

Navigating the liminal space: Enhancing film teaching through anonymous feedback, digital collages, and advocacy

Hande Çayır (she/her)

PhD candidate, Department of Film and Television Studies, University of Warwick

hande.cayir@warwick.ac.uk

Hande is a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) and PhD candidate in Film and TV Studies at the University of Warwick. Her research delves into mental health activism and documentary filmmaking, earning an honourable mention from the British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies (BAFTSS). The core objective of her work is to collaborate with survivors diagnosed with schizophrenia, bipolar, or psychosis to co-create films that authentically represent their lived experiences, thereby acknowledging and promoting their agency, authorship, and ownership. Hande is an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (AFHEA) and was recently humbled with the Warwick Awards for Teaching Excellence (WATE). Her role as a peer reviewer for the *Disability & Society* journal allows her to make a meaningful impact and engage in ongoing professional dialogue.



Abstract:

This reflective piece focuses on the strategies of designing seminars that foster inclusivity and belonging, mainly when teaching in a liminal space as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA). It requires a commitment to understanding diverse student needs, including A-level subjects, learning difficulties, neurodiversity, LGBTQIA+ identities, ethnicity, socio-economic backgrounds, and more. Alongside the module convenor's guidance and departmental procedures, a GTA's identity and expertise play a crucial role in shaping the classroom atmosphere. My interdisciplinary PhD research, which focuses on co-creating films with participants facing mental health challenges, informs my view of students as co-creators. As a Staff-Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) representative, I am dedicated to upholding students' dignity, autonomy, and contributions to the university and society while aiming to provide them with the ethical understanding needed to navigate complex 21st-century challenges. After each seminar, I value anonymous student feedback to tailor my content, listening to their needs and questions, and incorporating audiovisual and interactive material to promote participation, especially among quieter students. With this piece, by sharing my lived experiences as a GTA, I intend to contribute to a collective knowledge base and foster dialogue and collaboration among my peers.

Keywords:

advocacy, anonymous feedback, co-creativity, inclusivity, liminal space

I recently completed the *Foundations of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging* training on LinkedIn, where I encountered an analogy by Vernā Myers (2015) that captures the distinction between diversity and inclusion: ‘Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance.’ This metaphor highlights the insufficiency of diversity without active engagement, illustrating that true inclusion goes beyond representation to ensure active participation and belonging. This perspective aligns with the University of Warwick’s *Social Inclusion Strategy*, which aims to ‘increase the diversity of Warwick’s staff and students to maximise creativity and innovation’ while fostering a supportive culture that enables all individuals to achieve their potential. Furthermore, scholars such as Dewsbury and Brame (2019) and Mitchell and Sutherland (2020) reinforce the importance of inclusive teaching, emphasising the value of fostering rapport between staff and students to create environments where everyone can thrive.

Metaphorically inviting students to ‘dance’ signifies actively engaging them in the learning process. However, Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) may operate within institutional constraints that can limit their autonomy (Muzaka, 2009: 10; Strongylakou, 2022: 39). For instance, as GTAs, our primary responsibility typically involves facilitating discussions around the seminar questions provided. Therefore, any unconventional initiatives we might wish to pursue usually need to be discussed and negotiated with the module convenor. Earning the trust of the module convenor and, at times, persuading them within the constraints of a fast-paced, neoliberal academic environment requires a distinct set of skills and motivation. Introducing a GTA’s authentic voice, particularly regarding perspectives on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), often necessitates ongoing dialogue, contingent upon the flexibility afforded by the role. This dynamic is not unique to academia but is common across many professions—newcomers must consistently prove themselves and build trust through their actions. In this article, I aim to share five key takeaways from my experiences as a GTA, reflecting on the creative and passionate strategies I have found effective in fostering inclusion within the classroom.

1- Accept the liminal space as an opportunity

We, the GTAs, occupy a liminal space: neither entirely student nor tutor (Lee et al., 2004; Mansaray, 2006; Young & Bippus, 2008). Sara Hattersley (2022: 119) characterises the positionality of a mid-space PGR (Postgraduate Research) teacher as 'both an asset and a curse,' highlighting the dual nature of navigating both student and teaching roles within the academic environment. This liminal position presents a challenge because GTAs may lack agency in decision-making processes or be underestimated. Since the primary responsibility rests with the module convenor, their approach—whether they trust, support, and show care for our work—directly impacts our performance. Danielle Jacobson and Nida Mustafa's (2019: 1) 'social identity map' helped me to understand my positionality in relation to my students and colleagues. This map can be used as a 'flexible starting point,' serving to enhance the 'understanding of the role of power, privilege, and visibility' (Ibid). According to this social identity map, 'a young [GTA] may have less experience and feel self-conscious due to this position, whereas an older [GTA] may be more experienced but could feel the stigma of ageing' (Ibid.: 2). Factors such as 'class, citizenship, ability, age, race, sexual orientation, cis/trans status, and gender' (Ibid.: 3) influence how we perceive the world. Therefore, how do my interactions with students and the module convenor differ due to these aspects within my liminal space?

In the first week of the *Academic and Professional Pathway for Postgraduate Researchers who Teach* (APP PGR) programme at Warwick, the theme of 'teacher role and identity' laid the groundwork for examining both personal and professional development. This focus encouraged us to reflect on our evolving roles as educators within the academic context. During this time, I/we focused on identifying my values and priorities, using reflective journaling as a tool for meaningful introspection. Revisiting this journal has deepened my understanding of students and actively strengthened my ability to be a supportive colleague, allowing me to uncover valuable insights about myself in the process (Bain et al., 1999). I understand that GTAs bring fresh perspectives that can act as catalysts for innovation. Engaging with module content through this novel lens allows GTAs to offer valuable suggestions for improvement, provided we have the 'confidence' to do so (Morss, K., and Rowena, 2005). It is essential to acknowledge that GTAs do not always have the autonomy to

design their seminars, often required to deliver pre-existing content. In such cases, GTAs can embrace the situation and adopt a research-oriented approach, introducing students to research practices (what research looks like, how we write the bibliography) and offering support. Furthermore, GTAs can focus on the ‘how’ of teaching—breaking down complex topics into more manageable parts or transforming dry content into an engaging and interactive experience. We must remember that we are partners in education, just as our students are. Establishing clear communication and agreeing on how to meet departmental standards while integrating our unique personalities into the teaching process is essential. Developing this skill takes time and practice but is key to becoming a more masterful educator (Kelchtermans, 2009).

2- Advocate for yourself, your students, and your peers

Advocating for ourselves and our students/peers is essential to sustaining our learning and teaching environment (Adams & Holland, 2006; Carroll & Ryan, 2007; Jensen & Bennett 2016). According to People First, London, self-advocacy is ‘speaking for yourself, standing up for your rights, making choices, being independent, taking responsibility for yourself’ (Gray and Jackson, 2001). When I first encountered the term ‘self-advocacy,’ it brought a sense of relief, as it not only affirmed that self-advocacy is possible but also provided me with the necessary tools, guidance, and language to articulate and pursue it. It felt like, ‘Oh, there is this option; I can speak for myself as a GTA.’¹

Similarly, fostering self-advocacy in students is one of our vital yet understated responsibilities. For example, when a student expresses concerns about their final essay, I escalate these issues to the module convenor and implement targeted exercises to assist students in structuring their essays in alignment with the module content. This targeted intervention effectively support students. In addition to self-advocacy, I emphasise the importance of professional networking and broadening horizons. I encourage students to engage in opportunities such as *The British Conference of Undergraduate Research* and our department’s writing blog,

¹ It sounds funny as I write it now here.

fostering their academic growth and preparing them for future professional environments.

Supporting peers and being a critical friend is integral to fostering an environment of self-advocacy and collective development. As Paulo Freire (2007: 73) eloquently states, 'I make myself with others, and with others, I can do things,' underscoring the importance of collaboration in personal and professional growth. Initiatives such as *Active Bystander* training further strengthen our capacity to advocate for one another, enhancing our ability to create a supportive academic community. This training equips individuals with the skills and confidence to address issues such as sexual violence, misconduct, and abuse, allowing us to actively contribute to a safer, more inclusive environment that embodies our shared values. By empowering ourselves and our peers through such initiatives, we reinforce the culture of advocacy essential to sustaining our academic and social communities (See Active Bystander Intervention Course).

3- Do not just perform the task; seek training to enhance your skills

My participation in the APP PGR programme at Warwick, accredited by Advance HE, has significantly enhanced my teaching practice. This programme has not only boosted my confidence but also provided peer support and emphasised the broader academic context in which teaching takes place. Covering key themes such as the teacher's role and identity, inclusive learning, engaging with learners, assessment and feedback, and professional development, the programme has demonstrated that learning and teaching are ongoing processes, continuously evolving rather than one-time events (Jarvis, 2010). GTAs have the opportunity to adapt these training methods in their teaching practice. By implementing strategies from the APP PGR programme—such as fostering inclusive environments, refining assessment techniques, and actively engaging students—GTAs can more effectively address diverse student needs. This approach bridges theoretical pedagogy with practical application, creating a dynamic and responsive learning environment. In addition to this, my participation in workshops like *Evaluating Teaching and Learning in HE Forum*, *Active Bystander*, and *Decolonising Education* further equipped me with tools

and perspectives that enhanced my understanding of my role as both a learner and a facilitator. This training is vital for GTAs, as it contributes to a more inclusive, reflective, and student-centred learning experience.

Informed by my interdisciplinary PhD research, where I co-create films with participants facing mental health challenges, I view students as co-creators in the learning process. The safeguarding and ethics training I received shaped my approach to engaging with participants/students, respecting boundaries and promoting a supportive environment (Hargreaves, 2001; Brookfield, 2015). Just as the 'experts by experience' in my research contribute their lived experience/knowledge (McLaughlin, 2009; Beresford, 2019), students, too, bring years of classroom experience and insight into how they learn best. Recognising their expertise fosters a collaborative atmosphere that enhances learning outcomes. For example, in my research, listening to participants' perspectives on the project's benefits led to unexpected insights, such as allyship and public education, demonstrating the importance of openness and adaptability in teaching.

Serving as a Staff-Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) representative has further enriched my skills in fostering inclusivity and supporting students. I see this position as a part of my training. This role has provided invaluable experience in advocating for students' dignity and autonomy, equipping me with skills in mediation and ethical leadership. As an SSLC representative, I have developed my ability to empower students, helping them articulate their needs and ensuring their perspectives are valued. I aim to convey that although GTAs have PhD responsibilities and other life commitments, focusing on their education and training as much as possible will ultimately benefit their teaching practices, enhancing classroom discussions and making them more enjoyable.

4- Challenge text-based learning environments by incorporating audiovisual

Richard Mayer's research (2009) on multimedia learning emphasises the benefits of integrating both visual and auditory resources, which enhance engagement and comprehension, particularly for diverse learners. Many students, especially those with diverse learning styles, neurodivergent conditions, or disabilities, may struggle

to engage with purely text-based materials. By integrating audiovisual resources, educators can offer alternative ways to access and process information, catering to a broader range of student needs. Therefore, I promote participation and curiosity using multimedia tools such as a real-time audience engagement app, doodling, and polls. For example, one of our seminar questions asks about the various Harvey Pekar in the film *American Splendor* (Dir. Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini, 2003) and their relationships with one another.² To assist students in exploring the question, I designed the collage (Figure 1) below, keeping in mind that 'a well-prepared [GTA] is another important factor that increases the student motivation which can bring better achievements of students' (Danko et al., 2016: 7610).



Figure 1. As a GTA, I prepared a visual aid to facilitate student discussions and explore seminar questions.

² *American Splendor* is a 2003 biographical film that blends live-action and animated sequences to tell the story of Harvey Pekar, an everyman who worked as a file clerk in a Cleveland hospital and gained fame through his autobiographical comic series *American Splendor*. The film, directed by Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini, captures Pekar's life, including his struggles with work, relationships, and cancer, and how he transformed these everyday experiences into compelling comic book narratives. Over the years, many different artists contributed to illustrating Pekar's stories, with each artist bringing their own distinctive style to the portrayal of Pekar himself. This variance in artistic interpretation is a central theme in both the comics and the film adaptation.

Without the visual aid, comprehending the various iterations of Harvey within the confines of a one-hour seminar would have been challenging, particularly given the breadth of other questions we needed to address. We began by discussing and recalling the different portrayals of Harvey in the film, which inspired students to explore the topic more freely. Following this, I introduced the collage. Some students had not noticed the presence of ‘the puppet Harvey’ until they saw the image, underscoring the visual’s role in deepening their understanding. In a broader context, each portrayal of Harvey is crucial for understanding the (mis)representation in cinema, a theme that aligns with my research focus and enhances my ability to deliver this material proficiently. The collage sparked student-led discussions, with one student asking, ‘How can Harvey appear different every time he is on the Letterman Show— isn’t he the same person?’ Recognising that some students had studied philosophy at the A-level, I facilitated interdisciplinary dialogue by introducing Heraclitus’ aphorism, ‘You cannot step into the same river twice.’ This metaphor underscores the fluid and ever-changing nature of ‘reality,’ suggesting that it evolves with every encounter. By drawing on the students’ Philosophy background, we were able to foster an insightful discussion, further building a sense of intellectual community in the classroom. This example also illustrates the importance of GTAs finding ways to assess and tap into existing knowledge within the classroom. Doing so enables them to facilitate richer, more dynamic conversations that resonate with students’ prior learning and experiences.

While guiding students through seminar questions, I encourage them to explore their interpretations of Harvey through doodling, drawing inspiration from the different artistic renditions of the characters in the comics. I make it clear that this is not a mandatory activity (see Figures 2 & 3 below), but rather an optional exercise that can be both enjoyable and provide deeper insight into the theoretical framework being discussed. This approach acknowledges the diverse cognitive and temporal experiences of learners, allowing them to engage with the material at their own pace and in a way that aligns with their unique learning styles. Similarly, the *Evaluating Teaching and Learning in HE Forum* held in February 2024 emphasised the value of visual, hands-on activities as powerful learning tools. By integrating such exercises into the seminar structure, we not only address the core questions but also cultivate a participatory environment where many students, including those who tend to

remain quiet, can actively contribute to the intellectual discourse. It is important to note that silence does not necessarily indicate disengagement; GTAs can gauge student involvement by observing non-verbal cues, such as body language, to assess the room's atmosphere. The resulting mini-exhibition of student doodles is rich in self-reflection and promotes what Schön (1987: 25) refers to as 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-action,' encouraging students to critically examine both their immediate responses and the broader implications of their learning experiences. This process fosters a deeper engagement with the material and enhances students' understanding of complex concepts through creative, participatory methods.

At the end of the term, I recommend giving students the opportunity to create their own comic strip, enabling them 'to think, to perform, and to act with integrity' (Shulman, 2005: 52) by using module content to explore topics they are passionate about. One of my peers found this approach inspiring, which encouraged them to engage more openly and creatively with their module convenor to enhance students' agency, authorship, and ownership. Ultimately, research and teaching should resonate with students' lives and inspire meaningful change. Teaching and learning are transformative processes, and it is essential to connect the theoretical and practical aspects of the course to students' lived experiences, ensuring that the material is relevant and impactful.



Figure 2 & 3. Students' drawings of various Harvey Pekar depictions contribute to the discussions.

5- Prioritise listening to and responding to student feedback

Student feedback serves as a compass, guiding the refinement of my teaching practices and fostering a dynamic learning environment (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Brookfield, 2017). In one-on-one interactions, such as informal conversations in the corridor, students tend to ask more questions, suggesting that some may find it challenging to voice inquiries in front of their peers. For instance, Ellie Middleton (2023), in her book *Unmasked*, which discusses autism and ADHD, suggests that some individuals prefer to ask questions away from the attention of others. To address this, I implement anonymous feedback techniques after each seminar using Vevox, a real-time audience engagement app.³ Based on the anonymous feedback collected through Vevox, I adjust my support to incorporate student agency into my teaching practice, creating a safe, meaningful, and engaging learning environment.

After each seminar, I recommend that GTAs dedicate a few minutes to ask students to identify one key concept they learned and one area they needed clarification on rather than waiting for formal midterm feedback. Similarly, Race (2015) argues for continuous, formative feedback to keep students engaged and improve communication between teachers and students, allowing students to reflect on their understanding of key concepts. This technique was introduced by the Academic Development Centre at Warwick at the outset of our roles, and its value lies in how effectively it is implemented. In other words, cultivating an environment where students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts may take time. Furthermore, incorporating online tools (see Figures 4 & 5 below) to anonymise feedback has, in my experience, encouraged more honest and constructive responses. Following up on these conversations via email has further enriched our dialogue and strengthened the feedback loop.

³ I would like to acknowledge the valuable insights gained from observing the classes of Oliver Turner, SFHEA, which significantly contributed to my understanding of the positive effects of this application.

vevox

Join at:
vevox.app

ID:
172-083-576

What's one thing you learned today? 7

post/structuralism
intertextual dialogi
 multiple harvey's
unrepresentability i cant draw
 intertextual empathy
 clarity interdialogm
lots of versions

Illustration of a hand holding a smartphone and two people talking.

vevox

Join at:
vevox.app

ID:
188-540-913

Is there anything that you find most confusing? 5

When examining intertextual dialogism, how deep do we go (everything is related to everything else, there is no point of origin to focus on)

what is structuralism

Why fidelity is necessary. If not necessary, what should we strive for in adaptation?

no confused

Intertextual Dialogism

Illustration of a hand holding a smartphone and two people talking.

Figure 4 & 5. Anonymous student feedback collected after seminars to make them more accessible and student-centred.

Through the National Student Survey (NSS)⁴, anyone can learn how well universities and departments perform by listening to student feedback. However, we must go beyond mere statistics. For example, organising zine-making sessions where students can express themselves and co-create knowledge in a relaxed environment can offer deeper insights. In these sessions, students can discuss what worked well and identify areas for improvement, fostering a collaborative approach to curriculum development. This method amplifies students' voices and strengthens human connections, moving away from a transactional 'I have done my job' mindset toward one rooted in care. As Ken Blanchard (2022) states, 'none of us is smarter than all of us,' together, we can effect meaningful change. Listening to student feedback is central to student-centred teaching, which involves 'knowing how your students experience learning so you can build bridges that take them from where they are now to a new destination' (Brookfield, 2017: 62). And this is what I strive for.

Conclusion

In this reflective piece, I shared my strategies for navigating the liminal space as a GTA in film education. My experiences have highlighted the importance of fostering inclusivity and belonging by tailoring seminars to meet the diverse needs of students, incorporating tools such as anonymous feedback, digital collages, and active advocacy. Through my journey, I have learned to accept the liminal space as an opportunity for growth rather than a limitation, allowing me to explore new teaching methods and perspectives. It is essential to advocate for yourself and your students and peers, ensuring that their voices are heard, and their needs are met. Moreover, I have found that success in this role goes beyond merely performing tasks—seeking ongoing training and development is key to enhancing teaching skills. Challenging traditional, text-based learning environments by integrating audiovisual materials has proven to be an efficient way to engage students, particularly those who may be quieter or face learning difficulties. Prioritising listening and responding to student feedback has been fundamental to creating a dynamic and responsive classroom environment. By viewing students as co-creators, informed by my interdisciplinary PhD research, and actively engaging in peer dialogue, I have found that creating an

⁴ You can find the most recent data here: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/student-choice-and-flexible-learning/national-student-survey-nss/> (Accessed 30 September 2024).

open, responsive, and inclusive learning environment is essential. The integration of these strategies has enhanced my teaching and enriched the classroom experience for students, promoting active participation. Through this reflection, I hope to contribute to a broader understanding of how GTAs can navigate their roles effectively and inspire further peer dialogue on cultivating more inclusive and collaborative educational spaces.

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