

Teaching the Teachers: Reflections from two Graduate Teaching Assistants

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Abstract

This paper offers a critical reflection on the experience of two former Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) - the authors - who were tasked with creating a digital learning program during the first UK national lockdown in 2020. The program drew from an emerging body of literature that seeks to employ Freirian pedagogies in the digital classroom and was designed to equip both new and established members of faculty with the skills needed for online teaching. While taking on this challenge, however, the experienced GTAs found that their pedagogical instincts and practices were challenged by their positionalities as young Early Career Researchers (ECRs) from underrepresented groups in British Academia. The aim of this paper is thus to scrutinise the potential for online learning to democratise and shift perceived hierarchies within academia, not only for students, but for ECRs navigating the structures of university teaching in the current employment climate.

This paper offers a critical reflection on the experience of two former Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) - the authors - who were tasked with 'teaching the teachers' at the Department of International Development (DID) at King's College London during the UK's first national lockdown in 2020. The 'teaching the teachers' program included workshops and learning activities that we designed to train senior academic staff as they prepared to teach online, many for the first time. DID approached us as experienced GTAs with a successful track record of using these tools in our teaching, as well as experience in delivering teacher training in the past. The program included everything from how to navigate subtle aspects of *Keats* (the internal learning management platform at KCL) and use external software tools such as *Padlet*, *EduFlow*, *Mentimeter*, and *Kahoot*, to how to record and edit lectures and manipulate user interfaces for maximum impact. Our program, like our day-to-day teaching of students, was guided by the work of noted Brazilian pedagogist Paulo Freire and his theories relating to the concept of a 'pedagogy of the oppressed' (Freire, 1968).

While taking on this challenge, we found that our pedagogical instincts, practises, and methods were particularly challenged by our positionality as two Early Career Researchers (ECRs) from underrepresented backgrounds (in terms of gender, race, class and citizenship) in British Academia. As we implemented blended, digital, and active learning techniques to deliver the staff training program, we were pushed to reflect upon the perceived academic hierarchies that engulf us and shaped our role within the broader team of staff. While we were able to make an impact on teaching and learning in the department, we were unable, as might be expected, to translate this into

serious change in the academic hierarchies which have and continue to bind ECRs.

We use this reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983) of our experiences to initiate an important dialogue about how digital learning might impact workplace relationships, especially between experienced and new members of academic staff. This essay dialogues with recent scholarship on digital pedagogical design and delivery as well as literature concerning inequality and the casualisation of employment within higher education institutions. Most extant scholarship focuses on the potential for online learning to enhance the learning-teaching experience. Such research continues to focus on the experience of learners, leaving aside the relationship between educators, their colleagues, and their employers, as well as the potential for online education to reinforce rather than break down employee hierarchies and inequalities in higher education. It is to these questions that our present reflection now turns. In this way, our aim is to scrutinise the potential for online learning to democratise and shift perceived hierarchies not only for students, but for ECRs navigating the structures of university teaching in the current employment climate.

Freire in the Digital Age

The recent turn to online learning, loosely defined as learning that takes place online, remotely, and at a distance, as opposed to in the traditional classroom, has catalysed a wave of new scholarship, much of which has emphasised the transformative and inclusive potential of online learning. At least in the Global North, the COVID-19 pandemic that forced education into the virtual sphere has also come at a time of

passionate debate surrounding the ‘decolonisation’ of curricula and universities more broadly. In this context, the conceptual and theoretical frameworks offered by Freire have seen something of a revival within pedagogical research, having been called upon to contemplate how online learning might challenge the social hierarchies and inequalities that are replicated in the classroom.

For Freire (1968), traditional methods of education that follow a ‘banking’ system, whereby the student is measured in terms of their ability to memorise and repeat information, reflect colonial power relations. In such relations, the teacher takes on the role of colonial oppressor, however benevolent and charitable, by reinforcing hierarchies of knowledge production. In this process, the teacher and student alike perpetuate relations of oppression; the teacher, by banking knowledge, and the student, through a phenomenon Freire terms ‘internalised oppression’ (1968: 47), which describes the student who passively takes on new knowledge without active critical engagement or reflection. The danger here is not only that the creation of new knowledge is neither encouraged nor valued, but that students who are unable to relate to or see themselves in the information they are being asked to memorise can fall into what might typically be perceived as disengagement or poor performance.

In Freirian practices, oppressive pedagogies are challenged first and foremost by creating a two-way dialogue between teacher and student. It is through this equal dialogue that new knowledge is produced, knowledge that draws from the worldview of all participants. In a process Freire calls ‘conscientisation’, students are ‘liberated’ (ibid: 66-67): they see themselves in and identify with the learning materials,

and they become actively engaged in challenging their reality both within and outside the classroom. Transferring aspects of Freirian practices to both the physical and virtual classroom is thus understood as a potential not only to decolonise learning content, but to combat educational inequality, promote social justice, and support students in fulfilling their utmost potential as actors in the world (ibid).

Applying Freirian theories and practices to the virtual realm require readjusting our lenses to identify what Gariola (2021) calls the 'digitally oppressed'. The digital resources, media, and tools that make online teaching possible carry their own colonial baggage that can be internalised by educators and learners alike in ways we might not be attuned to (ibid: 36). Access to quality internet, physical spaces that are conducive to learning, and basic technological skills are all examples of factors that combine with existing inequalities reinforced by the banking method and resultant learned oppression.

Several case studies have been undertaken to explore the more practical dimensions to this process. In a qualitative study of 78 students over the course of four semesters, Blau, Shamir-Inbal, and Avdiel (2020) demonstrated that the Digital Literacy Framework (DLF) not only supported learners in developing their own digital literacy, effective communication, and collaboration skills, but also their "sense of ownership over learning outcomes" (ibid: 1). What follows this sense of ownership is what Freire would understand as the liberatory potential of education: by being able to identify themselves in learning outcomes, students are able to actively participate in the world and their position within it.

Such outcomes are not a given: it is all too easy to assume that online learning is inherently more inclusive, accessible, and value-free, however, certain precautions need to be taken (Montelongo & Eaton, 2020). To ensure inclusivity and the 'liberating' potential of education, measures such as being less stringent on attendance, creating asynchronous learning content, and diversifying formats (audio, captions, etc.) have all been cited as ways to support more inclusive dialogue (Sousa, 2021). Dialogue itself is another understudied challenge; scholars have noted the importance of effective engagement to support learner-facilitator interaction and collaboration, educators' understanding of learner expectations, and the most effective tools for enhancing the user experience (Regmi & Jones, 2020). Tools that facilitate social media-style interaction, such as blogs (DeWaard & Roberts, 2021), and simulate face-to-face classroom time strengthen the potential for online learning to support meaningful relationships (Mehta & Aguilera, 2020), socialisation, and the collaborative creation of content (Greenhow & Galvin, 2020). It is also crucial that students understand the technology being used as well as how to use them to engage with their peers and teachers (Bedenlier et al., 2020).

With recent scholarship, therefore, educators such as ourselves have been provoked to think about the many ways that liberatory pedagogical practices can be transposed from the physical to the online classroom, as well as how they need to be adapted in line with the particularities of digital tools at our disposal. What recent literature has not accounted for, however, is what happens when the teachers become the students. With the sudden shift to online learning catalysed by the Covid-19 pandemic, educators at all

levels were forced to return to the (digital) drawing board and rethink entirely the delivery mechanisms for their teaching content. With this, we scrutinise the potential for digitised Freirian theories and practices to be employed when training and educating the educators themselves. We also question whether, and if so how, liberatory processes continue to hold when applied to teachers rather than traditional learners.

Teaching the Teachers

Over the Summer of 2020, the authors, at the time employed as Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), were tasked with ‘teaching the teachers’ to swiftly make the transition to delivering their classes online. While most faculty were able to finish off the 2020 spring term with basic knowledge of online tools such as *Teams* and *Google Docs*, the start of the 2020 autumn term necessitated a more holistic and dedicated venture into online teaching as the Covid-19 pandemic refused to subside. We approached the challenge in the same way as we would student teaching; by designing the online workshops and activities for our senior colleagues with the intention of cultivating two-way learning and encouraging inclusivity, active learning, collaboration, and mastery of a range of media and digital tools.

We called our program ‘teaching the teachers’, which consisted of three major components. The first was to explore a host of online tools and prepare training materials that would help our department’s teachers adapt to online delivery. These included KCL-specific tools as well as external tools such as *Padlet*, *Eduflow*, *Kahoot*, and *Mentimeter*, to name a few. The second was to deliver three training

sessions to more junior GTAs and faculty on how to incorporate these tools in their teaching. Finally, we worked with nine individual faculty members to adapt existing in-person learning content to the online space. Our efforts ranged from teaching faculty members how to frame their camera angles correctly to record and deliver online lectures, to identifying software to allow a faculty member to continue their weekly peer-to-peer review writing exercises.

Like in our day-to-day teaching of students, Freirian concepts and methods relating to learned oppression and two-way dialogue sat at the back of our minds as we designed and delivered the program. During the entire process, we were aware of our own positionality – subject to numerous hierarchies (gender, race, class and citizenship) – which we have had to overcome while working with faculty. Firstly, we were both ECRs working on zero-hour contracts tasked with working with full time, permanently employed faculty. A 2019 UCU survey showed the rampant prevalence of these types of contracts. For example, the report showed that 68% of research staff in higher education are on fixed term contracts. Further, 78% of participants reported regularly working more hours than they are paid for in order to do their jobs properly (UCU, 2019). Staff in such situations of precarity associate their employment status with numerous other challenges: the ability to make ends meet and pay bills, needing more than one job, detrimental impacts on mental health and family planning, the quality of teaching, and their ability to carry out research and publish. All of the above add to a cycle of stunted academic career progression – a position of ‘oppression’, in Freirian terms.

Our race, gender, and economic status were also factors that impacted our coordination of this program, as they do our wider experience as employees. As shown in a 2021 report by the UK Political Science Association, there are consistent disparities amongst employees in political science departments across the country. For example, in the 2018/19 academic year, 61% of staff were male, and 78% were white (Hanretty, 2021). This overrepresentation becomes worse the higher up the ladder academics go. Men and white members of staff are over-represented at senior levels: only 29% of senior academics (senior lecturers, readers, professors) are female, and only 13% are from an ethnic minority (ibid). In our own experience, as well as through anecdotal evidence gained in conversations with fellow ECRs (see also Wilkinson, 2020), entering academia on these grounds adds to a sense of inferiority that perversely leads professional achievements to be interpreted as good fortune or charity.

In this way, it is clear that Freirian concepts of learned oppression are felt not only by students, but also by ECRs – including GTAs and hourly paid lecturers (HPLs). ‘Imposter syndrome’ is by comparison insufficient, as it individualises and privatises the process through which individuals from underprivileged or underrepresented backgrounds find themselves feeling inferior and inadequate in a given environment. We reflected on the way that the precarious nature of our employment contracts led us to taking on the work in the first place; a drive to make ourselves indispensable and necessary to the department’s functioning had over the years led us to self-exploit, to the point where we were even proposing ideas for additional work we could take on. Along similar lines, offers of additional hourly paid

work, however menial or counter-productive to our careers, were received with gratitude and a feeling of being valued.

These are classic examples of learned oppression in the Freirian sense. The request for and grateful acceptance of ‘charity’ perpetuates a myth of heroism on behalf of the donor, and signals that the ‘oppressed’ has internalised and aspires to the superiority of the ‘oppressor’ (Freire, 1968: 46;140). Indeed, on a number of occasions in the past we had found ourselves resisting our understanding of what constitutes productive teaching time. In terms of GTA work for module convenors, hourly budgets constrained by college-level decisions meant that we regularly had to de-prioritise our goals of making teaching content and activities more accessible and liberatory to focus on other things, such as administrative work. This comes amidst a broad range of examples of how GTAs feel forced either to compromise on the quality of their teaching or spend significant hours carrying out unrecognised labour¹.

Reflection-on-Action

Looking back now, it might seem like the work we did was easy and could be considered overkill. However, in mid-2020, the academic world had not fully incorporated TEL tools and techniques, primarily because there was no major need to do so. Therefore, our program which introduced faculty to new tools for online teaching such as *Padlet*, *EduFlow*, *Kahoot*, and *Mentimeter*, along with our one-to-one consultancy with individual faculty members on module development was new

¹ See the 2020 survey carried out by the King’s College London GTA campaign: <https://kclgtas.wordpress.com/2020/11/26/fair-pay-for-gtas-start-of-term-survey-results/> [site last accessed 01/05/2022].

and vital to meet the need of the hour. By the following spring, we were encouraged following our presentation at the King's College London's *Learning and Teaching* conference to reflect on our experience. Guided by the conference theme of 'working together for a world-class education', we thought about how crucial we perceived our contribution to the department to have been in those critical months of uncertainty, both for staff and students. At the same time, we looked at our continued situation of precarious employment, and thought about how 'teaching the teachers' had influenced, and been influenced by, department collaborations marked by unequal power dynamics.

Carrying out a simple activity of collective reflection-on-action, we returned to our Freirian conceptual frameworks to revisit the process from start to finish. We also reached out to senior faculty to understand how they looked back on the program, and whether they even remembered it.

At the end of the day, most academics had taken on board what they had learned as they incorporated new content, methods and tools into their teaching, be it online, hybrid, or in-person. Our ideas and approaches were mixed into the process; we had, through dialogue and two-way learning, been valued as knowledge producers. Senior faculty provided the following breakdown of what they understood our contribution to have been:

In the transition to online learning, work as teaching teams – with GTAs who had experience on modules, in particular – was essential to planning interactive activities.

This included designing asynchronous activities (e.g. use of Padlet, quizzes, discussion fora) for students to complete ahead of lecture and seminar, to ensure that they were actively reading, and for the teaching team to have a sense of how they were engaging with the material.

Doing this as a convenor-GTA team meant teaching objectives and realities of classroom dynamics were married up effectively.

In some ways, the result of this collaboration created the most pedagogically comprehensive and thoughtful version of the module.

On the surface of things, therefore, and in particular on an interpersonal level, it was clear that ‘teaching the teachers’ had generated greater equality between ourselves (as GTAs and HPLs) and more senior members of staff. For Freire, to engage in dialogue is to “recognize the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process of knowing” (Freire, 1995: 379); it is an epistemological relationship. Indeed, the learning that took place was markedly reciprocal, the outcome being a series of online modules that were coherent in themselves as well as an overall program. At the same time, however, an overarching sense of privilege and gratitude to be carrying out the work also marked our experiences.

On the one hand, we were exposed to decision making procedures that ordinarily take place behind the scenes of a GTA’s main concerns and responsibilities. We recalled one occasion where the task was to create a set of interactive questionnaires to asynchronously monitor students’ understanding of core readings. What ensued was a back-and-forth debate between the GTA, who was working from

the perspective of the possibilities and limitations of the college's online learning platform, *Keats*, and the module convenor's very personal commitment to ensuring a balanced treatment of their module's overall learning and skill-based objectives. The result was a series of questionnaires that came in a broad format of question styles and drew from a range of tools far beyond the true/false or multiple-choice options that are typically used.

In another example, one GTA was tasked with producing 'audio guides' to accompany core readings for first-year students looking to develop their critical reading skills outside of synchronous sessions. While this pedagogical innovation was clearly the module convenor's, it was the GTA who was entrusted with highlighting key aspects of readings to best serve the module outcomes, objectives, and assessment patterns. Their voice had thus been incorporated into the learning through collective epistemological dialogue. On this personal level, through the one-on-one component to 'teaching the teachers', we both felt a renewed sense of being valued equally as both authorities on the matter of digital learning and co-creators of learning content, rather than simply assistants to the delivery of learning content.

More broadly, we were also called upon to suggest new learning content as a way of supporting the 'decolonising' strategy of the department to diversify reading lists and make them more inclusive in terms of authors' nationality, race, and gender. Although it was never explicitly addressed, we felt this decision was likely facilitated by our position as ECRs, our more intimate understanding of student needs as GTAs and seminar leaders, and, more specifically to us, our widely acknowledged social justice and decolonial

approaches to teaching. Beyond simply changing or diversifying reading lists, this also meant decolonising the means of delivering content itself. Our intention was to shape the student (user) experience and interface to avoid simply transferring existing hierarchies from face-to-face teaching to the online sphere, in line with earlier-cited literature. The process meant that we were entrusted with something quite personal: to translate a senior member of staff's educational creation for the online space. This required module convenors to compromise and let go of a number of aspects of their work to trust not only the GTAs, but the digital sphere itself.

While on this interpersonal level hierarchies were challenged, structurally they were not. It is not radical to state that GTAs are exploited in terms of their labour, and that those that take part in teaching as ECRs are often entering a self-sustaining cycle of disadvantage when it comes to their longer-term careers. While teaching for low wages is often sold as an important part of professional development, particularly during the final years of a PhD, dependency on such work as the main source of income takes away from opportunities to write postdoctoral grant applications and work on academic outputs - critical requisites for obtaining more permanent employment. Paradoxically, it is only in gaining permanent or full-time academic employment that researchers might be allowed to dedicate a portion of their hours to outputs and gain access to a wider pool of research grants. Those entering academia with unpaid student loans (most of whom are from historically disadvantaged backgrounds) and without financial security, like ourselves, thus often find themselves

reckoning with a rigid feedback cycle whereby permanent employment rests on unpaid labour and financial sacrifice.

We left 'teaching the teachers' with a little more experience under our belts, and an important example to relate during potential future interviews. Yet at the end of the program, we returned to precarious employment (as fixed-term contract lecturers) and a clearly defined position within the employment hierarchy. Just two years on, we wonder whether certain members of staff even remember that 'teaching the teachers' took place. In this context, 'teaching the teachers' did not alter or challenge hierarchies. Ultimately, the department only had a limited number of hours it could hire us for to do this work, and we had to make those hours sufficient, despite the feeling that our work was unfinished. We felt that we could have continued developing the course for ongoing and future training sessions; to be delivered and implemented on a more regular basis and to be incorporated into workload models.

These were also matters that clearly sat outside the hands of the department and the colleagues we had been working with. Yet it is worth observing that 'teaching the teachers' spurred no efforts to challenge or scrutinise the norms surrounding GTAs and HPLs' contractual position. Long-standing issues, such as GTA and HPLs' exclusion from department meetings, for example, would not be revisited in light of the increasingly important role we played as part of the broader team during this time. Permanent staff continued to act as gatekeepers and mediators for GTAs/HPLs to raise their concerns and grievances to the college. All of the above, of course, is the result of a deeply entrenched neoliberal system of employment within

academia, one that values the student primarily as a consumer, which in turn necessitates the cheap labour and exploitative employment of GTAs and HPLs.

Conclusion

To conclude on this short reflection, there is potential to extend the application of pedagogical theory beyond the experience of learners, particularly using Freirian perspectives. In particular, digital learning should be scrutinised to understand how it might challenge employment hierarchies for those positioned in the early stages of their career, in particular those who are subject to systemic hierarchical oppression and precarious employment. This reflection on our experiment 'teaching the teachers' has shown us how pedagogical theory, in particular Freirian concepts surrounding hierarchies, can be a helpful tool for rethinking one of the most pertinent issues in academia today. 'Teaching the teachers' challenged the ways we had formerly been valued as knowledge producers, as our input into the department's wider teaching framework and programs became critical to ensuring a smooth transition into digital learning. Yet while the urgent challenges created by the Covid-19 pandemic and national lockdown spurred opened certain doors for us, they did not challenge the deeply entrenched systemic oppression faced by many in academia today.

Through providing this reflection, we hope to encourage greater contemplation into the ways that Freirian concepts and frameworks can be applied beyond the learner-educator relationship to also scrutinise glaringly uneven hierarchical relationships between senior and junior staff members, and

between permanent and temporary employees. We believe that more empirical and theoretical research is needed to emphasise the complexity of these relations in particular at a time when, on the one hand, academia becomes an increasingly more precarious and exploitative environment to work in, while on the other hand, the 'decolonial' and digitally literate profile of ECRs in HPL or GTA positions becomes increasingly valuable to the commodification of academia. In a bid to recognise the value of such knowledge beyond personal thanks and offers of sporadic hourly paid opportunities, we hope that concrete recommendations can emerge as to how to incorporate digital pedagogical labour and its related skills into job specifications and contracts.

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