

Editorial: “GTAs’ (Re/De) Constructing the Learning and Teaching Space Piece By Piece”

Group Bio:



This year’s editorial team consists of seven GTAs (From left to right: Youn Affejee, Irsa Ajmal, Farzan Dar, Yanyan Li, Adam Read, Yvette Wang, Meifang Zhuo) from across five departments at the University of Warwick. Everyone on the team is passionate about supporting PGR teachers within and beyond Warwick.

Abstract

This editorial introduces our fourth issue- “GTAs’ (Re/De) Constructing the learning and teaching space piece by piece.” First, we outline how we continue to build upon the successes that previous JPPP issues have already achieved. Following this, we explain what we mean by the theme and how the nine articles in this issue contribute to this theme. Finally, we conclude the editorial by reflecting on the journal's fourth year and offering some thoughts for future JPPP issues.

Key word: GTAs, Wellbeing and Support, Innovations, Challenges, Interdisciplinarity

Hello!

Building on the excellent work of the previous three JPPP issues, the editorial team of JPPP Issue 4 are delighted to present you with the fourth issue of the Journal of PGR Pedagogic Practice (JPPP)! Like its predecessors, this issue continuously manifests the amazing work of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) and the wider postgraduate community. We hope this issue will provide valuable insights into the teaching and learning in Higher Education in and beyond the UK, for current GTAs and those who aspire to take this role soon.

With this issue- GTAs' (Re/De) Constructing the learning and teaching space piece by piece", we not only maintain but also extend the aspiration of the founders of JPPP. In the editorial of our pilot launch issue, Patel (2021) emphasized JPPP as a tool for GTAs to share their work, exchange and learn from each other, and pursue ongoing professional development. To achieve this, we listed the following four aspects as part of our key sub-themes for Issue 4, including *Innovations in teaching and learning practices*, *Overcoming the GTA Challenges*, *Well-being and Support*, and *Professional Development*. In addition to our endeavor to continue the core values of JPPP, we also hope to use this journal to keep GTAs up with emerging technologies and the latest trends in educational settings. To achieve this, we also included the *Impact of AI and Crossing Disciplinary Boundaries* as the other two key themes of this issue. The reasons why these two key themes were specifically highlighted are as follows:

In respect of the theme of AI, the release of the large language model ChatGPT in November 2022 has transformed how we use AI-generated information in our day-to-day lives (Neumann et al., 2023). GTAs, with their critical role in assuring the overall quality of Higher Education (HE), should be involved in the discourse of AI in higher education, considering the potential of AI-driven transformations in HE (Saaida, 2023).

The second theme of interdisciplinarity aligns with the growing focus on interdisciplinary education by research universities (Schijf et al., 2022). It has been argued that interdisciplinary collaboration can contribute to the achievement of sustainable development goals in HE (Podgórska & Zdonek, 2024). Moreover, interdisciplinary education has been found effective in enhancing students' awareness of inequalities

and implicated biases. Interdisciplinarity is considered essential in addressing needs and challenges in HE today (James Jacob, 2015). Considering all these, GTAs, who hold significant teaching roles in HE, should be encouraged to enhance their understanding of interdisciplinarity by reflecting on their work.

Issue 4 of JPPP includes five research articles and four critical reflections, covering all the themes mentioned above except for *Impact of AI* (although we did receive an abstract on Generative AI for this issue, no complete article was submitted). Compared to Issue 3, we have fewer articles. However, we significantly increased the proportion of international contributors to 30%, with one from Malaysia and two from India. This, in turn, contributes to our aim of continuing to make JPPP a platform for PGRs beyond the University of Warwick and beyond the border of the UK. The research articles and critical reflections received in each of the sub-themes for this year's JPPP issue are briefly discussed below.

Subtheme 1: Wellbeing and Support

Two research articles below this sub-theme address a core question about Wellbeing and Support offered by GTA's in their teaching spaces. Both articles really focus on the importance of being a relationship between postgraduates who teach and their students. **Catherine Lillie, Brenda Grant, Dr Michelle Smith** and **Amy Tomlinson**, colleagues from the University of Hull bring a fresh perspective on how postgraduates who teach help to give their students a sense of belonging due to working in small and more intimate groups. This article is a partnership between staff and students with Brenda being a master's student in the school of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences, Catherine and Michelle who are both teaching enhancement advisors and Amy a senior lecturer in Sport Rehabilitation. This perspective exemplifies the impact of GTA's on student experience and how it goes beyond purely academic ability. Our second research article for this theme is from **Shakiratul Hanany Abd Rahman**, a senior lecturer from Universiti Malaysia Sabah with an interesting discussion about cultivating care in the classroom. Her recent doctoral research focused on innovating teaching methods in English language education in Malaysia, specifically investigating virtual drama as a potential alternative pedagogy for ESL learners. Something unique

about this article is that the students were taught in online classes which normally create additional barriers to developing a sense of care within the classroom. Shakiratul makes it very clear that creating a sense of fun within her online classes helped her to develop a sense of trust and care with her students that ultimately led to greater enjoyment of the class. From both research articles it is clear that postgraduates who teach have much more to offer beyond just teaching, they are able to offer and create safe spaces for students so that they can feel a part of something greater. Ultimately, a large part of the educational system stems from having a sense of unity with peers, therefore working towards creating these safe spaces where students can feel confident is vital and the work of GTA's is paramount to ensuring these spaces.

Subtheme 2: Innovations in teaching and learning

For this year's issue of the JPPP, a key sub-theme in deconstructing and reconstructing GTA's teaching and learning space is that of innovations in teaching and learning.

Under this sub-theme, we received two critical reflection and two research articles.

Farzan Bashir Dar, PhD candidate and GTA at the Law School, University of Warwick provides a detailed exploration of development of effective teaching strategies within legal education, emphasizing personalized teaching, interactive learning techniques, and continuous professional development (CPD) using personalised approaches such as correct pronunciation of students' names and providing tailored feedback. He also suggests the implementation of mock courtroom scenarios and technology-enhanced learning tools like VEVOX and Padlet for promoting higher-order thinking and inclusivity. The findings of his critical reflection highlight the importance of integrating personalised attention, interactive methods, and CPD to enhance student engagement and well-being alongside creation of equitable learning environments.

In addition, **Hande Cayir**, PhD candidate and GTA in Film and TV Studies at the University of Warwick, suggests designing seminars fostering inclusivity and belonging given the challenges faced by GTAs when teaching in a liminal space; some of these challenges being understanding diverse student needs, including, learning difficulties, age, neurodiversity, LGBTQIA+ identities, ethnicity, language, socio-economic backgrounds. Based on her own interdisciplinary PhD research of co-creating films with

participants facing mental health challenges and her experience as a Staff-Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) representative, she explains how students can be co-creators and how GTA's identity and expertise affect the classroom atmosphere. With practical implications such as using anonymous student feedback to tailor the teaching content and offering audio-visuals and interactive material to promote participation among (quieter) students.

Furthermore, **Nikita Goel**, PhD candidate at The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India suggests integrating self-regulatory strategies, such as the use of reflective journals, peer assessments, and technology-enhanced learning tools, into their teaching practices for GTAs, thereby balancing their research commitments and effective teaching practices. She also discusses how such self-regulatory strategies empower students to take control of their own learning by setting goals, self-monitoring progress, and adjusting their approaches based on feedback; helping students develop critical thinking skills, improving their academic performance, and enhancing their resilience in the face of challenges.

Similarly, **Virginia Thomas-Pickles**, GTA and PhD candidate in the department of Global Sustainable Development, University of Warwick critically reflects on her experiences as an introverted GTA trying to 'tackle the tumbleweed' (i.e., seminar silences). She discusses the challenges of verbal engagement of students in seminars with her and their peers. Drawing on her reflective practice, she considers the varied definitions of 'student engagement' within the seminar context, focussing on the verbal dimensions of engagement and reflects on some techniques to encourage verbal engagement (e.g., assigning smaller group-based tasks to students) and non-verbal engagement (e.g., Kahoot!). She also alludes to various external factors impacting engagement that lie beyond GTA control (e.g., massification of HE) and suggests peer-discussions for GTAs to feel less alone and discuss ideas to get conversations flowing in a classroom setting.

Subtheme 3: Overcoming GTA challenges

The sub-theme of Overcoming GTA challenges serves as an opportunity for GTAs to discuss perspectives and solutions to challenges they have faced. The two research

articles we received within this sub-theme are focused on self-improvement through self and peer reflection. Our first article for this theme is a research article by **Meifang Zhuo** and **Yanyan Li** who are both PhD students in the school of Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick. Meifang's research aims to support language teachers' professional development and wellbeing by teacher research, and she is passionate about innovative learning and teaching methods and believes in the significance of supporting inclusive and empowering education in every possible way. Yanyan's research centres on group work and social interaction in classrooms and other institutional settings, with a focus on understanding how people collaborate and communicate. Through her work, she aims to improve group dynamics and support the development of individuals' social competencies within collaborative environments. Meifang and Yanyan's article focuses on the benefits of peer dialogue between GTA's. This article offers a fresh approach to GTA development as it is often thought as something that a GTA either has to think and work on themselves or seek guidance from more senior colleagues. The approach of working with other GTA's to enhance professional development is an area where research is severely lacking. Our second article is a critical reflection by **Akshay Kumar**, a Doctoral Fellow in the school of English Language at The English and Foreign Languages University Hyderabad. His current research includes undergraduate and postgraduate mentoring, language teacher cognition, English as a Second Language research writing and materials development. Akshay's reflection focuses on GTA intuition and mentoring and how this can influence a student's success or failure. The article also outlines GTA intuition in relation to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, an innovative approach is then taken towards creating a scaffold for GTA mentors to work on their own skills and intuition with regards to advising students. Each article offers a new and unique approach where challenges faced by GTAs are tackled. This theme acts as a reminder that challenges hit by GTAs offer up new opportunities for growth and reflection.

Subtheme 4: Crossing disciplinary boundaries

For the sub-theme of crossing disciplinary boundaries in the process of deconstructing and reconstructing the teaching and learning space by the GTAs, we received one

critical reflection. Under this theme, **Grace Kamanga**, a PhD student and senior GTA at the Global Sustainable Development department, University of Warwick shares her experience of teaching a research project module for a diverse classroom with students belonging to various disciplines such as economics, health, education, sociology, and business studies. In her critical reflection based on the theme of crossing disciplinary boundaries, she discusses how challenges in interdisciplinary pedagogy persist, especially in classroom preparation, delivery, assessment, and feedback and highlights how disciplinary distance and varying degrees of disciplinarity—from intradisciplinary to transdisciplinary effect interdisciplinary teaching and learning. Finally, she discusses some of the interdisciplinary dilemmas from her own experience of teaching and learning as a GTA at Warwick and presents practical implications of her reflection by suggesting epistemological and pedagogical practices, such as developing adaptable pedagogical strategies, to navigate these interdisciplinary dilemmas.

JPPP in its fourth year

Beginning as a platform for GTAs at the University of Warwick to exchange their work and pursue professional development, JPPP has grown into a welcoming space for GTAs both from and beyond the University of Warwick to share their voices. In its fourth year, JPPP has become more inclusive and international, attracting the highest number of international contributors ever. Furthermore, JPPP has indicated its ability to sustain itself by involving some authors of previous issues as reviewers for this issue.

Like last year, we intended to organize a pre-submission workshop in late August 2024, aiming to bring together all the authors who had been invited to submit full papers and provide an interactive space for networking. This workshop was also intended to support authors during their preparation of the full articles, by answering their questions and offering feedback on their planned writings. However, due to increased international interest in the journal we have moved to an online drop-in session to allow for greater author participation during this session. This flexibility reduced the burden on our JPPP members in charge of this workshop and provided much-needed support for some authors more efficiently.

One interesting question regarding research ethics came up during the drop-in session. This question was related to one of our author guidelines for Issue 4 required authors who used data from human participants to obtain ethical clearance. This implied that authors should ensure both macroethics in obtaining institutional approval and microethics in receiving full informed consent from the human participants in the research (check Zhuo, 2024, for more information regarding macroethics and microethics in research). One author asked us the question: *where am I supposed to get institutional ethical approval for my research when my institution does not have an ethical review board?* Hearing this question, we realized that it was wrong for us to take it for granted that every institution has an ethics review board for research. Nevertheless, we believed it was essential that research by our contributors practiced a form of macroethics. Therefore, we suggested that the author obtain ethics approval for his research from his supervisor instead. Overall, articles submitted to the JPPP are suggested to get some form of ethical approval either from an institutional board of ethics or from direct supervisors, as this is a key part of the JPPP core values.

A specific highlight associated with this issue is that we are going to hold a launch event for JPPP Issue 4 around mid-November 2024, after its online publication in early November. For this event, we will invite all the contributors to JPPP 4 to showcase their work to the wider community of GTAs at Warwick and beyond. To accommodate international authors/participants who might not be able to travel to the event, this event will be hybrid, welcoming both in-person and online attendees. In addition, we will also include some other activities for GTAs' networking and professional development at this event to enrich the experiences of our event participants. We believe this event will be a great opportunity for authors to showcase their wonderful work, for us to formally express our appreciation for their contribution, for WPTC to receive feedback, and advice and attract new members and potential contributors for JPPP Issue 5 next year.

Checking the future directions for JPPP specified in the editorial of Issue 3 of JPPP (Affejee et al., 2023), we are delighted to share that we have realized most of the visions. These visions include attracting more international contributors and having reviewers beyond Warwick. All the nine articles included in Issue 4 went through two

rounds of anonymous peer review, thanks to the kind support by members of JPPP editorial team and our internal and external reviewers. Looking ahead, we hope that the next editorial team will continue the endeavor to increase the visibility of JPPP among GTAs in different contexts across the globe to continuously attract external contributors, within and outside of the UK. Regarding the vision of seeking editors beyond Warwick, we consider having an issue edited by guest editors as a possible way forward. As a journal to enable and amplify GTAs' voices, we feel it essential that we continuously work towards GTAs' needs and interests. Therefore, it might also be a good idea to involve the wider community of GTAs in deciding on the key themes for our future issues, through a survey or some mapping events.

Acknowledgement

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