participation in the class.

- **Enhanced Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving**: GTAs agreed that students demonstrated improved critical thinking skills, especially when reflecting on their learning in journals and during peer assessments. One GTA said, *'The reflective*

journals encouraged students to critically assess their strengths and weaknesses. It wasn't just about completing the tasks but about understanding their progress.' Students learned to self-monitor and adjust their learning strategies, which improved their problem-solving abilities in language learning.

Challenges and Considerations in Implementing SRL in GTA Contexts

The GTAs also encountered challenges when implementing self-regulatory strategies, particularly in the context of working with students with low English proficiency.

- **Initial Resistance and Lack of Familiarity**: *'Some students struggled with the concept of self-regulation initially,'* one GTA remarked. *'They were used to more direct instruction and found it difficult to take responsibility for their learning.'* This challenge required GTAs to provide additional support and clear instructions on how to use reflective journals and participate in peer assessments.

- **Consistency in Reflective Journaling**: Several GTAs noted that maintaining consistency with reflective journaling was difficult for some students. *'Students would start out strong but lose momentum halfway through the semester. We had to provide frequent reminders and more detailed prompts to keep them engaged,'* said one GTA. This highlights the need for ongoing support and scaffolding to help students internalize the self-regulatory process.

- **Technological Barriers**: Although technology-enhanced learning tools were helpful, a few GTAs mentioned that some students encountered difficulties with accessing or fully utilizing the platforms. *'We had some technical issues, especially with students who were not familiar with using apps like Trello or the LMS,'* one GTA reported. This required additional time for troubleshooting and technical support.

Recommendations for GTAs to Foster Self-Regulated Learning

During the focus-group discussions, GTAs provided valuable suggestions for improving the implementation of self-regulatory strategies in GTA-led courses, particularly for students with low English proficiency.

- **More Training and Support for Students**: One of the key recommendations was to provide more detailed training at the start of the course. *'We need to invest time in training students on how to reflect and assess themselves. This will help them embrace the self-regulation process earlier in the course,'* said one GTA. By offering workshops or step-by-step guides on reflective journaling and peer assessments, students can develop confidence in these practices from the beginning.

- **Smaller, Frequent Peer Assessments**: Another suggestion was to break peer assessments into smaller, more frequent activities. One GTA mentioned, *'It would be more effective to have shorter peer assessments throughout the course rather than a few large ones. This way, students can build confidence in giving and receiving feedback.'* This approach would make the peer assessment process more manageable and encourage regular feedback loops.

- **Increase Use of Simple Technology Tools**: While technology played a positive role, GTAs suggested focusing on simpler, more user-friendly tools. *'Some of the tools we used were too complex for students, especially those who weren't tech-savvy. We should streamline the tools we recommend and provide tutorials,'* said one GTA. This would help students focus on learning rather than struggling with technology, ensuring a smoother integration of tech-enhanced learning.

The findings from focus groups indicate that while the self-regulatory strategies were largely effective in improving student autonomy, engagement, and critical thinking, further adjustments such as additional training, simplified technology, and more frequent peer assessments could make the implementation even more successful.

Conclusion

The feedback gathered from the GTAs (both from questionnaires and focus groups) indicates that the integration of self-regulated learning strategies into GTA-led courses has great potential for improving both teaching and learning experiences. SRL strategies effectively foster student autonomy, engagement, and critical thinking while reducing the teaching workload for GTAs. However, there are still areas that need further refinement. Addressing challenges related to student resistance, consistency in reflective practices, and technological barriers will be key to enhancing the success of SRL strategies in the future. By incorporating the GTAs' recommendations—such as providing more comprehensive training for both students and instructors, simplifying technology tools, and breaking down peer assessments into smaller tasks—future courses can create a more supportive environment for students to engage fully with self-regulatory learning. With these adjustments, the potential of SRL to foster independent, reflective learners can be maximized, ultimately leading to better academic outcomes.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Future Research

One major limitation of the study is the small sample size—the findings are based on the experiences of only five GTAs. While their insights provide valuable perspectives on the integration of SRL strategies, the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings. The study was also conducted in a specific context—an English proficiency course for students with low proficiency—so the findings may not be fully applicable to other disciplines or student populations.

Future research could expand on this study by incorporating a larger and more diverse group of GTAs across different subject areas to explore how SRL strategies are implemented in varied contexts. Additionally, longitudinal studies that track the impact of SRL strategies on student outcomes over multiple semesters could provide deeper insights into the long-term effectiveness of these practices.

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Tackling the Tumbleweed: Reflections on increasing seminar engagement from an introverted GTA

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Abstract

Pedagogical literature identifies established links between student engagement with learning and subsequent academic attainment. During my first year as a GTA, the main challenge I experienced was getting students to verbally engage in seminars, both with myself and their peers. I was surprised by how challenging I found teaching a seminar with limited verbal engagement, and how difficult it was encouraging this during seminar discussions. In this piece, I critically reflect on my experiences as an introverted GTA trying to 'tackle the tumbleweed'. To commence, I consider the preconceptions I had about what constituted an 'engaged' seminar group, and examine varied definitions of (verbal and non-verbal) 'student engagement' within the seminar context. Then, I reflect on the techniques I used to encourage both verbal and non-verbal engagement in practice, plus further approaches I will trial in future teaching. In the concluding section, I provide advice for other GTAs and raise wider, external factors likely impacting engagement that lie beyond GTA control.

Keywords: student engagement; seminar teaching; GTA challenges; teacher reflections.

Introduction

When I accepted the Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) role, my main concern was of not knowing ‘enough’. Would I really be able to answer the diverse questions students would have about the module content? To manage this concern, I prepared for a seminar group containing a diverse range of learning styles and was braced to answer questions from and be challenged by vocal students. In practice, however, the main challenge I encountered was getting students to ask questions and verbally engage with myself and their peers. As a quiet, introverted learner myself, I was surprised by how challenging I found teaching a seminar where verbal engagement was limited, and how difficult it was encouraging this during seminar discussions.

In this article, I focus primarily on the verbal engagement of students in seminars through participation in activities and assessments. Concurrently, I grapple with my own preconceptions about what an ‘engaged’ seminar group constitutes. Going into teaching, I was focussed on maximising verbal engagement in my seminars. Yet, this contradicts how most of my own engagement as an introverted learner occurs through non-verbal methods, such as note-taking and independent thought. Correspondingly, I also detail how I increasingly utilised non-verbal engagement methods to benefit student learning and increase my confidence in my teaching abilities. After outlining theories of student engagement, I critically reflect on the approaches I utilised to increase engagement, considering what worked well and where in hindsight I would do things differently.

Theories of student engagement in the seminar room

Pedagogical literature notes there are established links between student engagement and attainment (Finn & Zimmer, 2012), alongside the need to assess student engagement to enhance the learning process (Das & Dev, 2024). Yet, the term ‘student

engagement' lacks consistent definition and application (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Robinson, 2012). In the broader Higher Education (HE) context, student engagement is associated with improving student experience, with Robinson (2012, p. 98) defining it as "the active involvement of listening to individual and collective perspectives of students". This need to actively listen to students has clear resonance within the seminar room. Furthermore, Bryson & Hand (2007) theorise that engagement spans a multi-levelled spectrum, whereby students range from engaged to disengaged at the levels of: the task set, the module, the course, and the university.

Focusing on the task and module, student engagement can be viewed as "the active participation, involvement, and interest demonstrated by students in the learning process", which fluctuates over a teaching session as levels of student interest and concentration vary (Das & Dev, 2024, p. 2261). This includes an emphasis on the verbal participation of students with the teacher such as by asking questions, and with their peers in group discussions (Ahlfeldt et al., 2005). Other conceptualisations of engagement do not rest on the need for verbal engagement, instead centring on engagement "with the content of learning tasks in a way that is likely to enable them to reach understanding" (Ramsden, 2003, p. 97). Admittedly, however, determining the most suitable and inclusive methods to assess understanding itself is a contested topic (see McConlogue (2020)). Wider, non-verbal forms of engagement evident in the seminar room include attending the seminar, paying attention, completing assessments, and taking initiative such as seeking help when required (Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

Engagement in (my) Practice: Techniques to Tackle the Tumbleweed

Introductions: scene setting and ice breaking

For context, I taught the small-group seminars on a first-year undergraduate module for students external to my department, Global Sustainable Development (GSD). From the start, I was aware this could create quiet seminars with students lacking familiarity both with the department and each other. With home departments ranging from mathematics to history, students were used to different signature pedagogies, “defin[ing] what counts as knowledge in a field and how things become known” (Shulman, 2005, p. 54). GSD, I would argue, has a very different signature pedagogy to many of these home departments, centring on student-led exploration and research-based teaching. Research-based teaching utilises inquiry-based seminars, with modules not about acquiring specific subject content but broad theories and key skills (Healey, 2005). Interestingly, such active, problem-based learning styles often benefit student engagement, including through giving students the independence to collaboratively explore areas they are interested in (Ahlfeldt et al., 2005; Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Ramsden, 2003).

Recognising the GSD teaching approach was likely unfamiliar to students, I started the first seminar with a clear outline of how seminars would run. This included informing students that seminars provide a safe space to explore ideas and develop learning, and that they should constructively and respectfully challenge and question each other. This outline reflects Mann's (2001) argument that learning environments should be respectful, target alienation, and welcome unclear, unformed ideas that nurture student learning. Equally, I emphasised that the only stupid questions are those not asked, and from my own experiences when one person is stuck others likely are too. I told students that I would never pick on them as I do not think it is conducive with creating an effective learning environment. As an introverted learner, I used to dread seminars where there was a possibility I would be picked on.

This first seminar included time for students to introduce themselves. We went around the room sharing names, preferred pronouns, home departments, and the reason for choosing the module. I thought this would help students feel comfortable talking to each

other – especially important given the significant amount of group work to come. Upon reflection, however, I would trial a different approach I encountered as an undergraduate that could be more beneficial. Rather than putting students ‘on the spot’, we were instead given two minutes to find out the name and an interesting fact about the person sat next to us, then introducing our partner to the wider group. I feel this approach could be better by removing the immediate expectation to engage with the wider group. Plus, it means students have a familiar face to work with in future discussions.

Reflecting at different scales

Continually reflecting on my teaching during and after sessions helped me identify activities and content facilitating greater engagement, and how I could amend future teaching to build on these successes. For example, after one debate was quiet and required lots of prompting to get groups talking, I considered alternative seminar activities that could vary sessions and enhance engagement. I had recently read an article by Kempston (2023) discussing approaches she used to increase engagement and empower students, including incorporating apps with the dual benefit of non-verbally assessing student understanding. In the next session, I trialled this using a Kahoot quiz after a mini lecture. The competitive element resulted in students engaging with each other, while I could assess levels of comprehension and recap areas the group were less sure on. For future teaching, I am keen to continue using Kahoot alongside other technologies, including Vevox, to facilitate non-verbal engagement whilst potentially simulating verbal engagement.

Over the ten-week term, I increasingly realised the importance of discussions with and seeking guidance from colleagues. Especially in the early weeks of teaching, I felt alone in tackling the tumbleweed and was convinced I was a ‘bad’ teacher. Hearing that lecturers on the module were having similar challenges reassured me that the issue

could not solely be my teaching. The lecturers also gave me tips for increasing verbal engagement, including not being afraid of waiting a few minutes for a response to a whole-group question. Additionally, participating in the microteaching exercise during a teaching course I undertook was helpful for gaining external feedback on my teaching from fellow GTAs. Although microteaching can cause initial anxiety, Donnelly & Fitzmaurice (2011) found it gave participants greater confidence and self-awareness of their abilities – which I believe to be true.

In all honesty, I was nervous for the end of module evaluation feedback from students. The extent of positive feedback received genuinely shocked me – particularly of multiple students saying they enjoyed the seminars. This reaffirms that while verbal engagement is important, engagement extends beyond the verbal, including attendance and completing assessments (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). It reiterated to me that such non-verbal forms of engagement are equally valid for facilitating learning and student enjoyment of seminars.

Technology: helpful and a hinderance?

In some ways, technology hindered verbal engagement in seminars. In one small-group task, groups were initially quiet, having created shared Google documents to collate their thoughts rather that have a verbal discussion. After 15 minutes, I spoke to each group about what they had discussed and was pleasantly surprised by the amount of content they had covered. Their use of technology had prevented me visibly seeing and hearing learning occurring, however from talking to students it was clear they had identified a plethora of pertinent points. This made me reflect on how I relied on ‘reading the room’ to assess extent of engagement, and that these students had chosen an alternative, no less valid, non-verbal engagement approach. Plus, after this check-in, I was pleased that students started verbally engaging with each other about the debate and how to divide points up for the wider group discussion. As discussed above, I also

found technology such as Kahoot valuable for diversifying seminar activities to facilitate greater engagement.

Students were more likely to ask questions after a seminar by email than face-to-face in or just after a seminar. For future teaching, I am going to trial offering flexible office hours with some on Microsoft Teams alongside fixed, in-person hours. This virtual option can enable students to be engaged with a module when they may be unable to get onto campus and when the in-person times may not be suitable (Wolf, 2023).

Making the most of assessment

Student engagement was consistently greatest when discussing assessment. This is understandable – I know from my own experiences that my verbal seminar engagement peaked in discussions about assessment. This reflects Bryson & Hand (2007) finding that engagement increases around assessment, with many students focusing on achieving a good degree to obtain a good job post-graduation. Interestingly, they also found least engagement in the first year of an undergraduate degree which does not 'count' towards their final degree classification, coupled with wider challenges of transitioning into HE and navigating socialisation pressures. I did wonder if this was a factor influencing engagement in my seminars, in conjunction with students focusing on core modules they needed to pass in their home departments.

I was keen to reassure students about the summative assessments, which included a group presentation. I empathised with the students who found presenting difficult, sharing with them how much I struggled as an undergraduate and giving tips I used to settle my nerves. Utilising informal, low stakes presentations in seminars allowed students to develop their confidence presenting across the term. Plus, it enabled me to give verbal feedback based on the summative marking criteria. I focused on the

positives of their presentations, constructively adding areas for improvement. For example, I would say “it was really powerful how you looked at the audience as you made this point, doing this more would further enhance your verbal communication”. Nearer their presentations, I showed students examples of presentations I had done as an undergraduate so we could critically evaluate them. I was surprised by how much students engaged with this, asking questions including about my experiences. I will certainly increase the use of exemplars in future teaching to stimulate discussions.

Given many students did not reach out to ask questions during the term, I found providing written feedback on summative assessments a valuable opportunity to provide personalised feedback – especially important given the continued massification of HE (Vardi, 2013). When providing formal, written feedback I value feeding forward. Rather than giving highly specific feedback about a piece of work the student is unlikely to rewrite, this instead focuses on general points such as conceptual knowledge, extent of analysis, and referencing that can be used in future assessments (ibid). My feedback from the group presentations included a focus on points for students to consider when writing their research projects, such as working on their referencing.

Concluding Thoughts and Advice

Having to ‘tackle the tumbleweed’ in my first year of teaching was an unexpected challenge. Positively, it provided me with many opportunities to reflect on my teaching and enhance my toolkit for teaching to come. To conclude, I provide advice for GTAs experiencing similar challenges, plus briefly acknowledge wider, external factors likely impacting engagement that lie beyond their control.

Advice for GTAs

The main piece of advice I have for GTAs faced with seminar silences is to talk about it with other GTAs, module leaders, and wider colleagues with teaching experience. It is more than likely you are not the only one dealing with quiet seminars. From my experience, discussing these challenges with colleagues made me feel less alone, gave me reassurance, and provided me with guidance and approaches to trial in coming seminars.

Secondly, try changing up how you teach your seminars. I found that different activities yielded varied results with the group, with smaller group tasks often working better than big group debates. See what works for your group, as there is no single approach that suits all students (Bryson & Hand, 2007). Celebrate where an activity worked well and see how you can incorporate similar activities in the future. Equally, do not be hard on yourself when something does not work; reflect on it, learn from it, and then move on.

Finally, embrace non-verbal forms of engagement. They are no less valid than verbal forms of engagement. Overtime, I learnt to accept that not all seminars are going to be filled with verbal discussions and debates, but that does not mean students are not learning and enjoying the content. As an introverted learner, I must confess that some of the most valuable, interesting seminars I attended had little verbal engagement from myself or my peers. Equally, there is nothing wrong with using technology such as Kahoot or letting groups work quietly on shared online documents to facilitate learning.

Factors beyond GTA control

A range of wider factors impact student engagement. This includes the massification of HE which makes it challenging to individualise approaches for students (Bryson & Hand, 2007). While I was fortunate to have one small seminar group where I could vary

teaching approaches across the weeks and conduct in-session modifications when needed, for GTAs teaching multiple seminars this is less possible. I was also lucky to be given flexibility in how I taught the content, something not all GTAs have. Furthermore, not all focus should be on the teacher; student engagement is the “shared responsibility” of students and staff (Robinson, 2012, p. 98). While I felt responsible to engage learners, there may have been other factors impacting their engagement – from assessment stresses to personal circumstances. As GTAs, it is important we acknowledge these wider factors that lie beyond our control while making the most of what we can influence to improve student engagement.

Ethical Claim

There are no conflicts of interest to declare. All supervisors approve of this publication.

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Harnessing the power of peer dialogue to support GTAs' professional development: Two reflective stories

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Abstract

Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) have played an essential role in supporting teaching and learning in higher education institutions (HEIs) across the globe. Enhancing GTAs' professional development (PD) is critical for ensuring the quality of higher education. The influence of peers in GTA's PD has been widely acknowledged (e.g., Bale & Moran, 2020; Dobbins et al., 2021). However, there is limited research on the benefits of peer dialogue, one of the most accessible means of harnessing peer powers in GTAs' PD. This qualitative study aims to explore how peer dialogue can contribute to GTAs' PD. This study will use data from two narratives detailing the experiences of peer dialogue, completed independently by two senior GTAs in a UK-based university, who are also the first and second authors of this study. Through thematic analysis, the two researchers will first identify the themes of the data separately and then work together to synthesize the key themes from the data, to uncover the key benefits of peer dialogue in promoting GTAs' PD. The findings of this study will add to the literature on the power of peers in GTAs' PD and provide insights into the positive impacts of engaging in peer dialogue activities to promote GTAs' PD. This study will have significant implications for GTAs interested in seeking PD opportunities and for stakeholders who support GTAs in higher education. By highlighting the benefits of peer dialogue, this study also underscores the need to create a supportive environment or platform for GTAs to be engaged in open and collaborative peer dialogue.

Key words:

Peer dialogue, Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), Professional development (PD); benefits

Introduction

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) play a critical role in Higher Education (HE), juggling their responsibilities as students, teachers, and researchers. These multifaceted responsibilities present significant challenges that can affect their professional development (PD) and overall wellbeing. Recent research (e.g., Jonnalagadda et al., 2022) underscores the need for targeted support and PD opportunities to help GTAs navigate these challenges effectively. This paper argues that peer dialogue, with significant benefits, serves as a promising strategy to enhance GTAs' PD.

This study examines the benefits of peer dialogue on GTAs' professional growth and overall wellbeing. Through thematic analysis of reflective narratives from two senior GTAs, the research explores how peer dialogue has assisted them in managing their roles, shaping their professional identities, improving their overall wellbeing, and fostering both interdisciplinary understanding and a sense of teaching community. The findings offer practical implications for supporting GTAs' PD more effectively. They suggest extending PD frameworks to address aspects of professional identity and wellbeing, raising awareness among GTAs about the value of peer dialogue, and creating supportive environments for peer interaction. By integrating these insights, this article suggests that institutions enhance their support structures for GTAs, leveraging peer dialogue as a vital tool for ongoing GTAs' PD.

Literature review

GTAs' role in higher education and professional development

GTAs are PhD students employed to teach and support learning in their own department/institution, holding the student-teacher-researcher identity (Bale & Anderson, 2024). GTAs play a significant role in HE, undertaking various teaching assignments. For example, STEM GTAs are expected to instruct undergraduate students' learning in a laboratory and discussion settings, marking students' work and

communicating with students concerning their learning during office hours (Zotos et al., 2020). How GTAs live up to their roles can impact the overall organisational effectiveness. Recent years have witnessed an increasing number of research on various aspects of GTAs, including how they are trained (e.g., Jonnalagadda et al., 2022), how they navigate their identity (e.g., Bale & Anderson, 2024; Slack & Pownall, 2023), how they impact students' learning (e.g., Huffmyer & Lemus , 2019; Wheeler et al., 2017), and how students evaluate their teaching (e.g, Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2018). Findings from these studies can be integrated into institutional support for GTA's PD and how they sustain their own PD.

Having said that, there has been research specifically on GTAs' PD. Some put forward frameworks for the training or evaluation of GTAs' PD programmes. For instance, Reeves et al. (2017) propose a conceptual framework for assessing and investigating GTAs' PD programmes, as an initial step for practitioners and researchers to collaborate on large-scale and systematic research. This framework integrates the contextual, moderating and outcome variables. Some conduct empirical studies to investigate the effectiveness of their own GTAs' PD programme. For example, the research by Alicea-Muñoz et al. (2018) indicates that their programme which integrates pedagogy, subject content and PD strategies contributes to GTAs' self-confidence and teaching abilities. Others pay close attention to different ways for advancing GTAs' PD (e.g., Sadera et al., 2024). Popular strategies encompass practicing reflective practice (e.g., Gallego, 2014), engaging with teaching observation (e.g., Campbell et al., 2021), conducting action research (e.g., McDonough, 2006), and leveraging the power of peer (e.g., peer mentoring, see Anders et al., 2023; peer facilitation in training, e.g., Bale & Moran, 2020).

Peer (dialogue) in GTA's professional development

According to Jonnalagadda et al. (2022), a lack of training of GTAs can adversely affect organizational effectiveness and individual performance. Conventionally training sessions, consisting mainly of workshops on general guidelines, are argued to be insufficient for supporting GTAs' role in HE (Di Benedetti, 2023). Maximizing the power

of peers in GTAs' PD can be an innovative way to contribute to the training of GTAs. As mentioned in the previous section, the role of peers has been recognized in promoting GTAs' PD. Studies have indicated various benefits associated with involving peers in GTAs' PD. Anders et al. (2023) conclude that a human-centered design for inclusive peer mentoring contributes to a collective sharing and learning experience and GTAs' sustained motivation and confidence in handling challenges. Similarly, in another designed program of GTAs embedding peer elements (Bale & Moran, 2020), it is found that peer facilitation of GTA training enables ongoing pedagogical discussions beyond the training program, and higher quality of learning experience for new GTAs. Additionally, the empirical study by Di Benedetti (2023) shows that GTAs can develop their skills of reflective practice and student-centered teaching by engaging in peer teaching and self-reflection. Similarly, through a literature survey, Howe (2010) concludes that peer dialogue, which involves exchanging opinions in support of shared objectives, has value for one's cognitive development.

To date, no systematic study has yet been done to investigate how peer dialogue influences GTAs' PD. This study intends to address this gap by exploring the benefits of different types of peer dialogues that two senior GTAs from Applied Linguistics at Warwick have experienced.

Methodology

This study uses data from two narrative reflections by two senior GTAs (the first and the second author of this article) to explore the benefits of peer dialogues for GTAs' PD. The reason why narratives are used is that through narrative inquiry, researchers can gain knowledge and make sense of life from storytellers' viewpoints (Bakhuizen, 2019, as cited in Zhuo, 2024).

For the collection of the two narrative reflections, first, the two researchers discussed with each other the various types of peer dialogues they had engaged in since the beginning of their GTA work. Figure 1 shows how the two researchers visualized all the possible aspects of peer dialogues for GTAs in Applied Linguistics (See Footnote 1 for

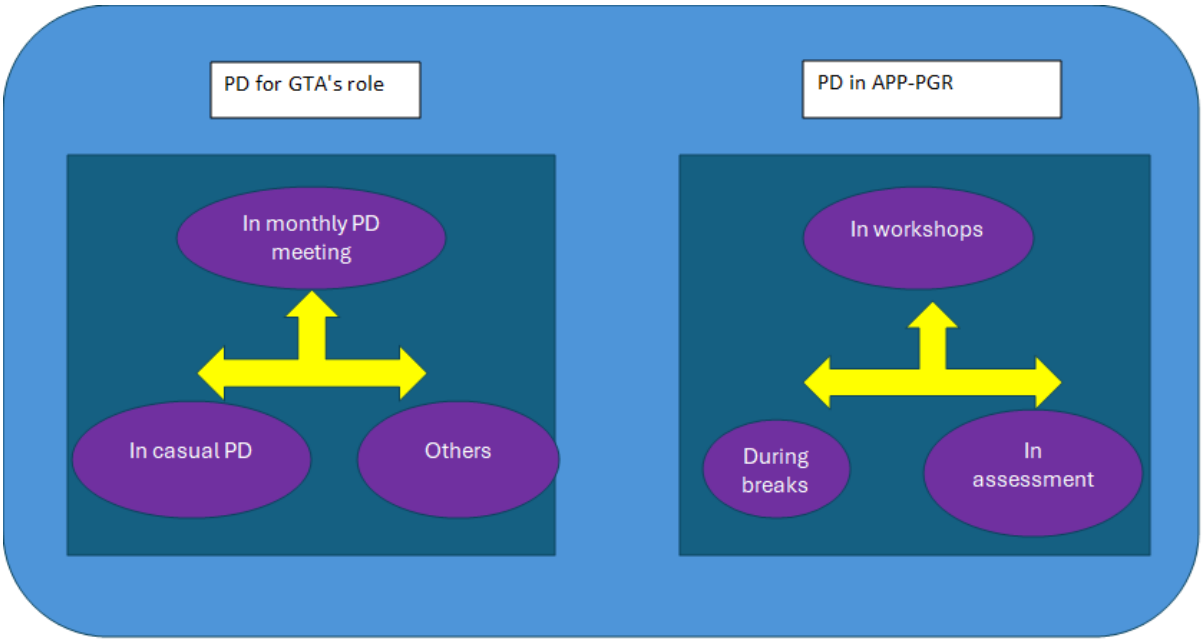
more information about APP-PGR [5]programme at Warwick). Then, according to Figure 1, the two researchers went separately to write the story of their peer dialogue experiences. It is worth noting that Figure 1 acted more as the prompt for the two researchers to consider various peer dialogues, instead of a rigid roadmap to follow. In other words, the two researchers chose the aspects that they intended to elaborate on, which might or might not include all areas in Figure 1. For easier references, the researchers highlighted the specific areas in bold in their story.

Regarding data analysis, when the two reflections were finished, the two researchers adopted Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to generate codes and produce themes on the benefits of peer dialogue for GTAs. This step was also conducted independently without consultation with each other. Then, the two researchers sat down together to compare their codes and themes. Finally, through discussion and negotiation, the two researchers agreed on the final codes and themes for this study. The following section presents the two narrative reflections: Meifang's story and Yanyan's story.

Figure 1

Visualising the possible aspects of peer dialogues for GTAs

[5] APP PGR stands for Academic and Professional Pathway for Postgraduate Researchers who Teach. This professional programme, offered by Warwick Academic Development centre to those having teaching roles alongside PhD/postdoctoral/early careers research commitments, is externally accredited by Advance HE and leads to a recognised Higher Education teaching status. See more information here: https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/academic-development/coursesandpathways/apppgr



Two narratives

Meifang's story

For my role as a GTA, I benefited from communicating with senior GTAs who worked/were working for the same module before me. In our **informal peer dialogue**, they shared with me advice on catering to the diverse learners, using innovative approaches to enhancing students' participation during the seminar and supporting students to explore the connections between the knowledge and application in their future teaching context. Thanks to these helpful dialogues, I felt much less anxious for my first debut as a seminar facilitator.

For more general questions regarding my role as a GTA, I find answers from **the monthly peer dialogue meeting**. These peer dialogue meetings created a safe environment for us to share our vulnerabilities and a wonderful platform for us to support each other's growth as a GTA. I remember clearly that in one session, some GTAs mentioned that they had spent much longer than they were paid for marking. Most GTAs confessed that they had the same issue with the first few markings. From this, I realized that some issues were common problems for every GTA, due to unfamiliarity with the work. Instead of doubting our ability as GTAs, we should have

more patience with ourselves and allow ourselves time to develop. I felt I got validation from these peer dialogues. As I grew more experienced, I saw myself transforming from an advice seeker to an advice giver in these peer dialogues. As Zhu and Carless (2018) point out, peer feedback is a dialogic process whereby both the receiver and the provider could gain some benefits. Thanks to these peer dialogue meetings, I also felt that I was not alone, and we were all part of a community.

When doing the APP-PGR program, I had the chance to communicate with peer GTAs from other disciplines. I particularly liked the dialogues about our teaching philosophy and signature pedagogy (Shulman, 2005) **in the workshops**. Through the discussion, I understood that teaching philosophy can vary from person to person, but the fundamental professional values are expected to be shared. Additionally, I was inspired to ponder how a typical pedagogy outside my field can be used in my area. For example, case study, which is a signature pedagogy for Law is rarely used in teaching in Applied Linguistics. How might it be if we use a case study for language teacher education in our department? This could be a fascinating and effective unexplored territory for our discipline.

Peer dialogue, required as part of the summative **assessment** by the program, enabled me to reflect and have a deeper understanding of my teaching philosophy and how it affected the way I taught. The significance of reflective practice for teachers' PD has long been emphasized in literature (Schön, 1983). Through this discussion and reflection, I realized that my seminars were future-oriented, prioritizing assisting students in transforming the declarative knowledge they gained from lectures into functioning knowledge for the students to think about its connection to their future professional practice (Biggs & Tang, 2011). In addition, this peer dialogue also enabled me to consider my weaknesses in teaching and how I could improve it.

Thanks to peer dialogues, I have now grown more confident in my role as a GTA and gained a sense of achievement as a GTA.

Yanyan's story

My journey as a Senior GTA began in September 2022. This marked a significant shift from being solely a PhD student to balancing the roles of a PhD candidate and a Postgraduate Research (PGR) teacher.

The APP PGR course proved invaluable in helping me manage the complexities of my intersecting identities - my Chinese female identity, my role as a PhD researcher, and my emerging identity as a teacher**. During a session on Teacher Role and Identity**, I recounted a challenging experience from my first seminar to my peers. A senior male student, a native English speaker with substantial teaching experience, persistently contradicted my points on classroom exercises with his wrong ideas, which undermined my confidence. This incident highlighted the cultural and professional conflicts I faced as a non-native English-speaking female teacher from China. I struggled with doubts about my legitimacy as a 'real teacher' (Winstone & Moore, 2017). However, with support from peers and mentors, I learned to address these conflicts by affirming my expertise as a researcher while acknowledging my growth as a new teacher. I concentrated on improving classroom management for mixed-aged master's students and sought advice on handling classroom disruptions, gradually building my confidence and refining my teaching and research skills.

Another pivotal moment occurred **during an online chat with a PhD colleague** regarding activity design. As a new teacher, I found it challenging to create engaging activities for a complex and technical course. I discussed my concerns with an experienced seminar tutor, who suggested that the students' disengagement might stem from not seeing the relevance of the course to their future careers. She advised designing activities that linked course content to their future teaching roles. Her suggestion to incorporate evidence from my PhD research into a group activity proved transformative. I designed a group discussion and presentation activity based on my research on classroom interaction, demonstrating how course content could analyse classroom dynamics and enhance teaching practices. This evidence-based approach not only boosted student participation and engagement but also encouraged them to

integrate an interactional perspective into their teaching reflections and group work designs (Perry & Smart, 2007).

Conversations with fellow dissertation supervisors were also crucial when I took on the role of master's dissertation supervisor in April 2023. **In a peer dialogue in July 2023**, I voiced concerns about students delaying their dissertation drafts, which might force me to work on weekends to review their submissions before the supervision deadline. This situation caused significant pressure and disrupted my schedule. My peers shared similar concerns but stressed the importance of maintaining a work-study-life balance. They reminded me that as GTAs, teaching is just one part of our responsibilities. We should work within our allocated hours to avoid harming our physical and mental well-being. Their advice underscored the importance of work-study-life balance, leading me to adopt a healthier work style that prioritised both my wellness and efficiency.

Reflecting on these peer dialogues, I recognise how crucial peer support has been to my PD as a GTA. As I continue in this role, I am better equipped to manage the demands of academia and teaching. I deeply appreciate the guidance from my colleagues, which has helped me grow into a more capable and resilient teacher.

Analysis and discussion

Thematic analysis of the two narratives reveals five key benefits of peer dialogue for GTA, including promoting professional growth, establishing professional identity, enhancing overall wellbeing, constructing interdisciplinary understanding and strengthening a sense of PGR teaching community.

Promoting professional growth

Both authors expressed appreciation for peer dialogue as an effective tool for enhancing PD in teaching skills and pedagogical knowledge. This was in line with most existing studies on the peer power (e.g., Anders et al., 2023; Di Benedetti, 2023). Meifang particularly valued the advice she received on customising her teaching

methods for culturally diverse learner groups, while Yanyan found inspiration in her peer's suggestions for incorporating research evidence from her PhD project into group activity designs. Moreover, both narratives emphasise the harvest of elevated understanding of evidence-based teaching from peer dialogue, an indication of peer dialogue contributing to enhanced cognition (Howe, 2010). This shows that peer dialogue can guide GTAs in fostering student engagement, supporting students' application of knowledge to real-world scenarios and adopting evidence-informed approaches. This aligns with the findings of Bale and Moran (2020) who highlight the role of peer facilitation in promoting pedagogical discussions and improving teaching practices among GTAs. Furthermore, Alicea-Muñoz et al. (2018) emphasise the value of integrating pedagogical knowledge with practical experience, which resonates with the experience shared by Yanyan in incorporating research into teaching practices. This further illustrates that peer dialogue can cultivate GTAs' professional values of respecting individual and diverse student groups, promoting engagement of and equal access to all learners, and using scientific research and alike evidence-informed approaches outlined in UK Professional Standards Framework 2023 (PSF2023) (hereafter UKPSF2023) (Advance HE, 2023).

Meanwhile, it also helps GTAs in pursuing better professional practices of learning activity and programme design and providing support to guide learners emphasised in UKPSF2023. Consistent with the advocate for adding peer elements in GTAs' PD in Bale and Moran (2020) and Di Benedetti (2023), the analysis displays the benefits of embedding the peer elements in such professional dialoguing activities in spurring GTAs' PD. Additionally, this discover also extends Howe's (2010) discussion on peer dialogue to the context of teacher education and training and offers empirical evidence on its function in boosting GTAs' professional growth in HE sector.

Establishing professional identity

Existing studies have emphasized that GTAs frequently juggle multiple roles as students, teachers, and researchers (e.g., Bale & Anderson, 2024). The act of balancing these roles can trigger identity conflicts and challenges. This study reveals that

engaging in peer dialogue can be vital for resolving these issues and supporting their development from novice to experienced teachers.

Firstly, peer dialogue was instrumental in helping GTAs navigate the conflicts tied to their cultural, gender, professional, and personal identities. It facilitated Yanyan's gradual recognition of her research strengths and illuminated areas for growth as a new teacher. This is consistent with Slack and Pownall's (2023) findings on how peer interaction can help GTAs navigate complex identity intersections and foster professional self-awareness. International GTAs, in particular, face unique challenges, such as those highlighted by Jonnalagadda et al. (2022), which include language barriers and cultural differences. Peer dialogue provides a space for addressing these barriers, allowing GTAs to gradually adapt to the teaching context.

Meanwhile, a lack of teaching experience can present challenges for GTAs in shaping their professional identity and pedagogical practices. However, through peer dialogue, Meifang evolved from a novice GTA, seeking advice from her seniors, into an experienced teacher who now offers guidance to new GTAs. This progression highlights how peer dialogue can significantly facilitate the transformation from novice to seasoned tutor, demonstrating substantial PD in teaching expertise and understanding of institutional norms. This echoes the findings of Nasser-Abu Alhija and Fresko (2018), who argue that peer-based feedback helps develop teaching confidence, thereby accelerating the shift from novice to expert within the teaching role.

Enhancing overall wellbeing

Previous studies on how peer dialogue can contribute to GTAs' wellbeing mainly focus on GTAs' confidence in teaching. This study indicates that peer dialogues offer a safe space where they can openly share their concerns and difficulties, thereby obtaining crucial emotional support and improving their overall wellbeing.

Balancing multiple commitments is a major challenge for GTAs, especially given their intersecting identities. The multiple responsibilities of GTAs can significantly impact their physical and mental wellbeing. As Park and Ramos (2002) explain, GTAs often feel like

“donkeys in the department” (p.47) because of the heavy workloads, which can lead to immense stress. Peer dialogue is crucial in helping them manage this pressure. For instance, Yanyan found relief and support after discussing her struggles with excessive working hours with fellow dissertation supervisors who understood and reciprocated her difficulties. This mirrors Musgrove et al.’s (2021) observation that peer support plays a critical role in alleviating job-related stress among new teachers, creating an adaptive coping mechanism that improves emotional well-being. This illustrates the critical role of peer dialogue in encouraging healthier work habits and improving GTAs’ overall wellbeing.

Moreover, new teachers, particularly GTAs with intersecting identities, busy schedules, and limited experience, often face a range of negative emotions. Initially, Meifang experienced self-doubt and anxiety due to her unfamiliarity with the role and limited knowledge of HE pedagogy. Similarly, Yanyan struggled with waning confidence in the face of classroom disruption. Their experiences of feeling positive after peer dialogue demonstrate its crucial role in providing emotional support. This shows that peer dialogue serves as an adaptive coping strategy that helps GTAs navigate negative emotions (Musgrove et al., 2021), while also boosting their confidence, efficiency, and overall job satisfaction. This supports the findings of Anders et al. (2023) who argue that peer mentoring programmes significantly contribute to emotional well-being, motivation, and teaching effectiveness, particularly for GTAs managing multiple roles.

Constructing interdisciplinary understanding

In current literature, GTAs’ interdisciplinary understanding mainly results from an interdisciplinary GTA training program. For example, an empirical study by Mutambuki and Schwartz (2018) indicates that a GTA learning community consisting of Chemistry and Biology disciplines is essential for enabling GTAs to receive constructive feedback and discover ways to enhance their classroom practices. This study contributes to the current literature by revealing that casual conversations with peers from other disciplines also have a role in enhancing GTAs’ recognition of disciplinary boundaries within pedagogical practices and gradually foster their interdisciplinary understanding of

HE pedagogy. In Meifang's narrative, she noted that her conversation with a Law GTA prompted her to consider whether the unique approach to case studies in law could be adapted for exploring language teacher education in applied linguistics. This type of cross-disciplinary interaction is also encouraged by UKPSF2023, which promotes collaborations that transcend traditional academic silos. Such interdisciplinary dialogues can lead to innovative teaching practices that are both contextually aware and creatively adaptive across fields.

Strengthening a sense of PGR teaching community

PGR teaching community is relatively less researched in current literature, most of which seem to be embedded into GTA training programs. However, having a training program does not guarantee GTAs can have a sense of belonging. Morris (2021) and White and Nonnamaker (2008) have proved the importance of nurturing a strong sense of belonging within a community for postgraduate students and GTAs, which contributes to better academic and personal outcomes. Therefore, it is essential to explore how GTAs can gain a sense of belonging in the PGR teaching community. This study reveals peer dialogue can have such a positive effect. Peer dialogue is a crucial environment where GTAs can build alliances and camaraderie, significantly enhancing their positive feelings about their teaching roles. Meifang, for example, felt validated and supported within the GTA community, which strengthened her confidence to continue her work after doing peer dialogues. The sense of community fostered by peer dialogue also corresponds to the collective learning experience noted by Anders et al. (2023), which helps sustain motivation and a shared sense of purpose among GTAs.

Implications

This section outlines the implications of the findings from the two narratives to better support GTAs' PD in a wider context, particularly in HE in the UK. Based on the analysis and discussion of findings above, this study put forward the following three key suggestions regarding how we can harness the benefits of peer dialogue in GTAs' PD. These three key suggestions include: extending the framework for GTAs' PD,

enhancing GTAs' awareness of peer power and situating peer-dialogue in proper GTA communities.

First, to enable a sustainable and comprehensive GTAs' PD, it is essential that current professional standards frameworks ((in the UK context, it would be UKPFS), for teaching and learning in higher education be extended, to include the dimensions of establishing professional identity and taking care of overall well-being.

Without a firm acknowledgement of one's GTA identity, GTAs are more likely to question themselves and doubt their ability in performing their tasks when being confronted by students of more senior teaching experience (as shown in Yanyan's story). Likewise, without paying attention to one's overall wellbeing, GTAs may struggle with their work and constantly experience negative emotions. Although some recommendations to enhance GTAs' wellbeing have been put forward in literature (e.g. the five recommendations by Slack & Pownall, 2023). Including overall wellbeing as one of the official descriptors can have a game-changing effect for GTAs' sustainable PD.

Second, to support GTAs' PD in difficult contexts, it is significant that GTAs develop their awareness of peer power in their PD, particularly taking peer dialogue as self-regulated PD opportunities and as a valuable channel for exploring teaching innovations by drawing upon interdisciplinary insights.

There is no lack of literature discussing the benefits of involving peers in GTA training. For example, the empirical study by Bale and Moran (2020) concludes that GTA can benefit professionally from being taught by a peer, gaining transferrable skills, which can be used in other professional settings. Similarly, the study by Campbell (2021) reveals that peers can build GTAs' teacher identity, confidence and self-efficacy through peer teaching observation. This study adds to this literature by proposing peer dialogue as a way for sustaining and self-regulating GTAs' PD. This is particularly relevant in contexts where institutional support for GTAs is not sufficient or ideal. Particularly, when peer dialogues happen with GTA peers from other disciplines, GTAs can explore opportunities for teaching innovations based on their communications with GTA peers,

as this study indicates. Practices in this regard will extend the finding by Mutambuki and Schwartz (2018), who explore the effect of a PD programme with interdisciplinary design.

Third, to ensure the benefits of peer dialogue in supporting GTAs' PD, it is crucial that peer dialogue be situated in a safe, welcoming and open community. In such an environment, GTAs have a higher chance to maximise their gains from peer dialogues in either casual or formal peer dialogues, as indicated by the two narratives in this article. GTA teaching community can be one of these communities where doctoral students who teach develop their sense of belonging. As Morries (202) argues, a sense of belonging to academia can impact doctoral researchers' academic journeys immensely. An empirical study by White and Nonnamaker (2008) suggests that doctoral students experience multiple communities of influence. It is therefore safe to infer that without a sense of belonging in the GTA community, GTAs can also feel disengaged and less likely to share their inner voices, which will inevitably reduce their chances of harnessing the benefits of conducting peer dialogues.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that peer dialogue has multiple benefits for GTAs' PD. These benefits include enhancing GTA's professional growth, overall wellbeing, established professional identity, interdisciplinary understanding, and sense of belonging. By providing a platform for GTAs to share experiences, receive feedback, and explore interdisciplinary insights, peer dialogue encourages reflective practice and innovative teaching strategies. This study contributes new insights into the need to extend existing PD frameworks to incorporate dimensions of identity formation and overall wellbeing, which ensures GTAs can thrive in their multifaceted roles. Moreover, this study illuminates that promoting awareness of peer dialogue as a self-regulated opportunity for development is essential, particularly in contexts with limited institutional support. Finally, this study also makes it evident that cultivating safe and welcoming peer communities is vital for maximizing the benefits of peer dialogue, ultimately enhancing GTAs' confidence, competence, and commitment to their teaching roles in

higher education. These findings offer practical strategies for institutions aiming to better support GTAs' growth and development.

Having said that, the study has several limitations. This study has a small sample size and a narrow disciplinary focus. Only two instances of engaging in peer dialogue drawn from two GTAs in Applied Linguistics are analyzed. This limited sample constrains the generalisability of the findings, as the perspectives of GTAs from other disciplines are not included. It is never the aim of this study to overgeneralize the benefits of peer dialogue, but it hopes to offer a springboard for further exploration of peer dialogue in other disciplines. Broader insights from other disciplines are encouraged to validate and expand these claims in future research. A final limitation concerns the ethical issues inherent in researchers generating and analyzing data about themselves. Drawing on autoethnographic insights, this self-reflexive approach can risk bias, where the researchers' interpretations of themselves in relation to peer dialogue are influenced by their personal experiences, potentially affecting objectivity and credibility. To minimize this disadvantage resulting from using autoethnographic data, the two authors worked together during the analyzing stage where they shared their stories, compared with each other's data coding, and determined the salient themes from the pooled data. Like the collaborative efforts in addressing ethical issues in collaborative autoethnography (Lapadat, 2017), the two authors tried their best to tackle what might stand out as ethical challenges in during this collaborative reflection. However, it is anticipated future research on GTAs' PD that deals with the self can explore more in detail how to navigate this ethical issue.

Looking forward, as one of the first few studies looking into peer dialogue in GTA PD, this study sets a foundation for further research into the specific mechanisms through which peer dialogue impacts GTAs' PD. Future studies should explore how different types of peer dialogues and institutional contexts influence their effectiveness. By addressing these areas, educational institutions can refine their support strategies to better meet the evolving needs of GTAs, ultimately enhancing their contributions to higher education.

Ethical claim

This study only used the data from 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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Exploring the ‘Invisible’ in GTAs: Reflections on Intuition and Post-Graduate Mentoring

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Abstract

Postgraduate researchers who teach (*G*raduate *T*eaching *A*ssistants) always navigate their academic spaces among several psychological factors in their routines from both inside and outside. They can often be observed attending to students, advising them on their problems and sometimes even relying on their seniors for various topics. In such situations, practitioner intuition remains a well-known and relied-upon source of GTA's decision-making skills but also an underexplored area of investigation, especially in mentoring and language teaching literature (Ushioda, 2023; Burns & Williams, 2023 & Kumar, 2024). Based on this premise, this reflective paper aims to simplify and understand the GTA's pedagogic intuition towards success and failures in PG thesis writing contexts from peer-mentoring perspectives. The initial sections of the paper, imagining GTA's as mentors and their learners as mentees, establish what GTA intuition can be thought of, how it is related to Vygotsky's ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) and the potential operations based on an intuitive decision-making model.

The latter part of the paper offers detailed practical insights about these theoretical connections through my own workings of intuition while scaffolding the PG mentees to plan, execute and write their theses. Detailed reflections of both the GTA/mentor and the mentees elicited through think-aloud and discursive puzzling measures are reported extensively. Lastly, the paper advocates for more work towards exploring GTA's intuition in mentoring scenarios (and otherwise), getting more awareness from their cognitions and becoming more intuitive practitioners.

Keywords: GTAs, Practitioner intuition, Peer mentoring, Thesis writing, Zone of Proximal Development

1. Introduction

GTAs, in their beginning teaching careers, often need help with issues like typical freshman teachers, i.e.- managing different tasks and responsibilities and relying on their training or existing knowledge(s). For example, when I started teaching post-doctoral work (and before that), I was working on my research commitments and heavily relying on my own school and college experiences while preparing for undergraduate and postgraduate classes. This reflux of being on your toes often results in those momentary decisions or suggestions we give to our students and sometimes think about them later. You may be hurrying for a class or are about to finish one and may suggest a student (in their doubt of difficulties regarding editing their essay) to divide their essays in alternate sections, edit one section at a time, and go on to another task of the day. It may help them or not, but as a reflective practitioner, you may think more about it, whether it was informed of you or what could have been done better, or just feel simply curious about whether it worked for them or not.

In such a situation, the momentary occurrences or feelings that drive these 'rushed suggestions' under time crunches can be considered GTA's intuition, which are tacit in nature. In language education contexts, researchers have subscribed to it being a 'gut feeling', 'moments of decision', 'spontaneous emergent feelings', 'funds of experience' or 'automated acts of cognitive processing' (Sampson & Pinner, 2023; Burns & Williams, 2023). In mentoring scenarios, which happens both inside and outside the classes, GTAs, being the mentors, often handle many mentees and make such decisions or give rushed suggestions. Based on this premise, this reflective paper intends to imagine a connection between GTA's intuition and Vygotsky's ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) and investigate it from theory and praxis perspectives.

2. But... How are Intuition and ZPD Related?

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), a concept originally given by Lev Vygotsky (1978), gets mostly talked about in peer mentoring/ coaching scenarios. It can be thought of as a distance between what a learner knows (without any assistance) and what they get to know (with assistance of a more knowledgeable other), as shown in

Figure 1 below. It is recommended that the teachers (GTAs in this case) should aim to be within the ZPDs of their students (mentees in this case) to encourage cognitive growth (Sage, 2022). Hence, understanding ZPD as an important zone of teaching acts and their enaction in relation with intuition can be fruitful for better learning outcomes, as reflected in Figure 2 respectively.

Figure 1 and Figure 2

A potential imagination between ZPD as a cite for intuitive decision making of GTAs/ Mentors

Figure 1

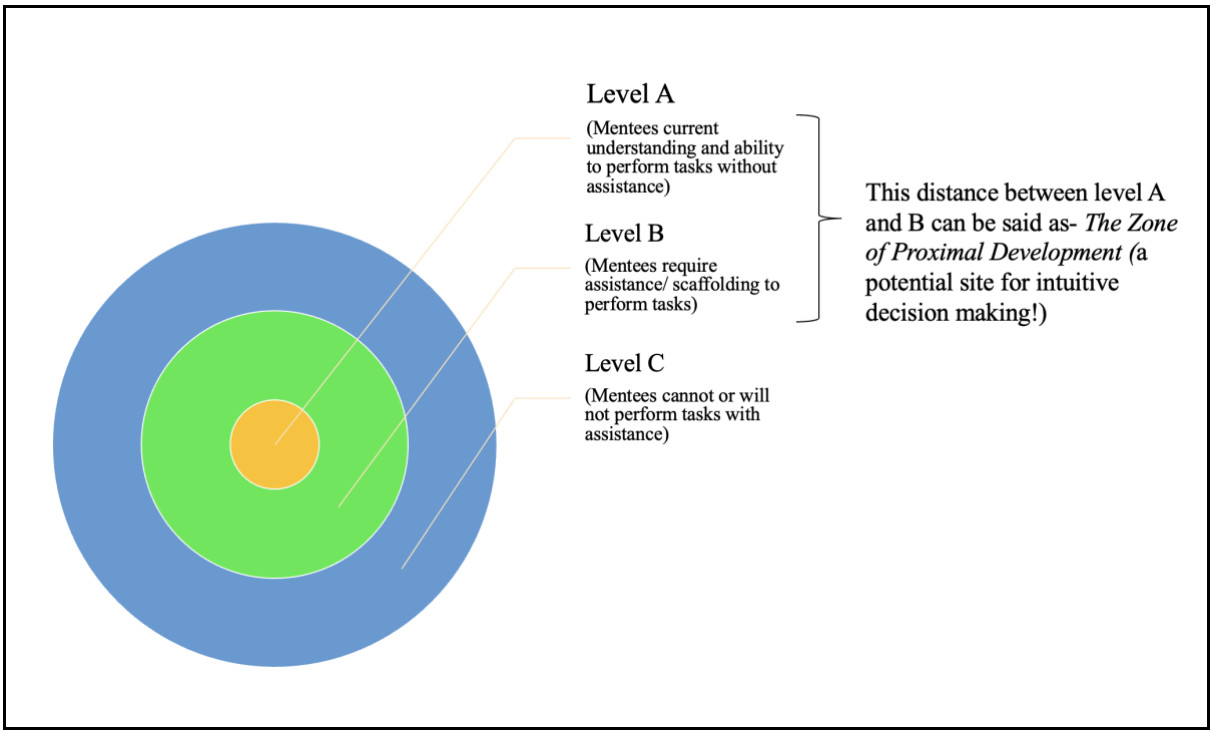
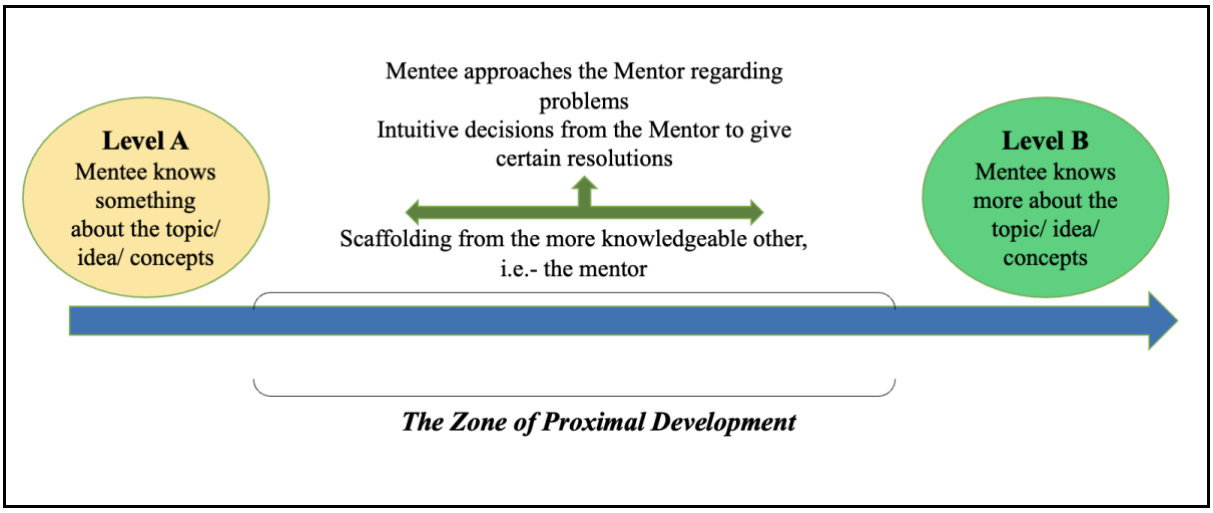


Figure 2



Source: Author

As Figure 2 demonstrates, this ZPD acts as a site for the mentors and the mentees to interact and make intuitive decisions regarding their learning and development. For example, imagine a scenario where a mentee approaches a mentor regarding problems with a literature review in thesis writing. There lies some established understanding that the mentee is bringing to the table being on Level A before asking for scaffolding or support from the mentor. Then, the mentor dealing with many tasks altogether, suggests a resolution to the mentee, which may or may not work for them. However, these decision- oriented moments of interactions force the learners to reach the Level B, where the mentees know more than earlier or possess an enhanced understanding of their problem.

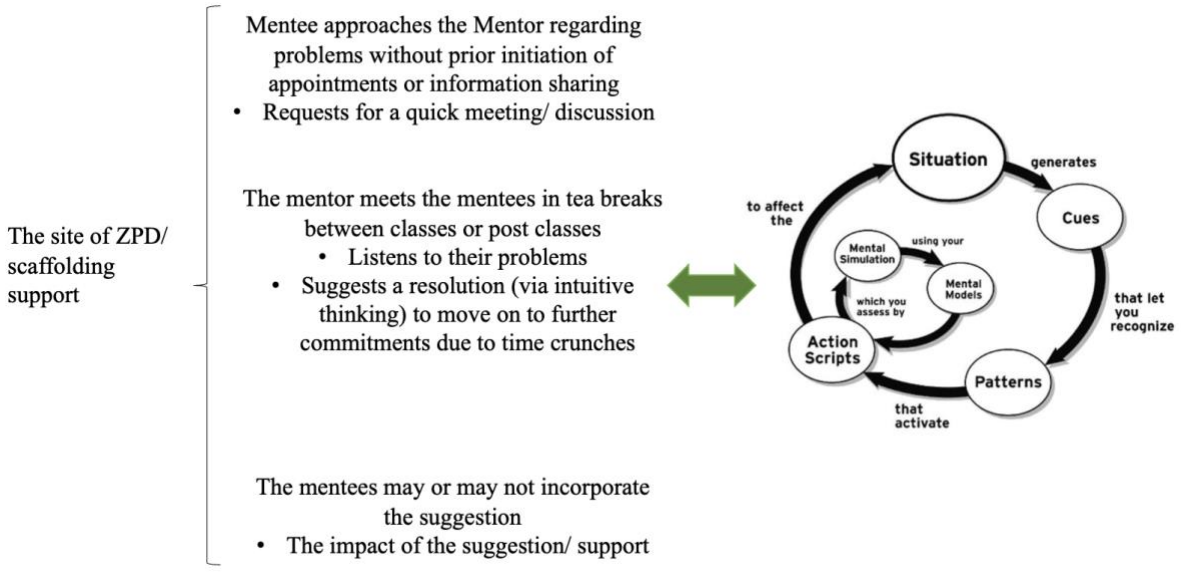
3. Okay! But... How do these Intuitive Decisions work?

One may think, to begin with, whether these interactions/ suggestions and reactions happening between mentors and mentees are even intuitive or not. The answer to that

curiosity can be that these reactions or suggestions are momentary, fast and automated, i.e.- done without much preparation, prolonged thinking and emerging from the experience of the mentor involved. It is like teachers just knowing about the mechanics of their students without too many tests based on the generalisations or patterns of years of teaching. Also, GTA, preparing for an undergraduate first class, already knows some things that will work based on previous semester's interactions with a different batch. To get a concrete picture of these cognitive operations in place, Figure 3 attempts to create an example through a situation below:

Figure 3

Operations of GTA's/ Mentors' intuitive decision making via RPD (Recognition Primed Decision Making) Model in ZPD



Note: The diagram of the Recognition Primed Decision-Making Model has been adapted from Klein (2003)

There have been several models throughout decades which have attempted to delve into untangling this thing called intuition. While we see an explicit literature of models in the fields of business studies, behavioural sciences, medical education contexts to name a few disciplines, ELT (English Language Teaching) as a discipline have not investigated it much. With fewer theoretical insights (borrowed from education studies) in the past, the discipline has much recently started to extend on them, dominantly relying on work(s) from business studies and organisational psychology. (Kumar, 2024). Drawing inspiration from this recent ‘awakening’, and with the intention of ‘building on what’s been explored’, this study subscribed to Kelin’s (2003) Recognition Primed Decision Model (RPD model). In my view, this model seems more facilitative to mark the impressions of decision-making components like action scripts, initial thoughts etc., which is also often used in language teacher cognition research.

It 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.

Impression marking also enables the researcher reflexivity to concretise intuition with already employed measures such as- discursive puzzling and think aloud tasks.

Being one of the most studied and referred models, it is often praised for its emphasis on highlighting people at work as well as their reliance on past experiences to make current decisions. It is a model of both intuition (the intuitive pattern matching part of the process also referred to as System 1 processing) and analysis (the deliberative mental stimulation part of the process, also called as System 2 processing) (Epstein, 1994; Kahneman, 2003 & Sadler Smith, 2023).

It can help us with a concrete picture or at least a beginning understanding of how the GTAs (referring to mentors for this paper) are making these ‘momentary decisions. Based on the example shown in Figure 3, the mentee fixes a quick meeting with the mentor without much prior intimation, who is expected to provide some support or resolve the issue. It reminded me of a short interaction with a mentee in one of my classes where they asked me about how they struggle with finding ‘good’ articles for their thesis surrounding tribal literature. After some talking and realising that they were researching too many aspects of a selected novel on tribal literature focusing on (e.g., the role of the women, poverty, governmental effects, the cultural significance of their art, etc.). It immediately reminded me of my experience while reading about peer mentoring during my postgraduate thesis’ preparation. I asked them to pick up their two favourite aspects of the novel anyhow and then find specific articles reflective of the same. A few days later, they reported that the suggestion worked for them. In this interaction, the following components of the RPD model can be see working in relation to GTA’s intuitive decision-making, as follows:

Table 1

An overview of different components of RPD model along with real-life examples

Components of RPD Model of Intuition	***Inferences from the given Example***
Cues let us recognize patterns:	Cue: the mentor struggling with choosing a few aspects of a topic among many Pattern: My memory tells me of having

	experienced the same and seeing many postgraduates having a similar issue
Patterns activate action scripts:	This aspect tells me what 'action' needs to be taken and reminds me of all the actions I may have taken or am aware of from different sources of learning in my experience.
Action scripts are accessed through mental models via mental stimulation:	Mental models can be thought of as engrained ways of 'how things work'. I correlate the actions with the taught or conventional ways of doing via mental imagination/ stimulation and suggest a resolution.

To reiterate, the table above represents a simpler understanding of these mechanisms in place, and it is this mechanism that the later section will utilise to build some real-life cases of GTA's intuitive decision-making.

4. Realisations from the Praxis…

As a GTA, I was amused by the work of my own intuition in several surroundings and the fact that I was not always aware of it. As an aspirational reflective practitioner, I often reflect on my day-to-day operations and practices. Still, it was only when I came across intuition related literature like the RPD model, and a book titled *The Intuitive Practitioner* by Guy Claxton that I started to take it seriously and think more of it. Hence, being inspired by the minimal literature which tells us how intuition works, especially in

language teaching contexts (see Kumar, 2024). I thought of mapping such intuitive decisions with my mentees by subscribing essentially to intuition being ‘funds of experiences’ and ‘a process in which instructors efficiently code, sort and access experientially conceived mental models for use in making instructional decisions’ (Bruke and Sadler Smith, 2006)**.** I adopted a think aloud measure (Gass and Mackey, 2024) with a discursive approach, inspired from Pinner and Hanks (2023). I sent a task prompt (attached in appendix 1) to about seven mentees (upon their gracious acceptance of my invitation) whom I have mentored informally (outside the classes, without being into a mentoring scheme) in the last one and a half years to reflect on their significant incidents of learning during our interactions. They were given a feasibility to submit their responses via writing or voice notes on WhatsApp. Further, we discussed their responses and my reactions in those situations, in online meetings, using a discursive approach (where participants question each other like puzzling and deriving insights from solving it). The table below highlights some of the significant incidents via their problems regarding thesis writing, involved issues and challenges as well as potential resolutions/ momentary advice they received along with their effects (on their cognitions) and affect (emotional regulation) on them.

Table 2

An overview of dominant problems of the mentees concerning thesis writing and GTA’s/ mentors’ resolutions of the same. (attached in appendix 2 as well)

Context of the problem	Issues and challenges	Potential resolution by the mentor	Effects and affects
Mentee 1			
Ms. A (interaction between their 2nd and 3rd semester of the degree) Research Idea/ Topic: Attempting to look at bureaucratic elements in Bengali novels.	•Finding one's voice in writing •Lack of explanations for writing background of the paper •Lack of surety of one's own interpretations of a text. •Reporting data in literary studies research	•Free writing and creation of a mind map and then using relevant citations in a balanced way. •One cannot accommodate everything, focusing on salient works can help us in writing a better background. •Reading more and more and attending to your own interpretations and then choosing the one you like. •Experiment with ways of reporting via stylistics and use diagrams if possible.	· Felt motivated towards the suggestion and implied it in other works. · Felt satisfied with it and learnt more about it on her own. · Felt more confident and enjoyed further interpretations of literary works. · Felt dissatisfied and learnt literary conventions on her own.
Mentee 2			
Mr. T (During the 4th semester of the degree) Research Idea/ Topic: trying to investigate around Maslow's need of actualisation in Hesse's works	•How to choose and apply relevant methodology •How to design a theoretical framework •Not feeling sure about the existing works' relevance.	•Thinking more about specific research questions and imagining yourself in their implementation may help. •Think of your research at different stages like a process and then report the theoretical investment involved in each case. •Read more theories aligning specifically with your research variables and then decide the best.	· Felt more curious about his topic and continued learning more about it. · Felt satisfied about the topic and motivating , did the work suggested. · Felt motivated and continued exploring more suitable works.
Mentee 3			
Ms. K (During the 4th semester of the degree) Research Idea/ Topic: viewing different stakeholders' role in tribal literature	•Justification of the finalised topic •Interpreting information from novels •Reporting the findings	· Try making a table of literature review and look for trends in terms of contexts, participants, research questions and their findings, especially focusing on their suggestions. · Use the lens of a theory, assign different information to different aspects of it. · Have a play, utilise images and diagrams, report one questions' findings at a time.	· Felt motivated and still continue to follow the advice. · Felt confused and learnt more about it later for further clarity. · Felt more excited about data reporting and continued in her work.
Mentee 4			
Ms. S (Post their degree) Research Idea/ Topic: learner washback effects and its dissonance with prescribed assessment pattern	•How do I summarise the studies for literature review effectively? •What research tools for data collection will be relevant for my research? •How do I write research questions better?	· Create a table of columns assigned to different aspects of a study and report the given information into them for better summarisation. · Imagine if you are finding your research questions and then think of the tools you'd like to choose or use for the same. · Break down your hypothesis in achievable objectives, each later being reflective of a research question.	· Felt heard and did a more detailed job of the table. · Felt more curious about her research questions and decided tools with more enjoyment. · Felt satisfied and still continue the practice.

Mentee 5			
Ms. J (During the last semester and post their degree) Research Idea/ Topic: role of multilingual materials for classroom interaction	•Selecting a relevant topic for research proposal •The reporting of selected studies for literature review lacks connectedness •Not being able to recognise the implications of the study	· Firstly, note down five topics that you really like, now choose the best three and make connections between them. Try to pick the best connection and pursue it. · Break down your summaries in small readable paragraphs and add your personal take (in relevance of your study). · Begin by imagining what all will happen if you finish the proposed study. List down the stakeholders which may or may not get most benefits of it.	· Felt satisfied and ended up following the advice partially by choosing a broader topic. · Felt eased down and still continues to first report studies in the said way. · Felt satisfied and reports of boosting imagination and creativity.
Mentee 6			
Ms. N (Post their degree) Research Idea/ Topic: something which is similar to teaching language through literature	•Finding a relevant topic for research •The relevant tools in sync with research questions •Designing of tools	· Writing down your top five topics and making connections among the top three and pursuing the best made connection. · Firstly, check the connectedness of the research questions. Further, imagine using at least one tool for one research question. Merely a few tools won't suffice for all research questions. · Learn how to design tasks and their basic elements of language, participant focus etc. may help with designing tools.	· Felt satisfied and feels more curious about her chosen topic. · Felt motivated and still practices it. · Felt challenged and audited a course on the same to learn more about task design.
Mentee 7			
Ms. M			
(During the 4th semester of their degree) Research Idea/ Topic: role of military films and different stakeholders involved	•Bringing neutrality in stances •Reporting the chosen studies •Ensuring connectedness among different components of a thesis	· Note down both the favourable and unfavourable instances from the films and then talk about both of them critically, In relation to your topic. · Make a table for the studies, dedicating each column to the different aspects of the study. · Think of it as if you are telling a story, you decide the opening scene, then tell why it is important to listen to, and further what all it entails, highlighting its merits and demerits at the end.	· Felt eased down in the paralysis of information and now evaluates information before she chooses to utilise. · Felt satisfied and continued adopting this practice. · Felt motivated and started to personalise her academic work.

To concretely understand some of these experiences about the ZPD and the RPD model, let us discuss how they spanned out. We would have to keep the information supplied in Figure 3 (*Operations of GTA's/ Mentors' intuitive decision making via RPD Model in ZPD)* and Table 1 (*An overview of different components of RPD model along with real-life examples) in* mind while going through these reflections.

4.1 Reflection 1

Mentee Ms. A. approached me over a tea break in distress over her previous assignment for an English literature course. With her first cup of tea, she asks- How do I find my voice in the assignments? The fact that she was reflective of whatever she had written, and the expected outcomes assured me that she was already at Level A of knowing how to frame arguments and cite relevant things. My reaction in the form of a suggestion reminded me of a typical 'pattern' of postgraduate students facing the same issue when I was pursuing my degree and asking the professors for support. It reminded me of a similar situation where I struggled with one of my reports, getting feedback of 'too many citations' and needing more individuality. The triggered action scripts were my own dealing with it through a mind map and a colleague's way of re-reading and editing your work till you find the balance. My mental models reminded me of academic conventions, which enabled me to give her the following advice- begin by writing whatever you have understood first. If needed, make a mind map of your proposed assignment. Then, reread and rewrite each section carefully by playing with it via proverbs you know or any other mechanics of giving a film's example, etc. Then decorate it with a few citations, wherever needed, to make it sound academic. It would ensure a good balance between you and the expected academic-ness. She later reported that the advice worked in her favour and gave her a better understanding of her own writing mechanisms as well as the voice of the other authors (taking her to Level B).

4.2 Reflection 2

In another incident, Mentee Ms. S approached me to post one of my classes, asking if I could find the relevant studies for my thesis proposal but failing to summarise them effectively. It all sounds so repetitive. Similarly, her being at Level A taught me about her ability to summarise and the need for scaffolding. The recognising pattern element in my cognition came to the rescue of one of our professors, telling me in an informal conversation that most of the thesis literature lacks connectivity and is a typical writing issue for students. The action script aspects triggered the memory of my class struggling with it, and when an academic writing professor demonstrated how we could break down summaries and acknowledge them to connect them. The mental models in my mental stimulation told me- But she first has to organise these summaries well to be able to make connections then. Such an assessment led me to talk to her about a tabular summary technique I used during my thesis. I suggested she put all her information about different studies in a tabular manner, dedicating each column to different standard components of a study, i.e., the title of it, the context it's been done, research questions, concerned tools for collecting and analysing data, the findings and suggestions, and then summarise them. This ensures you do not miss crucial details in your reporting and then make your summaries dialogic by adding your take on them at the end of each one of them, so you see trends. The advice, too, worked for this mentee, enabling them to see summaries with much more intricacy (bringing them to Level B).

4.3 Reflection 3

Much recently, Mentee Ms J, during a brief meeting at a conference, reported how she is struggling with finding relevant studies around multilingual materials and classroom interaction for her tentative thesis work. She told me about a few works she had read (suggesting her Level A awareness). Again, the pattern recognition reminded me of this as a trend in thesis writing issues and challenges. Further, it triggered a memory of my supervisor advising me to notice the presence of concerned variables while finalising any study for my thesis work. The action scripts hinted at me being able to give the

same advice. Still, the mental models enabled the pedagogic realisations of instead first suggesting she read more about classroom interaction and then picking up one aspect of it. Hence, I meant to her that many things can come under the term classroom interaction, such as teacher talk, learner participation, learner and teacher cognition, etc. More reading will help you define your variables better and make it easier to find work on them. Further, she conveyed how this advice worked with her in defining research variables better and their connection (bringing her to Level 2). However, she still chose to stick to the broader variable of classroom interaction for her work.

4.4 Reflection 4

Another incident worth sharing to continue these reflections is of Mentee Ms. K and Mentee Mr. T, where they asked me to enable them to find relevant research topics based on their preferred themes. They both reported how they have been seeing and reading about assessment and self-actualisation, but it seems endless. It suggests they should be on level A and know how to find and read research works. Another pattern is where we mostly dissociate our likings in topics for the sake of what may look good and expected as students. The action scripts called for more effort towards finding what they really liked, and my mental models suggested that I advise them to make a mind map of these things and write the top five things they like about them.

Further, I advised them to eliminate two, keep their top three choices, draw connections among them without worrying about the theoretical aspects, and choose one connection they liked most. It did not initially work very well with them since they thought their personal insights were not academic. However, sticking to them and finding work around them made this decision successful (enabling them to have level B awareness).

5. Getting it all Together with Concluding Thoughts

This reflection paper has attempted to sail on a boat to find treasures of GTA’s cognitions, i.e.- their intuitions in this case, through an example of one GTA mentoring

seven mentees with their thesis writing problems. It did not only try to showcase a potential theoretical link with a beginning understanding between GTA's intuitive decision making and ZPD but also tried to reflect the same in mentoring experiences. The mentoring incidents may vary among different contexts, but it feels hopeful there would be some common patterns in the future studies on GTAs intuition. It is also to remind that the intuitions can be wrong or less relevant at times and the GTAs may feel that it always will help them to make quick and important decisions about a familiar situation (Epstein, 2010; Gilpin & Gibbon, 2000). While being useful in these ways, the GTAs may also feel cognitive biases in their decisions or think of their habitual reactions as their intuitive understanding. They may also be prone to only suggesting/ advising what worked for them and not being open to learning through reflection on situations and the knowledge surrounding them. They may not simply be able to reflect as well based on the stressful work commitments, lack of motivation and support for themselves as well.

To deal with such scenarios and become intuitive practitioners the GTAs can: a) accept that their intuitions may not always work, b) appreciate their existing knowledge and experiences and feel more open to learning, c) can refer to writing reflective journals or even reflect on different parts of their lesson plans and delivery in their own capacities, d) have regular peer meets with their mentees to realise what is working and what is not, and, e) always seek out help through discussions with their peers, seniors and professors regarding their difficulties. These may seem to be some easy 'doable' steps, but these are what we struggle to keep up with amidst managing different social, psychological factors operating around us.

The implications of such investments will not only enable the GTA's to become reflective practitioners or ensure better learning outcomes but will also enable them to find enhanced motivation for what they do and build on it all. On the other hand, the mechanisms of students' writing and their apprehensions will also inform them the

intricacies of classroom teaching, building a less hierarchical two-ways learning environment, where **T**ogether **E**veryone **A**chieves **M**ore. To realise this, the GTAs will also need to engage in reflexivity, being careful towards the ethical considerations of their situations by responding sensitively (Ushioda, 2023).

While many more incidents may provide us with more insights about GTA's intuition and its effects on the mentees/ students, I would like to advocate for more interest among such reflective means to grow. One may doubt the feasibility of think-aloud and the RPD model; the lack of work towards the same in language teaching contexts shall inspire us to begin from somewhere. The very site of a GTA operating with some psychological factors at their work (personal life, stress, own deadlines, student motivation and whatnot) indicates endless possibilities of worthwhile research into their intuitions. As a reminder, while these (models and techniques) have been utilised by education psychologists and business and medical experts, we shall take these experimentations further, being more aware of our own (intuitive) practices. I do not suggest that reflecting on intuitions and intuitive decisions will always bring success stories, but I can ensure that failures are worth exploring- for more reasons than we are aware of.

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Navigating pedagogical dilemmas in interdisciplinary education: a reflective practice perspective

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Abstract

Interdisciplinary education is increasingly recognized as essential in higher education for addressing complex real-world issues. Although this paradigm shift began in the 20th century, challenges in interdisciplinary pedagogy persist, including classroom preparation, delivery, assessment, and feedback. One significant challenge is disciplinary distance, the disparities between disciplines that hinder effective interdisciplinary teaching and learning. Additionally, the varying degrees of disciplinarity—from intradisciplinary to transdisciplinary—complicate this landscape. Despite interdisciplinary pedagogy's potential to enhance critical thinking and problem-solving, it presents numerous dilemmas. As a graduate teaching assistant, I have faced several such dilemmas. This reflection discusses these interdisciplinary dilemmas and explores epistemological and pedagogical practices to navigate them. Leveraging my experience as a PhD researcher and educator, I examine how teachers with multidisciplinary backgrounds can navigate the complexities of interdisciplinary education.

Keywords:

pedagogy, interdisciplinary, dilemma, reflection, education

Background:

Disciplinary dilemmas in education

In universities across the globe, a shift away from mono-disciplinary and towards multi-, cross-, inter-, and transdisciplinary education has been observed. This shift is driven by the belief that addressing complex societal issues requires more than a single disciplinary perspective (Vereijken et al., 2023). In today's professional environment, employees are adept at leveraging interdisciplinary knowledge to tackle challenges and convey their discoveries effectively, thus, schools should prepare students for such environments (Warr & West, 2020). Practical arguments for interdisciplinarity highlight that real-world problems are not confined to academic disciplines and require diverse perspectives (Stember, 1991). However, the specialization and segregation of academic disciplines over time have led to siloed academic structures, making true interdisciplinary studies difficult. To compound the problem, the terms multi-, inter-, cross-, and transdisciplinary are often used interchangeably and without a clear understanding of their distinctions (Hollmén, 2015). Furthermore, there is a lack of clarity surrounding the term interdisciplinary education, with some critics arguing that it has become too vague and that universities' commitment to it is almost meaningless (Wasserstrom, 2006).

Another primary challenge of interdisciplinary education is effectively bridging the gap between disciplines to generate novel insights and understanding (Hollmén, 2015). Additionally, it is crucial to consider the differing signature pedagogies across disciplines. How can we achieve a balance in light of these differences? Hence, this is exacerbated by the challenge of the lack of pedagogical training for university teachers, which can hinder the development of cross-disciplinary teamwork and education (Hollmén, 2015). Despite these challenges, interdisciplinary education is considered a more productive approach to disciplinary studies, as Stember (1991) noted, hence the focus of this critical reflection. However, before engaging in the critical reflection, it is crucial to establish clear definitions for the respective disciplines.

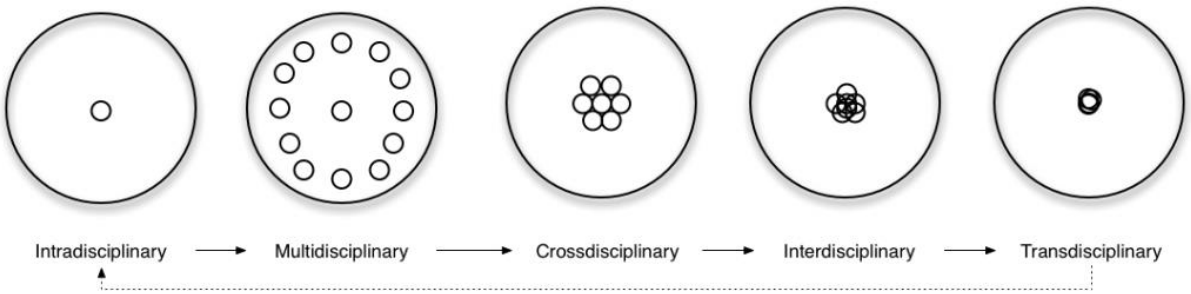
Defining disciplinarities

Disciplines are the basic units in the knowledge structure that have been "historically delineated by departmentalization. Within each discipline, "there are rational, accidental, and arbitrary factors responsible for the peculiar combination of subject matter, techniques of investigation, orienting thought models, principles of analysis, methods of explanation, and aesthetic standards" (Miller, 1982 in Miller, 2020). In this critical reflection, I use the term 'disciplinarities' to describe the whole spectrum of multi-, cross-, inter-, and transdisciplinary. The subsequent section delves into typologies of disciplinarities to lay a foundation before the critical reflection, and to clarify the dilemma of using the disciplinary terms carelessly and interchangeably.

A typology of disciplinarities

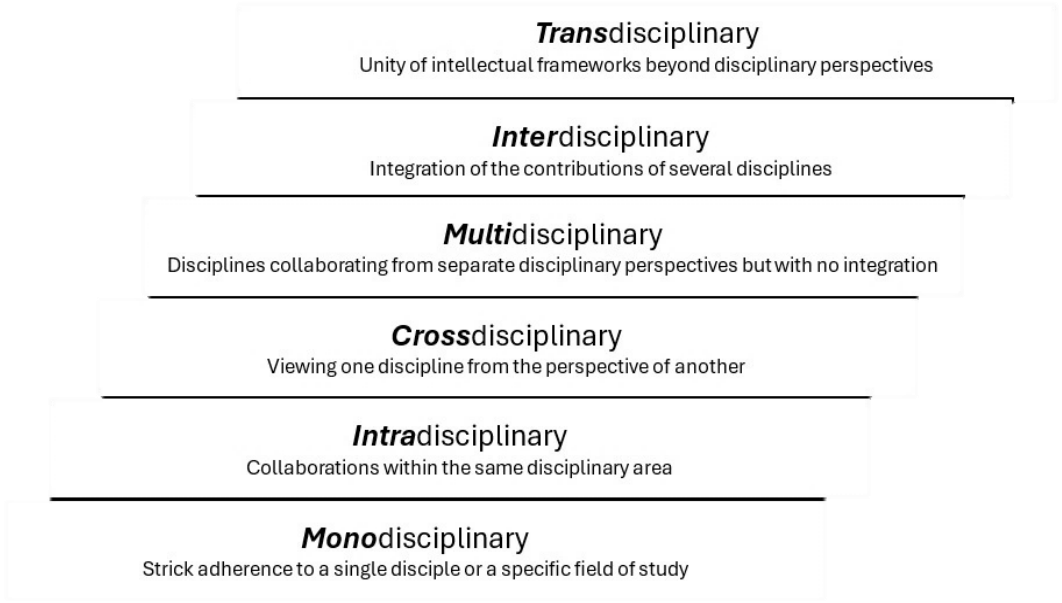
Marilyn Stember's paper from 1991 described a five-step typology for 'enterprises within and across disciplines' including intra-, cross-, multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary. This hierarchical structure runs from intradisciplinary to transdisciplinary, with each step requiring 'increasing integration and modification of the disciplinary contribution' (Stember, 1991, p.5), as shown in Figure 1. In her paper, Stember argues that many people believe they work interdisciplinary, while in fact, it is more common to work multidisciplinary.

Figure 1: The interdisciplinary scale (Source: Marilyn Stember, 1991)



Drawing from September 1991, Figure 2 shows an adapted ladder of disciplinarities with the addition of monodisciplinary, which entails strict adherence to one specific discipline. The ladder shows that the higher up you go, the more complex the disciplinarities become.

Figure 2: Ladder of disciplinarities (Source: Author, adapted from Stember, 1991)



Each of these disciplinarities has been expounded in Table 1.

Table 1: Defining disciplinarities (Source: Author)

Disciplinarity	Explanation and Implications
Monodisciplinary	This approach involves strict adherence to one specific field of study. It emphasizes using methods, theories, and knowledge from a single discipline to address problems or conduct research (Chen & Luetz, 2020).
Intradisciplinary	This approach also focuses on a single discipline but involves collaboration within that discipline (Stember, 1991). For instance, various branches or areas of expertise within a single field collaborating on a specific research endeavour (Moș, & Crașovan, 2015). https://rse.uvt.ro/pdf/2015/NR1/tot1_2015.8.pdf
Crossdisciplinary	Cross-disciplinary approaches involve looking at one discipline from the perspective of another (Stember, 1991). They entail real interaction across traditional disciplines, involving extensive communication. Therefore, combining, synthesizing, or integrating concepts and/or methods can vary considerably (Miller, 2020).
Multidisciplinary	Multidisciplinary methods juxtapose parts of various disciplines to better understand a common theme or problem (Klaassen, 2018; Miller, 2020; Stember, 1991). However, no systematic effort is made to integrate these disciplines, which maintains the identity and practices of each field (Miller, 2020).

Interdisciplinary	Interdisciplinarity applies the epistemological methods of one discipline within another, leveraging multiple perspectives for comprehensive understanding. Unlike multidisciplinarity, it integrates disciplines to address problems single approaches cannot resolve effectively (Miller, 2020). This flexibility enhances collaboration, creativity, and communication skills
Transdisciplinarity	Transdisciplinarity, a meta-level approach to interdisciplinarity; prompts students to tackle real-world problems through various disciplines, revealing new knowledge. Transdisciplinarity extends the scope of mono-, multi-, and interdisciplinary approaches to include broader societal involvement (government, industry, citizens, and civil society) (Vereijken et al., 2023). Characterized by complex stakeholder involvement, transdisciplinarity spans from expert knowledge to that of laypeople (Klaassen, 2018). This lens is essential for educators and students to engage beyond traditional academic boundaries (Miller, 2020; Radakovic et al., 2022).

Personal reflections

As a postgraduate researcher with a different disciplinary background, I struggled to imagine how to effectively deliver an inter/transdisciplinary module. It was a research project module aimed to strengthen students' research skills through a combination of assessed online activities, taught workshops, an assessed reflective journal on the research process, and a mini-group research project. The module was focused on sustainable transport. In my teaching, one of the most challenging dilemmas was to

balance the disciplinary perspectives, considering the diversity among students in my classes. However, the diversity of students also meant that there was more to be offered by each one of them. In this vein, collaborative activities among the students worked best to promote peer learning. I could allow them to discuss in pairs, trios, or groups, and those who wish to speak to the class share what they have discussed were allowed to do so. Smaller groups, especially pairs, worked very well to get everyone engaged in the discussions, as Crisianita and Mandasari (2022) recommend. In doing this, I also tried other strategies to make sure that students were not grouped in the same usual groups as friends. In as much as students who already know each other are freer to have a discussion, I found that varying their groups every time helped them to widen their interactive networks and benefit differently from each other each time. This approach resonates with the agentic dimension of the student-centered education framework by Starkey (2019), which entails giving students a choice, seeing them as resources or experts in their own right.

The interdisciplinary nature of the module meant that students were also from various disciplines ranging from economics, health, education, sociology, and business studies among others. Hence this approach helped them to know each other more as I could observe random introductions among themselves as I was moving around the class. This helped to balance the level of understanding and allow the students to move at the same pace. Nevertheless, the specific methods of delivery largely depended on the content to be delivered for that specific day, hence the need for flexibility. For instance, where students needed to practice using Excel, they had to work independently; where they needed to have critical reflections, students had to be grouped, and they could even have debates to stimulate critical thinking. This also was helpful in line with the Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which primarily focuses on what, why, and how students learn. Similarly, implementation techniques like team-based and inquiry-based learning, along with practical assessment, are also useful as they methods enhance group learning, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication skills in interdisciplinary education. Nonetheless, like any other education, even with these techniques, there were always some students who dominated discussions all the time

while some were consistently silent. This challenge cannot uniquely be attributed to interdisciplinary education, but many factors including different personalities come into play.

Still on teaching and supporting learning, I was challenged in relation to the research-teaching nexus, signature pedagogies and the epistemologies of interdisciplinary education (Hollmén, 2015), and their influence on practice. For instance, drawing from the research-teaching nexus by Healey (2005), I found that research-oriented teaching, research-based teaching, and research-tutored were more practical in my interdisciplinary teaching than researcher-led teaching. Specifically, for the module I was handling, the goal was to help students learn about the research process so that they could carry out their own research. Hence, students learned through inquiry-based activities because, in one of the summative assessments, they were required to carry out a group research project as researchers under the supervision of PGRs (postgraduate researchers) and staff. This is supported by literature; for instance, Corbacho et al. (2021) and Klaassen (2018) highlight that teaching strategies for interdisciplinary pedagogy include teamwork, problem-based learning (PBL), and activities to foster academic motivation and working with diverse perspectives. Teamwork was found to be a central aspect of interdisciplinary experience, positively influenced by group diversity and the development of a learning community. Often, teamwork activities support knowledge integration while enhancing the development of collaborative and problem-solving skills (Lyall et al., 2015).

Most importantly, interdisciplinary education also concerns assessment and feedback. Assessments, in this case, include both formative and summative. To begin with, formative assessments, as well as screening and initial assessment at the beginning of every lesson before I share learning outcomes, helped to check the student's level of knowledge and assess lower-order thinking skills in the students, like remembering and understanding (Bloom’s Taxonomy). Nevertheless, these assessment methods have a potential downside. They may lead to inaccurate evaluations of knowledge levels for students who are introverted or less outspoken. Referring further to Bloom’s Taxonomy,

I also found that providing students with formative assessments allows them to engage in higher-order learning by analysing and applying concepts. Further reference to Bloom's taxonomy, with the group research, project the students were doing; they were more exposed to higher-order thinking skills beyond applying and analysing to evaluating and creating (Chandio et al., 2021). They successfully conducted research projects in their groups by applying what they learned in class.

Finally, summative assessment and reflective writing worked best as they allow for capturing the individual's experience and a deeper understanding of the value students attributed to the interdisciplinary course since students are free to write on any aspect of the course (Corbacho et al., 2021). Nevertheless, marking reflective writing assessments becomes a challenge because you are not looking at the correct answer, rather the focus is on the uniqueness and quality of each person's reflection, which introduces some subjectivity. Regardless, giving students assessments that require them to practice what they have learned is beneficial for interdisciplinary education. As the literature highlights, extant knowledge about interdisciplinary learning indicates that the learning benefits are greater when students can do interdisciplinary work, not just learn about it (Smith et al., 2024). In this case, students are active agents using a free space, promoting their agency.

Conclusions

To conclude, mono-, multi-, cross-, and interdisciplinary still fall short as solutions to complex challenges; hence some authors have argued that transdisciplinary is desirable (McGregor & Volckmann, 2013). Transdisciplinary pedagogy helps students to learn to codesign, co-disseminate, and cocreate transdisciplinary knowledge, which emerges from the iterative interactions between disciplines and the rest of the world (McGregor & Volckmann, 2013). Nonetheless, the relevance of a discipline highly depends on the problem intended to be addressed. Similarly, Vereijken et al. (2023) argue that multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary approaches each have their own value for teaching, learning, and science and society; hence, choices should be tailor-made or outcome-

oriented. Therefore, having discussed disciplinarity dilemmas, this reflection asks whether effective multi-, cross-, inter-, and transdisciplinary education calls for different epistemological and pedagogical approaches, which could be considered for further studies. Moreover, empirical research on the best practices for assessing interdisciplinary learning outcomes is needed to guide GTAs and institutions in refining their assessment strategies.

Practical implications

The reflections in this piece have significant implications for GTAs and provide important lessons for their practice. Firstly, interdisciplinary education requires shifting from traditional, discipline-specific methods to more adaptable pedagogical strategies to address disciplinary distance, integrate multiple perspectives, enrich the learning experience, and cater to diverse student needs and backgrounds. Hence GTAs should centre their teaching on complex, real-world issues that require knowledge from various disciplines. This makes learning more relevant and engaging. Secondly, GTAs should invest in personal and professional development to enhance their interdisciplinary competencies, focusing on designing and delivering courses that bridge disciplinary gaps, incorporating research-based learning, and implementing suitable signature pedagogies.

Thirdly, assessment practices in interdisciplinary education face unique challenges, requiring formative and summative assessments that emphasize higher-order thinking skills and reflective writing with different grading rubrics. Therefore, GTAs should develop assessment frameworks aligned with interdisciplinary learning goals. Lastly, different disciplinarities suggest a deeper epistemological shift in knowledge framing and teaching, requiring GTAs to reconsider disciplinary boundaries and promote an integrative approach where new knowledge transcends academic silos. Thus, GTAs should introduce students to research methods and tools from various disciplines (such as qualitative analysis and statistical methods) and show how they complement one another. In doing so, GTAs encourage multiple perspectives and **f**acilitate discussions

where students can compare disciplinary approaches. Through embracing flexibility, collaboration, and continuous learning, GTAs can better prepare students to tackle complex, real-world problems that transcend traditional academic boundaries.

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Growing our own: enabling PGR teachers to flourish in authentic ecosystems

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Sara Hattersley is a colleague in University of Warwick's Academic Development Centre, a cross-faculty department leading initiatives and professional development programmes in learning and teaching, supporting the Education and Student Experience Strategy. Sara leads ADC's provision for postgraduate researchers who teach, primarily through the *Academic and Professional Pathway for PGR teachers* (APP PGR), accredited by Advance HE, where hundreds of Warwick PGRs have gained Associate Fellowship status. Sara mentors and assesses colleagues with a range of teaching experiences but her passion is in growing the confidence and self-efficacy of early career colleagues. She is co-founder of the Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community, a cross-institutional community of practice recently recognised by Advance HE in the CATE awards. Sara is an advocate of the PGR teacher voice on a number of Warwick committees, and nationally Sara co-leads the GTA Developer Network, which represents over 50 HEIs and provides connection for those in educational development or faculty roles who work closely with PGR teachers. Although teaching-focussed, Sara's research interests centre around the self-efficacy and identify of early career teachers, compassionate pedagogy, inclusion, persistence and blended learning, and PGR communities of practice. She is currently a co-mentor on an international research project, connecting PGR writing groups between Warwick (UK) and Monash (Australia).

Abstract

Postgraduate researchers who teach (PGR teachers), or Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) play a valuable role in global Higher Education, being a central part of the teaching workforce. PGR teachers are noted, amongst other things, for their ability to relate closely to students, bringing research-informed perspectives and providing effective and nuanced support to students in a massified HE sector. However, in spite of their longstanding presence, they are ubiquitously described as being in a 'liminal space' in the literature, and as early career colleagues, often have less professional experience and reduced agency to make pedagogical decisions, all whilst experiencing precarity and other challenges relating to occupying an impermanent role.

Professional development opportunities for PGR teachers are reasonably widespread but do they enable the best way for PGR teachers to grow and thrive in their teaching work? This Afterword, drawing on the contributions of authors in Issue 4 of the JPPP, considers how PGR teachers are deploying the outcomes of professional learning, and where the 'best space' might be for them to develop and evolve as practitioners. It reflects on the structure and rationale established in the Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community and argues for the support and initiation of similar PGR communities of practice across the sector, as being optimal spaces for PGR teachers to thrive, learn and grow with peers.

Building a narrative for PGR teacher place and contribution

Once again, I am delighted to be invited by the editors of the JPPP to write the Afterword for Issue 4: it's becoming a bit of a habit. It is kind to have acknowledgement in the Editorial for the role I have played in Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community (WPTC) and the production of the journal but I am keen to say that this is very minimal: the JPPP process is managed successfully by the editorial team of Warwick PGRs, with guidance from the Teacher Mentor: this year Youn Affejee. This is essential to me: that ownership of this space is preserved as PGR-centred.

My (now four year) career as the JPPP bookend began in 2021 as I reflected on the crucial position taken up by Warwick PGRs during the pandemic contingency work which really shone a light on the unique space these colleagues can occupy, especially in supporting positive relationships with students, as **Lillie et al** attest in this issue. The following year, in the era of post-pandemic uncertainty, I called for a reimagining of PGR teacher identity: something that would elevate them (once and for all?!) beyond the 'donkey in the department' (Park and Ramos, 2022). Last year the editors chose to focus on equality, diversity and inclusion: a double-edged sword in my reflections. PGR teachers' own professional and personal liminality, deepened and nuanced by identities such as race, gender, class and disability, presents challenges for these colleagues which we must recognise. But also, the PGR teacher role has huge potential in helping us effectively move towards a more inclusive HE: they have strengths we should harness. Which brings me neatly to this year's issue, with a wide-ranging focus on ***'Re/De-constructing the teaching space, piece by piece*.'** I love this title: it speaks of both care and radicalism: building up strategies and practices that make a difference but also questioning received wisdom and trying something new. This dual lens shines through in the papers in this issue: it's a celebration of the tangible differences PGR teachers can make, when they have the freedom to act.

So how do we best afford to our PGRs the opportunity to find agency and self-direction in their teaching work? Much literature and dialogue focuses on how PGR teachers 'fit in' or (mainly) how they 'don't'. I am wondering if the answer therefore lies somewhere else.

How beneficial is CPD to the PGR teacher experience?

One theme of this year's JPPP Issue was continuous professional development (CPD): truly my business, as an academic developer. Naturally, I am an advocate of learning opportunities for PGR teachers: programmes, workshops, forums, specific skills training and the chance to gain a qualification or professional recognition. I am also delighted to see how such activities have been positively received by PGRs in this issue. However, as Blair asserts very recently (2024) "*continuing professional development for staff does not always reflect the creative and developmental approaches that they aspire to."* Although this blog piece focuses on staff mobility and appraisal processes (often the preserve of more senior, permanently employed colleagues, anyway) it calls for a shift away from what can be a 'tick box', performative approach to development. Often I see PGR teacher CPD badged as 'training' conflating it perhaps with other mandatory staff training activities (e.g. information and data security training: recognising its importance, of course!) which imply a 'one-off' activity and often (literally!) a box to tick. Blair goes on to call for *"a stronger focus in (staff) discussions on the importance of collaboration within and across universities and different industry sectors."* I agree. Elsewhere in the literature, we find evidence that PGR self-efficacy and confidence in teaching reduces after formal CPD has ended (Chiu and Corrigan, 2018; Peng et al, 2022): that back in departments, classrooms and lab spaces, beyond the comforts of a managed CPD environment, PGR teachers could start to lose their way. I certainly try to ensure that my own CPD programme for PGRs provides a safe, nurturing, challenging but accessible space and I have evidence that it does: in recent evaluation feedback one student commented that they did not want the programme to end. It could be easy to be flattered by such comments perhaps, but maybe there's a danger in not preparing PGR colleagues adequately for the 'afterwards': out there in the wilds of their own teaching context. Peng et al particularly note a decline in GTA's ability to engage students in classroom settings, and so the suggestion by **Lillie et al** that perhaps CPD should also focus on helping our PGRs manage connections with students is a convincing one.

Reflecting on the papers in this issue, it is clear that CPD in and of itself is not what matters: more important is the application of it, as a catalyst for thinking and acting. For **Thomas**-**Pickles** microteaching formed one part of a wider understanding of the value of peer feedback; for **Li** (Zhuo and Li), studying intersectionality provided a language for making sense of positionality and power in the department; for **Çayır** translating active and inclusive learning techniques directly into classroom practice supported diversity. Harnessing the power of reflection, and synthesising theory and practice, has enabled **Kamanga, Dar** and **Kumar** to dwell on relational aspects of their work with students, including belonging, problem-solving and making sense of the discipline. But something else I noticed was the power of being an effective and active peer: equitable participation alongside students **(Hanany)**; developing other GTAs with specialist teaching strategies (**Goel**) and recognising patterns and similarities between own experiences, and that of students (several authors). The influence of PGR teacher peers manifests itself in yet another way, where more than one author in this issue has cited previous JPPP PGR contributors, taking narratives forward in their own work. JPPP articles are on the reading list for my professional learning programme, the *APP PGR*, introducing new teachers to the perspectives of their more established peers, and ensuring that PGR published pedagogies have a seat at the table of CPD. And as such it creates an eco-system: a way of growing the dialogue authentically within and for the community. In a similar way, when considering the transition through monthly, departmental peer dialogue meetings, **Zhuo** (Zhuo and Li) reflects, *"as I grew more experienced, I saw myself transforming from an advice seeker to an advice giver in these peer dialogues"* showing how peer relationships have the potential to evolve a professional identity, something we have seen through Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community (WPTC). No 'course' or 'training' has facilitated that, but rather, an environment created where PGRs are empowered to work together and grow in a space they own.

PGR communities of practice: how we've done it at Warwick

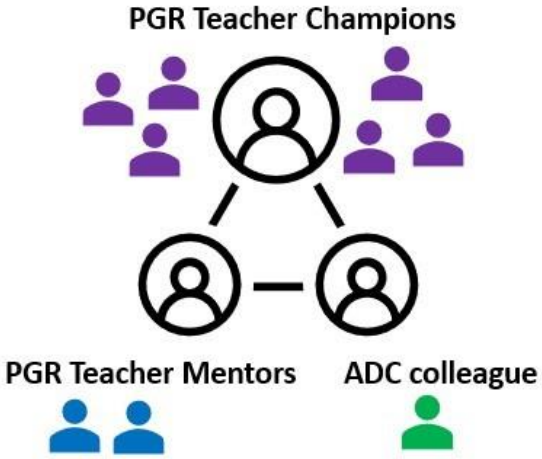
This year Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community won the Advance HE Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence (CATE). I'm not including this to brag (!) but I am incredibly proud of the PGR teachers in this community of practice who built something so special that it was worthy of the recognition. WPTC occupies a space, beyond formal training programmes, for mentorship, and for professional and interpersonal interactions, which Nasser-Abu Alhija and Fresko consider essential to GTA development (2020). Furthermore, such communities of practice have been recommended in a recent Advance HE report to *"explore wider educator/educational opportunities for developing postgraduate researchers as GTAs"* (Floyd and Hack, 2021, p. 51).

One of the benefits of the CATE process is the invitation to consider both what makes collaboration work and what the effects of that are, something which representatives from across the first three years of WPTC**, Pierre Botcherby, Imogen Knox** and **Youn Affejee** have helped me to reflect on this year (1). I'd like to share a little of what we think makes WPTC work. Firstly, it occupies a space which is unusual in Higher Education: whilst there is discussion about discipline-specific GTA peer mechanisms (we often have such peer networks in our departments), and the value of cross-disciplinary peer learning and mentorship in Graduate education more broadly (Lorenzetti et al, 2020), there is little in the literature or wider field pointing to cross-institutional PGR teacher spaces which seek to bring support, advocacy, recognition and co-creation. Secondly, WPTC embodies, by necessity, a sustained, continuous and inclusive collaborative approach as a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) where PGRs collectively develop the work allowing it to move in a meaningful direction, with an authentic voice and a vested interest in the community and its needs. This legitimacy is maintained through devolved and shared leadership within the core team between PGR Teacher Champions (who are new to role within the initiative); PGR Teacher Mentors (from the previous year, who support these peers) and me, someone here to support both groups (figure 1).

There is a strong rationale for our recognisable yet adaptive structure, which embodies collective effort, shared mission and support, and responsiveness to the changing

conditions. Team roles are interconnected. Champions drive the work, collectively negotiating priorities for the year. In the case of the journal, it means organising the call for papers, managing submissions, editing etc. Mentors bring a practical knowledge of the previous work, which might be timescales for the production of the journal, for example, but perhaps, more valuably, a tacit sense of the current climate, issues arising and lessons learned from their own experiences in the previous year (e.g. who is a key contact at Warwick, to support the journal). A culture of peer mentoring is thus enacted, facilitated through our MS Teams space and in regular meetings between Champions and Mentors. Tripartite connections are also maintained, so that the whole team (all the PGRs and myself) can share updates and progress. WPTC is personified by a relational pedagogy, as described by Bovill (2022): a democratic space built on positive relationships which is indispensable for the progression of the work (we work hard, but we also have fun!)

Not only that, but the ecosystem of WPTC also brings developmental and reciprocal benefits to individuals who work in and transition between the roles (figure 2):



"Transitioning to a Mentor role has enabled me to reflect more deeply on my experiences as Champion. I received valuable feedback on past WPTC activities from the perspectives of incoming Champions. Mentoring and passing on advice is crucial to challenging the gatekeeping so common in Higher Education. Subsequently I have drawn on this experience to mentor Masters students in my own department." (PGR Mentor, Year 3)

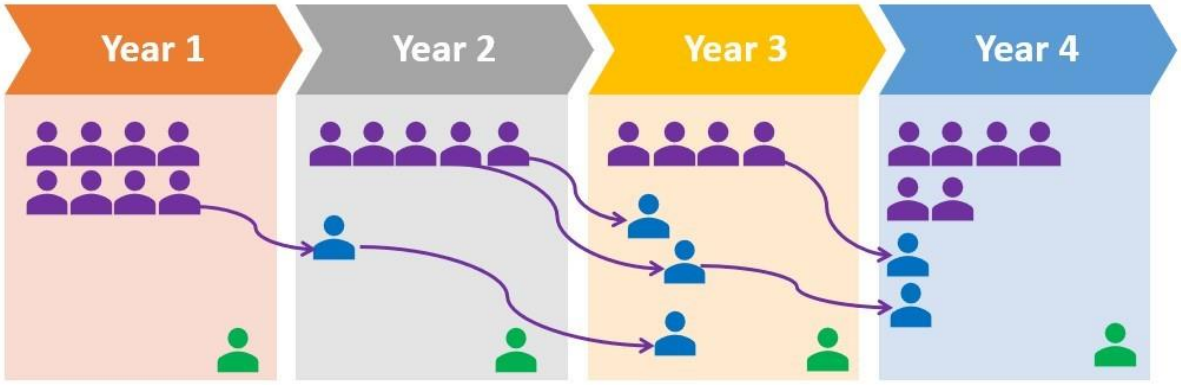


Fig 1: WPTC members **Fig 2: Transition of Champions to Mentors**

WPTC members have the opportunity to explore areas of individual interest: to experience choice and agency in their work. For example, this year two of the PGR Champions ran a successful workshop for PGRs on *Developing Interactional Competence in Teaching*, drawing on their disciplinary specialism. Skills developed in WPTC can support future PGR careers too:

"I gained an appreciation of the 'other side' of academic publishing, which was helpful for me when preparing my own manuscripts for submission and in reviewing publications! This editorial role has been a valuable addition to my CV, as editorial positions for ECRs can be few and far between." (Teacher Champion, Year 2)

WPTC is made up of PGRs from across the Faculties. After nearly a decade running professional development programmes for PGRs at Warwick, I know that one of the huge benefits is the ability to engage with others from across the University, enabling PGRs to see beyond their discipline and affording new understandings.

"Learning how postgraduates from different departments approached teaching allowed me to both critically assess and transcend the pedagogic strategies of my own discipline thus enhancing my ability to teach students from diverse academic backgrounds. This has proved particularly helpful during my postdoc, when I transitioned into an interdisciplinary field." (Teacher Champion, Year 1).

Finally, there is much in the literature about doctoral student wellbeing, and this year I have been part of a cross-institutional writing project considering just this. One final and obvious benefit of close working alongside PGR peers is the collegiality, shared experience and empathy it can bring, as these early career colleagues juggle a range of activities: teaching being just one. Therefore, to have 'fellow travellers' (Hadjioannou et al, 2007) in the PhD journey can be invaluable. Earlier in this issue, **Goel** showed how teaching self-regulated learning to students could not only have good learning outcomes for them, but save valuable time for PGR teachers with a heavy workload. WPTC is adding to that workload, perhaps, but a small numbers of hours split across the team, worked flexibly, when taken collectively, can lead to effective outcomes. And yes, Teacher Champions and Mentors are paid. So much of our CPD and community of practice work in Higher Education is premised on free labour and good will. This approach, as championed by Su and Wood (2023) brings a 'costing' to expert participation and maintains a commitment to upholding PGR colleagues as valued professionals. Most importantly (and in combination) pay, peer mentorship, flexibility and co-authoring can enable a 'decisional capital' as discussed by Chadha and Shah (2023) which may not exist elsewhere.

Ending with a flourish..

There is much talk of 'belonging' in the sector at the moment, and Warwick's revised strategy re-commits firmly to this notion. I was not surprised by how many pieces in this Issue made reference to establishing the right environment for learning: somewhere where a student could *"bring my whole self to the class"* **(Dar);** or creating spaces for the *"uncrowning of power"* and where *"a more profound emotional connection between teachers and students is essential for fostering a sense of belonging and engagement."* **(Hanany).** A safe space, if you will. I also noticed there was no piece on AI in this Issue, in spite of the invitation to write on this topic, which surprised me perhaps. Maybe it's too soon for us to have grappled with pedagogy and practice in the face of this change (do *we* feel safe?), or maybe in **de/reconstructing the classroom**, PGR teachers are focusing on the differences they can make through dialogue, modelling, noticing,

reflection…all of which require an authentic, organic and nuanced approach perhaps, rather than speedily-generated solutions.

Whilst not denying the obvious institutional challenges PGR teachers face - but wanting to shift away from the perpetual discussions about liminality - I pondered a suitable metaphor or analogy for this 'other space' where I think PGR teachers best thrive. When I drew a blank (and in the spirit of the age!), I asked Chat GPT (2) and this is what it suggested (annotated by me):

Fitting into a department is like being a sunflower in a sunflower field (conforming to and mimicking disciplinary custom and practice, although perhaps losing visibility in the hierarchy). Being distinct is like being a tulip in that same field (much more noticeable but at risk of being distrusted or peripheral because of that). An alternative setting is the wildflower meadow: a space for cultivating something unique, growing in your own way, alongside other distinct individuals to support a creative whole.

This for me captures the potential of the PGR teacher community of practice pretty well: independent, growing and agentic. Nurturing such spaces in our institutions perhaps could be the best way for PGR teachers to establish themselves and their unique position as specialist educators, connecting our undergraduates with the discipline; providing a fertile, immersive space for propagating successful pedagogies. For us, as institutions, it is a chance to 'grow our own': nurturting compassionate and confident future sector educators and leaders. If well considered and supported, communities of practice like this can achieve a sustainability (Sadera et al, 2024) and continuous eco-system with long term benefits. And moving beyond 'belonging' (which does, to a degree, imply 'fitting in' I think…) I was recently inspired by a presentation by my fellow GTA Developer, Olumide Popoola (Queen Mary University, London) who presented a framework for combining Belonging, Dignity and Justice with our GTAs, resulting in our enabling them to 'Flourish'; *"A just system treats all GTAs fairly and provides equal opportunities for growth."* (Popoola et al, 2024). WPTC in its own corner is trying to do that: I hope others do too.

Acknowledgments and notes

1. Although this Afterword is not co-written, I would like to acknowledge the shared writing in the WPTC CATE submission, some of which is reconsidered here. This writing was co-created with WPTC alumni specifically Pierre Botcherby, Imogen Knox and Youn Affejee, who worked tirelessly and brilliantly alongside me to draw these ideas together.

2. I asked ChatGPT: “Can you give me an analogy for ‘fitting in’ and ‘not fitting in?’ https://chatgpt.com/share/672d6382-f688-8004-9ed3-8867c722ebaa

With my heartfelt thanks to Yanyan, Meifang, Youn, Adam, Farzan, Irsa and Yvette for their brilliant work for WPTC this year. You rock!

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