Who am I? Teacher identities and the PGR tutor

Evelyn Strongylakou

PhD student, Politics and International Studies Department, University of Warwick
Correspondence: evelyn.strongylakou@warwick.ac.uk

My research focuses on political legitimacy in 'less-than-perfect' democracies. I am particularly interested in the construction of national identities and how these lead to a shared understanding of a ruler's legitimacy. In my spare time, I reflect on and write about critical pedagogy and global social issues.

Abstract

This reflective piece is meant to produce more questions than answers. It can be used as a framework both by PGRs who enter a classroom for the first time and by more experienced ones. PGRs who teach will often question their role inside the classroom: "am I a teacher or a facilitator? which side of the fence am I at? Am I one of the students or one of the teachers?" Questions like these usually arise from the ambiguity of a tutor's role, whether they are there to facilitate understanding of a lesson that someone else taught, or if they are actually the teacher of this module for a specific group of students. Being a teacher for a few years before pursuing a PhD, I found myself wondering the exact same thing when I first entered the classroom as a PGR tutor. In this written piece, I briefly go through the literature on teacher roles and identity, and I reflect on how my previous experience helped inform my identity as a PGR tutor.

Keywords: teacher identity, GTA, teacher reflection, PGRs who teach

On a lazy Sunday evening in October 2021, I was notified that I was due to teach my first seminar the next day; as a PhD student in the Politics department, I was allocated two seminar groups on a first-year introductory module on politics. This module spanned two terms and my seminar groups comprised 12 students each. My first thoughts were something like this:

"uhm, ok…?"

"alright, no big deal, I've done this before"

"it's just an hour, I can probably survive…as long as they don't ask me stuff"

I thought I had a good grip of the situation mostly because I had been a language teacher for the past ten years. I mainly taught young adults, either on in-sessional or pre-sessional academic English courses. Students on these

courses were preparing to enter British universities at undergraduate or postgraduate level. Pre-sessional courses were quite challenging and required a good level of certainty from my part, so I had to enter the classroom knowing precisely "where we're going and how we're getting there". As was expected by everyone involved - myself, students, and the University - I entered the classroom as "the teacher". Although I was following a set curriculum, I myself was the one responsible for the class, the adaptation of materials and the overall progress of my students.

A week into my GTA teaching, and after growing feelings of uncertainty, I was determined to set things straight and figure out my role in the world, or at least the seminar classroom. I increasingly felt I had questions I could not really answer: who am I, the teacher of this class or just someone who'll go in and ask questions? Are they my students or are we all just students here? And many more questions a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) will inevitably ask themselves when they first start teaching. Vaughn (1998) and Muzaka (2009) acknowledge that, rather than students who just happen to teach, GTAs are simultaneously teachers and students among other roles they might have. One thing made clear by Muzaka (2009) is that GTAs are not in a liminal space between being a student and a member of staff, they already are a member of staff. The duality of holding two different roles, that of a teacher and a student, generates concerns about GTAs' identity, both when their ideas and beliefs are tested (Park, 2004), and when they are conflicted about being both a student and a teacher (Lee *et al.*, 2004; Young & Bippus, 2008). Existing research focuses on the GTAs' experience in class and on their role as a whole, in contrast to literature on new teachers, which explicitly explores

feelings and identity narratives (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011; Flores & Day, 2006; Cook, 2009). Cook (2009) has identified a variety of different questions that an early-career teacher asks themselves and, through my personal lens, I have adapted them to reflect the experience of GTAs:

1. As a <u>Graduate</u> Teaching Assistant, am I a teacher or a student?

I've often heard my supervisors talk about "different hats" and how we switch from one role to another, even within the same institution or even job. So, apparently, we are allowed, or perhaps should, switch from student mode to teacher mode, even if we're feeling and acting as students for the majority of our time. After having clarified that, I considered how I had introduced myself in class, which was that I am a PhD student. While there is nothing wrong with that, I couldn't help but wonder whether this gave the impression that "I am one of you and I'm just here to help you out a bit". Again, nothing wrong with that, but does this take into consideration student expectations and power dynamics in class? Do students expect another student to enter the classroom, or would they feel safer if they considered the seminar tutor as a teacher? I reflected on this and proceeded to the next question.

2. As a Graduate Teaching <u>Assistant</u>, am I allowed to add materials and adapt existing ones?

Through the grapevine, i.e., by asking experienced GTAs, I was made to understand that seminar tutors' role is to facilitate discussion, and ultimately help students comprehend materials set by the module lead. A fairly easy task one would think…or not, because aside

from set materials, who is practically responsible for emerging needs, or the overall progress of the group? How much could I stretch set topics, and how? Do I need to consult the module lead? And the questions went on and on… I wasn't surprised to read about research conducted at Sheffield University (Muzaka, 2009:10) which confirmed that GTAs feel they lack ownership and authority over course content, organisation, and delivery. Theoretically, I could always ask the module lead, but wouldn't it be better if the information was offered from the start?

3. Getting down to the nitty-gritty of actual teaching, how do I want to teach?

McWilliam (2009) details three main teacher roles:

    a. The Sage on the Stage,
    b. The Guide on the Side, and
    c. The Meddler in the Middle

The first role, that of the Sage, is what we have traditionally experienced in education, even more so in higher education, where the teacher is the main source of knowledge. The Sage will happily impart knowledge which the students will (and presumably can) consume. A typical lecture is a good example of what Freire (2020) termed the "banking model" of education, with students being empty vessels, or piggy banks, waiting to be filled. This didactic style of teaching is quite teacher-centred and denies students the opportunity to co-construct knowledge or even reflect critically on presented information. At the other end of the spectrum comes the Guide on the Side, who acts as a mentor and facilitates students in their journey for knowledge. This is quite the hands-off approach and students might barely notice the teacher's presence in class. A middle ground is a more recently developed role, the Meddler in the Middle, where the teacher actively participates in the learning process but doesn't overpower students. Instead, the teacher helps them build their learning capacity by engaging in meaningful discussions and challenging students by posing thought-provoking questions. For those familiar with Bloom's taxonomy, the Meddler will move between different levels of learning with relative ease.

4. What informs my teaching?

Things got more interesting, and admittedly deeper, when I considered what underlies my teaching. Van Lankveld *et al*. (2017) support that the minute we enter the classroom, we bring with us our previous experience as teachers, students, and as people. I had no professional experience in the field I was teaching, but I often found myself asking whether I should be translating theory into practice in the seminars. How would a practitioner approach a certain topic? Was it even necessary to bridge the gap between theory and practice? Due to personal preference, I ended up trying to get students to connect theoretical concepts to more tangible situations. The second underlying factor was one that I discovered while talking to fellow GTAs, with a number of them saying that their teaching was informed by their previous educational experience, and that they ended up teaching the way they were taught. As a researcher in the making, I then asked another question: does that fit with the teaching in our department or our university? What is Warwick's teaching culture and should we strive to emulate that? The third facet of this question lies in what Beauchamp (2009) talked about, and that is student identity. It is extremely easy for teachers to fall in the trap of seeing people in the classroom as students only, and not as real people with interests, opinions, and experiences. If I, however, see them as

people instead of only students, I can then explore what they want to learn, how they want to learn it, how they are applying their knowledge and in what way they contribute to the collective learning experience.

5. What is the purpose of each class?

Having a few different options here, before every session I like setting an intention. Will I be clarifying more today? Can I "stretch" students on this? Do I want them to challenge established norms? Freire (2020) emphasises the importance of education as a means to challenge existing power relations, to help empower the less empowered, and to liberate the academically and otherwise non-free. Although this might seem like an extraordinary feat to achieve in a one-hour seminar, I would not dismiss the possibility of changing the world through seminars. Of course, this brings about more difficult questions, such as "why do I want students to challenge existing ideas, is it to suit my view of the world?" and "how do I set boundaries in order to ensure respectful exchanges?"... and down the rabbit hole…

Considering all the above questions might seem a daunting task, particularly because questions have the bad habit of generating even more questions. The pursuit of a teacher identity for PGRs who teach might therefore seem never-ending. Going through pedagogical training and having substantial teaching experience meant that teaching as a GTA was not such an unnerving experience for me. And when in doubt, I fell back on my trusted teaching techniques which stemmed from a well-formed teaching philosophy. Taking on a different teaching role though, that of the GTA, was a challenge and an opportunity for me to rethink my identity as a teacher. My experience was that teacher identity is fluid and that these questions don't always have definitive answers. For instance, I sometimes adopt the role of the Sage, the Guide, and the Meddler all in one class. Likewise, I sometimes often try to get students to change the world, but I also allocate time for the clarification of concepts and discussion on essay writing. I also allowed myself a full year of teaching before being confident enough to declare that I've (non-definitively) shaped my GTA teacher identity. The key takeaway from this process was that if we go into teaching with an open mind and genuine curiosity, these questions will find answers sooner and easier than we think.

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