

GTA teaching practice development in the time of Covid-19: A collective reflective on how "having the chats" led to much more

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Abstract

Postgraduate research students who teach, also referred to as graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), have consistently been described as essential contributors to Higher Education (HE), given the crucial teaching role that they perform (Austin, 2002; Luft et al., 2004; Gardner & Jones, 2011; Roden, Jakob, Roehrig et al., 2018; Holland, 2018; Fung, 2021; Hastie, 2021). However, it has been noted that, frequently, the only opportunity provided for GTAs to engage with personal and professional development is through their allocated teaching hours, most of which are on common introductory or practical modules, which form the staple part of the GTA teaching experience (Seymour & Hewitt, 1997; Ellis, 2014; Schussler et al., 2015). In many cases, these are conducted in

isolation from other GTAs or Faculty members, leading to teaching becoming somewhat of an isolating experience. As such, GTAs often struggle to find the space and time to develop their teaching identity with other GTAs. Adopting a qualitative approach, this co-authored paper, which we describe as a 'collective reflective', details how, through involvement in a peer support initiative, we, as a group of GTAs, were able to reflect on our role and shape our identity as teachers. Together, we delve into the thoughts and discussions that we shared on this journey. Our considerations from this reflective piece highlight the importance of building supportive communities for GTAs, not only to allow for reflection on professional development but also to engender a sense of belonging amongst GTAs.

Introduction

This paper was born out of a peer support initiative called 'Hear to Help' (H2H), implemented in early 2021, as part of a suite of Covid-19 response measures, in the Institute of Technology Carlow, a higher education institution in Ireland. Coordinated by the Institute's Teaching and Learning Centre, the focus of the eight-week-long initiative was to bring undergraduate and postgraduate learners together to support each other through personal, social, and academic stressors, brought on by the sudden transition to online learning. The authors of this paper were all involved in the initiative, which consisted of each GTA meeting with undergraduate (UG) class groups online for 15 minutes each week, in what the GTAs termed 'micro-sessions'. The class groups to which we were assigned were from a range of disciplines and programme stages, from first to final year.

These H2H sessions were essentially established to provide a comfortable, non-judgemental space in which undergraduates could relay any concerns they had of an academic, pastoral, and social nature. As GTAs, we would listen and support them by addressing their concerns, while also navigating them to support resources available and, in some cases, providing discipline-specific advice. Each GTA was assigned 8 class groups to meet with on a weekly basis, where the number of participants varied, depending on the nature of their concerns at the time. In tandem, we, as a group of 13 GTAs¹, met with the initiative coordinator once a week for approximately one hour, and shared the nature of

¹ There were 13 GTAs which took part in the H2H initiative of which 7 are represented here.

the concerns emerging from the undergraduate students, thereby allowing us to discuss our experiences.

Prior to commencing the initiative, we were given some training on how to facilitate the micro-sessions and manage any concerns the participants may raise. However, due to the importance of the initiative for UGs who were struggling with online learning and wishing to commence it as soon as possible, training was kept to a minimum. While attendance at the sessions was not mandatory for the UGs, as GTAs, we were paid for our work which was funded through an Irish government Covid-19 funding allocation.

Although the main aim of the H2H initiative was to support and empower UGs to overcome any Covid-19-related challenges, the initiative created several benefits for us as GTAs. It became an important space for us to connect, to chat, and to create a supportive community, the impact of which has lasted long after the initiative itself, as we continue to meet informally and provide support for each other.

To capture our thoughts and ideas, after the initiative formally concluded, we decided to meet online to reflect on and share our experiences, a selection of which are documented in this collective piece. Though the benefits of being part of this initiative have been manifold, we have chosen to highlight three specific areas of development, namely, our sense of belonging within the Institute, our teaching identity, and our professional development.

Methodology

We have decided to align our methodology with a narrative approach, which focuses on the view that we understand human experiences through stories lived and told. This paradigm supports the gathering and telling of stories as a means of research inquiry and advocates that we understand our world through reliving and retelling stories of 'the experiences that made up people's lives individual and social' (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000: 20). In that regard, we consider human beings and their experiences to be - constructed through both individual and collective experience (McCormack et al., 2020) and that is why we have chosen to capture the story of our collective experience. As with many other narrative inquirers, we see ourselves as both the researchers and the participants in this study, and as such, are both living and telling our story (Clandinin, 2006). This article has been crafted in a manner that broadly corresponds with Giroud's (1999) interpretation of collaborative writing, with a keen focus on the exchange of ideas, discussion in respect of decision-making, and a shared approach to problem-solving. We are using story, not only to relay our experience but for us to better understand the complexity of this shared experience (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

Through our discussions, we captured what we had individually gained from being a part of the initiative, and a collective voice, threading our experiences, began to emerge. To illustrate this, the article is interspersed with our individual voices through the use of quotations. However, we have chosen not to attribute them to any one individual, thereby strengthening our collective approach. In that way, while it may not represent the format of a traditional journal article, we believe that hearing the unique voices of the collective aligns with our creative approach.

And this is our story...

Creating a sense of belonging

Morris's (2021) research into PGs' experiences of belonging and non-belonging and how that impacted their work found that a sense of belonging is an important aspect of the experience of PGs. Equally, a sense of belonging enables better outcomes academically and personally by supporting GTAs to identify with and be accepted by the community (White & Nonnamaker, 2008). The sense of belonging that the H2H initiative brought not only developed our confidence and lessened our anxiety, but further helped to develop our own pedagogical skills, thereby fostering quality teaching practice (Sharpe, 2000; Weidert et al, 2012; Chadha, 2013), which was positive for all learners.

As GTAs we could meet each week and talk about a range of issues in a safe and supportive environment. Feeling this sense of inclusion also plays an important part in maintaining well-being (Fleuret & Atkinson, 2007; Munoz et al., 2015) and for us, as a group of postgraduates working remotely during the pandemic, this was particularly important, evidenced in the contribution of one or our group members during our discussions.

“Bruner² describes learning as a social process based on current knowledge, experiences and contexts that make learners willing and able to learn. In terms of context, it would be fair to say that a global pandemic in itself, is difficult, emotional, stressful,

² Reference to Bruner (1961)

traumatic, and scary for most. I have yet to find an accurate description of how it felt to navigate oneself through such a context as a new student, or indeed a student new to virtual academic life for an ongoing unknown period of time. However, an understanding of that alone was probably what shaped us as a community of postgraduate students, while providing our fellow students with a form of support that was authentic to their needs. Both hooks³ and Freire⁴ describe this feeling of community that creates a sense that there is shared commitment and a common good that binds us. Certainly, after joining the group I felt a sense of something. What was it? I'm not sure. It was positive and safe, and I enjoyed our weekly discussions with these people, we laughed, we empathised, we listened and, it really helped me."

Not having a sense of belonging to the work community to which you are assigned as a GTA, not understanding what the rules of the group are, may lead to a sense of alienation bringing with it mental and emotional ill-health. Day (2006) refers to the importance of belonging to a particular community and, without the H2H initiative, we would not necessarily have had the opportunity to meet, share and develop a better understanding of the world of GTAs. This, in turn, improved the feeling of mutual dependence, which Schlossberg (1989) describes as 'mattering', the feeling that others depend on us and are interested in us. This was aptly captured by a fellow GTA, when they said:

³ Reference to hooks (1994)

⁴ Reference to Freire (1970)

“Working from home during the pandemic would have been daunting enough if you were already established in a job, but as a new researcher and new to IT Carlow, it was a little more daunting. This initiative enabled me to connect to a community of practice and feel a sense of belonging. The informal approach to the weekly hour-long meetings with the initiative coordinator was an important element in creating this connection, and it allowed me to bond with postgraduate researchers across disciplines. We were able to form a community, albeit a small one, not just what Wenger⁵ calls a community of practice, but also one of interest, which enabled us to share our identity, both as researchers and teachers.”

Forging our GTA identity

Being a GTA can also cause an inner struggle (Winstone & Moore, 2016), as it can create role conflict (Pierson, 2018), by continuously switching between roles and identities, including that of a teacher and student. A major benefit of taking part in this initiative was that we got the opportunity to try out our new teaching persona (Winstone & Moore, 2016) in a safe space, emulating some of the behaviours that we had observed in teachers that we admired, as one of the group articulated below:

“Becoming a teacher for me was the idea of adopting a new mask or as Colbeck⁶ describes, a new persona,

⁵ Reference to Wenger (2000)

⁶ Reference to Colbeck (2008)

separate from my general self, moving away from my student identity which has been a big part of who I am for such a long time. However, it is not as if I have completely moved on from my student identity so to take on both these roles at the same time has been odd. One of the main benefits of the initiative on a personal and a professional level for me was that it allowed me to enter a conversation with undergraduates and teach them in a way. Not necessarily in an academic or content sense but passing down information on how the college works and college systems. So, this gave me the opportunity to take on a knowledgeable role in an informal way, therefore it provided me with more confidence and lessened my anxiety when it came time to teach in a more formal manner during the Research Masters.”

In addition, the weekly feedback meetings supported us to listen to our peers and hear how they had dealt with situations in this new professional role. By listening, we gained knowledge of each other's experiences and shared good practices which we knew we could adopt later ourselves, thereby developing our identity as teachers. We recognised the value of reflection to support and critically assess our own teaching practice and were helped to identify areas for future GTA support and development (Miller, 2010). This point is discussed in the following quote.

“One benefit of the weekly meetings as part of the H2H initiative was the social interactions with other postgraduates who are in a similar circumstance. It allowed GTAs the ability to feel comfortable ‘not

knowing the answers' which can often be overlooked when introduced to a teaching role. As Schussler⁷ identified, it is a common limitation of educational systems that new postgraduates are thrown into teaching environments, often with limited preparation."

Before Covid-19, the teaching responsibilities of GTAs were primarily characterised by large in-person group sessions. The Covid-19 pandemic brought a lot of challenges to teaching and learning, one of the main ones being the move from face-to-face teaching to an online approach (Tinnion, Simpson & Finlay, 2021). This forced GTAs to reconsider their role and the way in which they were teaching, which again led to changes in how they viewed themselves and their role. In the case of the GTA below, this was characterised by a transition from being a demonstrator working interactively with students face-to-face to one where the instruction moved to a more distanced online provision. This added a particular strain on the GTA who struggled with this identity transformation as echoed below:

"As a Graduate Teaching Assistant on an engineering-based course, the problem faced by me was how to plan and deliver highly interpersonal and interactive laboratory-based sessions to the small groups online. This was the time when we were completely cut off from socialising which was affecting my mental health."

⁷ Reference to Schussler et al (2015)

Professional Development

However, the H2H initiative provided many opportunities for professional development for GTAs. Professional development can be defined as ‘structured professional learning’ (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017: v), that results in a change in teaching practices, anticipating both improvements to teaching ability and student learning outcomes. Moreover, early in a GTA’s teaching role, it is especially important to develop a teaching philosophy and foster confidence in their ability to conduct a class (Lang, 2016). However, recently, it has been established that the educational systems both within the institution, and at a systemic level, can inhibit the professional development of a GTA (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017). A study by Ellis (2014) underpins the importance of professional development for GTAs and links this to the success of students and the institutions themselves. Furthermore, professional development may also support the development of communication skills and other transversal skills, as highlighted by one of the group when they commented:

“In my view, professional development can have two aspects, one is the GTAs’ own goals or expectations from the work (in the form of growth or skills addition), and the other is driven by the Institute where the GTAs’ are working. Thinking from the Institute’s viewpoint, I would imagine an initiative such as the H2H at IT Carlow, allows GTAs to help students with additional learning support and perhaps helps develop GTAs’ into seasoned lecturers who can work with the Institute in the future.”

It has been well documented that common introductory modules and practical classes are often the staple point of the GTA teaching experience (Seymour & Hewitt, 1997; Gardner & Jones, 2011; Ellis, 2014; Schussler et al., 2015). Research by Reeves et al. (2016) reports that ‘introductory courses’ are influential pathways to the attainment of undergraduate degrees. Moreover, due to the natural progression from undergraduate to postgraduate researcher, GTAs have a unique knowledge that is commonly seen as novice, given the context of experience (Kung, 2010) but that they are constantly developing in their role. Reports show GTAs are more open to student-centred teaching practices than that of their more experienced counterparts (Seymour, 2005; Ellis, 2014). While this makes the role of GTAs uniquely invaluable there is a lack of importance attached to professional development for GTAs. This point is echoed by one contributor’s quote:

“A common problem faced by newly established postgraduate students, which I faced was the facet of hierarchical institutional structure. Throughout undertaking an undergraduate degree, it is expected that a student progresses from a medium low-level topical knowledge to delving into greater knowledge. As you progress through the years as an undergraduate, the additional responsibility of your actions increases with the weight of your voice. All building to a state of self-actualisation promptly associated with graduation. This was similar to my experience, although, to my surprise, the life of a postgraduate researcher who teaches lacks compassion, often resulting in a feeling of isolation. The new responsibilities, expectations, and duties

placed upon the shoulders of new postgraduates can often be associated with an overwhelmed sense of reactions, with little outlets to turn to.”

This highlights the importance of institutions focusing on supporting GTA professional development. The proven traditional approach of self-evaluation is perhaps the first step in professional development for GTAs, so that they know where they started in terms of development and what their current progress reveals. Feedback from peers and experts in the field often helps one think of improvement opportunities and this all combines to help them develop in their roles. As an example of this, the H2H initiative enabled improvement opportunities through the weekly feedback sessions with the initiative coordinator. Summarising self-evaluation and feedback from experts and students, a GTA should be able to determine if, and in what context, professional development has happened, as flagged by one member of the group in the following contribution:

“From my perspective, professional development primarily arose through feedback received from undergraduate learners in the initiative and subsequent discussions with fellow GTAs regarding same. Specifically, undergraduate learners outlined what they perceived to be effective and not effective. Due to the nature of the initiative and the role of GTA’s, this feedback from learners came from a wide range of disciplines. GTA’s subsequently engaged in discussion and reflection regarding the implications and applications of this broad feedback to their respective teaching practice. Notably, these dialogues and collective discussions were peer-led.”

Feedback is an indispensable element of the learning process (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Wisniewski, Zierer & Hattie, 2020), and a vital component of professional development for teachers (Knight, 2002; Ulker, 2021). While GTAs benefited from the facilitator and peer feedback on microteaching sessions incorporated within an introductory teaching and learning module, the context of Covid-19 and online remote classes reduced further such opportunities. In addition, UG learners' propensity to have their video off during online classes (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021) removed GTAs' ability to receive feedback from crucial nonverbal cues that would facilitate and contribute toward the moment reflection and evaluation (Schön, 1983; Miller, 1988). While some GTAs are fortunate to receive generous support from lecturers, successive lockdowns ensured actual feedback on teaching practice did not happen, resulting in GTAs not knowing whether or not they were developing professionally in their practice. With the traditional feedback loop disrupted, the H2H acted as a means for the GTAs to develop professionally, but in a different teaching environment, as they were exposed to the teaching and learning experiences of the undergraduate students and were able to reflect and refine their own practice based on this feedback. This was commented upon by one member of the group, as follows:

“The H2H initiative generated regular informal and detailed feedback from undergraduate participants in relation to aspects of their teachers’ learning strategies. Approaches that learners felt were particularly useful were highlighted, as well as practices that were not as effective as intended. It

appears that the voicing of honest and unapologetic feedback was facilitated by the fact that undergraduate learners primarily perceived GTA's as fellow students. The design and delivery of the initiative also encouraged the building of trust from the outset."

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the traditional written feedback questionnaires, which would normally be completed by, undergraduates to elicit feedback on pedagogical practices adopted by GTAs. For us, as a group, it was felt that such feedback may not have been beneficial, given that the context of teaching had changed dramatically. In addition, providing individual feedback on a GTA's early teaching performance at the height of a pandemic, that involved a sudden move to remote teaching, may well have been counterproductive. On the other hand, receiving broad H2H feedback from a range of students, across a variety of disciplines, ensured that any emotional response that may include embarrassment, stress, or withdrawal (Moore & Kuol, 2005; Arthur, 2009), on the part of the GTA, was effectively bypassed. Additionally, the input of disciplinary-specific knowledge from other GTA's added a layer of context that allowed individual GTA's to make sense of feedback and apply what was most relevant to the circumstances of their own individual practice, thereby supporting them to learn from each other.

Conclusion

This article presents the benefits of a co-created, postgraduate-led peer support initiative, that was central in developing the GTAs' sense of belonging, teaching identity,

and professional development. Through the H2H initiative, we became a GTA community of practice. It created an informal, non-judgemental social space to reflect on our own individual teaching practice, exchange ideas and knowledge, and build confidence in our teaching. Our pedagogical practice developed through a collaborative and iterative process (Bryk et al., 2015; Durksen, Klassen & Daniels, 2017). The initiative also enabled those of us who had yet to begin teaching, to gain insight from those who already had.

In addition, this initiative allowed us to receive direct feedback from undergraduates about their thoughts on effective teaching strategies and approaches to remote online classes. Through both peer support and undergraduates' feedback, we developed our teaching behaviours and practices (Gaertner, 2014) and engaged in what we perceived as 'improvement orientated actions' (Rohl, Bijlsma & Rollett, 2021: 3). Furthermore, the social connections we created as part of this initiative aided our mental well-being during the Covid-19 lockdown and attendant isolation.

Implications and Limitations

The H2H initiative has had a significant positive impact on developing our teaching identity and aiding our professional development. Investment of time and effort by the GTAs in building a community of practice, developing friendships, and focusing on professional development led to an increase in our own confidence as teachers. In addition, it helped us to be more reflective and had a positive effect on our teaching practice, thereby having benefits on a wider institutional level. Our experience suggests that it would be advantageous

for both educational institutions to have structured teaching practice provided to all GTAs so as to enhance their own practice. Furthermore, placing power and direction in the GTAs' hands, by supporting the co-creation of a professional development opportunity environment such as the H2H initiative allowed us to be more agentic in our professional development and to learn from each other in a safe and supportive way.

One limitation of this study is that the H2H initiative was conducted during an emergency situation relating to the onset of Covid-19 and may not be easily replicated now that students have transitioned back to onsite teaching activities, thereby limiting their availability to meet online as class groups. However, this study has highlighted that the underlying benefits of such an initiative are so numerous that consideration should be given to how more initiatives of this kind could be created across higher education institutions. Such initiatives would not only support undergraduates but would clearly help GTAs to improve their confidence, to develop their professional identity, to engage in professional development, thereby enhancing the learning experience for all.

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