

Exploring the complexity of GTAs' co-teaching experience through zine-making: a collaborative self-study

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Abstract

GTAs bring their own educational values into their teaching (Robertson & Yazan, 2022), making it important to examine factors shaping their instructional decisions. While some studies addressed identity tensions or peer support among GTAs, research on their co-teaching experiences is limited.

This collaborative self-study investigates the evolving identities of two graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), one experienced, one novice, using zine-making as a data collection tool in a co-teaching context. Drawing on Zhuo's (2024) conceptualisation of zine-making as a narrative inquiry method, we created our personal zines to reflect on our co-teaching experiences. The experienced GTA focused on how her teaching strategies shifted with different co-teachers and how these shifts shaped her identity over time. The novice GTA's zine captured her first two co-teaching experiences, exploring how uncertainty, collaboration and mentorship shaped her emerging sense of self as a teacher. Upon completing our zines, we shared them through oral presentations, extending the narrative beyond the page and enabling dialogic engagement.

Qualitative content analysis, one of the analytic approaches demonstrated in Zhuo's (2024) study, was used to analyse both the visual-textual elements of the zines and the transcripts of our oral zine presentations. This process revealed four key themes in GTAs' co-teaching, including identity negotiation, relational dynamics, emotional trajectory and key factors for GTAs' learning. Specifically, it identifies trust, clear communication, mutual respect, and structured reflection as crucial factors in leveraging co-teaching for effective professional development of GTAs. The study concludes that zine-making offers a powerful, reflexive methodology for GTAs to articulate the complexity of their co-teaching experiences and the development of their professional identities. As such, this study adds to the emerging literature on GTA teaching and offers practical insights for programs seeking to optimise co-teaching models for GTAs' professional development. Additionally, it proposes and demonstrates zine-making as an effective approach to researching GTAs' experiences and identity.

Key words: GTAs; Co-teaching; Identity negotiation; Emotional trajectory; Power dynamics.

Introduction

Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) play a pivotal role in supporting teaching and learning in higher education institutions (HEIs) across the globe (McLeod et al., 2025; Zhuo & Li, 2024). As doctoral students employed to teach and support learning in HEIs, GTAs are juggling their multiple roles as students, teaching assistants, and researchers (Bale & Anderson, 2022). These multiple identities pose a central challenge for GTAs, as they are constantly involved in the process of identity work through negotiating an emerging professional identity (Winstone & Moore, 2016). Research has indicated that GTA teacher identities are strongly influenced by the behaviours and values of others, including students, other GTAs and course leaders, and the autonomy of the individual (Bale & Anderson, 2022). One of the scenarios where GTAs have direct interactions with their fellow GTAs or faculty members is co-teaching. According to Howlett and Nguyen (2020, p. 411), co-teaching is “an interdependent process of planning and sharing responsibilities”. As such, GTAs can face complex identity challenges in co-teaching contexts, particularly when they co-teach with faculty or more experienced GTAs, considering possible power differentials. However, to date, despite the growing amount of research on GTA’s identity (e.g., Bale & Anderson, 2022; Campbell et al., 2021; Slack & Pownall, 2023; Winstone & Moore, 2016); and on GTA’s co-teaching (e.g., Dyer, 2019; Harter & Jacobi, 2018; Howlett & Nguyen, 2020), no research to our knowledge has been conducted to explore how the complexities of GTAs’ co-teaching experiences influence the development of their identity.

This study, using the collaborative self-study design, investigates the co-teaching experiences of one experienced GTA (the first author of this article) and one novice GTA (the second author of this article) through zine-making (Zhuo, 2024), to uncover the complexities of their identity negotiation during co-teaching. Qualitative content analysis of the two zines and zine narratives reveals the four key themes in GTAs’ co-teaching, including identity negotiation, relational dynamics, emotional trajectory and key factors in GTAs’ learning. Specifically, it identifies trust, clear communication, mutual respect, and structured reflection as crucial factors in leveraging co-teaching for effective GTA professional development.

Therefore, this study not only fills the gap in the current literature but also offers in-depth and nuanced insights into GTA’s co-teaching and identity negotiation by providing the contrast between the experienced and novice GTA perspectives. Moreover, it adds to the emerging call for employing zine-making, a visual and narrative methodology, as a reflexive, emotionally resonant way for GTAs to articulate their personal experiences and emotional complexities (Li & Liu, 2025). Despite the limitation of a small sample size, this study highlights the identity tensions that GTAs experience in their co-teaching and strategies that they employ to navigate these tensions in different co-teaching contexts. These findings offer valuable insights for both GTA support systems and GTAs themselves to harness the full potential of the co-teaching partnerships for their professional development.

Literature review

GTA identity

Teachers, or those who aspire to become teachers- in this study, GTAs - are continually engaged in negotiating and constructing their identities within educational contexts (Lindahl & Yazan, 2019; Miller, 2009; Winstone & Moore, 2016). In particular, GTAs, who simultaneously inhabit multiple roles as students, teachers and researchers (Bale & Anderson, 2022; Robertson & Yazan, 2022), encounter the complexity of situated identity work.

Existing scholarship identifies a range of factors that shape GTAs' identities, contingent on specific contexts. Bale and Anderson's (2022) study demonstrated that GTAs' sense of being teachers was mediated by students' responses and by the extent to which course leads or lecturers articulated expectations and recognised their roles, shaping the legitimacy that GTAs attributed to their professional identities. The duration of teaching experience also played an important part: as GTAs accumulated more experience, their identification with the role of teacher became increasingly consolidated. Similarly, Robertson and Yazan (2022) highlighted that professional autonomy influenced GTAs' identity formation, as their participant often experienced internal tensions when institutional directives, particularly mandated teaching approaches, conflicted with her personal pedagogical beliefs and professional principles.

While these factors can complicate identity work, such tensions may also act as catalysts for growth, enabling GTAs to develop strategies for overcoming difficulties and strengthening their sense of professional self (Robertson & Yazan, 2022). One possible strategy here is reflection (Eick & Reed, 2002), as it can help mitigate the impact of role conflict on the formation of role identity and support the development of a resilient identity capable of withstanding differing expectations and demands.

Co-teaching: General opportunities and challenges

Co-teaching has been recognised as an instructional strategy that supports pedagogical development and has been implemented across diverse professional domains, including the education of teachers (e.g., Beach et al., 2008). While there are different types of co-teaching, depending on teaching models and responsibilities of participants (Colson et al., 2021), building on the conceptual framing of Haag et al. (2023), the present study defines co-teaching as a collaborative endeavour involving two instructors within the same disciplinary field, in which all participants are equally involved in the full range of teaching responsibilities such as lesson planning and classroom instruction.

Co-teaching offers multifaceted potential. Teachers can foster their professional development by expanding their instructional repertoires and enhancing their confidence in adopting innovative methods (Scherer et al., 2020). Especially, when a novice is paired with a more experienced teacher, they are able to incorporate elements of their colleagues' pedagogical approaches (Beach et al., 2008). Furthermore, observing and engaging with other teachers' teaching methods encourages participants to critically evaluate their own practices and identify

opportunities for refinement (Henderson et al., 2009). Camarao and Din (2023) provide empirical evidence of such potential benefits in the context of GTAs. Through ongoing interaction with other GTAs, the participants obtained sense of psychological safety as well as insights into alternative pedagogical practices. This indicates that peer interaction can enhance relational dynamics and collaborative teaching effectiveness.

While the benefits of co-teaching are widely acknowledged, research has also identified several potential drawbacks that complicate its implication. In co-teaching contexts, if teachers' roles are not clearly defined, or if one teacher assumes a dominant role, the other may struggle to exercise their professional expertise (Murawski & Lochner, 2011). Also, in order to manage potential tensions among co-teachers, they require not only competence to co-teach effectively but also communicative skills to navigate conflicts (Friend & Cook, 1992). In this regard, trust and mutual respect (Murawski & Lochner, 2011) and peer support (Camarao & Din, 2023) between teachers are essential to maximise the effectiveness of co-teaching. Indeed, empirical evidence from GTAs who participated in co-teaching indicates that such experiences can enhance interpersonal skills, suggesting that navigating these challenges may contribute to professional development (Howlett & Nguyen, 2020).

Navigating emotions and power in GTA co-Teaching

A prominent aspect of the GTA context is emotional work. GTAs may at times encounter cognitive dissonance or anxiety as they negotiate the dual demands of teaching and conducting their own research (Musgrove et al., 2021). Musgrove et al. (2021) found that GTAs' self-doubts about their ability to meet the expectations of both roles as a teacher and researcher as well as apprehensions regarding the consequences of their performance for students and peers can contribute to anxiety. These findings suggest that navigating dual roles can shape GTAs' emotional resilience and professional identity formation. To manage anxieties arising particularly from their teaching responsibilities, many GTAs engaged in cognitive restructuring, reframing stressful experiences as opportunities for development. For instance, feedback that might initially have been perceived as discouraging was instead interpreted as constructive input that could contribute to their pedagogical growth. Positive emotional outcomes are also evident. Li and Liu (2025) examined GTAs' reflections as researchers, teachers and students. Through teaching experiences, GTAs can find motivation by recognising transferable elements between their own research and their teaching practices, have a sense of accomplishment through interdisciplinary, develop self-efficacy and confidence through ongoing teaching experiences. Such experiences highlight how co-teaching can simultaneously support identity negotiation and professional learning.

In co-teaching settings, GTAs are likely to be engaged in more complex emotional work, particularly when the co-teaching constitutes power dynamics and puts GTAs in a vulnerable position. When GTAs co-teach with staff members, student-staff dynamics can result in a regression to an apprenticeship or supervisory model (Irrazabal Elliott & Marie, 2021). Related to this perspective, within staff-GTA partnerships, GTAs may feel anxious because they perceive themselves as less knowledgeable and not yet experts (Clark, 2021). GTAs may also experience tension in co-teaching contexts with peer GTAs. According to Festinger's (1954)

social comparison theory, individuals compare themselves with others when evaluating their own abilities, achievements, and emotions. Such comparisons influence motivation and self-evaluation. When GTAs work alongside peers who are at similar stages in their academic journey, invisible tensions and subtle competitive dynamics may arise.

Despite extensive research on GTA identity, co-teaching and emotional work, few studies have examined how these dimensions interact in practice, particularly within collaborative co-teaching contexts. Most existing studies have focused on either novice or experienced GTAs in isolated contexts, limiting understanding of relational and emotional dynamics in collaborative co-teaching partnerships. Specifically, the ways in which identity negotiation, relational dynamics, emotional trajectories and professional learning are shaped by enabling conditions remain underexplored, particularly in studies that consider both staff-GTA and peer-GTA co-teaching partnerships.

Addressing this gap, the present study, situated in a co-teaching context, investigates how the two GTAs, one novice and one experienced, interpreted their evolving teaching experiences, focusing on four key themes: identity negotiation, relational dynamics, emotional trajectory and professional learning. The study aims to identify the enabling conditions that support these processes and to understand how they interact with GTA experiences, thereby providing a comprehensive view of professional growth in collaborative teaching.

Research questions

Building on this review, this study asks the following three research questions.

1. How do co-teaching experiences shape the evolving professional identities of GTAs?
2. How do the two GTAs navigate power dynamics and emotional trajectories in their co-teaching experiences?
3. What factors contributed to their professional learning as GTAs in co-teaching settings?

Methodology

This study is a collaborative self-study using the narrative data contributed by both authors of this article, Meifang and Suji. Meifang is an experienced GTA with various co-teaching experiences, and Suji is a novice GTA with two co-teaching experiences. Collaborative self-study has been used to facilitate authentic conversations and develop identities and proves effective in creating a comfortable but critical collaborative space where experiences could be shared and debated (Hordvik et al., 2021). With this collaborative self-study design, we intend to not only share our own co-teaching experiences but also make this sharing another learning experience for our roles as GTAs.

The narrative data of our co-teaching were collected by zine-making. According to Zhuo (2024), zine-making is a fun, ethical, reflexive, and empowering data collection tool in narrative inquiry. For a tool to articulate our co-teaching experiences, we appreciate zine-making's idea of reflecting while having fun and being empowered. As a way for reflective practice, zine-making has been used for GTAs to reflect on their experiences. For example, Li and Liu (2025) explore the use of zines as a creative medium to reflect on their multifaceted roles as teachers, researchers, and students in cross-disciplinary teaching. Their study highlights zine-making as a personalised and visual form of storytelling that enables GTAs to articulate their experiences and express emotional and pedagogical insights, which might be overlooked by traditional reflective practices. Therefore, the appropriateness of our choice of zine-making is also empirically evidenced.

Following Zhuo's (2024) detailed explanation of how zine-making could be used for collecting narrative data, we collected our zine-making narrative data by completing the following four steps. First, we prepared the zine-making materials as suggested, including zine-base materials (blank A4 papers), zine-content materials (Times Higher Education magazines, consumer lifestyle publications, marketing flyers and leaflets), zine-decoration materials (art stickers, dry flowers, glitter glue pens, colouring pen sets, and pink self-adhesive gem stones) and supporting stationery (marker pens, scissors, glue sticks and double-sided sticky tapes) (see **Figure 1**). Second, we sat down together to discuss and decide the time limit for making our zines (around one hour) and sharing our zines (around 5 minutes), as well as the expectations of the contents of both sets of data (co-teaching experience and its influence on our identity). This step was taken to provide essential orientation, ensuring that the data collected aligns with the study's objectives and could be gathered within a reasonable timeframe. Additionally, we agreed to allow flexibility in the design and size of the zines and to use MS Teams to record our oral presentations. Third, we used the zine-making materials to make our zine. Although we created our own zine independently, we shared the materials and kept up casual conversations to foster a relaxed atmosphere and support each other throughout the process. For the same purpose, we also played relaxing music in the background to create a calm and comfortable atmosphere during the zine-making process. Last, we each presented our zines to one another with a brief oral presentation lasting up to three minutes, and both presentations were recorded via MS Teams. This way, we collected the narrative data for this study, including the two zines and the two recorded oral zine presentations.

For data analysis, the recordings of two oral zine presentations were transcribed verbatim. To familiarise ourselves with each other's data, we transcribed each other's zine presentation. This was done by first generating the auto-transcripts from MS Teams and then revising them by listening to the original recordings. Then we confirmed the final versions of the two transcripts together.

Figure 1

Zine-making materials



Figure 2 shows the zine-making data contributed by Meifang, the experienced GTA and **Figure 3** presents the data by Suji, the novice GTA. Drawing on Zhuo's (2024) article, we adopted qualitative content analysis (Elo et al., 2014) to approach the data. To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, we first conducted the data analysis independently to generate themes in GTAs' co-teaching and identify any key factors in leveraging co-teaching for effective GTA professional development without the consultation with each other. Then we got together to compare our themes and factors and discuss any divergent opinions. Finally, through discussion and negotiation, we agreed on the final version of themes and key factors for this study.

Figure 2

Meifang' zine-making data (see **Appendix 1** for a clearer version of the zine)

Meifang's zine and zine presentation (around 9 minutes)



This is my Co-teaching experience as a GTA, and the zine I made reflecting about my co-teaching experiences. At the bottom you can see, this is my experience in a UK Higher Education institution. So, probably it cannot represent all others' experiences, but I would say that it probably can represent GTA's experiments in UK in general. As you can see, I have some very different kinds of co-teaching experiences. It's interesting because you said, 'like a baby', I literally put a baby here. So, this is in early stages when I was co-teaching, like dealing with senior PhD students. The first time of my teaching is also co-teaching experience, so I felt that "I'm not ready. I come from China, and this is UK. I don't have very clear idea about UK higher education. How it should be taught?" Of course, we experience(d) in seminar (as MA students), but when you transform yourself from a student to a teacher, this would be different. So, **I feel I'm not ready and I have some concerns like you that I felt worried**, if students would think my teaching is valuable but another concern is that if the senior PhD student, senior GTA would think my contribution is valuable. This is how I feel in the first stage. And I basically **look up to the senior PhD students and I followed their plans**. So usually in the very beginning, I asked like, *which part do you wanted to take. what suggestions do you have for my part?* I followed their suggestions because they have experience. I think they know better.

Then, in the second stage, as you can see, like the baby grows into a teenager. That was the time when I co-teach with my peers literally like from the same cohort. We enjoy it. It's basically like **we accompany** each other in the classroom in the seminars. But I also have concerns because sometimes I feel that because we are peers and then there are kind of **some tensions** there. I was **worried** that if students would think his or her teaching is better than mine or thinking, "OK, she does not seem so experienced as he is", but actually we are peers, so kind of competition there and I was worried that students will compare us. But generally, **I enjoy** because we are peers. We don't need to look up to someone. You just show ideas. You just go with your plan.

For the other my co-teaching experiences as you can see here. I was like someone on the on the ground and then here is someone. It's actually when I co-taught with faculty members. Because they are experts and I think they have the best practises because they taught like for over like 10, or 20 years. **I have that pressure**. If I am creating trouble for them. As you can see here, this is some kind of scenario I imagine. I fell, but they are laughing. But laughing is not because they are laughing at me because they think everything is good and nothing to worry about. But I was kind of OK. I fell, something like that. You can see the power dynamics there.

For the last one is when I co-taught with junior GTAs, I feel like I wanted to hold them up like, to make their ideas a reality and to support them to try out their teaching ideas. Because I kind of feel like I know a little bit more about the context about how to teach, like a little bit more about know-how. My role like transformed it more into a guide. But as you can see here, the other arrows (from) different direction is not going directly from the baby, the teenagers. Sometimes I switch the roles and have other co-teaching experience, so this is not a linear way, but we have very different kind of experience. These experiences show my identity change. Like from a baby as a novice GTA, to a teenager co-teaching with peers, I feel like we are mutual support each other. For teaching with experts, professors, I'm afraid I will become a burden and then for teaching with less experienced GTA, I think I am more in a role as a guide, so this my identity change with my different status of being GTA.

But I also came across some challenges and I also put a picture here like put down like module leader because we were, we have a module leader there and they somehow oversee us from far away, so to avoid like some serious problems happen. So, there will be no serious problems, and I also put empowering here. I think all the GTA teaching experiences helped me to grow, to empower me to be better. And I also put hard like crystal hearts stones around GTA on both sides. Because I think it's variable experiences for me, particularly if in the future I wanted to pursue a faculty job like in the UK higher education. I have highlighted these parts. This is what I learned like from my various experience as GTA. Currently I learned that co-teaching is more like I need to treat it more like we are a team. Being supportive to each other is very important and then we need to communicate the goal that we wanted to achieve, and we need to have trust with each other. Not necessarily because I am more junior or I'm a senior. Then I have less to contribute, more to contribute. Everyone has something to contribute to. We need to also respect each other's opinions and exchange some ideas and then discuss if there are some like disputes about something. I also think reflection like this is very important, because then we can look back on our journey and then see how we can learn from each co-teaching experience. I'm also thinking that maybe that the narratives of our co-teaching experience could be recorded, so it could be shared with the wider community for people to learn. There are two tips also like based on what I learned from my experiences. The first one is about failure, not necessary failure, but mistakes. Or something that you think you do not do well, it can help us to grow. And then the second one is sometimes we have tough experiences, but do not let the hard days win. If we learn from mistakes, failures then, we can grow. As a conclusion here, I think a co-teaching experience is more about relationship. And that relationship can be about like navigating dilemmas but also can help you to get some pleasures. And I think it's a dynamic relationship that can be also very rewarding and valuable for us. So basically, this is my co-teaching experiences.

Figure 3

Suji's zine-making data (see **Appendix 1** for a clearer version of the zine)

Suji's zine and zine presentation (around 7 minutes)



This is my Zine that I made for the first time in my life, or maybe in my adulthood, as far as I remember. I divided my Zine into four sessions in the timely manner. So let me introduce the first section.

The first section is describing how I felt in the very early stage when I was assigned for a teaching session for the first time. My main thoughts in my mind was like "but I am a baby, or I am a fresher". Because I was a first year PhD student with nearly no teaching experience in higher education in the UK, so I was **getting anxious** because as you can see here, *I didn't know*. I thought *I didn't know enough about how to teach and then what to teach*. So that's why I brought these hashtags as *challenges and anxiety-ridden and then self-doubt* as well. And then I want to describe this doubt more specifically. My **doubt was divided into two sessions: one was for a student. What if they find they think my session was not useful? That's gonna be waste of their time** as I was worried about that. **Secondly, I was worried about me as co-teacher** because the co-teachers that I worked with for two times, they were senior year PhD students including you, and then they had more experience in teaching. **I was worried** about potential situation that I was becoming a burden to them, not rather than helping. **I was worried** about that situation. So that was my early stage.

And then the second section is describing how I felt when I just started conversation with my co-teachers. We became a team and then we had the first conversation, and we exchanged the ideas. So, this is how I felt. So even though my teaching co-teaching experiences with them were only for one-off sessions, so there were no like ongoing conversations much, **but I still could see there was trust between myself and the co-teachers**. And then **there were a lot of interactions**. And then of course peer reviews when we made our materials and then it was **very supportive**. So yeah, that's how my experience in co-teaching was.

But the third section, in this section I wanted to give some more specific examples and that I had with you. When I was working with you, you helped me in time management. Because I had hardly any experience, even though I made all the materials, I didn't know how long it was gonna take. But with your experience, you gave opinion that, *oh, that's gonna take too long, or I think it'll be OK*. So, you helped me in time management. And in relation to time management, you gave me some suggestions in making changes. So, if you remember, the first few slides that I made was more informative lecture like rather than seminar or we are pursuing interactive seminar, right? So I said, *OK, I can exclude those slides*, but you respected my work and then you said you *don't have to. You can make them make the content into a handout and then you can just distribute it to students*. Then we don't have to cover it, but they will review the content, so my content is not going to be wasted. That was a really good learning point for my future teaching because before that, before your suggestion, I had not thought about any handout from me. They were just given, but I'm not touching on them. Yeah, the students can just refer to them, but I had not thought about it somehow. So that was a new idea. These were practical examples. And then other than that, of course, I gained new perspectives. And then you also assumed like, *oh, students may think that way...* because you also had experience and that we exchanged ideas. So, in the process of preparation of the session, **I started feeling safe** that I had a co-teacher. So yeah.

And then in the end, in the last section, it's showing myself after the session. **I felt like** I had a personal growth. So, **I felt that myself, confidence** in education through a little bit. Of course, there's a long way to go, but I felt that my I gained independence a little bit more than at the beginning and then I believe the more I experience, the more my independence level will go up. And then also what's more important is that I learnt **the value of trust, like in mutual respect, and then how important the communication** is, because you and you and I had open communication. Like I said in this example like *why don't you keep it handed out?* That's where **I felt my work and then I was respected** by my co-teacher, which was from you. I wanted to become a teacher in future like you in the sense like so I can **respect** the junior colleagues as well. Thank you.

By adopting a self-study design, we were fully aware of our vulnerability and the issue of interpretative ambiguity. Regarding the ethical complexities caused by using ourselves as research subjects and putting ourselves directly under the spotlight, we familiarised ourselves with the six categories of ethical risks, including psychological or emotional, physical, privacy, social, career and economic, and integrity risks (Xue et al., 2025) that may be experienced by us and acted mindfully during our research to avoid these risks. In terms of interpretative ambiguity, instead of avoiding it, which is hardly possible in a qualitative study, we embraced it by using evocative storytelling through presenting the transcription of our oral zine presentation, by being transparent about our data analysis procedures and by enhancing the rigour of our data analysis process with the two-step analytical scheme shared above. Through these efforts, we mitigated the issue of researcher vulnerability and interpretative ambiguity and maintained the ethical practice and the credibility of the research.

Findings

Qualitative content analysis of the two sets of zine-making data reveals the four themes regarding the two GTAs' co-teaching experiences, including identity negotiation, relational dynamics, emotional trajectory and professional learning.

Identity negotiation

Both GTAs reported identity negotiation, which was reflected in three ways according to their zine-making data. First, both reported internal dialogues at the early stage of their co-teaching as novice GTAs, self-questioning of their capabilities to teach. Both had concerns about the value of their contributions to the students and to the teamwork. Nevertheless, Suji's worry was largely due to a generic lack of teaching experience and the possibility of becoming a burden to the teamwork. This is illustrated by two texts on her zine "*don't know enough about HOW*" and "*But, I AM a fresher?*". Meifang's worry was due to a more specific contextual unfamiliarity with the UK higher education, as she highlighted in her zine presentation, "*I come from China, and this is UK*".

Second, both experienced role changes, from an unconfident GTA to a GTA with more self-efficacy. Suji's transformation, which could be directly observed from two contrasting images in her zine, from a worried man lying face down on the sofa to a smiling girl standing confidently and looking straight into the camera. The one-directional arrow indicates the linear nature of her transformation. In contrast, Meifang's transformation is non-linear, represented by the multidirectional arrows in her zine. Despite the complexity and fluidity of Meifang's role changes, Meifang's zine illustrates her journey from a GTA who is "Not ready yet" with "concerns" to a GTA with "KNOW-HOW".

Third, both employed adaptive strategies, adopting behaviours that aligned with their perceived identities. Early in their co-teaching experiences as novice GTAs, both Suji and Meifang described themselves as babies. With this identity, they adopted a compliant role, placing trust in senior GTAs and readily accepting and valuing their plans, ideas, and suggestions. The adaptive strategies were further confirmed by Meifang's corresponding behaviours in other co-teaching experiences. Both her zine and zine presentation illustrated her flexibility of role shifts in different co-teaching scenarios: an accompanying role when co-teaching with peer GTAs, an apprentice role with faculty members, and a guiding role when working with junior GTAs.

Relational dynamics

Overall, three types of relationships could be drawn from the co-teaching experiences of the two GTAs, including junior-senior relationship, peer-peer relationship, and student-staff relationship. The degree of power differential among the three types of relations is depicted in **Figure 4**. Each of these relationships manifested itself in its own unique way and resulted in different experiences of co-teaching that the two GTAs experienced. Due to the limit of Suji's teaching experience, the junior-senior relation was the only type that was reflected in both Meifang's and suji's co-teaching stories. Due to the power differential between novice and senior GTAs, the novice GTAs usually looked up to the senior GTAs and desired the acknowledgement from them. In Meifang's case, she used the image of a baby looking upward in her zine to symbolise her perceived subordinate position in the junior-senior relationship. She also expressed concern during her zine presentation about whether "*the senior GTA would think my contribution is valuable*", highlighting her sense of vulnerability and dependence. Similarly, Suji expressed the

worry of herself “*becoming a burden to them, rather than helping*” when co-taught with senior GTAs. Nevertheless, Suji perceived a smaller power differential in the junior-senior dynamic. She underscored the collaborative nature of their relationship that contributed to her teaching and learning. Specifically, Suji illustrated the relationship of “US” with an image of two equally sized creatures holding hands in her zine.

Interestingly, this image mirrors the depiction in Meifang’s zine of two children arm in arm, symbolising the peer-peer relationship that she experienced in her co-teaching. For Meifang, this sense of equality brought joy and a greater sense of freedom in teaching, as she felt accompanied on the journey rather than needing to look up to someone. However, Meifang also expressed the concern that the harmonious dynamic might be disrupted by student comparisons between her and her co-teacher. The third type of student-staff relationship was also drawn from Meifang’s experience of co-teaching with faculty members. Although she acknowledged that faculty members, who she considered to have the “best practices”, were laid-back, she was still troubled by the power imbalance, expressing a persistent fear of “*creating trouble for them*”. Her zine vividly illustrated this pressure through an image of a smiling man moving forward while dragging someone behind, highlighting the emotional weight of the unequal dynamic.

Figure 4

Three types of power differentials in GTAs’ co-teaching



Emotional trajectory

While reflecting on their co-teaching journeys, both GTAs were found to have emotional experiences and feeling shifts throughout their co-teaching experiences. Due to her limited experiences in co-teaching, Suji’s emotional trajectory was relatively straightforward, shifting from negative to positive emotions. As the texts in her zine indicate, she had “*doubts*” and was “*anxiety-ridden*” in the beginning of her co-teaching, to feel “*safe*” after interactions with her co-teacher and finally gained “*self-confidence*” and “*independence*” when she finished her two co-teaching experiences. In contrast, Meifang’s emotional trajectory was more complex, reflecting the diversity of her co-teaching experiences. Similar to Suji, Meifang began as an unconfident novice GTA, feeling “*not ready*” and “*worried*”. Her emotions lifted when co-teaching with peers, as she “*enjoy(ed) it*”. This feeling shifted again during her co-teaching with faculty members, where she was troubled by the recurring thought, “*I fell*”. When co-teaching with junior GTAs, Meifang’s emotions evolved once more, shifting towards a sense of responsibility and support, expressing a desire to “*hold them up like, to make their ideas a reality and to support them to try out their teaching ideas*”.

One point worth mentioning is that Meifang's experiences of co-teaching with peers, faculty members, and junior GTAs could shift back and forth, as both her zine and her zine presentations indicate. As such, the fluidity of her co-teaching scenarios added to the complexity of her emotional trajectory.

Key factors for GTA's learning in co-teaching

Four key factors, including trust, clear communication, mutual respect, and structural reflection, were identified as crucial factors in contributing to the professional learning of the two GTAs in this study. Both zines have clear texts that support the first three key factors, including "trust", "respect" and "communication" in Suji's, and "trust", "respect" and "discussion" in Meifang's. Their elaborations of the zines in the presentations further confirmed the importance of the three key factors. For example, in her zine presentation, Suji highlighted that

I learned the value of trust, like in mutual respect, and then how important the communication is, because you and I had open communication. Like I said in this example, like, why don't you keep it handed out? That's where I felt my work and then I was respected by my co-teacher.

Structural reflection is evident not only in the creation and presentation of the zines, but more significantly in the GTAs' systematic process, beginning with a description of what happened, followed by an analysis of personal learning, and concluding with forward-looking thoughts on what they might do differently in the future. For instance, based on her description of her two co-teaching experiences and the growing awareness of the importance of mutual respect in co-teaching, Suji had the forward-looking thought of becoming a GTA who respects her co-teacher in the future. In a similar vein, Meifang, reflecting on the key insights gained through describing and analysing her diverse co-teaching experiences, proposed an idea with potential impact beyond herself in the near future.

I also think reflection like this is very important, because then we can look back on our journey and then see how we can learn from each co-teaching experience. I'm also thinking that maybe that the narratives of our co-teaching experience could be recorded, so it could be shared with the wider community for people to learn.

Discussion

GTA identity negotiation

The findings of this study illustrate that the two GTAs experienced an ongoing negotiation of their professional identities, resonating with the existing literature that emphasises identity work as a dynamic process (Bale & Anderson, 2022; Robertson & Yazan, 2022).

Musgrove et al. (2021) highlight that GTAs' anxieties often stem from self-doubt regarding their capabilities and from apprehensions about the potential consequences of their performance for students and peers. Similarly, both GTAs

reported self-doubt and concerns about their capacity to contribute meaningfully to the classroom and collaborative work in the early stages of co-teaching. The novice GTA's anxieties were largely rooted in her limited teaching experience, whereas the experienced GTA's concerns stemmed more specifically from her unfamiliarity with the UK higher education context. This contrast between the two GTAs' early perceptions aligns with Bale and Anderson's (2022) observation that GTAs' sense of teacher identity shaped by contextual factors.

Importantly, both GTAs employed adaptive strategies that facilitated their identity development. Initially adopting a compliant role, Suji and Meifang trusted senior GTAs and accepted their guidance, reflecting both the anxiety associated with perceived knowledge gaps in staff-GTA partnerships (Clark, 2021) and the early-stage dependence of typical of junior-senior co-teaching relationships. Over time, both GTAs demonstrated a transition towards greater self-efficacy and agency, with the novice GTA's trajectory appearing more linear and the experienced GTA's more complex and fluid, again reflecting the multifaceted nature of identity negotiation in situated teaching contexts (Bale & Anderson, 2022). These findings suggest that navigating early-stage uncertainty and role ambiguity can serve as a catalyst for professional growth, highlighting the importance of adaptive strategies in GTA identity development.

Relational dynamics and power

Relational dynamics emerged as a crucial dimension shaping GTA identity development. As highlighted in the literature, power structures and social comparison processes are integral to professional learning contexts (Musgrove et al., 2021; Festinger, 1954). The findings further reveal that relational dynamics and power hierarchies significantly shaped the ways in which both GTAs positioned themselves and interpreted their teaching experiences.

In junior-senior interactions, both GTAs initially positioned themselves as dependent learners, which facilitated learning through guided participation. This resonates with Beach et al. (2008), who note that novice teachers can be provided with opportunities to incorporate elements of senior colleagues' pedagogical approaches in co-teaching contexts.

Peer-peer relationships, by contrast, offered a sense of equality, which contributed to the enjoyment of the experienced GTA's co-teaching. The observed relational dynamics indicated that balancing guidance and autonomy within co-teaching partnerships is critical for fostering both confidence and collaborative competence among GTAs (Bale & Anderson, 2022; Robertson & Yazan, 2022). However, working with peers also sometimes generated inner tension. Meifang sometimes worried about students' comparisons between her and other peer GTAs, reflecting Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, which suggests that individuals evaluate their abilities and achievements relative to others. This is also consistent with Bale and Anderson's (2022) argument that GTA's sense of being teachers is shaped by students' responses.

In student-staff relationships, although Irarrazabal Elliott and Marie (2021) note potential concerns regarding faculty authority, the faculty members with whom

Meifang co-taught were not authoritative or overbearing. Nonetheless, she still experienced a power imbalance and worried about potentially making mistakes, which reflects Clark's (2021) observation that GTAs often perceive themselves as less knowledgeable and still in the process of developing expertise when working with staff.

Emotional trajectories in GTA identity development

These relational experiences, with their inherent tensions and opportunities, were closely tied to the GTAs' emotional trajectories. From the perspective of a novice GTA, although Suji initially experienced self-doubt and anxiety, these challenges were gradually replaced by self-confidence and independence through co-teaching with senior GTAs. This aligns with the findings of Camarao and Din (2023), who reported that interactions with other GTAs can provide a sense of emotional safety. Suji's growth in confidence and independence following her co-teaching experiences may also be related to Bale and Anderson's (2022) observation that the more GTAs engage in teaching, the more consolidated their self-perceptions as teachers become.

As GTAs gain further teaching experience, their emotional trajectories become increasingly complex. Meifang's emotions varied depending on whom she was co-teaching with, highlighting that GTA identity manifests differently according to situational factors such as teaching partners and the degree of autonomy available (Bale & Anderson, 2022). Furthermore, as teaching contexts are cyclical, GTAs engage in identity negotiation across diverse educational environments, consistent with the dynamic processes described by Lindahl and Yazan (2019), Miller (2009), and Winstone and Moore (2016). The variation in emotional experiences across co-teaching contexts underscores the role of situational factors in shaping GTAs' professional identity and highlights the need for supportive peer and staff interactions.

Professional learning through co-teaching

The findings of the present study highlight the significance of co-teaching as both an opportunity and a challenge for GTAs, resonating with the arguments of Beach et al. (2008) and Camarao and Din (2023). Successful co-teaching was shown to rely on four key factors: trust, mutual respect, clear communication and structured reflection.

The first three factors have been emphasised in existing scholarship; for example, co-teaching requires not only the ability to teach together with someone else, but also communication skills (Friend & Cook, 1992), particularly trust and mutual respect between co-teachers (Murawski & Lochner, 2011). The finding that the novice GTA perceived co-teaching primarily as teamwork suggests that her positive experiences were grounded in mutual respect, rather than senior GTAs taking a dominant role (Murawski & Lochner, 2011). In addition, through ongoing communication, clear goals were shared in both GTAs' experiences, reflecting Bale and Anderson's (2022) point that clearly articulated roles and expectations from others contribute to GTAs' professional identity development.

Lastly, the reflective practices embedded in their zine-making and co-teaching interactions provided opportunities for critical self-analysis, supporting the internalisation of GTAs' teaching roles and strengthening their sense of professional self. These findings underscore the importance of reflection as a mediating tool in identity formation, consistent with Eick and Reed's (2002) argument that reflective processes help mitigate the impact of role conflict and support the development of resilient teacher identities. Importantly, such reflective engagement is not only valuable for GTAs' identity consolidation but also lays the groundwork for the development of pedagogical content knowledge, as Major and Palmer (2006) highlight that graduate students' teaching experiences significantly shape how they conceptualise and apply subject-specific pedagogy in the future. Co-teaching appears to facilitate professional learning by providing structured opportunities for reflection, mutual feedback, and the development of pedagogical strategies, suggesting its potential as a deliberate professional development approach for GTAs.

Conclusion

This collaborative self-study through zine-making demonstrates that GTA identity development is neither linear nor uniform but emerges through continuous negotiation shaped by relational, emotional and contextual factors. The experiences of Suji and Meifang illustrate how both novice and experienced GTAs employ adaptive strategies to navigate uncertainty, power dynamics and shifting levels of autonomy. Co-teaching, in particular, was found to serve as more than a pragmatic arrangement; it functioned as a strategic space for professional learning in which trust, respect and communication and reflection mediated professional growth.

This study makes three major contributions. First, this study addresses the gap in the literature regarding GTAs' identity complexities in co-teaching settings. Particularly, it provides empirical evidence of how relational dynamics and emotional trajectories can shape GTAs' identity in co-teaching contexts. Second, it provides insights into how co-teaching can be most effectively organised and enacted to support GTAs' professional growth in co-teaching settings, by highlighting the key enabling factors, including trust, clear communication, mutual respect, and structured reflection. Accordingly, one key takeaway for GTAs in co-teaching settings is to establish open communication and clear role expectations from the outset while engaging in regular structured reflections to process experiences and build trusting, reciprocal relationships with their co-teaching partners. Third, methodologically, echoing the work of Li and Liu (2025), this study provides further empirical evidence of the effectiveness of zine-making in prompting GTAs' reflection on their teaching experiences and in enhancing research transparency.

Having said this, this study is not without its limitations. First, by adopting a self-study design, this study risks our vulnerability and the issue of interpretative ambiguity, although measures have been taken to address these two concerns. Second, the power differential between the novice and the experienced GTA, combined with their shared co-teaching experience, may influence the authenticity of the perspectives and experiences reported by both GTAs. To address these

limitations, researchers interested in investigating GTAs' co-teaching experiences could adopt a more objective stance by acting as researchers only and by working with two or more GTAs whose co-teaching experiences are independent of one another.

Ethical Claim:

This study only used the data from the two authors and received full consent from the two authors to use the data. There is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix 1



Meifang's zine



Suji's zine