Reflections on the value of teaching observations: a holistic training model for GTA development

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Abstract

Introduction

The University of Glasgow is a Russell Group institution in a research-intensive setting and is structurally divided into four cognate Colleges: Arts; Social Sciences; Medicine, Veterinary, and Life Sciences; and Science and Engineering. The School of Geographical and Earth Sciences (GES) occupies an unusual liminal space straddling multiple Colleges: Arts, Social Science, and Science and Engineering, encompassing students, Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) and staff from diverse backgrounds including the fine arts, physics, computing, history, biology and literature alongside traditional 'geographers' and 'geo-scientists'.

GTAs in the School are primarily, but not exclusively, postgraduate research students from a variety of academic backgrounds and contribute substantially to the overall teaching portfolio, particularly in the undergraduate degrees. Undergraduate degrees are four years long with GTA teaching concentrated in years one and two, primarily supporting two types of practical class: labs and tutorials, with a significant role to facilitate student discussions, further student engagement and encourage students to explore in more depth through reflection on lecture content in a more skills-focused manner. In these spaces GTAs act as a near-peer role model for UG students. Many GTAs are graduates of the School and so are able to support students due to their familiarity with the teaching staff and the degree structure. In complement to this, non-alumni GTAs, especially international PGRs and those with non-GES undergraduate training, provide a diversity of knowledge and experience in complementary subjects to the geosciences and geo-humanities and serve as active role models for interdisciplinarity. Positions as Teaching Assistants (TA) are

also offered intermittently, with these individuals progressing from GTA work to manage teams of GTAs with increasing contribution to curriculum design and development (Figure 1).

Increasing professionalisation of GTA roles as facilitated by both the shift to fixed term contracts and through emphasis in the UK Professional Standards Framework (Descriptor 1) has seen a positive shift in the profile of GTAs within the Higher Education sector. At departmental level we (as GTAs) have sometimes continued to experience identity conflict and uncertainty regarding the value of our work and place in the School teaching community, which is echoed in other contexts as evidenced by Watson (2018). This illustrates an experiential lag between policy change and immediate cultural change experienced by individual GTAs. Consequently, we believe it is imperative that GTAs are appropriately trained and supported to feel confident and respected as teachers and supporters of learning. Working in a mixed discipline school necessitates that we as GTAs teach in contexts where we may have low confidence in our subject specific knowledge. Acknowledging this stressor, our training model aims to route confidence in student-centered teaching skills and learning facilitation, rather than a didactic transmission approach.

In the following paper, we present a model for the integration of teaching observations (TOs) and associated reflective practice into GTA development that we believe helps to build confidence, self-evaluation and the notion of evolving pedagogic practice into GTA teaching methodology. The model was initially developed for the undergraduate Geography degree in our School and has in the last three

years been expanded to cover early years of our Earth Science degrees, in order to enhance learning community formation and student retention. Drawing on experience from the sciences and social sciences, and the perspectives of both the observer and observee, we reflect on a number of ways in which engagement with an observation process can be pivotal in GTA identity formation and participation in the wider teaching community. We make recommendations for GTA-stage relevant training and development by classifying GTA experience under three terms we have defined as: 'hatchling', 'fledgling' and 'on the wing' (see Figure 1).

Our model is informed by our shared experiences and critical reflections of GTA development within our School. In response to a call for presentations at the annual GTA Developer's Forum in 2019, we assembled a small team to consider GTA experience and support in the School. Our discussions offered us an opportunity to reflect on practice, but also to recognise, document and critique our training model that spoke to the needs, challenges and opportunities we had identified. This paper is one outcome of that process and is written with a reflective voice, informed by the experiences and insights of each of the authors and further resourced by informal feedback from GTA peers. In our School we are now revising and promoting the teaching observation model in light of our reflections, in order to provide support and development relevant to GTA stage and requirement.
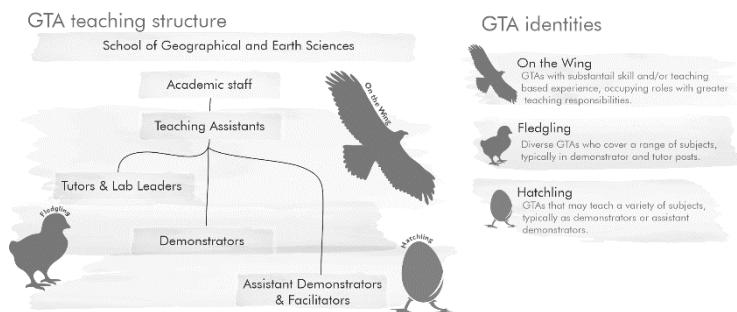
Figure 1. Structure of GTA teaching involvement and development (including GTA identities as separate from roles) in GES, University of Glasgow.

As part of GTA development at the School, we support an optional programme of teaching observations. Teaching observation opportunities and benefits are described and advertised repeatedly throughout the academic year via GTA Induction and teaching meetings. Meanwhile, GTA testimonials and example feedback are available as a permanent reference section for GTAs on the online learning platform, Moodle. Once the observation has been requested, the GTA convenor creates a teaching observation request form and feedback proforma. GTAs volunteer to participate via teaching meetings, contacting GTA peers in their team or academic staff directly. Our approach echoes two of Gosling's (2014) types of peer review: emphasising development and collaboration over evaluation. The uptake of the TO programme is good (in non-COVID years) where a collaborative cohort has been established. In the next sections we reflect on the impact of the TO programme (Figure 2) through the voice of GTAs in certain teaching environments.
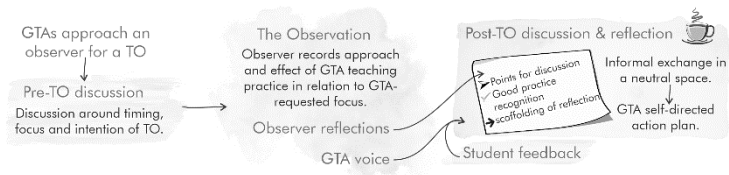
Figure 2. Teaching observation process, from initiation by a GTA, through to development of a GTA self-directed action plan.

Framework for Reflection

Our critical reflection on teaching observations and their value for GTA development echoes Brookfield's (1995) model of four considerations: (1) Students' Eyes (2) Colleagues' Perceptions, (3) Personal Experience, and (4) Theoretical Scholarship. Brookfield surmises that, in order to be truly reflective, we must acknowledge, understand, and critically reflect on our teaching from our own perceptions and beyond. It is essential at all levels of teaching to reflect on our own experiences from the perspective of the student, considering feedback from our learners. This is because the student perspective can emphasise 'those actions and assumptions that either confirm or challenge existing power relationships in the classroom' (Brookfield, 1995: 30).

In complement, discussion among colleagues is essential for good reflection-informed practice. This method of reflection is relevant as we examine the role of teaching observations in GTA development. As such, it is important to acknowledge the value of peer observation, not only for skills development, but also for building confidence in teacher identity (Atkinson & Bolt, 2010). Meanwhile, self-reflection permits us to interrogate 'the paradigmatic assumptions and instinctive reasonings that frame how we work' (Brookfield,

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1995: 30). Examining and reflecting on our own practice can help us engage critically with our pedagogy and identify areas for development (Miller, 2010). This ethos underscores this paper, as we reflect together on our shared context. Finally, we turn to Brookfield's acknowledgement of theoretical literature. It is the method through which our understandings are shaped and the base to which we return after reflection. We recognise that it is important for all educators to engage with reflective practice throughout their career and that this should include digestion of theoretical literature.

For the scope of this paper, we focus on the value of peer observations and self-reflection throughout GTA development. We begin our discussion with the context of a GTA's developmental journey within GES. We discuss our reflections using a collective voice combining the experience of four GTAs and the GTA convener for Geography and Earth Science undergraduate teaching. We reflect on the value of teaching observations in three different teaching settings: 1) small-group teaching; 2) large-group teaching; and 3) online teaching. More broadly we discuss the development of a teaching community within GES. We conclude our paper with recommendations for a model that integrates teaching observations and reflective practice into GTA development.

Discussion

School (departmental) context
Assignment to teaching roles is GTA-led, whereby GTAs formally apply for specific roles such as Demonstrator, Tutor or Lab Leader, and, in most cases, GTAs sign fixed term contracts. Roles are appointed by experience, merit, and availability ensuring a broad community of GTAs whose teaching work is largely independent of their research

connections, and which results in teaching that is engaged and consistent. GTAs are required to complete six hours of training (three institutional, three in School) and may also choose to participate in training offered by the university's Academic and Digital Development Team (ADD). GTAs are also encouraged to engage in the university's teaching recognition programme: Recognising Excellence in Teaching (RET), which is aligned with D1 of the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) and utilises TOs and peer-supported workshops. The explicit focus on reflective practice in this programme emphasises this as fundamental in the development of professional teaching.

Our vision for GTA development addresses the themes defined by Zotos et al. (2020), who recognised teacher identity issues in their own surveyed GTA cohort around their role on the course, affect, personal goals, and desired student perception. The provision of GTA training and observation aims to address these by:

- Defining GTA roles and responsibilities,
- Advertising a network for support and development,
- Providing opportunities for GTA feedback and feed-in to teaching approach and course design, and
- Assisting in the establishment of reflective practice and teacher identity formation.

On reflection, we feel teaching meetings are the primary context for developing a teaching community between convenors and amongst GTAs. Teaching meetings also provide spaces for innovation, discussion and design, actively encouraging conversations around best practice. It is a valuable way for GTAs to reflect on and communicate their

experiences, influencing the design and adaptation of curriculum materials and lesson structure. This collaborative and supportive approach is one we believe facilitates development in GTA confidence and validation of teacher identity. Reflecting on teaching situations where meetings and feedback opportunities were not designed into the GTA support model, we (as GTAs) have felt under-recognised as an autonomous, but less-experienced, teacher. This under-serving of graduate student training needs in relation to teaching has been recognised by Austin (2002) highlighting the importance of autonomy, self-efficacy and GTA community.

In addition to looking forward to the next teaching session, these (bi)weekly meetings also allow us to reflect on teaching from the previous block, discussing both what has worked well and how we might amend other areas in the future as well as suggesting approaches to solving problems involving both classroom issues and subject content. Engagement with University provision of continuing professional development and scholarship activities is communicated and promoted through these teaching meetings, GTA mailing list and Moodle channel. We will now discuss this local approach to GTA development through reflecting on teacher identity formation in a range of teaching environments.

Large Group Teaching: Using TOs to reinforce a sense of teaching community

Within geography and earth science, large lab classes are instructed by a pair of GTAs (one lab leader and one lab demonstrator). These large group sessions involve different responsibilities depending on role – leaders guide the lab, and demonstrators facilitate student discussion. However,

within this lab setting, there is room to manoeuvre between these roles, depending on subject-specialism and desire to try something new. The role of the lab leader is usually undertaken by a GTA 'fledgling', or a GTA 'on the wing' – someone with previous teaching experience of a similar nature. The demonstrator, meanwhile, is usually a 'hatchling' (completely new to teaching or someone wanting a different experience) or sometimes a 'fledgling' with limited availability.

Our experience of demonstrating or assisting a more senior member of academic staff in the 'hatchling' phase of development differs greatly from working alongside another GTA. Senior staff often overlook the value of GTAs, providing fewer opportunities for GTAs to 'own' their role and rarely gave feedback. This can discourage GTAs from engaging in professional development or from seeking feedback from established staff, because they feel their professional identity is not acknowledged. It is important that both GTAs and the staff working with them are attuned to: "Recognizing and making room for the complex life worlds of GTAs and allowing for the customization of identities based on desire and need" (Pierson, 2018; p.50). In contrast, within the GTA community there is mutual recognition and often collaborative work on professional development – we believe this is rooted in a shared understanding of professional identity, often reinforced through the TO process.

Large group teaching can be a little more daunting than tutorials and perhaps as a result of this, tutors have more frequently requested teaching observations than lab leaders and demonstrators. Most commonly, GTAs receive feedback from early career staff and other GTAs; while this has led to

community building it can also produce feelings of separation and hierarchy within a department. This experience is particularly common in research-intensive institutions, where members of staff are under increasing pressure to publish research. As a result, teaching is often undervalued and under-resourced (Rawat and Meena, 2014; Young, 2006).

In the context of these larger group labs, peer feedback is often ongoing, with lab leader and demonstrator communicating before, during, and after each session. Due to the nature of teamwork required, reflection and peer observation are a way for the team to work together effectively. In this setting, peer observations are especially relevant and can have immediate influence on the way a lab is run.

Small group teaching: Building confidence in teacher identity through engagement in TO practice

As 'fledgling' GTAs, in the early stages of small group teaching, we often experienced feelings of inadequacy in delivering these sessions independently. Although we were provided with teaching materials, we felt underqualified compared to the more senior academic staff. Anecdotally, 'fledgling' GTAs have been the most common requestors of teaching observations from both peers and senior staff. Both peer TOs and the collection of informal student feedback on post-it notes or digitally at the end of sessions (Figure 2), have highlighted the value of tutorials to first year students. This additional perspective counters GTAs' perceptions of inadequacy, by demonstrating that students have identified the approachability and non-didactic style of postgraduate tutors as a strength. Equally, observers noted the relaxed environment for the students, where individuals felt

comfortable asking questions and contributing to group discussions. The intimacy of the small group setting (from our collective observing experience) requires a GTA to have confidence in an authentic, or constructed, teaching persona in order to create a supportive and collaborative learning space. Tutorials, in our School, often operate around a single table format which offers a sense of equality for students, who experience their tutor as a person as well as a teacher, operating as one of the group (hooks, 1994).

Tutorials in first and second year are collaborative, focused, and rely heavily on both student engagement and the ability of the tutor to foster, encourage, and direct discussion. These are advanced teaching skills and not necessarily intuitive to 'hatchling' GTAs (Figure 1). GTAs in GES normally 'graduate' into small group teaching after gaining confidence in student group facilitation, as a lab demonstrator. Tutorials tend to be discussion-based or rooted in methods of active learning. To this end, it is imperative that the tutor feels confident, not only in navigating student input, but also at managing adverse or unusual territory – this is particularly important within the second year, where curriculum design means that tutorials can touch upon sensitive or emotive topics. Unlike in lab classes, tutors teach alone and therefore do not have the benefit of having previously 'taught alongside' as a demonstrator.

With responsibilities of leading a small group, teaching observations are imperative for tutors at this stage in their career. Our reflections suggest TOs can reveal new ways of engaging students, or even highlight methods of practice that work well for particular topics. This experience shows that a proactive and developmental approach to TOs rather than

imposed and regulatory (as argued by Gosling, 2014) can generate positive impact on teacher identity in GTAs. In this way the teaching observation process becomes a vehicle, not only for increasing GTA confidence and self-efficacy, but in building community and collaborative working as a teaching team through observer pairs. The engagement in TOs requires trust on both sides. It is common that teaching observations do not result in direct changes in practice, as with observations of staff (Marie et al. 2018), and often GTAs are not able to make changes they would like due to the confines of their role. However, we have observed that tutors in small group teaching roles willingly invest time in learning experience evaluation and self-reflection. Reviewing one's own teaching from another perspective helps to alleviate some of the initial tensions of having a peer observation and can also foster reassurance in the knowledge that others are undergoing the same process.

Teaching Online: Recognising the value of collaborative reflective practice

In March 2020 all our teaching moved online; a new environment for most of us. With this significant shift in practice there was, perhaps, an even greater need to reinforce support for GTAs in developing a confident teaching identity. The feelings of inadequacy mentioned above were just as rife, if not more focused, when examined in this new context.

In some of our TA experience, online delivery does offer a more flexible model for TOs, with the ability to record classes, allowing tailored attention and providing more opportunity for self-reflection. Importantly, online TOs provide an opportunity to gain shared experience in

establishing best practice (Purcell et al. 2017). This wider TA perspective of what works well in an online format demonstrates that TOs and collaborative reflective practice enable a strong sense of community and build confidence. Both impacts are particularly important for GTA development as we navigate through new and uncertain online territories.

Discussion-based lessons are almost as effectively taught online; student discussions can be facilitated via breakout rooms and tutorial preparation is easily facilitated with online resources (Petrides, 2002). However, collaborative teaching, which is often responsive to classroom dynamics and gains energy from spontaneous adjustments, can be more challenging online (Woods, 2002; Vonderwell, 2003). Project-based sessions that rely on the careful facilitation of group dynamics can be impeded by technological barriers (Song et al., 2004). Here, the opportunity for students to ask questions, or GTAs to observe interactions, can be more stilted. Although this shift has changed the dynamics of large-group and collaborative teaching, from a TO perspective this online delivery format has also encouraged us to 'experiment' with our delivery. As a result, TOs have highlighted new areas of strength and possible areas for further reflection.

Some of us have experienced a self-imposed or perceived pressure to perform in an engaging way when teaching online, which led to the adoption of a more didactic mode. The shift to online delivery may have undermined the teacher identity of some GTAs who are no longer a bridge from lecturing staff to students, but just one of a faculty of online teachers. Maintaining a feeling of being present and connected to learners can be hampered for some GTAs by

technological barriers. TOs can partially redress this balance by heightening our self- and classroom awareness, prompting intention and being present in the teaching space. Negative comparisons with face-to-face teaching experience can be countered with recognition that the focus of the learning experience, and consequently a GTA's role, is still the same: learner facilitation. On balance, reflective practice, engrained by experience of teaching observations, has equipped some GTAs to cope better with this environmental shift. Teaching meetings can also ease the transition by providing a forum to discuss solutions and gain alternative perspectives. These can also act as informal and permissive spaces for staff to express the challenges they are experiencing in pivoting to this new format.

Recommendations: Model for the integration of teaching observations and reflective practice into GTA development

We propose that academic units wishing to strengthen their teaching community and develop the teacher identities of GTAs consider the following recommendations. Our guidance is influenced by Gosling's (2002) recognition of the objectives of developmental and peer review models of teaching observation approaches. Specifically, our approach aims to emphasise mutuality of benefit (observer and observee) with opportunities for improvement (of teaching and reflective practice) through constructive feedback. The positive impact of the School's approach has been recognised through a College Teaching Excellence Award for the Geography-1 Teaching Team (comprising staff and a large team of GTAs).

Investment in effective and sustainable GTA support and training is key. In parallel to this, an attitude in support of development rather than monitoring for quality assurance, is important for fostering community and the development of a separate teacher identity for postgraduate research students. An appointed and time-recognised role of GTA convener is often the foundation of a GTA community of practice. GTA coordinators or course conveners should monitor the teaching experience level of their GTAs in order to offer tailored advice and progression opportunities should these be appropriate. Our suggestions for stage-appropriate integration of teaching observation and reflective practice are summarised in Figure 3.
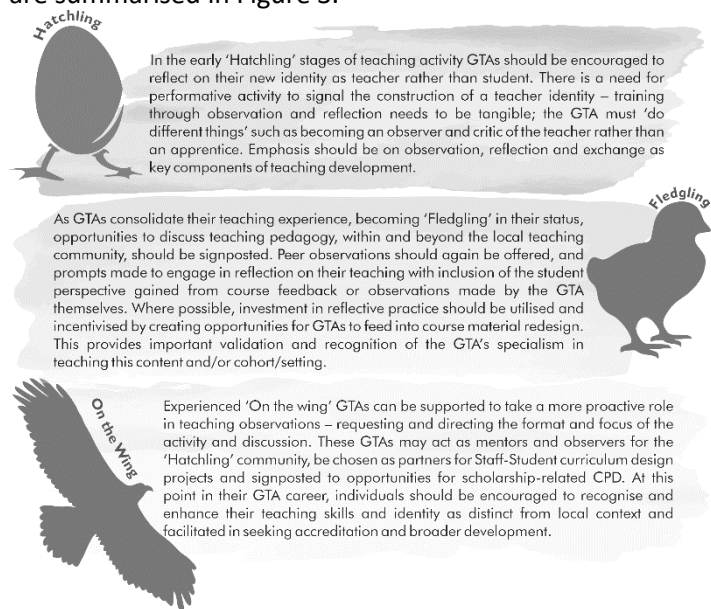
In the early 'Hatchling' stages of teaching activity GTAs should be encouraged to reflect on their new identity as teacher rather than student. There is a need for performative activity to signal the construction of a teacher identity – training through observation and reflection needs to be tangible; the GTA must 'do different things' such as becoming an observer and critic of the teacher rather than an apprentice. Emphasis should be on observation, reflection and exchange as key components of teaching development.

As GTAs consolidate their teaching experience, becoming 'Fledgling' in their status, opportunities to discuss teaching pedagogy, within and beyond the local teaching community, should be signposted. Peer observations should again be offered, and prompts made to engage in reflection on their teaching with inclusion of the student perspective gained from course feedback or observations made by the GTA themselves. Where possible, investment in reflective practice should be utilised and incentivised by creating opportunities for GTAs to feed into course material redesign. This provides important validation and recognition of the GTA's specialism in teaching this content and/or cohort/setting.

Experienced 'On the wing' GTAs can be supported to take a more proactive role in teaching observations – requesting and directing the format and focus of the activity and discussion. These GTAs may act as mentors and observers for the 'Hatchling' community, be chosen as partners for Staff-Student curriculum design projects and signposted to opportunities for scholarship-related CPD. At this point in their GTA career, individuals should be encouraged to recognise and enhance their teaching skills and identity as distinct from local context and facilitated in seeking accreditation and broader development.

Figure 3. Suggested mode and integration of teaching observations and reflective practice for different stages and identities in GTA development.

Engagement with the Teaching Perspectives Inventory (Pratt, 2001) can help to initiate self-reflection and provide nucleation material for discussions. This may be actively promoted through opportunities to sit-in on others' teaching ahead of beginning their own sessions. There should also be discussion of teaching approach in teaching meetings and signposting of near-peer mentors in the GTA community. As identified in the work of Bovill and Cairns (2014), the pairing of teaching observation feedback with discussion adds value to a peer observation activity. Observations must have opportunities for feed forward and allow space for GTAs to justify and question their own, or the unit's, practice and approach. GTA conveners may work to stretch the skills palette of experienced GTAs and revitalise courses by employing these individuals in alternative roles where GTAs lean on their skills rather than their research specialisms.

Engaging with teaching observations is as beneficial for the academic staff member (observer) as it is for the GTA (observee). The recognition of this reciprocity is key in the development of a trusting and mutual mentoring relationship, with more experienced staff benefitting from the perspectives and ideas of new members of staff (Blackwell & McLean, 1996). The harnessing of new energy and perspective is central to the valuing of teaching meetings in our GTA system. GTAs should feel that their insights are valued and may enact changes in courses, staff attitudes and approach. Critically, we have sought in this paper to not only include GTA perspectives on teaching practice, but to speak directly from those positions by centring GTA experience and knowledge in our discussion of shared challenges and good practice for teaching more widely. In summary, peer feedback and teaching observations foster a more reflective

teaching community and facilitate professional growth and progression into more diverse and effective modes of teaching and learning for both staff and GTAs.

Taking TOs forward: Next steps for a more visible and sustainable observation system

As a group, we are in the early stages of establishing a departmental GTA TO group (TOG), with the focus of fostering GTA development both through TOs and an associated community of reflective practice. Our aim is to scaffold and incentivise the exchange of good practice between GTAs and other teaching staff. This will be achieved through an online platform of guidance, workshops and training. Our ambition is to enhance the connectivity, sustainability and profile of GTA-led teaching for the benefit of the broader School community. The training model we present in this paper offers a strategy for integrating and empowering GTAs within the broader teaching community. It is grounded in shared reflective practice, and mediated by informal mentoring, collaborative teaching, teaching meetings, TOs and informal peer-to-peer feedback and support among GTAs. It is relevant for GTAs and those managing and working with them who wish to enhance the learning environment and experience for teachers and learners.

Maintaining a framework for teaching observation and self-reflection is a labour-intensive endeavour requiring staff buy-in, the nurturing of a culture of trust and belief in developmental practice. Our model facilitates a shift in perceptions, resulting in enhanced reciprocity and departmental resilience, grounded in a mutually-supportive community of teaching practice. Our collaborative reflective

practice has provided an opportunity to not only share and build upon our individual experiences, but to establish a support structure to facilitate active and meaningful change in our department. This process has also been invaluable in recognising our teacher identities and personal growth as GTAs, as we ourselves continue to navigate 'on the wing'.

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