# *"Dear Former GTA-Self":* Reflections from the Final Chapter of a Graduate Teaching Assistant Journey—from Novice to More Experienced Educator

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**Abstract**

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) are foundational to teaching practices in Higher Education (HE). Despite their widespread prevalence, academic discourse on GTA development remains largely outward facing, focusing on pedagogical practices and institutional outcomes over individual lived experiences. This article addresses that gap by proposing reflective letter writing as a methodological tool to document and facilitate the complex evolution of GTA experiences, drawing from a place of introspection.

The basis of the practice presented in the article is theoretically scaffolded by *Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle* (1984), *Gibbs' Reflective Cycle* (1988), and *Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection* (2017). The letter format offers a unique and creative medium for GTAs to express detailed insights, particularly engaging with the emotional and relational dimensions of their experiences. The practice is modelled through an illustrative example: a self-written, diary-like letter, addressed to the author's former GTA-self. This reflects on their GTA experiences at the end of a four-year role in UK HE.

The letter offers a personal account of the complexities encountered during the transition from a novice to a more experienced educator. The narrative is organised thematically, examining GTA experiences through the lenses of (i) identity construction, (ii) shifting perspectives on what is considered to be important, (iii) the role of intentional actions leading to self-growth, and (iv) the value of self-reflective practices for individual development. A critical discussion is provided, linking this to scholarly discourse.

The work offers insight for those navigating their own GTA journeys, inviting readers to reflect on their trajectories and recognise both shared and divergent experiences. This contributes to a more nuanced understanding of GTA development by championing reflective letter writing as tool for fostering self-awareness and agency, as individuals forge their own pathways and foster transformative impact both for themselves and those who surround them in HE and beyond.

**Keywords:** doctoral student; higher education; critical reflection; letter writing.

# 1    Introduction and Background: *Examination of Graduate Teaching Assistant Development*

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) serve a foundational role in supporting teaching practices within Higher Education (HE). Becoming a GTA acts as a foundational stepping stone in a person's academic journey, where an individual's disciplinary expertise begins to intersect with pedagogical practice, and the identity of being a student gradually shifts toward becoming that of an educator (Cayir, 2024; McLeod et al., 2025).

Despite the prevalence of GTA roles in HE, academic discourse exploring such roles remains largely outwards facing. Much of the research centres on how GTAs support student learning and focuses on the required competencies of being a good educator (Clark et al., 2021; McLeod et al., 2025; Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2018). This focus, however, comes at the expense of exploring GTAs' own developmental journeys, and how this shapes them as an individual. It is recognised that the emotional, relational, and personal dimensions of GTAs' experiences remain less well documented, despite playing a central part in an individual's development and overall progression (Salvo-Canlas et al., 2024; Strongylakou, 2022; Zhuo & Li, 2024).

Student-lead journals, such as the *Journal of PGR Pedagogic Practice* (published by the University of Warwick), and *Postgraduate Pedagogies* (published by University College London, and The London School of Economics and Political Science jointly), do however provide valuable opportunities for capturing such narratives. This is due to their flexible publication scope, of which many mainstream journals do not provide.

To address this underexplored area, reflective letter writing methodology is proposed as a tool to address this issue, specifically documenting and facilitating the complex evolution of GTA experiences amongst the HE community. The goal of this article is to explore how this can be implemented in practice. The article is structured into four parts. It begins by introducing theoretical frameworks and methodology to guide reflective processes. An example reflective letter addressed to the author's former GTA-self is presented in the Appendix of this article. This is then followed by a critical discussion of the themes examined in the letter, including that regarding reflective practices. Finally, the article concludes with the reader being encouraged to reflect on their own experiences, contributing to their own personal and professional growth, advancing the discourse on GTA development going forward.

# 2    Theoretical Frameworks and Methodology: *The Process of Reflective Practices*

This section is structured into: **(a)** Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, **(b)** Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, **(c)** Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection, and **(d)** Reflective Letter Writing Methodology and the Application of the Frameworks.

## (a)      Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

When formally learning how to teach, it is common to encounter multiple frameworks describing how students learn (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Bloom et al., 1956; Kolb, 1984; Piaget & Cook, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). One of these seminal frameworks is *Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle* (1984); a foundational model that describes learning as a continuous, four-stage cyclical process based on experiences. This is illustrated in Figure 1 for reference.
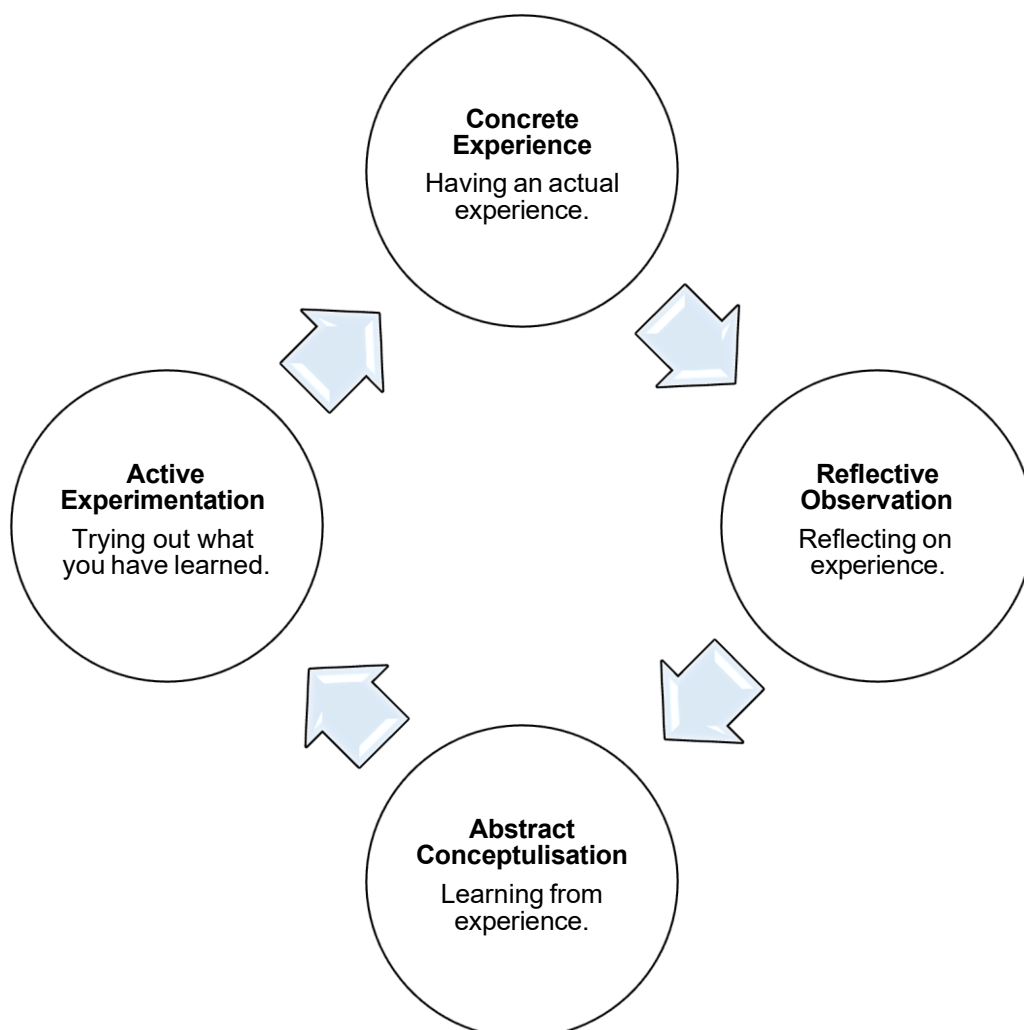


**Figure 1: Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984). This describes learning through a four-stage cyclical process.**

Although *Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle* is traditionally applied to student learning, it is suggested that its principles can be readily extended to the self-developmental process of *learning how to teach* and subsequently becoming an experienced educator. Learning to teach is considered to be a learning process *per se*; it is also an inherently experiential and iterative process, making the framework a robust fit for analysing GTA evolution and development. This is also particularly true emphasising that GTAs occupy a liminal space as both student and educator, so

being able to apply this both in the context of self and who they teach is particularly significant. The framework applies directly in the context of this article:

i. **Concrete Experience:** This refers to the experience of being a GTA, i.e., the raw experience from which reflection is drawn.

ii. **Reflective Observation:** This is the act of letter writing itself, a crucial stage where the GTA steps back to review and reflect on the experience.

iii. **Abstract Conceptualisation:** This stage is detailed within the letter, manifesting as the self-development and self-realisation—the translation of observation into generalised lessons and insights.

iv. **Active Experimentation:** This is subtly expressed by the letter's intent, providing gentle reminders and encouragement for future actions, thereby closing the loop and initiating the next cycle of learning.

The letter writing process itself particularly engages with the earlier stages of the cycle, emphasising engagement with stages (ii) and (iii).

**(b)    Gibbs' Reflective Cycle**

While Kolb's framework establishes the cyclical nature of the learning process, *Gibbs' Reflective Cycle* (1988) provides a structure for more in-depth self-inquiry. This seminal model consists of six stages that guide reflection processes. This cycle is illustrated in Figure 2 for reference.
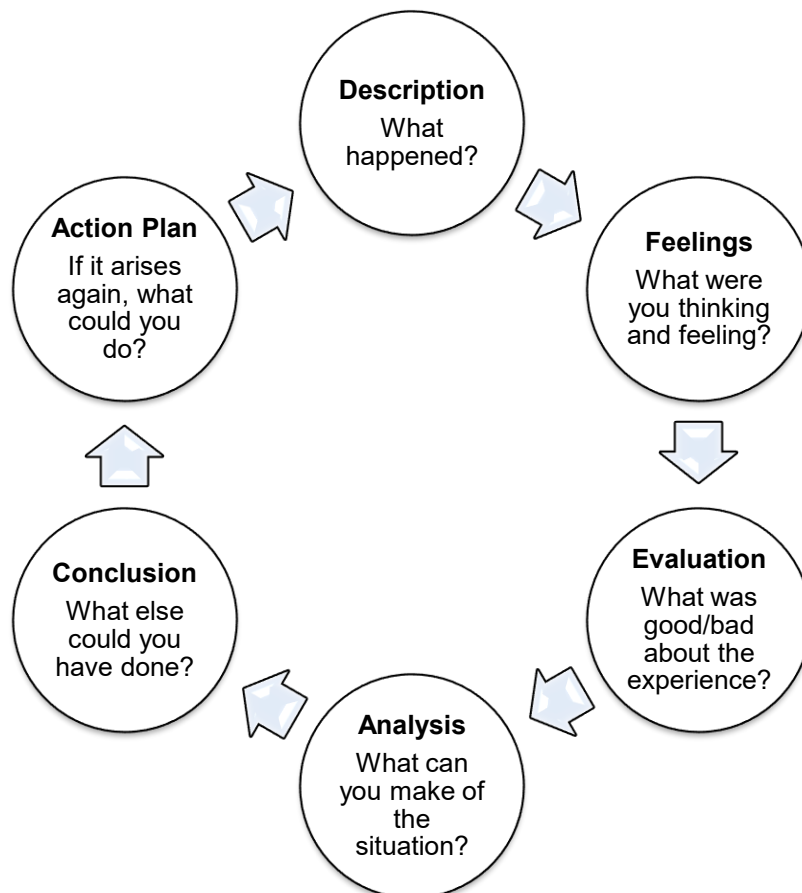


**Figure 2: Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (1988). This describes reflective practice as a six-stage cyclical process.**

The application of this model is particularly popular in educational and professional developmental contexts (Advance HE, 2020). This model guides reflection beyond description, ensuring that practices result in meaningful actionable insights, rather than remaining only surface-level reflections.

**(c)    Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection**

An additional framework that can be used for extending and deepening reflection is *Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection* model, which provides four distinct perspectives for critical reflection on teaching practices (Brookfield, 2017). This is illustrated in Figure 3 for reference.
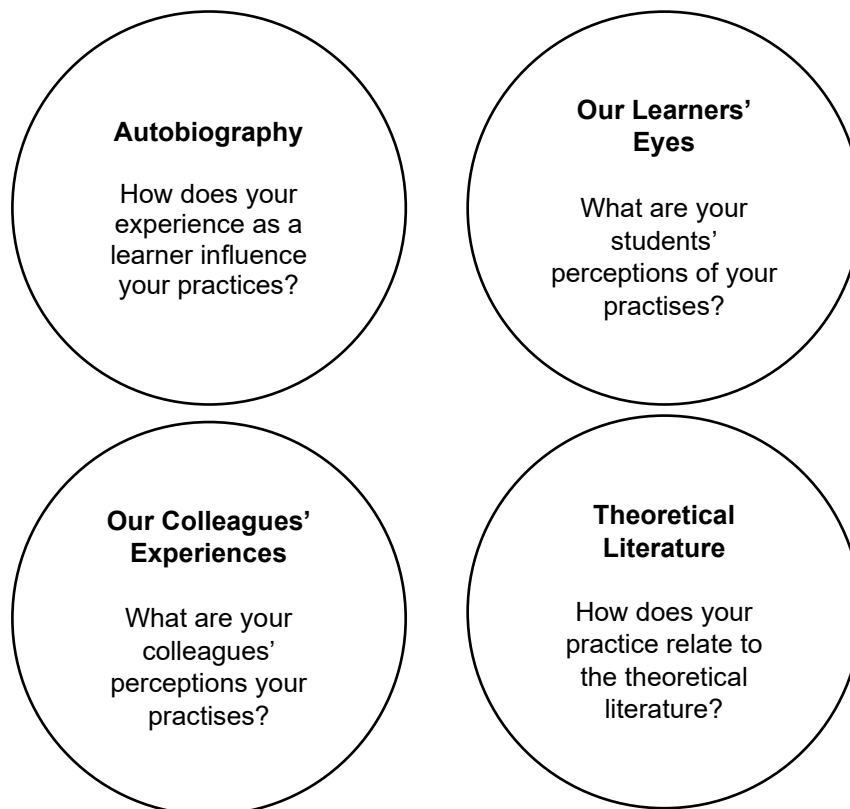
**Autobiography**

How does your experience as a learner influence your practices?

**Our Learners' Eyes**

What are your students' perceptions of your practises?

**Our Colleagues' Experiences**

What are your colleagues' perceptions your practises?

**Theoretical Literature**

How does your practice relate to the theoretical literature?

**Figure 3: Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection (Brookfield, 2017). This describes four lenses for reflective practice.**

The model is traditionally applied through actions such as seeking direct feedback from students or engaging with colleagues to explore alternative views and experiences. In the context of this article, the application is adapted for the reflective letter writing methodology. The letter-writing process *per se* directly addresses the autobiography lens. Engagement with the learners' and colleagues' lenses can be encouraged by imagining experiences from these alternative viewpoints. The scholarship lens is then explicitly applied later in this article through the critical discussion of the letter's themes, linking the personal reflections to wider academic literature.

**(d)     Reflective Letter Writing Methodology and the Application of the Frameworks**

Reflective practice can be undertaken through many approaches (Advance HE, 2020). The focus presented here is to explore reflective letter writing: specifically addressed to an alternative version of oneself. The technique is widely used across various contexts to encourage introspection and gain perspective on particular situations; it may also be considered to be a therapeutic activity depending on context (Channa, 2017; Freedman et al., 2023; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012). Despite, the specific origin of this method is not well documented. The act of self-reflective writing *per se* is however not new, tracing its philosophical origins to classical antiquity where figures like Marcus Aurelius used private notes (i.e., *Meditations*) for moral self-examination and self-guidance (Aurelius, 2015).

The described frameworks in parts **(a)**, **(b),** and **(c)** may be used to assist with the reflective letter writing process to enable *reflection-on-action* (Schön, 1983), referring to the critical thinking and reviewing of an event after it occurs. These frameworks serve as valuable tools for readers to guide their own detailed reflective practices. There is no strictly defined way to apply these frameworks to the reflective letter writing process. To provide practical guidance, the author followed a process that synthesised alternative elements of the frameworks together. The step-by-step process is detailed below describing the content formation. Readers are encouraged to adapt these steps for their own practises, particularly given their career stage.

### *Step 1:* Brainstorming Experiences
Begin by brainstorming ideas about particular scenarios or points of significance, both positive and challenging, regarding experiences as a GTA. This captures the *Concrete Experience* (Kolb) and forms the foundation for the *Description* phase of reflection (Gibbs).

### *Step 2:* Evaluating Scenarios
For each documented item, consider what feelings arose and what the initial evaluations of the event were. This engages with the *Reflective Observation* phase (Kolb) and directly addresses the *Feelings* and *Evaluation* stages of Gibbs' Reflective Cycle.

### *Step 3:* Gaining Perspective Through Multiple Lenses
During content development, engagement with alternative perspectives, such as those described by *Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection*, is recommended to extend critical engagement. This may involve imagining experiences from the viewpoints of students and colleagues, or linking these experiences to scholarship where applicable. This may also include exploring relational dynamics, or reflecting on any feedback that you have received from others as a GTA.

### *Step 4:* Thematic Structuring and Conceptualisation
The notes made should be reviewed, and related ideas or scenarios should be grouped into broader themes (e.g., identity, shifting perspectives, growth/challenges, reflective practices). Categorising these ideas provides the overall structure for the letter and begins the *Analysis* (Gibbs) necessary for *Abstract Conceptualisation* (Kolb). This is where higher-level learning points are derived from specific events.

***Step 5:* Synthesising Insights and Future Action**

Translate the high-level learning points into gentle reminders, encouragement, and actionable advice addressed to your *"Former GTA-Self"*. This completes the cycle by moving into *Active Experimentation* (Kolb). You may wish to provide an *Action Plan* (Gibbs) for future behaviour based on past learning.

To illustrate the outcomes of how such a methodology can be implemented in practice, the author has written a letter addressed to their *"former GTA-self"*. **The reflective letter is presented in the Appendix of this article.** The reflection has been written at the end of the author's four-year journey assisting with undergraduate modules at a UK HE institution. The letter format itself is considered a form of autoethnographic inquiry (Ellis et al., 2011), enabling the surfacing of dimensions of lived GTA experiences that may be obscured in more conventional academic accounts.

Although the letter is addressed to the author's past self, it is written with a specific audience in mind for the purposes of this article: current and future GTAs, and those who support them. The letter utilises non-technical and accessible language throughout due to this. It is acknowledged that GTA experiences are varied and complex; shaped by individual identities, institutional cultures, and disciplinary contexts. The content contained in the letter is considered not to be prescriptive. Readers are invited to recognise both shared and divergent elements of the content discussed in comparison to their own personal and professional trajectories.

## 3      Discussion: *Exploration of the Letter's Themes*

This section now provides a critical discussion of the broader concepts and themes detailed in this letter regarding GTA lived experiences. This has been structured into the four themes contained within the letter. The undertaking of this discussion extends the reflection process, which may be thought of as applying the *Theoretical Literature* lens from *Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection* model, linking the reflections to the wider findings contained in the academic literature. It is noted that this could have been integrated directly into the letter itself; however, given the publication requirements of this article, the author has decided to complete this separately.

### Theme (I) - Reshaping Your Own Identity: *Navigating Liminality and Identity Reconstruction*

The first thematic reflection in the letter engages directly with a common discussion found in academic discourse regarding GTA identity (Cayir, 2024; Rao et al, 2021; Strongylakou, 2022; Winstone & Moore, 2017). The core of this literature centres on the topic of liminality, examining the transitional space that GTAs are positioned in that is often defined as the author puts it as being *"neither fully a student nor an educator".*

While this space is frequently described in the literature as ambiguous and/or challenging (Rao et al, 2021; Strongylakou, 2022), the author's personal experience reframes it not as a dilemma, but rather as an opportunity to explore and reshape their own personal and professional identify. It is suggested that this dual status gives GTAs a unique positionality that they can leverage effectively in practice. For instance, in the context of teaching, this allows them to intuitively understand the level of course content difficulty from the student vantage, leading to more nuanced scaffolding practices that supports learners within Vygotsky's *Zone of Proximal Development* (Vygotsky, 1978). Further, this positionality can facilitate the development of stronger relational interactions with students, as GTAs may be perceived as less 'distant' compared to traditional academic staff.

In the context of professional development, this unique space may be utilised as an act of agency, allowing the GTA to define their own educational values and develop a distinct teaching philosophy guiding their practices (Bowne, 2017).

## Theme (II) - It's About the Journey: *From Achievement to Development*

The second thematic reflection in the letter offers a critique of the 'outcome-chasing' mentality prevalent in academic environments. As Becher & Trowler (2001) argue, in context of HE, the growing pressure to meet quantifiable performance targets can reshape disciplinary cultures and academic identities; this is often at the expense of intangible dimensions of personal and professional growth. Related to this in the context of this article, the reflection in the letter fundamentally redefines success away from this framing, asserting that *"the true outcome of your efforts is you"*, repositioning the process of development as being intrinsically motivated for the individual as opposed to extrinsically motivated relating to external demands.

From a more holistic vantage, the explicit encouragement to "*let yourself be present in the unfolding of the journey itself*" is a call from the author for mindfulness and self-compassion. This serves as an essential counter-narrative to the performance-driven culture faced in HE environments, which often lead to issues such as burnout amongst staff (Watts & Robertson, 2011). This issue is not limited only to staff and applies to all individuals navigating the pressures of HE. Research from a student perspective, for example, has shown that students who engaged more greatly with mindfulness and self-compassion were considerably more likely to achieve higher academic attainment (Egan et al., 2022). It is therefore suggested that encouraging such approaches would be mutually beneficial in teaching practices and amongst those who deliver them, sharing conceptual linkages with the principles of compassionate pedagogy (Killingback et al., 2025).

## Theme (III) - Growth Beyond the Comfort Zone: *Experimenting with Opportunity though Discomfort*

The third thematic reflection in the letter explores the connection between taking opportunities that are associated with anticipated discomfort, and how this contributed to personal and professional development. It is not uncommon for discomfort to arise in GTA experiences as the situations faced may prove to be challenging at times (Thomas-Pickles, 2024). Nevertheless, the narrative reframes this discomfort, demonstrating that transformative growth often stems not from "*dramatic leaps*" but from an accumulation of small, consistent steps. By actively engaging with challenging activities beyond the author's comfort zone (e.g., delivering part of a lecture, etc.), the this takes advantage of on what Bandura (1997)

identifies as the most effective source of self-efficacy: engaging with mastery experiences. This is where each successful step made proves competence in an activity, directly contributing to an individual's self-confidence which drives growth.

Another theme explored in the letter related to this concerns the importance of relational interactions. The realisation that "*teaching isn't a solo act: it's relational, collaborative, and alive*" highlights the social dimension required in teaching practices. This relational aspect is foundational in the GTA experience in building *Communities of Practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This theory emphasises that learning is fundamentally situated within a social process. In the context of this narrative, the collective of fellow GTAs and teaching staff serve as a supportive network, whereby this community provides the belonging and support necessary to embrace opportunities that initially cause discomfort. From a learner's perspective, this type of social scaffolding is vital, as it allows GTAs to operate effectively within Vygotsky's *Zone of Proximal Development* (Vygotsky, 1978), pushing the individual to achieve tasks that would not be possible without it.

**Theme (IV) - Self-Reflection is a Powerful Tool: *The Art of Reflective Practice***

The final thematic reflection in the letter champions self-reflection as a valuable tool for facilitating both personal and professional development. The letter's very form highlights its value for understanding transformation, particularly from a longitudinal perspective through engaging with such lens shift. The process helps to make sense of multiple experiences including examining alternative dimensions of engagement such as behavioural, cognitive, and emotional related to a situation (Fredricks et al., 2004), of which traditional discourse does not regularly capture. It has revealed that there are a lot of similarities shared between being a student and being an educator, and a distinct line cannot be directly drawn between the two.

Nonetheless despite its benefits, a critical discussion requires acknowledging that reflective practice is not without its limitations. Scholars sometimes critique reflection for risking superficiality, where there may be a tendency to be descriptive without achieving true *critical* analysis, or leading to future change (Harvey et al, 2025; Schön, 1983). This is why this article has been structured around multiple frameworks to guide such processes (Brookfield, 2017; Gibbs, 1998; Kolb, 1984). Another limitation is the risk of navel-gazing or becoming overly self-absorbed, where the reflector focuses too much on personal feelings without sufficiently considering the external context or the perspectives of others (Harvey et al, 2025; Brookfield, 2017). Furthermore, the advice in the letter to not to "*force it*" emphasises a practical risk of turning reflection into a chore, driven by compliance rather than genuine curiosity and ability to facilitate self-improvement. It should also be recognised that self-reflection is not a solution for all challenges; reaching out to others for additional support may be vital for navigating difficult moments if needed.

## 4.    Conclusion: *An Invitation to Pause and Reflect*

The core contribution of this work lies in modelling the practice of self-reflection and letter writing as a valuable tool for personal and professional development. This has been explored in the context of GTA development, though it is readily possible that this can be extended to alternative contexts. An example letter

has been provided to illustrate this process, drawing on the author's own accounts of being a GTA in UK HE. This has provided unique insights and has showcased a story of an individual's development. This reflective process was scaffolded utilising several established academic frameworks to guide effective practice (Brookfield, 2017; Gibbs, 1988; Schön, 1983). A discussion has been provided regarding the themes of the letter content showing that the experiences described by the author are not uncommon, extending such findings to the wider community.

The reader is now invited to pause, reflect on their own experiences, and engage in the reflective letter writing practice. This exercise may be directed toward a former or future self, or an alternative recipient, depending on current circumstances and needs. Guiding questions to facilitate this process include:

- What parts of your identity feel most present in your teaching? Which parts feel hidden or still emerging?

- How do you tend to yourself—emotionally, intellectually, relationally—through the messiness of growth?

- What does reflective practice look like for you right now? What might it become if you gave it more space?

Brainstorming answers is always a good idea. There is also space for experimentation and to be creative with the process. It does not necessarily need to be only limited to words. The practice could also be extended amongst the GTA community, where such letters might be shared or 'posted' among colleagues, creating a supportive environment for fostering communal reflection and supporting peer development in *Communities of Practice.*

As a final note to end this article, reflective practice is not seen to be a task to complete *per se*, but a space to return to when needed. May the reader keep returning, gently and often, and may what they find there continue to shape them in ways that feel meaningful.

**Acknowledgments**

**Ethical Statement**

This article draws on personal reflection and professional experience within a GTA and doctoral context. No external participants were involved, and there are no conflicts of interest to declare.

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**4 Appendix: *The Letter to The Author's "Former GTA-Self"***

Dear Former GTA-Self,

I'm writing this letter at the closing chapter of my role as a GTA in August 2025. This acts as an opportunity for me to reflect on the four years that have grounded and shaped me as a person. I would like to let you know that during this time, I have developed a lot as a person. I've gained experience, built relationships, and have also learned a lot about myself, including being able to find my own voice, not just as an educator, but as a person.

Four years may sound like a long time from where you stand now, though when you get there, you'll be surprised by how quickly it passes. I wanted to leave something behind for you. Not advice, exactly, but a series of gentle reminders and a handful of reflections; things I wish someone had told me when I was just starting at the beginning of my journey. I hope this offers you some comfort, clarity, and maybe even a little courage as you figure out your own path. Let me remind you that you won't need to have it all figured out. You don't need to be polished or prepared for everything, and don't try to carry it all at once. So, take a breath—step into this role with openness. What follows in this letter are a few reflections from the path I've walked, thoughts that I've gathered and pondered on over the years, in the hope they'll accompany you as you find your own footing along your journey.

**Theme (I) - Reshaping Your Own Identity: *Navigating Liminality and Identity Reconstruction***

You've grown up in an environment where your identity has been defined by others: defined solely as being a student. I encourage you to begin to recognise that this has shaped how you've been seen and treated by others. But most importantly, I want you to recognise that this has influenced how you've come to see yourself, and there's so much more to you than just that. You'll come to realise that your identity isn't fixed. It is something that you get to shape and explore as you discover who you are, figuring out your likes and dislikes. By paying attention to this, you'll begin to carve out a sense of self which is not guided by other people's expectations, but by your own curiosity, interest, and emotions.

Becoming a GTA offers you a new space to do just that. Given the role's liminal nature, being a GTA is an experimental space where you can hold multiple perspectives at once: where you are neither fully a student nor an educator. For example, you carry the memory of what it feels like to be a student, such as feeling nervous to ask for help when things don't quite make sense. And now, as an educator, you're also learning to guide and teach others. These roles intertwine, offering a richer understanding of your own identity and where you stand, though it is noted that this can be often ambiguous, which is a not uncommon to experience as a GTA.

You'll begin to notice that your positionality is also uniquely valuable. Having once been an undergraduate in the modules you now support, you carry an intuitive understanding of how students engage with the content. Use these insights to scaffold their learning, not just to help them get through the content, but to help them properly grasp the foundations that support them throughout their degree. In time,

you'll find yourself carving out a teaching philosophy that feels distinctly yours; one rooted in curiosity, mindfulness, and trust. And as your research deepens in practice, especially with its educational focus, you'll start to see new perspectives regarding how students learn, and how you also learn alongside them, advancing your own development.

**Theme (II) - It's About the Journey: *From Achievement to Development***

You've spent your life focusing on and chasing outcomes: achieving high grades, milestones, and the kind of success that others say matters. That's understandable, as we're conditioned to believe that such achievement is the ultimate measure of worth. For example, in your context, it may be easy to believe that the financial pay or the title validates the number of hours that you exert as a GTA, or that your thesis is the pinnacle of your doctoral degree. But here's what I wish someone had told me sooner: *the true outcome of your efforts is you.* The outcome is the version of yourself that emerges through the process of these efforts. The one shaped by late-night reflections, small breakthroughs, and small interactions that leave a lasting impact. The real reward isn't the degree certificate, the pay, or the job title. It's the confidence you build, the resilience you strengthen, the clarity that you gain about who you are and what you value.

I didn't come to this realisation all at once. It unfolded slowly, quietly, like something waiting patiently in the background until I was ready to notice that it was there. I recall facilitating focus groups as part of my doctoral research, which, perhaps unexpectedly, called upon many of the same skills I'd developed through my experiences as a GTA. I remember listening to undergraduates describe their early realisations of this with such clarity at the beginning of their degree. This is when this realisation really struck me. Over time, I came to realise that learning doesn't just happen only in the teaching space, but also outside of it. It happens in the quiet preparation, the moments of doubt, the unexpected questions that you receive that shift your perspective. It taught me that teaching is not about having all the answers, but rather about creating space for others to think, feel, and grow. I began to see that the real impact lies in the trust that we build—both with students, peers, and ourselves, making them feel seen—and the practices that we cultivate upon undertaking these acts.

So, if you're feeling unsure or weighed down by the pressure to perform, remember this: be gentle with yourself. You don't need to have all the answers, and you don't need to get everything right. What matters most is that you keep showing up with a willingness to grow and develop, and most importantly, let yourself be present in the unfolding of the journey itself.

**Theme (III) - Growth Beyond the Comfort Zone: *Experimenting with Opportunity through Discomfort***

I know that you're reluctant to step outside your comfort zone; you like certainty, structure, and the safety of what's familiar to you—you always have. But here's something I've come to realise throughout my time: growth doesn't always occur in dramatic leaps; it often forms from an accumulation of small and consistent steps. Even if what you do doesn't feel transformative in the moment, when you look back, you'll see how far you've come. And here's also a reminder to celebrate both big and small wins, as they matter more than you think! And to convince you, let me

give you a few examples of what you'll encounter during your journey.

You may sign up for a teaching-focused training course to gain professional accreditation as an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (AFHEA), perhaps with some hesitation, nudged gently by a supervisor who sees your potential more clearly than you do. You won't be sure at first, as you'll still be clinging to the idea that your thesis is the only thing that counts. But trust me: this experience will surprise you. You'll be welcomed into a warm, supportive community, and you'll also meet the academic course lead, who will later stop you around campus and ask about your houseplants (still alive, by the way). In moments like that, you'll feel seen—not just as a GTA or doctoral student, but as a person—and that's what really stays with you and feels meaningful.

As part of the teaching course, you will face your first teaching exercise. Your microteaching session—on meditation, of all things—which will make you slightly nervous in the lead up to it. But you'll step up, and you'll do it well. You'll receive feedback from others that's not just constructive but also deeply encouraging, and will build your self-confidence. You'll deliver a session that others will remember, not just for the content, but for the care and thoughtfulness you bring to your teaching. Someone you teach in that session may even take away something positive to implement into their own lives, and that's real impact.

Later, you'll spend a long time convincing yourself to deliver part of a lecture for a module that you support. You'll hesitate, rehearse, and doubt. But eventually, you'll volunteer yourself and say yes to the opportunity. And it will be good for you. It will boost your confidence more than you expect. The session will pass by quickly, much faster than you expect. And while hearing your voice through the microphone might feel strange, you'll manage it well and will be proud of yourself when it's over. Here's a tip: before you begin, imagine it going well. Let that picture settle in your body. And if it doesn't go perfectly? That's okay. You tried and you'll grow from the experience, and that matters more than flawless delivery.

Another realisation will come slowly: the importance of connection and community. You usually keep yourself to yourself, as that is how you've always been, though you'll start to notice how others shape and influence your own growth.

Teaching isn't a solo act: it's relational, collaborative, and alive. You'll work alongside fellow GTAs (who are mostly fuelled by coffee), where together you'll support students, work through complex challenges and programming errors, and learn from each other, balancing responsibilities together. You'll learn from the students too— how to adapt, how to listen, how to teach with flexibility and care. You'll also find yourself supported by academic staff—those who offer guidance, share resources, and model different ways of being an educator. You can take notes and implement them into your own teaching activities.

Over time, you'll build networks that sustain you. Not just professionally, but personally. These connections will help you hold steady when things feel uncertain and difficult. They'll remind you that support is always nearby and will encourage you to reach out and say hello which will positively contribute to your wellbeing. They'll also help you develop empathy and compassion toward others, and perhaps more surprisingly, toward yourself. And when someone remembers your name, your research, or offers you a gesture of kindness, you'll feel it: the warmth of being seen.

These are the moments that stay with you and feel meaningful. So don't be afraid to try something new. Say yes to the things that scare you a little. That's where transformative growth happens, so embrace it with fullness.

**Theme (IV) - Self-Reflection is a Powerful Tool: *The Art of Reflective Writing***

One of the most unexpectedly valuable tools you'll take away from completing the teaching-focused training course is the art of reflective writing. I know, just the thought of it makes you cringe. The idea of putting your inner world on paper feels very exposing and vulnerable to you. You've never been one for journaling, but I will remind you that those pretty notebooks and fancy pens that you've collected over the years are still waiting for a version of you who feels ready. But here's the truth: reflective writing is a powerful tool that helps your self-development both personally and professionally. It helps you make sense of your teaching experiences, notice patterns in how you respond to students, and surface the values that quietly guide your practice. It allows you to explore ideas more deeply than you ever could by keeping them locked away in your head.

It's not about writing perfectly; it's about writing honestly and openly. And the format of how you do this doesn't matter. For example, whatever works best to help express and capture your thoughts: pen and paper, digital notes, voice recordings, sketches, etc. There's no right or wrong, and you also don't need to commit to just one format, so I encourage you to experiment. If you're feeling adventurous, you might even try using generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) to scaffold your ideas by allowing it to generate reflective prompts. Or if you're feeling brave, talk it through with another human being who can hold a safe and open space for you. You'll take more away from these practices than you expect. But here's one gentle piece of advice that I wish someone had told me earlier: don't force it. If you're not in the mood, let it be. Forcing reflection can turn it into a chore, and that's the last thing it should be.

With time, engaging with reflective writing will allow you to trace your progression. You'll begin to notice how your practice has shifted not only as an educator, but also as a person: how you hold space for others, how you respond to situations of uncertainty, how you navigate moments that you once felt daunting.

You'll see how your confidence in the teaching space has expanded and your sense of self has become more rooted. And when you look back, when some time has passed, you'll see your own transformation. Re-reading my own reflections is always a tender experience. I sometimes want to reach through the page and hug my past self. She was so timid, so unable to see her own potential. But she kept going, and slowly, she began to believe. It is honestly surprising what we forget over time, and even more surprising what we carry forward with us without realising. Reflective practices allow us to recognise and honour that. And in that noticing, may you find companionship with yourself—in your thoughts, your questions, and the quiet unfolding of who you're becoming.

**Section (V) - To Finish: A Note of Care and Continuance**

I believe that's all I have to say for now, and the rest is all for you to discover! I hope you allow yourself to find fun and joy in the process of becoming, and also don't take things too seriously, even when things can feel difficult at times—it's all part of the process, so embrace it with fullness. Maybe you could write a letter like this one addressed to your 'Future Self', that would always be interesting to reflect back on in some years' time. What questions would you like to ask your future self? What do you envisage yourself achieving? How have you changed as a person? And lastly, as a final note before I leave you to your future discoveries, here are a few reminders you don't hear nearly often enough: you are enough exactly as you are, I am proud of you, and you've got this! Until next time.

With warmth and belief,

Your Future Self *(August 2025)*

***P.S.*** Growth isn't always dramatic. Sometimes it looks like a few small new leaves, a deeper root, a little more sunlight finding its way in (i.e., energy and warmth brightening your day). Keep tending to yourself gently. You're becoming something brilliant—truly.