

Afterword: Colleagues and Care

Reflecting on and Re-imagining PGR teacher identity in the wake of the pandemic

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Abstract

The experience and positionality of PGR teachers is well documented in academic papers, surveys, and discussions in our institutions. In the wake of the pandemic how should we conceptualise their role? What is their place? With reference to the University of Warwick specifically, but looking more widely, this afterword considers the PGR teacher experience, role, and identity alongside a perceived shift in the conversation about what matters now in Higher Education. It argues for a re-imagining of the PGR teacher role alongside more senior colleagues, who should take action to advocate in ways that will break through the liminality.

Keywords: teacher, identity, role, compassion, expertise

Introduction

It is wonderful to read and consider the excellent contributions to the second issue of the JPPP. This issue does indeed feel like a step-change from the first, when we were still much more visibly in the midst of the global pandemic and navigating our teaching work within that disrupted space. The papers presented here show how postgraduate researchers who teach have innovated and adapted their practice and used the challenges of recent times as an opportunity to reflect as practitioners. But there is still much discussion of liminality, mid-spaces, and uncertain identities, and reflecting the established literature (cited in the Editorial and beyond) that the positionality of a PGR teacher is both an asset and a curse. I would like to take the opportunity in this afterword to reflect through my lens, as someone who works closely with PGRs at Warwick and to consider the role of the PGR teacher in relation to some emergent themes in the HE context. I would like to conclude with a call for action; a proposal for a new way of seeing PGR and GTA colleagues which seems timely and current.

PGR teachers through my lens

I am an Associate Professor (more on that later) and academic developer with specific responsibilities for the development and support of postgraduate researchers who teach at Warwick. This role is a huge privilege; the opportunity to work with discipline-experts from a range of departments who are enthusiastic, challenging, and thoughtful but who may be relatively new to teaching – something which I am not. I see, therefore, our coming together as a joint enterprise: my understanding of pedagogy and practice and their expertise and knowledge in their field. Our collective goal is the

enhancement of learning and teaching at Warwick and the growing of the professional confidence of those in teaching roles. As **Tobias Slade-Harajda** described it, I seek to ‘act like a student who happens to know the experiment’ in my relationship with APP PGR participants. However, being a course leader there is an inevitable power difference, perhaps, even when working with fellow teachers. That’s why spaces by PGRs, for PGRs are so important, not simply for tangible outputs, but also for the experience of the process of collective effort, such as in the [Warwick Postgraduate Teaching community](#), which leads the editorial for this journal, and exemplified in the work of **Ben Sinclair** and **Bing Lu** and their Superb Vision Network. In their piece they note the idiosyncratic relationships between PGRs and their supervisors; some positive, some much less so. Equally unpredictable, it seems, is the PGR experience in relation to teaching. A side effect of working so closely with PGRs from across the University is that I hear their stories and they share them with each other. This can build an empowering space, through shared experience, but it also paints a painful picture. Last year’s [PGR Teaching Survey](#) highlighted a number of endemic problems that PGR teachers face: inconsistency in contractual arrangements, support and mentorship; lack of confidence and time related to disciplinary knowledge and preparation; feelings of a lack of respect for their work and for some, different treatment; precarity and lack of adequate compensation, and finally the inevitable impact of the global pandemic. And this is not unique to Warwick; in fact, there are many ways in which our institution is showing strong commitment: GTA contracts with good employment terms; parity of esteem for teaching and research across the institution; the highest Russell Group average for teachers with Advance HE accredited

status – including of course, PGRs. But we cannot negate the challenges. One source of great support and inspiration for me is the [GTA Developer Network](#), a national community of practice for those, who, like me, support and develop postgraduates who teach. But here, as elsewhere, the same stories about the PGR teacher experience are repeated. Publications like the [UCU Workload Survey report](#) and the recent [Advance HE Review of Policy and Practice in Supporting Postgraduates who Teach](#) confirm the problems, and recommend change, clarity of policy and widening of opportunities for our PGRs. The evidence is there. So, where's the sector at?

A shifting tone in the HE landscape?

Well, I feel a movement and shift in current HE pedagogical thinking, one where proper discussions about the value and work of our PGR teachers could prevail. I recently attended a session through Warwick's [Cultivate programme](#), led by Professor Theo Gilbert, where he described HE as a "theatre of cruelty". This was in relation to the student experience, but, taken at face value (and not delving too far into its surrealist origins) this made me sit up. HE can be a harsh environment at times: the PGR teacher experience can be harsh. Professor Gilbert's focus was on compassion as a "*psychobiological motivation to notice distress in others and then act*". He posed two key questions for students: "What have I done to develop my fellow students' social and learning experiences?" and "What have they done to develop mine?" This empathy and reciprocity is something I see in PGR teachers' work all the time, something I see on APP PGR and is captured brilliantly in **Fran Morris'** discussion of the "near peer" affordances of PGR teachers. Pedagogies of kindness, care and

respect are, I perceive, being talked about in HE more now than they have ever been. Perhaps not surprising given the emotional disruption of the global pandemic, but not always because of it. Developments at Warwick which reflect this shift include the [Wellbeing Pedagogies Library](#) and the establishment of the [Community Values Education Programme](#), as well as increased guidance and support for things like personal tutoring. More widely there is the commitment to [Inclusion as a strategic priority](#) and a focus on areas where we may need to educate or re-educate ourselves. Recently at Warwick the WIHEA [Neurodiversity toolkit](#) (co-developed with students) and the [Tackling Racial Inequality at Warwick](#) programme both encourage us to question, perhaps feel discomfort and act. The latter presented a particularly good opportunity for PGR teachers to learn alongside other colleagues in an equitable way. And this focus on diversity and belonging, on the social and emotional side of our work seems to be replicated across the sector particularly in the themes of the most recent institutional summer education conferences (e.g., *Student Inclusion and Belonging* at University of Liverpool; *Working Together to develop a University for public good* at University of York and *Connections and Conversations* at Warwick, to name three). More directly and in one of the most powerful pieces I have read this year, Warwick colleague Dr Maja Korica's essay called for a more humane University, one of valuing each other, remembering that we are human (which relates well to the piece by **Nur Aminatun Naemah binti Md Noor**) and celebrating all our colleagues' contributions. "*A better academia is possible if we live it,*" she asserts (Korica, 2022). And in spite of this essay not being strictly in Dr. Korica's research field, it was downloaded just under

4,500 times in the first week; perhaps an indication of an appetite for change.

Finally, something that has also appealed to me this year is Helen King's work on the notion of expertise. Here expertise is pitched as an alternative to "excellence", an important rhetoric in higher education (at Warwick we have our "Warwick Awards for Teaching Excellence" for example). Excellence implies a lofty status not attainable by all; expertise, as King explains, is not a static point but a process available to all; an evolution of our teaching. One aspect of this is "Artistry in Teaching", a consideration for the less tangible, perhaps neglected and more 'human' elements of our work. *"A teacher with expertise will have care: they will care enough for their students' learning to better understand them as individuals and to develop effective relationships, and also to spend time on continuing to improve their own teaching."* (King 2022).

Recognising the teacher

Where does this leave us in respect to PGR teachers? Well, I would argue that they have the potential to occupy, if they don't already, an even more important space in our immediate and future work. There is lots of evidence in the practice of the individuals who have contributed to this issue of the JPPP which demonstrates that they are exhibiting traits of King's "expertise": evolving their practice, innovating, and adapting, showing care. And there is a strong thread of the affective running through these pieces. **Francis K. Poitier** and **Christoffer Guldborg** present nuanced and innovative ways in which they challenge students' perceptions in a safe space. Also innovative were the approaches of **Shakiratul Hanany Abd Rahman** and **Nicole Berrios Ortega**, but perhaps what interested me most was their care for each other as critical friends. Reciprocal teaching

opportunities were also explored by **Youn Affejee** and the meaningful connections made between sports coaching and teaching in HE, particularly the integration of new learners, appeals to notions of compassion, already mentioned. Finally, how PGR teachers share a space which makes learning accessible to students is powerfully expressed in the study by **Victoria Palumbo** and **Christopher Cammies**. The evidence acknowledges the fact that PGRs, lab demonstrators here, are the ones establishing the right "conditions" for learning; the learning environment, the space to ask questions, the guidance and the lack of judgement perhaps perceived by students in more senior colleagues. Likewise, **Zhizhuo Su, Yiduo Wang** and **Di Wang** show how they mediate both the real and the digital space alongside students, with a care for digital literacy, avoiding overload and promoting feedback opportunities.

The themes of storytelling and positionality have appeared in several places in this issue too. PGRs have a great story to tell to undergraduates, as those who have taken the journey before them. But there remains the challenge of PGR teacher identity, which we seem to return to as a community time and time again. **Evelyn Strongylakou** asks a series of searching questions about her identity as a teacher, providing a thought-framework for others. Eventually this identity is acknowledged as fluid, "different hats", which may well be the reality...but will that quiet the unsettling feeling PGR teachers get of not quite "belonging"? "Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA)" is a title that conveys a teaching status at least: but most PGR teachers I know dislike it, seeing it as firmly tethered to the dirty business of contractual arrangements. And semantically as well as professionally, "assistant" does seem somewhat reductive for the work

that I know PGR teachers do. I've got some sympathy with the knotty issue of academic titles, which do little to support the kinder, relationship-forging, more inclusive University we might be seeking. My own academic title belies who I really am, as I explored when delivering the ["Playful Plenary" at the University of Hull's Learning and Teaching Conference](#) this summer. It was at this point that I was able to confront my own positionality and assert the identity that I really want: that of being a 'teacher'. And PGRs should be able to do the same.

As we've seen from the papers in this issue, PGR teaches work in "the virtual, the physical and the somewhere in between". And the less tangible, more affective, in-between spaces (the ones that values inclusivity, the ones that prevents drop out, the ones that encourages belonging) may well be the ones which we need to pay the most attention to, as we transition through the after-effects of the global pandemic. [The Office for National Statistics reports](#) that more than a third of students reported a decline in their mental health in the last academic year (ONS, 2022) and only half, or [less than half of students at Warwick felt connected](#) to the institution, or their departments. This cannot be ignored in our current teaching work. And although often well-placed in the realm of support, the responsibility for this work belongs to all of us, not just PGRs, who as we have seen, often lack their own support. They cannot run on empty. If we are to exhibit compassionate behaviours, if we are to develop as experts, then this has to be extended to them.

What struck me most about the papers in this second issue of the JPPP was their positive and proactive tone: of problem-solving, creativity, enthusiasm, empathy, reflection, and care. And this is in spite of what we know to be true about the issues our PGR teacher

colleagues face, through local and national surveys, and conversations on the ground. Returning to Dr Korica's paper, she offers suggestions which provide good yardsticks for better behaviours and advocacy in HE. For example, "*use your power to craft better systems*" which I interpret as our responsibility to challenge where we see failings in contractual arrangements, equitable training opportunities and policies. One example of this is escalating the PGR Teaching Survey through the committee structure, a process which has begun, and is having impact. And for that I might need to dust off my academic title; it comes in handy sometimes...

Korica also suggests "*If you've established yourself as a securely employed senior academic...reach out to a colleague you can equitably collaborate with*" which in the teaching context might mean more generous mentoring or giving some agency in learning design. This is exactly where we can dispense with those titles, and meet our PGRs as teacher peers and let them in. And we should extend this to postdoctoral colleagues, technicians who teach and others for whom there is no natural home when being recognised as a teacher.

I would conclude by calling for a re-imagining of the PGR teacher in Higher Education and affording them a special status which truly acknowledges the critical pedagogical role they play. In trying to unravel this, **Vicky Palumbo** and **Christopher Cammies** suggest "*one that sits somewhere between student-peer and student-lecturer... high quality educators and role models*". I think they are getting somewhere, especially with the last phrase. PGR teachers' work is often substantial and influential. We need to recognise them as colleagues alongside. And although technically viewed as "staff" their respective rights, access to systems and resources,

professional learning opportunities and relative treatment sometimes undermines that status and unless we fix those systemic irregularities they will

forever remain in the liminal space. Now feels like a good time to do that.

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