

## **Shape Shifting – Autobiography as a tool for exploring boundary practices: A GTA's perspective**

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### **Abstract**

This autobiographical paper sets out to discuss the value of introducing new practices to established discourses around teaching. Drawing on my background heavily influenced by the creative arts along with my present-day role as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) for a world-leading Faculty of Education, I will present a discussion that explores the impressions made by various professional encounters (Clements, 1999) and how they may spillover to inform a learning context.

Taking from my hatstand the roles of Artist and GTA, I will devise a reflexive commentary outlining the relationship between these identities, taking into account the theory of multi-membership (Wenger, 1998) and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The autobiographical method has been proposed in this reflective article as a valuable tool for GTAs to support the exploration of the meanings of their multi-memberships.

As we progress through life's many stages our portfolio of roles may grow, as might the number of professional titles

we are assigned. While these can oftentimes be interpreted as conflicting (Ibarra, 2003), they can also present opportunities for collaboration or transfer of knowledge across boundaries (Martin et al., 2014). With these roles, we implement various styles of communication in various environments. The GTA has been known to act as a bridge in between, facilitating knowledge delivery through shared behaviours and familiarity with various community norms (Compton & Tran, 2017).

Reflection on these practices has provided points of departure concerning the crossover of learning environments and creative academic activity. Qualitative methodologies have begun to reveal a growing body of creative research methods and means of presenting data within the formal academic landscape (Hakanurmi, Palonen & Murtonen, 2021; Mittelmeier et al., 2021). This has inspired me to inquire into the tools that practitioners employ and hence share across our discourses. Arguing that these needn't be considered context specific, I exhibit a brief discussion of information exchange in the classroom and the gallery.

## **Introduction**

Within higher education, pursuing the role of Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) can be considered an opportunity for transformative learning. Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) is a process of self-reflection and adjustment pertaining to an individual's belief systems and behaviours, amongst other things, as a result of an influential encounter. These new understandings may make an impact on an individual's identity (Partin, 2018), affecting how they perform, relate to and interact in particular contexts.

Central to this article, is a discussion exploring how one's prior knowledge can be employed across discourses, and to what extent our lived interactions shape and conflict with the identities we devise to implement this practice. Written from the perspective of a GTA practicing within a world-leading Faculty of Education, autobiographical reflections on my career trajectory present my transformation through a narrative that critiques person, place and practice over time. This reflective paper aims to provide a point of departure in the literature on GTAs, offering a holistic view of the diversified experiences that have affected the way I approach the practice.

This evolution of identity (Furnham & Gunter, 1993; Coman, 2016), often aided through socialisation (Kopala, 1993; Partin 2018), can assist an individual in becoming part of a community or landscape, and to enhance their professional contribution. Characteristics and behaviours expected in new roles are added to a backdrop of subject-specific knowledge

and styles of communication, which can periodically require an individual to modify their performance. Undergoing a transformation or change, can launch one into a state of liminality, initiating feelings of instability or uncertainty, feeling that they belong 'neither here nor there' (Turner, 1974: 232), a common notion in GTA practice where individuals often find identifying with just one role quite challenging. Cutcher (2015: 226) states that "...when you belong nowhere, you seek to belong everywhere", a statement I find rings true throughout my trajectory, all the long in search of sameness and shared values.

This article explores my role as a GTA in tandem with my Arts and Education focused career trajectory. The autobiographical method is discussed in the following section, followed by a literature review exploring the extent to which multi-membership and communities of practice have impacted upon my pursuit of adjustment and professional practice. I recognise the relevance of the study of intersectionality on this matter where group and identity politics are concerned but regret that it is not explored in this paper. Subsequent to this, is an autobiographical reflection on pivotal positions that continue to influence my identity. A discussion of this undertaking concludes the article, outlining the value of autobiography in transdisciplinary practices, and recommendations for creative research and learning tools.

## **Methodology**

To explore the transdisciplinary nature of my practice, the autobiographical method was considered an effective means of accumulating a timeline of narratives through a process of reflection, from which a holistic view of the various experiences could be retained (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2011).

Autobiography is often considered a form of self-interrogation (Mahani, 2020), where chronological lived experience can be produced as stories offering rich accounts of data (Schlamb, 2020). To carry this out, I reflected upon the various passages I have undertaken (Markides & Markides, 2020), taking into account the diversity of situated encounters with spaces and individuals. Frequently used to facilitate individuals in developing their professional practice, autobiography can help to make sense of scenarios and encounters, as well as relationships with others (Clements, 1999; Menna Barreto Abrahão, 2012). These happenings can impact the individual's beliefs, behaviours, and approaches to their practice. The same can be said of identity, which is thought to be informed by social, cultural, and environmental surroundings (McLean, 2012). We provide contrasting aspects of our identity (Lyle, 2020) under different circumstances, while these circumstances simultaneously provide influence on us (Mahani, 2020).

The self-portrait illustrated through my reflections, tells a unique story of transformation. The timeline evidences a series of life stages and how these have informed my career

trajectory. The language employed intends to produce a set for each pertinent scene that helped to shape how I address my practice, describing the process of becoming and belonging.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Identity and Community of Practice***

Identity has been thought of as “...never whole, but rather multiple and fragmented” (Cutcher, 2015: 130), arguably a notion conveyed through autobiographical research. Variations of identity are bestowed upon an individual as a consequence of our copious experiences with cultures and situations (Mahani, 2020). This review of literature examines the impact of social and professional interactions, along with our relationships with these contexts (Lyle, 2020), on the development of identity.

Interactions facilitating socialisation and collaboration can result in forming collective identities (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Within these, individuals may share values and beliefs, interests, and oftentimes practices. Communities are realised through these connections and common bonds (Lawthom & Whelan, 2012), notably addressed in the literature on Communities of Practice (CoP) (Lave and Wenger, 1991). A CoP is polyvocal. Individuals participate in group activities which may expand their knowledge and expertise (Wenger, 1998). Assimilation into the CoP is affirmed by commitment to fulfilling the practices of the group (Lawthom & Whelan,

2012), this association can provide individuals with support and security (Thornton, 2005). In the context of the current article, multi-membership (Wenger, 1998) has been discussed, demonstrating the fluidity of identity, and the possibility for undertaking many overlapping roles in multiple CoPs throughout our unique trajectories.

The role of GTA exemplifies how diverse qualities and skills can exist within one person, demonstrating applicability to multiple communities and contexts. GTAs are afforded opportunities to interact with and relate to both students and staff through encountering teaching and learning (Lund, 1993; Compton & Tran, 2017), informing their shifting identity. This dual identity has been recognised in other institution-based roles like Art Educator, combining the Artist and Educator professions, where “worlds must be straddled or interrelated” (Thornton, 2005: 167). There are instances where roles have the capacity to employ aspects of practices across disciplines; for instance, in higher education creative research methods can be incorporated to probe subject matter, encouraging communication through visual stimuli to overcome language barriers (Cutcher, 2015). The malleability of these individuals directs their role towards that of a facilitator or mediator.

### ***Across disciplines***

The higher education population is both vast and diverse, comprising multifarious identities with a breadth of experiences and knowledge bases. This population can be supported in various ways; for instance, the GTA has been

known to facilitate students' learning through their "empathy with students based on similarity of experience" (Winstone & Moore, 2017: 498), while also carrying out distinct behaviours and skills inherited from their academic mentors (Compton & Tran, 2017).

Depending on the requirements of a situation, an individual may draw upon their most significant identity qualities (Stryker & Burke, 2000) to facilitate learning. In the context of this article, I explore how an individual may employ known traits to help blur the boundaries between practices, to accomplish a more inclusive learning experience. The artist-turned-GTA might consider how the transformation of knowledge into visual stimuli such as photographs or paintings, can make available contrasting languages (Dewey, 1934; Kokkos, 2021) and access points (Banks, 2011), facilitating individuals to participate in learning where they may have previously struggled to connect with written content. This can encourage individuals to draw upon their former knowledge and experiences to give rise to unfamiliar interpretations of matter (Haley, 2008).

While creative material is likely to comprise of abstract qualities that ascend beyond the printed page, numerous models have been endorsed to analyse artwork, confirming Dewey's (1934: 211) notion that while speech dominates transmission, "each art speaks an idiom that conveys what cannot be said in another language", through writing for instance. Broudy and Silverman's conception of Aesthetic Criticism (Broudy, 1987) describes artwork deconstruction;



these steps include exploring the historic dimension, the creative dimension, and the judicial dimension (Kokkos, 2021). This requires similar cognitive dexterity employed to explore academic texts, taking into account the field or positioning of the material, the objectives and impact of the work, as well as the credibility of the source. This example evidences a bridge between the disciplines, and highlights the distinct approaches taken to convey information. More precisely put “Science states meanings; art expresses them” (Dewey, 1934: 209-210), this contrast in disseminating information resonates with the knowledge that learners have different needs and can be supported through different approaches.

The art object, or sign (Saussure, 1959; Goodman, 1972) can comprise of symbols, codes, and curated visual metaphors. When meaning is housed internally as well as externally, examination of the parts can facilitate understanding of the whole, reducing the risk of marginalising individuals in the learning experience (Allan, 2008). As Azzopardi (2012: 42) explains, “[t]he boundaries of a community are not only physical but also symbolic”, reaffirming the value of differentiating material so to provide opportunity for all to become anchored in the learning experience. The artwork mediates meaning; it can translate esoteric language (Parsons, 2010), making way for shared impressions and perceptions between learners. Opening the experience up in this way can bring together individuals to nurture branches of understanding.

### ***Belonging and Place***

Communities can be formed of diverse groups of individuals, based on shared interests, a common need, or their location (Schlamb, 2020); they might be context-specific, pertaining to the workplace, academia, or a social space or activity (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021). Being familiar with situations can help build connections (Markides & Markides, 2020), as reaffirmed by Lave and Wenger (1991) who explain how the extent to which one participates in a community will inform their relationship with it; for instance, the responsibilities or roles taken on within the group.

Acquiring a sense of belonging or a “deep connection” (Lyle, 2020: 1) within a community, to a place, or a precise time, can offer security or affinity through an awareness of shared qualities that characterise the experience (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Belonging may come about through an identity informed by our relationships and roles fulfilled within a certain context (Kraus, 2006).

While some places we encounter may only be part of fleeting experiences, some locations remain constant throughout one’s lifetime: a family home, a birthplace, a religious place, etc. Continued association with these places enables various strands of identity to endure, allowing the sites to shape and educate us (Gruenewald, 2003; Schlamb, 2020). As Markides and Markides (2020: 115) assert “[t]he places we inhabit, inhabit us”.

Emotional or intellectual connections bound to places can produce conflicting perceptions of self, other, and context (Schlamb, 2020; Leighton, 2020), as we acclimatise or integrate into new situations - relationships with these can determine our sense of belonging. Cutcher (2015: 221) explains how belonging is “a *process* not a consequence; it is a perpetual progression of encounter and becoming”, suggesting that while belonging can at times be experienced in multiple contexts concurrently, it can also be lost and found again as we travel through life’s many stages.

### **Autobiographical Excerpt**

This autobiographical excerpt sets out to address the various influential encounters that have shaped my career trajectory and consequently my identity. One of the many roles undertaken throughout my career is that of GTA, this has been thought of as a liminal or ‘in-between’ role (Turner, 1974) which is known to spur on individuals to take on a wealth of characteristics connected with distinctive communities. This cross-engagement and multi-membership has informed the way that I have approached the implementation of unfamiliar practices to others; this narrative presents an exploration of how my former experience in the Arts has contributed to my present-day role as a GTA.

### ***Space / Place***

Uprooting from the comfort of the classroom, I recall hastily acclimatising to the expectations of higher education as I embarked on a Fine Art degree. Immersing myself in the programme meant identifying with the values of the organisation; over time I grew to feel a part of the scene, a notion shared by Schlamb (2020) who discusses how identification with place can be reliant on one's involvement with it over a duration. Searching for ways to facilitate my identification as an artist, I reconsidered how my artwork was exhibited within the great expanse of space making up my studio. Deserting the sketchbook was a simple but transformational act, granting passers-by access to my work. My ideas appeared to migrate across the space in murmuration; the localisation of my practice enabled me to orchestrate the experience generated from interactions with the work. As Trofanenko and Segall (2014) put it, by using the language of the space I was able to facilitate others in understanding the abstract matter.

We would organise group exhibitions beyond the university site to engage with new audiences, spurring on a reconsideration of our competencies; undertaking various roles challenged us to examine the receptiveness of material in different contexts. These alternative spaces unearthed opportunity to validate various means of communication, ensuring that knowledge was available to those participating in the experience. This notion is discussed in more depth in Luzón (2013), who explores the recontextualization of esoteric information, in particular concerning the lay public.

This helped the language of the space to come alive; Dewey (1934: 211) confirms that “Language exists only when it is listened to as well as spoken”, proposing that the artwork can act as a mediator between creator and receiver.

I later found myself researching in a small team of specialists. The office resembled that of a Victorian clerk’s, with books piled high and a bounty of Vaseline shades hanging down above me. Utilising my former expertise, I would source esoteric material and information about rare and important antiquities to be communicated to fellow enthusiasts, a role often played by museums, Hooper-Greenhill (2000) writes. The computer, while appearing out of place amongst its printed counterparts, endorsed my value within the organisation.

Working unaccompanied impaired my perspective of the community of practice as I struggled to become affiliated. This led to great value being placed on former associations as I sought out practitioners with whom I had shared values.

### ***Longing / Belonging***

Artefacts produced for group shows were regularly composed by one artist, representing a collective input. This polyvocal quality was accomplished through familiarisation. Our collective provided stability and a sense of belonging, achieved through mutual behaviours and beliefs, commonly the foundation for establishing what Lave and Wenger term a community of practice (1991).

I found that a sense of belonging could be endorsed through affirmation of one's role in a collective. At one time I was an Art Technician in a rural high school, where I experienced full acceptance into a community. Despite my evident multi-membership, our shared interests and purpose provided a feeling of belonging. As put my Lawthom and Whelan (2012: 15),

“A group of people attains community status when there are adequate numbers of sufficient connections between them which enables them to organise for a common purpose”.

During this time, various facets of my artistic and academic identities were at play informing the various tasks I was required to undertake. Positioned within a department of artist-turned-teachers, I learnt how they continued to nourish their artistry while fulfilling their academic roles, finding a balance to avoid conflict. The complex nature of this is explored in Hickman (2010) who also exercises reflexivity to examine how the various identities inform one another. Within the workplace, each teacher maintained a skillset. For the duration, I shape-shifted between disciplines, making use of prior knowledge and opportunities for learning.

I bought supplementary skillsets to the department, like mounting and frame making. Upon seeing their artwork presented around the school, a sense of pride was activated in the students. This brought about opportunities to build bridges between individuals and their environment; recontextualising the students' artwork modified the

meanings they had associated with their learning and the discipline.

The following year I pursued a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education with a focus on art, design, architecture and media. It was then that I discovered a way to bridge the two worlds that I had been so deeply involved in – art and education. I attended a class of very accomplished artist-turned-students, amongst whom I acquired a series of teaching capabilities.

### ***Teacher / Student / Mediator***

Throughout my career trajectory I have oscillated between the roles of teacher, student, and mediator. The mediator can be thought to be translating, transporting or transforming information between giver and receiver (Luzón, 2013). This betweenness of roles and contexts, has led to adopting a flexibility that inspires me to recontextualise knowledge to enhance encounters for unfamiliar audiences and domains, a technique much explored by Dowling (2009).

In 2021, I was appointed Graduate Teaching Assistant in a world-leading Faculty of Education based in the UK. The engaging and multifarious nature of the role is evidenced through the various modules and tasks I encounter, from teaching, tutorials and providing feedback on assignments, to capturing the knowledge produced and disseminated during taught sessions on posters and mood-boards. This experience has prompted me to develop my capabilities in facilitating online and blended learning. My performance in this role is

informed greatly by my prior experience in the arts, as are my capabilities as a research student.

The practices of Art and Education both explore language use and how meaning is made concrete, requiring the reviewer to analyse, synthesise, interpret, attribute, and validate quality. When we take learning material as a sign (Saussure, 1959), a compound formed of a literal tangible substance (signifier) and subject matter (signified), it becomes clear that the connection between meaning and materiality is volatile, unfixed. As Dewey (1934: 209) contends, “[w]ords are symbols which represent objects and actions in the sense of standing in for them”. He goes on to state that “[e]ach medium says something that cannot be uttered as well or as completely in any other tongue” (ibid: 211), reaffirming the manifold layers of understanding that can be exposed through analysis of dynamic sources. As relics are examined, it is worth noting that “...the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe” (Berger, 1972: 8), much of which is informed by the spaces we occupy and the communities we identify with.

To communicate knowledge, I often mediate through visualisation; this means deconstructing complex matter into manageable parts. In my teaching, I have addressed research design through four ‘straightforward’ questions – *What*, *Why*, *How*, and *Where?* I have since illustrated this process in the form of a Ferris Wheel, a tool I have used in my own research. Each question is positioned in place of a passenger car, demonstrating how the information corresponding with



the three questions in the air can help to answer the question positioned on the ground. The structure of the wheel highlights the connections between the different elements, and how they can inform one another. While the Ferris Wheel begins its cycle containing only four parts, as it turns, questions are revisited, considerations enter and depart, much like fairground passengers stepping on and off the ride. I have found that popularising terms or concepts can help to make esoteric language more accessible, creating what Turnbull (1996) calls a knowledge space, the use of visual metaphors can bridge the chasm between abilities and understandings.

I have visualised the GTA's role and their function within communities of practice; firstly, as **the string between two paper cups** - receiving information from heterogeneous communities. Multi-membership can encourage a flexible and inclusive practice, which has inspired me to hone my capabilities in differentiation and personalisation. Another example is **a pylon** transmitting methods and conventions between communities and contexts. A likeness can be drawn between the ways that teachers and curators determine the involvement of their participants, for instance by capturing and releasing situated knowledge during immersive experiences.

Over the duration of my role as GTA, I have observed the effective use of creative methods within academic research. Continued multi-membership enables me to inform the

communities that I support through recontextualization and transportation of matter across boundaries.

## **Discussion**

Within this article I have considered the knowledge and skills acquired throughout my career trajectory, and the possibility for their applicability within the role of GTA. Through an autobiographical method, I have explored the various roles and interactions that have informed my identity today.

This method is the first recommendation I propose for those undertaking a transdisciplinary practice. Autobiography affords reflection and interrogation of former experience through dismantling narrative, enabling recognition of key encounters that have informed perceptions of self, space, and practice. With the knowledge I have today, I have expanded on the meanings I once assigned to the stages of my life. Autobiography is a recognised method employed by professionals to explore various encounters; through which they can reformulate the narrative, giving meaning and reason to their actions, whilst considering alternatives and revisions. The GTA may find value in this method as they ponder the many flexible roles they undertake, discovering hidden relevance in the practices, or connections between disciplines.

Further to this, a wealth of seemingly context-specific knowledge and skill was acquired throughout my time practicing in the arts. Creative research methods may

facilitate individuals in portraying their multiplicity of perspectives. To enable acquisition, documentation and transformation of matter I suggest the use of audio devices and podcasts; collage to collate visual representations; diaries and blogs for data collection and reflective practice; and imagery or digital storytelling to gather honest depictions of matter using accessible language. These suggestions are not exhaustive nor limited to the creative arts; this is discussed in more depth in Hickman's (2010) reflection of the artist-turned-teacher and 'studio thinking'.

Often, the GTA is not a trainee nor trained teacher, nevertheless they have a wealth of expertise at their disposal. Their preparedness to teach may vary, but their approach to disseminating knowledge through learned behaviours or techniques can be a welcomed contrast. This contrast may stem from the concoction of qualities that they have in common with both the students and teachers (Kendall & Schussler, 2012). Familiarity with role behaviours and values issues the GTA with opportunity to develop a more inclusive and humanistic approach. Responses to this practice have the potential to foster the confidence of the GTA, temporarily securing them in a more clearly defined role.

Acclimatising to the academic community, required merging my teaching and learning capabilities to form a hybrid or liminal participator. In this space, I discovered that the opportunities to work also presented opportunities to learn (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003). While my role is not

always clear-cut, existing within the betweenness with linkages to different communities of practice, allows for the accumulation of diverse skills and knowledge that allow me to participate in manifold roles as I gradually refine the direction of my academic career (Winstone & Moore, 2017).

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