

# **‘Precarity and Power Relations’: Navigating the Transition from Industry Professional to Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA)**

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## **Abstract**

The role of the Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) has been established as a “liminal space between studenthood and teacherhood” (Elliott & Marie, 2021: 71.) and even contested as a kind of “limbo” (Compton & Tran, 2017). Interestingly, however, most research only considers the joint role of GTA as both teacher and student, without considering the possible external professional roles and identities held by various GTAs. Resultantly there exists a gap in the literature in which the dynamics of the transition from industry professional to GTA are unexplored.

This paper seeks to address this gap by examining the transition of a professional strength and conditioning coach into the role of a GTA, specifically, a GTA based in the United Kingdom whose primary PhD research uses sociocultural theories and the post-structuralist work of Michel Foucault (1977, 1978, 1983a, 1983b, 1991). Building upon Campbell’s (2022: 209) suggestion that the “autobiographical method is a valuable tool for GTAs to support the exploration of the meanings of their multi-memberships,” the paper is

structured as a reflective essay enriched with autobiographic and autoethnographic 'moments.' These 'moments' are then analysed for themes relevant to the broader conversation around GTAs, as well as through a Foucauldian theoretical lens.

Finally, and crucially, although this paper draws upon one specific professional's experience, it is intended that the observations, themes (precarity, cultural difference, uncertainty, and the importance of 'Problematization') and analyses are far more broadly applicable and presented in a way that allows for enriching conversations across multiple industries.

## Introduction

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) make up a substantial portion of the higher education workforce, and yet the position of the GTA is unique within that landscape, occupying what Elliott and Marie (2021: 71) refer to as a “liminal space between studenthood and teacherhood” or what Compton and Tran (2017) consider to be a kind of ‘limbo.’

Relatedly, research has looked at the GTA through multiple lenses and angles, including but not limited to social class (Hastie, 2021) representation, (Elliot & Marie, 2021) power gaps (Clark, 2021) and even how the GTA role relates to Walter Benjamin's metaphysics of transcendence (Jaines, 2021). Interestingly, however, most research only considers the joint role of GTA as both teacher and student, without considering the possible external professional roles and identities held by various GTAs. Resultantly there exists a gap in the literature in which the dynamics of the transition from industry professional to GTA are unexplored.

This paper seeks to address this gap by examining my transition from a professional strength and conditioning coach into the role of a GTA. Importantly, this GTA role has exposed me to sociocultural thinking and the work of Michel Foucault, which I will use to enrich my analysis. The paper begins with an overview of Foucault, outlines my research process, and then a presentation of three autoethnographic moments and their related theoretical and Foucauldian analyses before concluding with a summative commentary.

## **An Overview of Foucault**

Although summarising the work of Foucault in a short section would be impossible, readers may find it useful to situate his work broadly in the region of poststructuralist thinking. For Foucault, reality and identity are socially constructed, and these constructions are ongoing yet often unconscious or normalised processes. At heart, Foucault advocates for examining, questioning and ‘problematizing’ these processes in order to raise awareness, broaden the available discussion and better develop personal ethics (Foucault 1978, 1983a, 1991). In relation to this specific paper, I utilise Foucault’s concepts to suggest that the role of the GTA, including the available spaces and ways in which they can operate, is socially constructed and subject to complex power relations. I also suggest that in order to better develop personal ethics through what Foucault would call care of the self, GTAs and others within academia need to begin questioning and problematising the many taken-for-granted processes around them.

## **The Research Process**

I introduce my research process to both explain and legitimize my decision to present a selection of personal narratives regarding my experiences transitioning from professional practice into the role of GTA. As a contributing author, I have been involved in the profession of strength and conditioning since 2014, and I began my role as a GTA at the start of 2022. For this paper, I have built upon Campbell’s (2022: 209) suggestion that the “autobiographical method is a valuable tool for GTAs to support the exploration of the

meanings of their multi-memberships,” and have adopted an analytic auto-ethnographic approach (Anderson, 2006). This research method utilises researchers' autobiographical data to thickly describe, locate, and analyse their experiences (Chang, 2008), whilst also committing to “develop theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena” (Anderson, 2006: 373) Moreover, my member researcher status and positionality, that is, the “position that I have chosen to adopt within the given research study” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013: 71) alongside a commitment to theoretical analysis and a blend of expression and theory (Anderson, 2006; Denison, 2016) made this approach a strong theoretical match. Using this approach, I have written three ‘autoethnographic moments’ or ‘vignettes’ each of which is presented, followed by a streamlined thematic analysis focused on GTA-experience-specific insights, as well as analysis through a Foucauldian lens. Specifically, I draw attention to Foucauldian concepts such as problematisation and power relations.

To improve academic rigour, my initial analyses each went through a process of re-examination by an experienced qualitative, Foucauldian researcher acting as a ‘critical friend,’ an approach validated within academic librarianship (Hultman Özek, Edgren & Jandér, 2012) clinical settings (Carlson, Nygren & Wennick, 2018) and teaching (Kiewkor, Wongwanich & Piromsombat, 2014). Moreover, I have endeavoured throughout the paper to implement critical reflexivity, (Bettez, 2015: 936) being “attentive to how [my] experiences, knowledge, and social positions might impact each aspect and moment of the research process”. Indeed, Foucauldian logic would argue that this step is essential for the ethical conduct of qualitative research (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Lastly, to ensure broader generalisability, I

attempt in each analytical section to make connections and comparisons to other industries and areas, aiming to identify shared situations, problems and areas for discussion.

### **Auto-Ethnographies and Analysis**

Will We Ever Use This In Our Jobs?

*'Will we ever use this in our jobs?'* One of my undergraduate students asks. They're about 20 minutes into a deeply technical two-hour long seminar and their eyes have already somewhat glazed over; they've disengaged from the content. I search my brain for a reason and all I can think of is some spiel about 'transferable skills,' and 'underpinning knowledge,' but deep down I know the reality is that they won't ever really need to use that information. As I talk to the student I find myself torn, do I tell them the truth based on my decade of industry experience and risk damaging a relationship with the senior staff member who designed the content? Or do I knowingly lie to the student, misleading them about the industry and, in my mind, acting unethically?

These themes of uncertainty, of this precarious position, sit at the heart of the Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) experience, especially for GTAs who have transitioned from professional practice into academia. As a new, junior staff member, it didn't feel like my place to criticise course content, but as an experienced industry professional, I was keenly aware that the content was miles from meeting the needs of the industry. I was uncertain how to act, and uncertain how my actions might be perceived.

Analysing the situation through a Foucauldian lens, I would

draw into question and problematise the taken-for-granted assumption that academia prepares students for industry, as well as the implicit assumption that in-depth technical knowledge alone is central to professional success. Supporting this, a recent review in my field (Szedlak et al. 2022) interviewed industry professionals with an average of 16 years of experience, who overwhelmingly suggested the same. If technical knowledge being seen as paramount is the familiar norm, then in thinking with Foucault, I would seek to make this strange.

Reflexively, it is not lost on me that my position as a practitioner first, and academic second, may bias my stance on this. Nor is it lost on me that my affinity for Foucauldian thinking renders me far more likely to find fault than it does to find merit. Nevertheless, I believe the points stand up to scrutiny. My experience is in the field of sports science, yet I've heard similar stories from GTAs within engineering, health sciences, business management, film and music production. Uncertainty, precarity and an acute awareness of the gap between academia and industry are commonplace.

Too Harsh

*'Can you change your feedback?'* I'm asked. Yet I'm unsure why. My feedback was detailed, it was honest, and it was constructive. In the world of sports performance that's exactly the type of communication that athletes perceive as useful and positive, even relationship-enhancing. (Rhind & Jowett, 2010). Yet I log back into the system, find the two students mentioned, and amend their feedback. I make it kinder, gentler. 'You evidently did not attempt to engage with this task' becomes 'Make sure to review the exam rubric fully.' 'You've only written 1500/3000 words' becomes 'Make

sure to fully utilise your word count.' I soften my words, but do I lose my impact?

Reflecting on this situation, the themes that come to mind are cultural differences, precarity and uncertainty. Culturally, academia is different to industry. My world, performance sports, is cutthroat. Competition is fierce, contracts can disappear overnight, and coaches with out-of-this-world egos can yell at you, give you the silent treatment, or even make your job incredibly difficult (sometimes even by accident or incompetence). In my mind, if that's the world we're sending students into, then they need to be prepared for direct, unfettered feedback. Yet as a new staff member, a GTA, my position feels precarious, and I find myself uncertain; should I tow the party line and adhere as closely as possible to university-approved practices? Or should I be more honest and upfront with my students? Moreover, being that I had already identified student dissatisfaction with learning outcomes and real-world applicability, was changing my feedback only going to further worsen this disconnect?

Turning to Foucault, I become distinctly aware that the university system is socially constructed, and I begin to problematise that system, to critically examine the taken-for-granted ways in which it operates. I question, if the university does not suit its intended purpose, should we not act to change it? It does not escape me, however, that doing so would be an inherently political act, and I ponder how this meshes with my precarious position as a GTA.

Engaging in critical reflexivity, there's no denying that my perspective has very much been shaped by my time in professional sport, perhaps there are people who have far

smoother, kinder and more collaborative experiences in the industry, and perhaps those people would be far more naturally inclined to take a gentler approach towards student feedback. On balance, though, I believe the theme of cultural differences between industry and academia applies across various professions, and that experienced GTAs across multiple fields must navigate these differences.

### Shouting in the Rain

Back when I first read through the seminar notes, I got a sinking feeling in my stomach. I knew beyond any shadow of a doubt that the session would be a nightmare to deliver. I was being asked to take multiple groups of 20 or more undergraduates through timed maximal effort sprinting, outdoors, in the dark, in late autumn. As I arrived early to set up, I knew my gut instinct had been correct. It was already raining, the floor was soaked, and for the first hour I watched students jog on the spot trying to stay warm waiting to take a single sprint, desperately hoping with crossed fingers that no one injured themselves. As the sessions went on the rain became worse, visibility became poorer, and the sound of the water bouncing off the floor, along with the wind, meant that my shouts were becoming less and less audible. With icy hands, the students were finding it hard to use their stopwatches to record times, and in the pouring rain, the paper they were supposed to record their data on all but fell apart. After what seemed like some of the longest, and coldest, three hours of my life, I walked back to my car, wrapped my now-soaked “waterproof” jacket and trousers in an old towel, cranked my heater up to full, and shivering, drove home.

Reflecting on that situation, the themes I keep coming back

to are rank, precarity and uncertainty. As an experienced strength and conditioning coach, I *knew* the session was going to be bad and I could have corrected it yet felt unable to do so. As a GTA, I'm the 'rookie,' the 'novice'. There's a whole academic structure and hierarchy (lecturers, senior lecturers, readers, professors) to navigate, and I sit right at the bottom of it, I'm 'outranked.' In my professional world, as a strength and conditioning coach, I'm the expert. Athletes look to me for advice, knowledge and leadership and I feel confident to provide it. In the academic world, however, I feel uncertain, I find myself in a precarious position. Caught between using my experience to deliver a better session, whilst not wanting to upset senior staff by making changes to an established way of doing things.

Foucault's concept of power relations offers a lens through which to view this situation. For it's not that senior members of the university are simply holders of power enacting their whims at will, instead, they guide or direct "the possible field of action" (Foucault 1983a: 221). Nor is it that I, or any GTAs, are unable to enact change or 'push back' (indeed the ability to do these things is central to Foucault's definition of power relations). The problem is that each individual exists within a complex web of relationships, accountabilities, decisions, influences and priorities, which although appearing to have perfectly clear aims (improving teaching/research) are often not attributable to any clear inventor or originator (Foucault 1978: 95). It is the difficulty of navigating this web which makes the GTA feel so uncertain.

Reflexively, I have to acknowledge a certain degree of ego-attachment on my part; the transition from expert to novice, the move down the perceived social and career rankings

weighs on me. In many ways, this professional ‘competitiveness’ has been trained into me through many years of elite sport, a field rife with what Foucault would call disciplinary practices (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Jones & Denison 2017; Jones, Avner & Denison, 2022). When you spend years focused on helping athletes gain every possible competitive edge, that mindset, that language, it bleeds over into your everyday life. Yet, with all that said, it still seems strange to me that my experience doesn’t seem to automatically ‘carry over,’ even when I have significantly more practical experience in the task at hand.

Once again, my experience is my own, and exists within my own sport and exercise science niche, yet I believe it is an experience shared by many GTAs transitioning from professional practice into academia. I’ve spoken to engineers who have worked on some of the world’s most cutting-edge technology and yet been asked if they could figure out an online learning platform. I’ve heard from lawyers who have handled multi-million-dollar cases only to be told that’s not how the law works by senior academic staff. The same questions arise; what space does the GTA inhabit? How much scope do they have to shape their practice? And how do they navigate their new ‘lower’ status, their relegation from expert to novice?

### **Thematic and Foucaultian Commentary - In Summary**

Through analysis of these three short vignettes, common themes emerge: precarity, cultural difference, uncertainty, and the importance of ‘Problematism’. These provide insight into the broader social phenomena of GTA experience

and academia. Precarity refers to the unstable position that the GTA occupies, underpinned by, and potentially understood as, a set of complex and shifting power relations best conceptualised as a “capillary-like network that ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localized in them” (Foucault, 1978: 93). Cultural difference refers to the gaps between industry and academia, whether that be in content or communication style. Linked to both of the above is uncertainty, in the midst of these relations, how does the GTA choose to act? Do they honour their experience as a practitioner, or align themselves more closely with the university status quo? And in making these decisions, are they truly able to engage in care of the self, the ‘self-forming activities’ that Foucault (1983b) would argue as being central to ethical living?

Lastly, but by no means least, is the importance of Foucauldian problematisation in all of this, the act of “affective unhooking” of questioning the unquestioned and of “rendering the familiar strange” (Coffey, 2019: 87); Because is it not strange that an academically gifted student often goes on to struggle upon entering the profession that their degree allegedly prepared them for? Is it not strange that we (as experienced industry professionals) are asked to communicate with students in a manner that leaves them open for culture shock as soon as they enter industry? And is it not strange that professionals with years of relevant industry experience should feel unsure of how to utilise this experience within academia? By asking these questions we are thinking with Foucault, challenging expectations and norms, struggling against power “where it is most invisible and insidious” (Foucault, 1977: 208), questioning our own

identities in relation to them, and beginning to enact the first steps of shaping ourselves to act more in line with our own ethics and integrity.

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