

Title: Storying the experiences of GTAs: Narratives of identity, agency and classroom practice

Presenter: Sarah Moore, Tom Stocks
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Session Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

- Discuss the diversity of GTA experience, and how they respond to a changing landscape
- Explore how GTAs' own backgrounds, conceptualisations of teaching and sense of agency impact on the ways they teach and support their students
- Critically reflect on how far their own academic development activity meets the needs of a diverse range of GTAs and recognises the skills, values and experiences they bring to the role

Session Outline

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) are increasingly used to support teaching across UK higher education and are therefore crucial contributors to a positive student experience (Chadha, 2013; Muzaka, 2009). On one hand the liminal space they occupy between student and teacher can be beneficial for both GTAs and their students, but their position can also be precarious and can involve a delicate balance between teaching, research and life pressures (Winstone and Moore, 2016; Muzaka, 2009). While they are constantly negotiating a changing landscape, they are too often seen as passive subjects to be shaped into teachers, rather than teachers with diverse experiences and agency that could support learning in unpredictable, exciting ways. If, as Zeichner and Liston (1996) argue, how we as teachers see ourselves influences what we do in the classroom, understanding how GTAs negotiate, adapt and enact the design and development of their curriculum in different ways offers new critical insights into professional development for this unique group. In doing so, it prompts us as academic developers to think critically about the dominant values we perpetuate, ground our activity within the context of diverse GTA experiences, and challenge the discourses of marketisation, metrics and 'students as consumers' through nurturing teacher agency.

This proposal draws on an ongoing project that aims to provide an in-depth exploration of the diversity of GTA experience in terms of how GTAs see their identities as teachers, how much space and agency they have in their role given the current environment, and how this plays out in practice. In this session the researcher (who is herself an academic developer) and one of the GTA participants will present stories from the project, and allow time for discussion around how academic developers can use the diversity of GTA experience to offer support and empower them in their classroom practice.

Session Activities and Approximate Timings

5 mins	Introduction and quick overview of the project
7 mins	Tom's presentation on his experience as a GTA
10 mins	Participant discussion on Tom's experience and the stories they read before the session (see below): <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do these tell us about the GTA experience?• What stands out/surprises/shocks you?• What doesn't seem to fit? Initial discussion in small groups and then a few answers from around the room
7 mins	Sarah's presentation around how the messages challenge us as academic developers
10 mins	Participant discussion in small groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do these ideas challenge you?• What initiatives/approaches do/could you use to mitigate these challenges?
5mins	Final plenary and close

Preparation before session

We will send a few very short (200-300 word) story fragments to participants to read in advance of the session. Participants will be asked to consider what stands out for them from the stories which will form the basis for the first session discussion. Copies will also be made available on the day.

References

- Chadha, D. (2013) Reconceptualising and reframing graduate teaching assistant (GTA) provision for a research-intensive institution. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18(2), 205-217.
- Muzaka, V. (2009) The niche of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs): perceptions and reflections. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14(1), 1-12.
- Winstone, N. and Moore, D. (2016) Sometimes fish, sometimes fowl? Liminality, identity work and identity malleability in graduate teaching assistants. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 14 June 2016, 1-9.
- Zeichner, K. and Liston, D. (1996) *Reflective Teaching: An Introduction*. Mahwah, L. Erlbaum Associates.