

Teaching unfamiliar content can lead to brilliant teaching: Data-led reflections

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Abstract

Unfamiliarity constitutes one of the major challenges faced by novice practitioners while constructing teacher identities. It is often associated with the perceived uncertainties and lack of ownership or autonomy in navigating pedagogical complexities. In practice, any module may entail a sense of unfamiliarity for PGR teachers because they are not involved in the content development processes, usually initiated by the senior module leaders. In writing this article, we seek to reflect on our teaching experiences in three academic departments/centres. As our data-led reflections will show, multiple situated complexities play out in our attempts to mitigate the initially perceived unfamiliarity and externally prescribed non-expert role.

The overarching aim is to shed light on strategic negotiation and construction of effective Higher Education professional identities while engaging in interdisciplinary practice. Following a qualitative methodological tradition, the data is generated from iterative reflective journaling and a series of peer dialogues, spanning two academic terms. We approach the data inductively via reflexive thematic analysis, highlighting three major themes in the two narrative reflections: 1) taking a humble stance to acknowledge the signature pedagogy of the unfamiliar field; 2) recognising the core threshold concepts from an etic perspective; and 3) fostering a bottom-up awareness of taking the students' perspectives as near-peers. The data analysis is based on concrete examples to foreground actionable pedagogical recommendations, which are tried and tested in our own professional development. As such, we will argue that teaching unfamiliar content can lead to brilliant teaching.

Keywords: Unfamiliarity, Identity Construction, Interdisciplinarity, Professional Development, Reflective Journaling, Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs)

Introduction

A sense of unfamiliarity can manifest as novice practitioners navigate pedagogical complexities while attempting to construct effective teacher identity in Higher Education (HE) contexts. This is especially so for practitioners who might not have been involved in the design phase of the curriculum, syllabus, and module development. Moreover, for graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), the interdisciplinary nature of teaching delivery and marking responsibilities has become increasingly salient across academic departments/centres, exacerbated by the lack of ownership or autonomy in decision-making processes (Muzaka, 2009; Park & Ramos, 2002; Song & Lu, 2023). To facilitate professional growth against uncertainties or even anxiety potentially associated with unfamiliarity, it is imperative for us to critically reflect on the challenges and the positive sides of teaching unfamiliar content.

This critical reflection brings together two data-led accounts to illustrate how and why teaching unfamiliar content can lead to brilliant teaching. The 'brilliance' here refers to positive evaluations from multiple perspectives, including that of ourselves (GTAs), the learners, and the module leaders, as partly evidenced by our data-led reflections. We will also demonstrate how such positively evaluated teaching may in turn enhance our adaptive confidence when teaching new modules or interdisciplinary content. The data are drawn from the reflective journaling along with a series of peer dialogues between the two authors, spanning two academic terms. Approaching the data inductively via reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), we would like to highlight three themes: 1) taking a humble stance to acknowledge the signature pedagogy of the unfamiliar field; 2) recognising the core threshold concepts from an etic perspective; 3) and fostering a bottom-up awareness of taking the students' perspectives as near-peers. To conclude, we seek to articulate actionable pedagogical recommendations based on the three themes above.

Literature review

GTAs: from deficiency to growth

Within the UK HE contexts, a GTA can be defined as any postgraduate research (PGR) student who is simultaneously employed by the department to teach part-time, alongside their own research studies. The term GTA is therefore sometimes used interchangeably with PGR teacher. Having reviewed relevant literature on GTA experiences in the UK, we have identified a deficiency-focused discourse, such as "donkeys in the department" due to their "heavy workload, sizeable responsibility and limited autonomy" in making pedagogical decisions (Bale & Anderson, 2024; Park & Ramos, 2002, p. 47). In practice, while GTAs often appear to exercise autonomy by applying for and competing over modules that align with their research interests, this autonomy is constrained by the fixed departmental module options and limited freedom in shaping the teaching. GTAs' role is often perceived as non-expert or ambiguous in the department, despite their evident

contributions. More recent scholarly attention is shifting to a growth-focused agenda, aiming at fostering professional development and recognising the unique and intrinsic value of GTAs (Gallego, 2014; Muzaka, 2009; Song & Lu, 2023). Yet, little is known about how GTAs themselves would perceive the pedagogical processes especially when it comes to dealing with unfamiliarity.

Unfamiliarity as a unique challenge

Teaching a new module can entail a sense of unfamiliarity in various aspects, such as the discipline-specific signature pedagogies and novel content in terms of the less-familiar threshold concepts (Meyer & Land, 2003; Shulman, 2005). First, this critical reflection defines signature pedagogies of the unfamiliar field as the salient forms of pedagogies that seemingly characterise the new module that we contribute to. These pedagogies are salient in that certain “characteristic forms of teaching and learning” can shape “the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new professions” (Shulman, 2005, p. 52). Existing literature has demonstrated that understanding the signature pedagogies is conducive to establishing professional identity and to reflecting on the GTA’s teaching philosophy (e.g., Zhuo & Li, 2024). In this regard, novice practitioners like GTAs can arguably benefit from making explicit what kind of signature pedagogies are involved in the new modules and how they contrast with one’s existing pedagogical repertoire.

Moving forward, another challenge associated with teaching unfamiliar content is to effectively identify and make sense of the threshold concepts. According to Meyer and Land (2003), threshold concepts refer to a conceptual gateway that helps unpack “previously inaccessible way of thinking about something”, therefore potentially leading to “a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress”. Meyer and Land (2003, 2006) further characterise them as ‘troublesome’ because the associated knowledge could appear counter-intuitive, alien or seemingly incoherent from a layman’s perspective. The disciplinary threshold concepts by no means only bear pedagogical significance for learners. Instead, it can be argued that GTAs must also utilise such conceptual tools to tailor their teaching practice when confronted with unfamiliar content.

Methodology

This study draws on two data-led narrative reflections written by the two authors to analyse how and why teaching unfamiliar content can lead to brilliant teaching. The reflective writings are extracted from our individual journaling, partly based on peer dialogues and professional development workshops spanning two academic terms. By no means rigidly structural, Figure 1 visually illustrates the reflective prompts that are utilised to scaffold our unfolding peer dialogues as we navigate the pedagogical unfamiliarity. It offers a starting point and flexible references for practitioners to consider relevant dimensions involved in interdisciplinary teaching practice, yet without prescribing fixed or universal criteria for all contexts. Following a qualitative methodological tradition, the use of iterative

journaling is justified by opportunities for peer scaffolding and its clear focus on the chronological timeline of events (Gallego, 2014; Li & Gong, 2025; Mann & Walsh, 2017; Sidaway et al., 2025).

The three dimensions of Signature Pedagogy, Threshold Concepts, and Near-peer Positioning, emerging from our pedagogical processes, also serve as conceptual stimulated recall devices throughout journaling. The textual data were approached inductively via reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). We started by familiarising ourselves with each other's reflective writings, treating the journaling texts as two separate cases. Code labels were assigned to capture significant extracts in relation to teaching unfamiliar content. We then collaboratively identified, reviewed, and clarified the patterned themes.

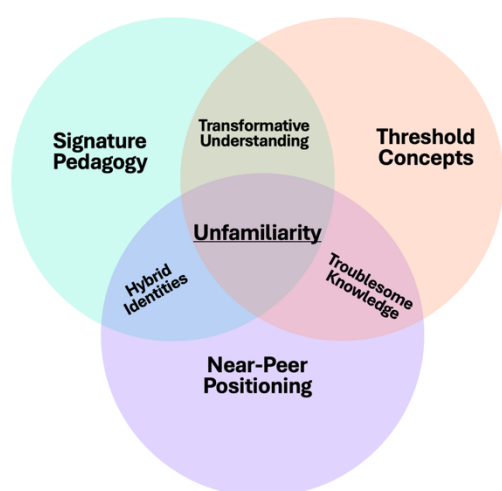


Figure 1 Visual representation of reflective prompts

The two reflections

Li's reflection

I taught three modules across two academic departments, mostly in Applied Linguistics. Here, I would like to highlight my unfamiliar topic area based on my recent teaching experience in a neighbouring department, Education Studies. Upon my first meeting with the module leader, a senior colleague specialising in Globalisation and Education, I was recommended essential readings about Sociological approaches to childhood studies beyond the Global North contexts. Despite my initial excitement about the new topics, the content appeared troublesome at first as I barely had any previous opportunity to immerse myself in the academic discourse permeating this new module. Meanwhile, I was simultaneously attending the APP PGR course (Appendix 1), where I learnt about useful conceptual tools for making sense of the troublesome knowledge and the perceived unfamiliarity. The notions of threshold concepts and signature pedagogy turned out to be particularly insightful in this case.

There were three concepts that facilitated my transformative understandings of this new discipline, namely: (1) social justice, (2) the rights-based framework, and

(3) the Global South childhoods. They potentially engendered thresholds given the previously inaccessible way of thinking about childhood equity issues in the Global South (Boyden et al., 2021). The three of them were closely interconnected in the field of child labour/ poverty in the least developed regions, e.g., Ethiopia in Africa (the context of seminar readings). Despite my existing background knowledge about childhood studies thanks to previous teaching and research experiences with young language learners, these concepts still appeared daunting as I perceived them to be highly value-laden and political. It should be noted that most of my academic training in Applied Linguistics tended to focus on the micro-level, everyday human interactions (e.g., in classrooms). I therefore felt the need to catch up on the wider Sociology literature on childhood inequality, but the core concepts above proved to be helpful when identifying worthwhile directions. The best strategy at that time was thus to do the readings from near-scratch just like every undergraduate student would, in a near-peer way.

Meanwhile, I noticed that the common ground of these three modules seemed to be a focus on the small-group seminar approach. Seminar delivery was a core responsibility of GTAs, following the weekly lectures led by module leaders. However, the nuanced differences manifested in teaching the new module were unfamiliar to me. My previous experience in the home department emphasised hands-on activities; it was crucial for the MA TESOL cohort (around 30 participants per seminar group) to closely observe the facilitation of pedagogical tasks encompassing poster presentations, motigraphs, mind maps, and PowerPoint slides. It used to echo what Kolb (1984, p. 38) would call experiential learning: “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”. In this vein, the pedagogical activities, as a form of experiential knowledge in itself, were constantly recreated and co-created with the student teachers at the master’s level.

But in contrast, my recent teaching experience in Education Studies was characterised by in-depth, case-based discussions with undergraduate students, with a seminar group typically comprised of fewer than 10 participants in each session. Such a cohort size made it extremely straightforward to observe students’ progress, seek feedback, and conduct formative assessment in real time. As a result, the positive evaluation of my teaching was in part evidenced by students’ expression of gratitude and growing interests in writing about that particular case study in their termly summative essay. This was followed by the written corroborations from the module leader, who generously completed a thorough teaching observation form after auditing our case-based discussions. These perspectives supplemented and reinforced my self-evaluation of the teaching quality. I also learnt from APP PGR colleagues that case study would typically be considered a signature pedagogy in certain disciplines such as Educational Psychology, Sociology, and Law School. It was through such interdisciplinary peer dialogues with other GTA teachers that I gained a comparative approach to consciously making sense of signature pedagogies when facilitating seminars.

In a word, I came to realise that unfamiliarity can be productive, given an acute awareness of signature pedagogies and threshold concepts in the host field. My experience of contributing to an unfamiliar module has hence been empowering in terms of effective GTA identity construction.

Gao's reflection

I worked as a GTA across three departments and centres. I will reflect on my teaching experiences in Natural Language Processing (NLP) at the Department of Computer Science (DCS) and focus on preparing and giving an interdisciplinary seminar titled "Language Variation in Natural Language Processing" to over 60 STEM postgraduate students.

When I first joined the module, I immediately realised the unique pedagogical approach in DCS, particularly in their emphasis on practical coding skills and algorithmic thinking that were unfamiliar to me. The module consisted of three main components: lectures led by the module leader, seminars, and lab sessions led by GTAs. Seminars were designed for more focused discussions on related concepts, and lab sessions provided hands-on coding practice as formative assessments. I learnt from fellow GTAs that DCS students would generally expect a more structured and instructor-led learning environment, while treating hands-on activities as independent practice opportunities, paralleling the content delivered in lectures and seminars. Such a parallel structure was quite different from the sociolinguistic pedagogy I was familiar with, which emphasised group discussions and reflections. This observation made me aware of the importance of understanding disciplinary signature pedagogy when teaching in an interdisciplinary context.

The seminar I led was the last one in the module, where I was given the freedom to choose a topic related to linguistics. The module leader and I agreed that I was not to position myself as an expert in the techniques of NLP, but rather to share my knowledge and linguistic perspective on language variation to broaden students' understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of NLP. Rather than embedding sociolinguistic pedagogy, I aimed to enclose the sociolinguistic interrogation within the students' established learning framework (Braßler, 2016). In other words, I would need to recognise the threshold concepts in sociolinguistics that were closely relevant to NLP and then present them in a way that aligned with the disciplinary norms. My session crafting began with observing the lecture delivery: Across the term I familiarised myself with the module leader's teaching styles and inspected the students' learning expectations. Taking advantage of an outsider stance, I identified myself as a "near-peer" of the students: trying to understand NLP from near-scratch, only with an additional sociolinguistic perspective. I also consulted the module leader to ensure that my seminar content was relevant and appropriate.

As a pedagogical objective, the core concept I attempted to introduce was "language variation is meaningful". To guarantee students' familiarity with the problem-solving structure, I employed sociolinguistic classification of language variations as a roadmap to guide them through the topic. Specifically, I started the seminar with a discussion on a social media post written in non-standard English that could not be properly understood by an NLP model, usually trained on standard English only. This naturally led to the following questions on "variations" that NLP practitioners might be interested in: What are the variations in a language? How does natural language variations influence the performance of NLP models? How to tackle the challenges of incorporating language variations in NLP? To answer these questions, I introduced the sociolinguistic taxonomy of language variations (e.g., regional, social, stylistic, and contextual variations) with relevant examples. I also

incorporated recent research as case studies to illustrate how certain algorithm designs can be adapted to better handle language variations.

This way, I was able to connect the sociolinguistic concepts with the technical aspects of NLP, making the content relatable and engaging for the students while respecting their disciplinary norms and existing expectations. My approach to interdisciplinarity was positively echoed and followed up by students' insightful questions on applying sociolinguistic methods in their projects, along with extended discussions between myself and the module leader about overlapping and complementary concepts in NLP and sociolinguistics. It could be argued that the seminar has effectively stimulated intellectual engagement and showcased brilliant teaching from perspectives of multiple parties. Reflecting on this experience, I found that teaching in an interdisciplinary context requires a delicate balance between respecting the signature pedagogy of the host field and introducing threshold concepts from my own discipline. It is crucial to understand the students' existing knowledge base and learning styles to effectively communicate new concepts.

Analysis and implications

This section aims to make the insights directly applicable to postgraduate teaching practice. A reflexive thematic analysis on the two narrative reflections have drawn our attention to three pedagogical aspects that can benefit GTAs in dealing with unfamiliarity: 1) taking a humble stance to acknowledge the signature pedagogy of the unfamiliar field; 2) recognising the core threshold concepts from an etic perspective; 3) and fostering a bottom-up awareness of taking the students' perspectives as near-peers. Referring back to the visual representation of our reflective prompts (Figure 1), the analysis has advanced an integrated, tripartite approach to tackling troublesome knowledge, gaining transformative understanding, and making use of GTAs' hybrid identities. In the following, we base the actionable pedagogical recommendations on the three major themes.

A humble stance on acknowledging signature pedagogies

Both authors have highlighted the importance of making explicit the signature pedagogies when teaching an unfamiliar module. To enhance one's teaching philosophy across disciplines, it is advisable for educators to take a humble stance to acknowledge distinct pedagogies in the host fields (Shulman, 2005; Zhuo & Li, 2024). This necessitates a step away from the pedagogical comfort zones of GTAs. A contrastive view may be particularly fruitful in distinguishing and identifying the core features of interdisciplinary practices across academic departments. We have also explored a dialogical way of attempting reflective practice in collaborations with colleagues (Mann & Walsh, 2017). To sum up, the tried and tested strategies in dealing with unfamiliarity may involve peer dialogues in and outside professional development workshops, consultations with senior colleagues or the module leaders, and longitudinal 'apprenticeship of observation' as preparation for the seminar delivery.

The recognition of core threshold concepts

In both cases, teaching an unfamiliar module has entailed crossing boundaries of conventional disciplinary knowledge, which could appear ‘troublesome’ at first. A conceptual gateway is imperative for novice HE practitioners to access context-appropriate ways of engaging with unfamiliarity (Meyer & Land, 2003). We have construed our etic or outsider stance as advantageous when integrating unfamiliar concepts into teaching practice. The interrogation of threshold concepts proves to be conducive to facilitating a transformative understanding and interpretation of the pedagogical content, benefiting both the GTAs and the students. In this sense, the knowledge co-construction can be effectively achieved either via collaboratively learning from near-scratch, or through critical interrogation of discipline-specific meanings associated with the same core concept. It is therefore advocated that GTAs be aware of the core concepts as part of their pedagogical objectives so as to effectively scaffold students in crossing the ‘threshold’ of learning.

Awareness of GTA's near-peer perspectives

The hybrid identities of GTAs can mean much more than merely “donkey in the department” (Park & Ramos, 2002). Our two narrative reflections have attempted to justify the unique strengths of being interdisciplinary GTAs, who possess fresh eyes to take a near-peer perspective when engaging students in seminars. By near-peer perspective, it means that we could collaboratively develop deeper understanding and co-create knowledge in the teaching-learning enterprise, although certain unfamiliar puzzles do not seem to immediately make sense to us especially when taking on new modules. This novel near-peer positioning arguably enables us to negotiate what could also count as GTAs’ pedagogical expertise and evaluate ourselves in a positive light. Echoing the shifting discourses of deficiency-focused to growth-focused literature, we would like to justify the agentic role of GTAs as being and becoming professional HE practitioners despite the hybrid identities of both research students and teachers.

Conclusion

Starting with unfamiliarity as a unique challenge, we have interrogated the taken-for-granted assumption of GTAs as non-expert or inexperienced in navigating interdisciplinary complexities. This reflective piece contributes to the understanding of unfamiliarity as a multifaceted phenomenon that can be productively approached if we can take a humble stance to acknowledge the signature pedagogies and recognise threshold concepts holistically. In addition, the two narrative reflections in this study have revealed that a unique strength of GTAs lies in their capabilities of taking a near-peer perspective to analyse learning needs of students from the bottom up. Li has reflected on the way teaching an unfamiliar module can be empowering for professional identity construction, while Gao’s reflection has

demonstrated how a GTA's disciplinary knowledge can be transferable to thrive interdisciplinary teaching.

Taken together, we argue that teaching unfamiliar content can lead to brilliant teaching, even if the content may be initially perceived as alien or associated with previously inaccessible way of understanding the discipline. This article hence concludes with a takeaway message for new GTAs to consciously draw on the visually illustrated reflective prompts (Figure 1) as reference points presented in Methodology when embarking on their journey of professional identity construction and interdisciplinary teaching. It is hoped that this strategic approach to reflective practice can enhance novice teachers' adaptive confidence when confronted with unfamiliarity. While one possible limitation of this study may be insufficient triangulation in dialogue with other stakeholders, we have attempted to incorporate alternative perspectives as complementary source into reflective journaling to see how our interpretations might be validated or challenged. A future direction can be to systematically seek feedback from the students and evaluations from module leaders. Looking forward, this critical reflection can be considered a sincere invitation for fellow practitioners and GTAs to engage critically in reflective journaling and peer dialogues about tackling unfamiliarity as they cross disciplinary boundaries.

Ethical claim

This critical reflection used data from the two authors and obtained their full consent to use the data. This study declares no conflict of interest.

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Appendix 1

APP PGR is the abbreviation of the Academic and Professional Pathway for Postgraduate Researchers who Teach at Warwick. It is a professional programme, externally accredited by Advance HE and leads to a recognised Higher Education teaching status, namely, the Associate Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (AFHEA): https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/academic-development/coursesandpathways/apppgr/. AFHEA candidates are encouraged to continuously self-assess their teaching practice with reference to the UK Professional Standards Framework (PSF) for teaching and supporting learning in higher education 2023 (Advance HE, 2023). To fulfill the partial requirement of the APP PGR assessment, the two authors teamed up as a pair to actively engage in a “Teaching Philosophy Dialogue” that inspired the subsequent series of continued peer dialogues, leading to this paper and a presentation at the inaugural Warwick PGR Teacher Conference. Despite lacking a rigid structure for the whole peer dialogue series, we would like to acknowledge the helpful prompts that structured the initial “Teaching Philosophy Dialogue” between us:

Prompt Number	Detailed Instructions
1. Perceived Importance in Teaching	Describe what feels important to you in teaching (e.g. the need for inclusion, enthusiasm in subject, good planning, dialogue with students)
2. Disciplinary Contexts	Describe your disciplinary area and broadly what and who you teach (e.g. School of Engineering, Fluid Dynamics, first year UG, large groups).
3. An Area of Activity (PSF)	Choose an Area of Activity in your teaching work (e.g. assessing lab reports demonstrating and supporting experiments).
4. Subject Knowledge	Subject knowledge: what specific subject knowledge and/or skill is being learned?
5. Teaching and Learning Techniques	Teaching that knowledge : what specific teaching and learning techniques are used to enable this learning?
6. Professional Values	Professional values: how do you draw this into your teaching work (e.g. thinking about inclusivity and diversity, encouraging equal participation, using an evidence base, drawing on the wider context)?