

# **IDEAS (Inspirations for Digital Engagement Activities) to support the teaching practice of early career academics.**

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## **Abstract**

The Covid-19 pandemic has provided both challenges to established patterns and also opportunities, such as for new collaborative approaches between different teams to support education within online or increasingly blended environments (Havemann & Roberts, 2021). This paper discusses one such collaboration which involved a group of UCL academic development and digital education staff who co-designed and developed a collection of open educational resources entitled Inspirations for Digital Engagement Activities or IDEAs (Walker et al, 2021).

The IDEAs are ‘recipes’ for activities which are designed to scaffold and support teaching in online or blended contexts, and perhaps particularly useful to those newer to teaching, such as postgraduate teaching assistants (PGTAs). The collection of IDEAs comprises a set of activities that can be used to enhance active learning (Prince, 2004), and to

encourage engagement and participation (Gourlay et al., 2021) in a flexible and playful way across disciplines. Each IDEA comes with a set of instructions about how to adapt it to different learning scenarios, planning time and relevant digital resources.

The IDEAs are disseminated via interactive workshops which introduce our dedicated blog (<https://reflect.ucl.ac.uk/ideas/ideas/>). The blog is organised in such a way that IDEAs can be browsed based on their pedagogical aims. The blog is also an open resource where we invite PGTAs to contribute their comments and examples of activities so to develop a community of 'early' practitioners beyond disciplinary environments. The use of resources such as IDEAs in professional development can support a new generation of educators by sharing and modelling good practice. At the same time through scenarios and activities in the workshop we problematise taken-for-granted assumptions about lack of participation and the nature of active engagement (Kuhn et al., 2021) taking a student-centred approach (Trinidad, 2020)

## **Introduction and Background**

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic initiated a rapid pivot online in order to facilitate learning and teaching continuity, initially via ‘Emergency Remote Teaching’ approaches which, in the main, sought to digitize and substitute familiar forms of classroom practice rather than redesign for online learning (Hodges et al 2020). However, in our experience, as weeks turned to months following the initial pivot, institutions such as UCL tended to focus efforts on enhancing provision of staff development, including technical and learning design support, in order to better support online education over an indefinite period. Trends towards greater digitalization within campus-based education were suddenly accelerated.

The pandemic context has provided both challenges to established patterns and opportunities for new practices, such as the emergence of unprecedented hours of live, synchronous online teaching. The latter included collaborative approaches between different teams and areas of expertise within universities to support teaching and learning within online or increasingly blended environments (Havemann & Roberts, 2021; Watermeyer, Crick & Knight, 2021). At UCL, as the pandemic response evolved from support for ‘teaching continuity’ to discussions of ‘connected learning’, a variety of projects were undertaken with the aim of building digital pedagogic capacity. The authors were members of a group drawn from the central Digital Education and Arena Centre for Research-Based Education teams, as well as Faculty Learning Technology Leads, who co-designed

and developed a collection of open educational resources entitled Inspirations for Digital Engagement Activities, or 'IDEAs' (Walker et al, 2021).

Against this backdrop, the role of postgraduate teaching assistants (PGTAs) has developed quickly over the past two academic years, as a high proportion of online, synchronous teaching was allocated to teaching assistants in the form of online tutorials, seminar groups and as supporting colleagues in large group teaching. The UCL Arena Centre, which provides central training and support for PGTAs in relation to their teaching and academic practice, noted an increase in more than 40% of PhD teaching assistants attending its non-compulsory training course Teaching Associate Programme (TAP)) in the academic year 2020-21.

As noted by Byrne et al. (2021), PGTAs are often asked to perform a task without being offered extensive preparation or support and this trend appeared to be exacerbated during the pandemic, as PGTAs were, at times, assumed to have expertise in the use of digital technologies. Whether in any individual case this assumption is valid, someone's facility with digital tools can be understood as necessary but not sufficient to provide them with expertise and confidence in digital pedagogy; but we have noted for experienced teaching staff, the challenges of using technology tended to be perceived as the main hurdle to overcome in moving online.

The Arena and Digital Education teams developed a range of specific resources accessible to teaching staff, including

PGTAs, to support the shift from face to face to online teaching, including asynchronous Moodle courses, templates, drop-in sessions and specific workshops in addition to the usual academic development provision, which was fully transferred online. Through the collection of formal and informal feedback that PGTAs shared through workshop activities with Arena and Digital Education at UCL, TAP and other seminars offered as part of our training provision, we succeeded to carry out an analysis of recurrent needs and areas for support development, which fed into the design of a new stand-alone resource that became known as IDEAs. The need for strategies to ensure students' engagement and participation in online sessions was reported as a key area of concern, as well as lack of variety of activities and general lack of confidence in relation to online teaching.

Our experience in developing the resource followed the same pattern as described by Varga-Atkins et al. (2021). As we designed the resource, we acted in response to students' needs following four prominent drivers for student-centred decision making: a) collecting and rapidly sharing student voice data, b) offering more choice in anticipation of different circumstances and access to technology c) giving a high priority to equalising access to technology and d) taking responsibility for students in difficult circumstances. In addition, we considered the particular dual/liminal position of PGTAs as both students and instructors. The positive response we received through formal and informal feedback across the number of activities and courses available for

PGTAs, and from the IDEAs workshop in particular, suggests a profound investment of the PGTAs in their development as teaching academics, which also results in an increased interest in accrediting schemes such as the AdvanceHE associate fellowship. We therefore found PGTAs highly concerned about the quality of their teaching practice and performance, in contrast with the findings of Compton and Tran (2017).

### **The IDEAS Resource**

The IDEAs are designed to scaffold and support teaching, particularly for those newer to teaching in digital contexts, and therefore we suggest they can be particularly useful to PGTAs, although we hope, not limited to this group in appeal. The collection of IDEAs comprises a set of activities that can be used to enhance active learning (Prince, 2004), and to encourage engagement and participation (Gourlay et al., 2021) in a flexible and playful way across disciplines. Our IDEAs are disseminated via interactive workshops which introduce our dedicated blog, where the IDEAs as well as case studies from participants are collected and showcased.

The idea of using a blog arose from our discussions as we collectively developed the IDEAs collection. Initially we were focused on producing a slide deck, aka, the 'IDEA cards', which can also be accessed via the blog. The cards consist of a title and quick description slide for each activity or recipe, with a second slide going into greater detail about pedagogic

reasons for using the activity and steps and resources needed for implementation. For example, one card outlines how to scaffold peer-feedback activities in class, whilst another how to engage students with reflective portfolios. The set of PowerPoint slides can be downloaded and modified; tutors might choose to copy an activity into their own presentation and modify it to give the relevant details to suit their session, and then show or share this version with students.

As we thought about these potential strengths of providing the resource in the slides format, we also noted that a slide deck tends to be presented and 'consumed' in a linear fashion, and that it would also be interesting to be able to search or browse the activities. Consequently, we also created a site on [Reflect](#), UCL's educational blogging platform, in order to display each activity as a post. Posts are each categorised with pedagogic tags indicating what kind of academic skills development the activity supports, for example, assessment literacy, reflection, or collaboration. In addition to pedagogic purposes, all recipes also became members of a 'supergroup' which differentiated whether they are suitable for short-term or long-term usage. In this way the resource represents an attempt to work at the granular level of activities which might take place once, several times, or evolve through the duration of a module, and thereby to introduce learning design concepts and practices to teaching staff engaged emergency online teaching in a scaffolded and practical way. In introducing the IDEAs to PGTAs, we surmised that they may be less likely to

be empowered to embed longitudinal learning activities into module design, as they often reported to be asked to teach sessions that have been already planned by module leaders, so while we made them aware of the range of activities available, we focused our attention on those which the resource describes as ‘quick, on-the-fly activities’ which, for example, could be set up and conducted during a single session.

### **Reception and Usage of IDEAs**

IDEAs was originally presented and promoted to UCL staff and the wider public via a number of bite-size workshops and conference presentations in the spring of 2021. These provided an excellent opportunity to raise interest in the resource and collect initial feedback on its reception and usage. Following the UCL education conference, we were asked to deliver tailor-made workshops for department and library staff. From the summer of 2021, IDEAs was embedded as a key resource as part of the TAP course. The course aims to introduce PGTAs to learning and teaching at UCL; it is not compulsory and divided into 5 sessions, its practice oriented with plenty of opportunities to micro-teach and reflect on practice. As mentioned in the introduction, TAP student numbers increased substantially over the past two academic years. As well as embedding IDEAs in our current offer, we applied for funding from the doctoral school to carry out stand-alone workshops, as we felt that a focus on the resource, as well as practice time in the context of a dedicated session, could benefit PGTAs in the process of



familiarizing themselves with (?) the resource and applying it to their teaching.

Since the beginning of the academic year 2021-22 we have run 4 workshops open to all PGTAs across different faculties. The workshops were attended by more than 20 participants per session and each session run for a total of 90 minutes. The structure of the session included a presentation of the resource through the engagement of 4 different IDEAs and time to use the resources in relation to a number of different teaching scenarios related to perceived lack of student participation. During and following each workshop we collected feedback from participants, which demonstrates that the resource supports PGTAs to scaffold their teaching practice and plan their sessions. For example: 'I feel I have a clearer understanding of how to plan my sessions', 'Thanks, I will try to use these with my students next week'.

As part of the workshop, we asked participants to contribute to the IDEAs blog with examples of their practice and we have so far collected a number of case studies from UCL on student engagement, which are available on the IDEAs blog, and our call for new contributions is open and rolling for new participants. We believe that sharing practice is a key element of the project and that it can further enhance the resource by adding new 'recipes' to the existing ones and, at the same time, examples of practice can help PGTAs from different disciplinary backgrounds to see how the resources can be practically adapted to different scenarios. We aim to develop a hub for PGTAs' IDEAs that can be a point of

reference as a teaching toolkit for PGTAs across institutions and that can also serve as an opportunity to build confidence and expertise in relation to academic practice.

### **Development of PGTA-led cases of Practice**

Following our sessions, several PGTAs contacted us for further support and to share and develop their ideas. We offered a number of drop-in times where we could discuss possible developments and get a better understanding of their teaching context. Formal and informal feedback we collected during and after the sessions, and presented above, offered a strong indication that the resources meet the needs of PGTAs in relation to the key aspect of their teaching, both face-to-face and online. The follow-up drop-in sessions were an opportunity to get to know some of the PGTAs better and tune in with their teaching practice and evolving teaching identity.

The PGTAs that engaged with the IDEAs workshops and resources articulated their usefulness in terms of their adaptability to their teaching and learning contexts. 'I see how they can be used for different purposes and how I can adjust them to my groups'. The resources offered participants an opportunity to share examples of teaching practice that resulted in professional identity building and a reflection on the importance of specific contextual aspects of what constitutes good teaching and rapport with students. Also, the PGTAs who engaged with us elaborated on the

importance of conceptualising IDEAs as a framework that needs adjusting depending on individual needs and circumstances. As we originally intended, the activities proposed in the blog have been treated as a starting point, rather than a ready-made 'solution', to scaffold and support session planning and students' independent learning. Our conversations with PGTAs outlined an implicit engagement with constructive alignment of content, activities and assessments (Biggs and Tang, 2011) and pedagogical approaches centred on students' needs (Varga-Atkins et al., 2021), as the PGTAs appeared articulate and convincing in their attempt to design sessions that could meet learning outcomes and preparation for future assessments in a timely and flexible manner that would be responsive to evolving needs and feedback.

Such reflections point in the direction of PGTAs identifying themselves strongly with their teaching identity and investing consistently in developing their practice, which is also supported by the increase attendance to Arena core provision and interest in accreditation as the HEA Fellowship scheme. Notwithstanding the centrality of their research, the IDEAs project has highlighted a strong need for academic practice training and support focusing on PGTAs as a key part of their academic development. This preliminary finding appears to contradict Compton and Tran's (2017) research, and it suggests that the shift in workload and teaching responsibilities accelerated by the pandemic might have had a profound impact on PGTA's identity building.

## **Next steps and Conclusions**

IDEAS is a learning and teaching resource which aims to scaffold the design of activities to support learning skills across disciplines. Early feedback from PGTAs mentioned above supports the value and usefulness of the resource. Our next steps are to support PGTAs in sharing their practice on the blog through case studies and discussions. We have made the resource available to staff beyond UCL and hope to use it as a hub of teaching ideas and activities. We are also currently encouraging some of the PGTAs that engaged with us to use their case studies as a starting point for presentations in education conferences or wider distribution via specific platforms. Sharing their work with a wider public would have a positive effect on the process of identity building we discussed in this paper.

We aim to develop a hub for PGTAs' IDEAs that can be a point of reference as a teaching toolkit for PGTAs across institutions and that can also serve as an opportunity to build confidence and expertise in relation to academic practice.

We are also planning to use tracking tools and analytics to develop a better understanding of the engagement with the blog and the areas that appear to be accessed and used more frequently. Together with the feedback we collect through the workshops, this will allow us to keep developing it further by responding to the users' needs.

Finally, we are embedding the use of IDEAs more broadly in our core teaching provision for PGTAs, for example by using it across a number of sessions in TAP and as a key supportive tool in the process of developing an application for associate fellowship of AdvanceHE.

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