

Class Act: Reflections on a working-class academic sense of self as a Graduate Teaching Assistant

Alex Hastie, Coventry University, UK

Abstract

This article provides insights into the social class position of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTA) in UK Higher Education. It does so through reflecting on the author's experiences of teaching undergraduate students as a GTA. Various described as 'the donkey in the department' and 'peacekeepers' in neoliberalised universities, GTAs perform a crucial teaching role in many academic departments. Currently missing from this scholarship is the consideration of what it means to be a working-class GTA. Whilst work on GTAs continues to grow, there remains an absence of working-class voices in postgraduate pedagogies. This paper then, reflects on what this future research might look like for those straddling these boundaries between student and academic, working-class and middle-class. To do so, it will go beyond the existing GTA scholarship to explore more broadly what it means to be a working-class academic and working-class student. This article will reflect on the tensions involved in tenuously identifying and 'performing' as both an academic and working-class. It will also examine the positive aspects brought to the classroom by the GTA's 'liminal' class position such as so-called 'approachability', and what the impacts of the job are on the production of working-class

academic 'selfhood'. In doing so, the paper's main argument is that the GTA role is one through which working-class PhD students can successfully 'become' academics and develop a confident academic sense of self.

Keywords: Graduate Teaching Assistants; working-class; identity; liminality

Introduction

I cannot move among the rich, the condescending, the ones who can turn me into an object of study with a glance or a word, cannot speak like them, learn their ways, and share them with my family without being disloyal to someone (Black, 1995: 25).

Scholars have been writing about Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) for the best part of 25 years. Variouslly described as 'the donkey in the department' (Park and Ramos, 2002) and 'peacekeepers' in neoliberalised universities (Raaper, 2018), GTAs perform a crucial teaching role in many academic departments. Juggling responsibilities such as running seminars and marking undergraduate exams with their own doctoral research, many authors have identified the 'liminal' (Keefer, 2015; Winstone and Moore, 2017) status of GTAs, who occupy a role between student and teacher. This is a logical interpretation, with GTAs not only managing the logistics of their PhDs and teaching workloads, but their 'emerging professional identity' (Winstone and Moore, 2017) and expectations of 'becoming' an academic. Currently missing from this scholarship is the consideration of what it means to be a working-class GTA. Whilst work on GTAs continues to grow, including work relating to identity (Lusher, Campbell, and Carrell, 2018; Collins, 2019), there remains an absence of working-class voices in postgraduate pedagogies. This paper then, reflects on what this future research might look like for those straddling these boundaries between student and academic, working-class and middle-class.

This paper draws on my own experiences of feeling in-between whilst working as a GTA at a UK university. This 'in-betweenness', as I will go on to explain, is experienced not only between roles as PhD student and teacher, but also between perceived feelings of being working-class and middle-class. To do so, I will go beyond the existing GTA scholarship to explore more broadly what it means to be a working-class academic (Brook and Mitchell, 2012; Crew, 2020) and working-class student (Reay et al, 2009; Ingram, 2011; Lehmann, 2014). Bringing this literature together, alongside my own reflections and experiences, will also provide original insights into the social class position of GTAs in UK Higher Education. This article will reflect on the tensions involved in tenuously identifying and 'performing' as both an academic and working-class. It will also examine the positive aspects brought to the classroom by the GTA's 'liminal' class position such as so-called 'approachability', and what the impacts of the job are on the production of working-class academic 'selfhood'. In doing so, the paper's main argument is that the GTA role is one through which working-class PhD students can successfully 'become' academics and develop a confident academic sense of self.

This article will first briefly introduce GTAs, highlighting some departure points; secondly, it will outline where we can learn from scholarship on working-class academics and students; thirdly, it will reflect on three main issues relating to performativity, approachability, and self-hood; and finally, it will offer opportunities and suggestions for future work in this area.

Graduate Teaching Assistants and their students

Scholarship pertaining to the experiences of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) is well-established. Park and Ramos' (2002) widely cited findings that GTAs feel like the 'donkey in the department' due to heavy workloads have been influential, inspiring others to explore GTAs' role in the 'neoliberal university' (Raaper, 2018), the negotiation of 'malleable' and 'liminal' GTA identities (Winstone and Moore, 2017), GTAs' role in relation to ethnic diversity and transcultural classrooms (Lusher et al, 2018; Collins, 2019), and to make suggestions to improve GTA working conditions (Chadha, 2013; Jordan and Howe, 2018). Underpinning much of this work are theories of liminality and subjectivity, increasingly within the context of the neoliberalisation and marketisation of higher education. For example, Raaper (2018) takes a Foucauldian approach, looking at the production of a GTA 'subjectivity' shaped by the forces of casualisation, resilience, and individual choices. Winstone and Moore (2017) deploy the term 'liminality' to describe the 'multiple identities' that GTAs are able to forge as they occupy roles between student and teacher. I argue that what is missing from this work are the experiences and voices of working-class GTAs, and a consideration of the GTA role as one that facilitates 'becoming', or as Winstone and Moore (2017) put it, the 'emerging self', for specifically working-class PhD students. In order to take this forward, I will draw on wider scholarship about working-class academics and students (Ingram, 2011; Brook and Michell, 2012; Crew,

2020) to better understand and situate the position of working-class GTAs.

I want to start with findings by Roach (1997: 137) that suggest “TAs should dress more professionally when they are in the role of instructor”. Roach (1997) finds that there is a positive correlation between what he calls ‘professional’ attire and student engagement and behaviour. I want to take my contention with this argument as my starting point because, whilst dated, it raises many issues about the class positions of GTAs, and academics more broadly, as well as their students. First, the claim that GTAs not only need to dress professionally, but also are required to ‘act’ in ways ‘appropriate’ to the role raises questions of what ‘professional’ and ‘appropriate’ look like in academia, and who gets to define them. Second, Roach’s observation that ‘attire can indicate attitudes, values and personality’ is obvious, but the implication here is that ‘less professional’ clothing represents values that are unwelcome inside the classroom. Roach (1997) ultimately goes on to argue that ‘casually’ or ‘sloppily’ dressed TAs promote lower levels of engagement and learning, which in my experience as a working-class student, GTA and now lecturer, who both dresses ‘casually’ and has been taught by casually dressed GTAs and professors, does not ring true. Underpinning this, then, are assumptions about the class identities of the students we teach, which have changed dramatically in the UK over the last 20 years, with a sharp increase in working-class and first-generation students going to university. According to Universities UK, there was a 7.8% increase between 2010 and 2019 in UK 18-year-olds from low

participation neighbourhoods accepted into full-time undergraduate degree study. How do these increasing numbers of students respond to different GTAs that do not fit the 'professional' model that Roach (1997) presents?

Surprisingly little scholarship exists on the relationship between working-class students and their GTAs, though Kendall and Schussler (2012) do find that students indeed view tenured lecturers/professors and GTAs differently. They found that students view their professors as 'confident', 'knowledgeable', and 'formal', compared to their more 'relaxed', 'engaging' and 'relatable' GTAs. We might also learn something from Lusher, Campbell, and Carrell's (2018) insights into the relationship between student outcomes and the ethnicity of GTAs in the USA. They find that, in the context of a shift in the ethnic and racial composition of students at US universities, students achieve better grades when they are assigned a GTA of similar ethnicity. Furthermore, they suggest that minority ethnic GTAs provide a role model for minority ethnic students who feel out of place. Similarly, Collins (2019) argues that the diversity of graduate teachers' ethnic and national backgrounds, and their diverse values, attitudes, and personalities to use Roach's (1997) terms, fosters 'transcultural and collectivist exchanges in the classroom' (Collins, 2019). They argue that international GTAs bring positive resources, including language, and different perspectives and approaches to teaching that work to highlight identity, reduce power asymmetries in the classroom, and develop practices that challenge the hegemony of Western systems of education and institutional expectations. To use Kendall and Schussler's

(2012) words then, instructor type *does* matter. In short, we need to pay attention to the identities of our GTAs, and think about how this might impact on our students.

Working-Class Students and Academics

What have scholars said about working-class students at university? And how might this help us to understand and centre the experiences of working-class GTAs? At the heart of work in this area, using the work of Pierre Bourdieu, is a sense that working-class students in 'elite' educational settings are, perhaps, like the working-class GTA, conflicted, in-between, and disconnected. Upon entering a new and unfamiliar education 'field', one that is in perceived conflict with the working-class 'field of origin' (reasons for which will become clear), working-class students are likely to find difficulties in reconciling, as Ingram (2011) puts it in the context of school-level students, being 'working-class' and 'educationally successful'. Others similarly describe working-class student experiences of 'elite' universities as difficult, with challenges in maintaining connections to their working-class backgrounds (Reay et al, 2009), and that unlike for middle-class students this involves a 'fundamental breaking away' from their home communities (Lehmann, 2013). Langhout et al. (2009) echo this, identifying that lower levels of belonging are a direct result of being subjected to classism, which included discriminatory remarks but also institutional policies and procedures, at university.

Whilst the majority of this scholarship focuses on 'elite' settings, Read, Archer and Leathwood (2003) write about similar feelings of '(not) belonging' and 'isolation' at Post-

1992 institutions (polytechnic institutions that became universities in 1992, and are often distinguished from older and Russell Group universities due to their offering of vocational subjects like nursing). Interestingly, they argue that working-class students negotiate belonging and isolation by choosing a university where they expect they might feel more at home because of a greater number of other 'non-traditional' university students. Other scholars point to some working-class students who are able to successfully negotiate two (maybe more) fields of working-class community and middle-class education, building up a self-awareness and resilience (Reay et al, 2009), growing new cultural capital, tastes and dispositions in order to 'fit in' (Lehmann, 2013), and 'modifying' their identity in order to succeed (Ingram, 2011). There is thus a focus within this literature on 'successful' working-class students. What about those who struggle to negotiate these complex and challenging differences in educational fields? Should they/we have to conform in order to fit in?

Imposter syndrome is a term that gets used a lot in academia, to describe feelings of inferiority or of feeling 'out of place' amongst both undergraduate and postgraduate students, and academics, often along lines of class but also gender, ethnicity (Peteet et al, 2014), sexuality, disability and amid an increasingly competitive environment for jobs, security, recognition and grants. Whilst often defined as an individual or private problem characterised by feelings of 'fraud' and 'inauthenticity', Breeze (2018) argues that imposter syndrome must be rethought as a 'public feeling' in the socio-political context of the neoliberal landscape of HE,

and mobilised as a catalyst for political change. In the context of this paper, and this scholarship, Mallman (2017) interestingly uses the legal term 'inherent vice' as a metaphor for the feelings of 'natural inferiority' amongst working-class university students. Responsibility, Mallman argues, for educational success is placed on the individual student, rather than on the structural disadvantage and lack of 'inheritable, symbolic resources' and access to the necessary 'techniques of selfhood' in the elite educational field. Similarly, Jack (2016) discusses the lack of confidence and understanding in working-class students to engage with their lecturers as authority figures, something which middle-class students do more effectively, resulting in potentially better grades, career prospects, and opportunities for personal and intellectual development. But what does this have to do with working-class GTAs?

Representation matters, for both students and (early career) academics. As Lusher et al (2018) argue, and as outlined above, students are more likely to engage successfully if being taught by someone 'like them'. This issue has also been a key area of contention for scholars writing about 'working-class' academics. Archer (2008), for example, argues that academic identity is wrapped up with notions of 'authenticity' and 'success', with both being regulated and structured by race, class, and gender. Drawing on Bourdieu (2001), she argues that the academic 'field' is constantly being negotiated as both individuals and groups battle for recognition, with those who identify as working-class, and/or as minority ethnic finding it most challenging to 'inhabit identities of success or authenticity' associated with

academics, in a permanent or legitimate way (Archer, 2008). This ongoing negotiation for working-class academics is also the focus of Crew's (2020) recent book, in which she examines common working-class experiences of academia such as imposter syndrome and alienation. These experiences, whilst common, are not universal and Crew (2020) reminds us, as does Archer (2008), that they need to be carefully examined at the intersections of ethnicity, gender, and dis/ability.

There are both positive and negative aspects of being a 'working-class academic', as many have pointed out, with scholars speaking not just of feelings of inferiority, but also, for example, approachability. This comes back to Kendall and Schussler's (2012) findings, one of which was that students found their GTAs to be more 'relatable' and 'understanding'. This may be because GTAs are often younger and closer to the student experience than more senior members of academic staff. But it might also be because they are working-class. Shepard et al (1998) in their influential edited collection *Coming to Class*, importantly argue that pedagogy can be positively impacted by the working-class background of the teacher. Background shapes how GTAs approach teaching and interact with their students, bringing attention to issues of language, power and inequality in access to education (Brook and Mitchell, 2012). There remains a gap in these literatures, however. Whilst there is plenty of scholarship exploring the experiences of working-class academics and students, this research has so far neglected the importance of the GTA role in the working-class academic story. Likewise, whilst work on GTAs continues to grow,

including relating to identity (Lusher, Campbell, and Carrell, 2018; Collins, 2019), there remains an absence of working-class voices in postgraduate pedagogies.

The remainder of this paper then, reflects on what this future research might look like for those straddling these boundaries between student and academic, working-class and middle-class.

Reflections: Performativity, approachability, and self-hood for working-class GTAs

Taking inspiration from these different strands of scholarship, we can ask questions about what might be specific about the working-class GTA experience, focusing on three main points that I think could shape future research and discussions: the notion of performance or performativity; the idea of an ‘approachable’ working-class academic; and the production of working-class academic self-hood via the GTA role.

What might it mean for a working-class PhD student, undertaking work as a GTA, to ‘perform’ an academic role? As a working-class former GTA, I felt the pressure to ‘pass’ as an academic with my students in the classroom. This pressure, for me at least, was not as heavy as it was and remains in research settings such as conferences, with their requirements of asking the ‘right’ questions, and perhaps most unsettling, ‘networking’. Archer (2008) identifies the pressure to publish and win grants as one of the main things that regulate the ways early career academics see themselves as ‘successful’, ‘legitimate’, or ‘authentic’ academics. Studying for a PhD and working as a GTA at a ‘Russell Group’ university in the UK, on modules that were

led by well-respected academics (who(m) I perceived as mostly middle-class – meaning they were ‘well-spoken’, well educated, and had what I saw as middle-class cultural tastes), came with its own pressures. There was a standard, or a reputation, to maintain, and expectations from academics and students to be met. Aside from this, a big pressure and point at which ‘performing’ was most important to me, was as a GTA in front of mostly white middle-class students. Despite being older than them, and studying for a PhD, it was hard at first to shake off the feeling that it would be my students, not the professors or my peers, that would ‘find me out’. Only a few years before, as a student myself studying for both undergraduate and Masters Degrees, it had been middle-class students who made me feel out of place, who mocked my accent and childhood experiences. My response to this as a new GTA was to do what Roach (1997) suggested: I dressed smart, I conveyed what I thought were the ‘proper’ attitudes, I even pronounced my Ts and softened my vowels (as a working-class Mancunian, I drop my Ts and flatten or harshen my vowels). Did I convince them? Is this what they wanted to hear?

I don’t think so. As I became more experienced in the classroom, working mainly with first years, I began to drop the charade. I noticed that despite their ‘ideal’ class backgrounds, many students were struggling with some of the more difficult concepts on their modules, with reading academic papers and with developing relationships with their professors and each other. Rather than being another obstacle, I decided I would try to be more approachable. Whether right or wrong, I interpreted this to mean speaking

in my normal accent, perhaps even exaggerating it at times (another kind of performance?), dressing more casually, drawing their attention to the barriers in/to academia such as classism and racism, to the often inaccessible and complex ways some academic papers were written. This brings us back to Jack's (2016) argument, as they highlight student anxiety around asking for help, and the disparity between working-class and middle-class students in doing so. My 'liminal' class position, in-between my Manchester council estate upbringing and (potentially) middle-class future, was useful in building a bridge not just for the students into a more successful and welcoming student life (whether they were working-class or not), but for myself, into a more 'authentic' academic life.

What does authentic mean in this context? For me, I knew that I was OK at teaching – or at least more comfortable in this setting than in spaces concerning research, despite being there to complete a PhD. Conferences and research seminars fill(ed) me with dread. The expectation to network with people who I perceive(d) to be smarter than me, who had a wider vocabulary than me, had the 'right' cultural capital, backgrounds, experiences, and stories, was and is something that makes me feel very unwelcome in academia. What teaching as a GTA gave me was some confidence. It gave me the opportunity to express myself as an academic beyond what I perceive(d) as bourgeois social events where academics would make connections, jostle for influence, know how to behave, talk, gain advantages and ultimately 'play the game'.

Teaching remains undervalued in academia. Though we now have the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), the Research Excellence Framework (REF) remains the most 'important' tool for measuring academic impact and success. Whilst academics at 'Russell Group' and other 'elite' institutions fight for research time, grants to buy them out of teaching, and pass many seminar and marking responsibilities onto GTAs due to the pressure to deliver impactful research, posts at post-92 institutions are predominantly teaching-focused. The prestige remains with the former, with post-92 or 'new' universities looked down upon by some (not all) employers, students and academics. GTAs are used less in post-1992 institutions, with less research pressure on permanent academics who have more time in their workload to teach their students. These differences raise some questions for what kinds of spaces there are for working-class academics, given my own reflections on the potential for teaching, specifically GTA work, for the production of working-class identity in the academy. How do working-class doctoral students 'become' 'successful' academics and how might this differ? Can they conform and fit in at research seminars and conference wine receptions? Or are they relying on the space of the classroom to find a more 'authentic' academic self? And if so, is it about time we recognised not just the value of our GTAs, but of teaching as a pillar of academic success?

Conclusion: Routes for further research and for working-class GTAs

The GTA role is an important one for working-class doctoral students. Whilst critics are right to point out the many flaws that exist within the system, largely owing to the neoliberal

machine that drives our sector, the role of GTAs is vital not only to academic departments but also to doctoral students who undertake the work. Not only does it provide often much needed financial support for those without the economic capital, but also a vital opportunity for the production of academic self-hood. Amidst increasing competition for secure jobs and grants, and the associated increasing pressure to publish, the GTA experience is one that has the potential to help develop important pedagogical skills.

This article did not set out to provide answers to the question of how working-class students can transition into working-class academics. Instead, the article is intended as a starting point for a much-needed conversation about, and among, working-class doctoral students. This is particularly important at a time when universities and academic departments are facing increasing financial pressures, potentially cutting diversity and inclusion measures (to the limited extent they even exist), cutting GTA jobs and reducing support available to GTAs, or in some cases making more expensive permanent staff redundant and relying increasingly on GTA teaching. This article has begun to carve out space for further research into the experiences of working-class Graduate Teaching Assistants, insisting that working-class voices (and other disadvantaged groups in HE) be heard at the Postgraduate level. It has also sought to give other working-class GTAs some insight into my own experiences and a potential opportunity for self-recognition. I do not expect these experiences to be universal, but in sharing them I hope to encourage other working-class GTAs and doctoral students to

articulate and improve their academic experiences. The GTA role can improve to provide opportunities for academic self-hood that may anchor working-class doctoral students in a stormy middle-class world.

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