



Teaching development for early-career faculty: Changing how we think about teaching

Gorana Mistic, Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow

Sulemana Abdul-Karim, Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow

Ghaida Alhooshani, Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow

Ali Awad, Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow

Ahmed Farhod, Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow

Jifeng Hong, Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow

Nawawan Panburana, Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow

David Youssef, Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow

Yifan Zhou, Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow

ABSTRACT

This paper presents an early-stage, collaborative reflective analysis of experience in a doctoral-level course Foundations of Teaching, aimed at challenging participants' underlying conceptions of teaching and learning. The course design was grounded in the premise that for development of teacher identity and a meaningful change in teaching practice we need to address teachers' understanding of what teaching is. Drawing on reflections from the course instructor and participating doctoral students who are co-authors of this paper, we apply thematic analysis to identify preliminary themes relating to which aspects of the course supported shifts in participants' conceptions of teaching and why these changes may have occurred. The paper contributes to discussions about how doctoral education can prepare future academics for teaching through transformative rather than purely skills-based approaches.

Keywords: teaching development, foundation in teaching, teaching conceptions, reflection, teaching identity

Introduction

Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) development has traditionally been characterised by short-term or limited provision focused on teaching techniques, rather than approaches that support sustained teaching development (see McLeod et al., 2025; Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2021). Recent scholarship emphasises more sustainable forms of GTA professional development that include framing GTAs as future academics and leaders in teaching, institutional investment in teaching and departmental support, as well as peer learning, pedagogical development, and attention to the formation of teacher identity (Bale & Anderson, 2024; Sadara et al., 2024). In this paper, we focus particularly on formation of teacher identity by

challenging conceptions of teaching, and reflect on our experience in a course on foundations in teaching, in a programme for teaching development for GTAs.

The course was designed to intentionally challenge participants' underlying conceptions of teaching, based on the central premise that a meaningful change in teaching practice is unlikely without a corresponding shift in how teachers understand what teaching is (Åkerlind, 2004; Trigwell et al., 1999). Because these conceptions are often rooted in personal theories shaped by prior experience, exposure to alternative perspectives is essential for development of teaching skills (Mimirinis & Ahlberg, 2021; Shum et al., 2020) and, ultimately, for shaping the professional identities of doctoral students as the future members of the professoriate (McDaniels, 2010).

To explore how the course influenced our understandings of teaching, this paper draws on reflective accounts collected from the doctoral students - the co-authors of this paper. Reflections were collected shortly after the completion of the course through a structured reflection form focused on our experiences of the course and understanding of teaching and learning. We analysed the reflections using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each author initially reviewed the reflections independently to identify patterns and emerging themes, after which interpretations were discussed in smaller groups, and refined collaboratively through a whole group discussion. The purpose of this analysis was to develop an initial understanding of how the course supported development of our teacher identity by challenging conceptions of teaching.

In what follows, we reflect on the course design, topics, practices, and moments in the course that most significantly supported development of our teaching identity and challenged our thinking.

What we did

A central feature of the course was peer teaching, with us - the GTAs - alternating between the roles of facilitator and learner (see Boud et al., 1999), and acting as co-creators of the course (see Bovill et al., 2011). To prepare for leading a session, we read the suggested literature and met with the course instructor to discuss big ideas we want our peers to learn about, session structure, and learning activities. Since we were neither experts in the pedagogical content we needed to teach, nor in teaching practice and session design, this process was quite challenging – but also crucial for deep learning and our conceptual development. What we were encouraged and supported to do is enacting in practice, reflecting on, and modelling the session's main topic. For example, when talking about learning theories, we intentionally chose learning activities underpinned by theories we were teaching – and in the end reflected on this with the peers in class. Maybe the most memorable class was the last one on 'can we teach what we don't know': something we had been doing throughout the course, and now used the time to reflect on how we did it. This enabled us to try out and experience, as learners, the teaching approaches we were teaching about.

The course instructor played a critical role throughout the sessions. During peer-led delivery, the instructor acted as an observer and participant, and supported learning through targeted questions and reflective comments without overt intervention. Following each session, the instructor met with the facilitators to provide feedback. These feedback meetings began by inviting facilitators to reflect on their own experience of leading the session and to identify perceived strengths and weaknesses. Feedback was then developed through discussion, enabling us to connect our reflections with pedagogical principles and alternative strategies.

Finally, an important feature of the course was the interconnectedness of the content. Throughout the course we discussed how academics develop as teachers, how learning works, learning theories, what the best university teachers do, and how we can teach something we don't know. In each session, the facilitators made connections between different topics and ensured we return to earlier ideas as we learned new theories or practices. This helped the course feel more connected, rather than like a series of separate sessions, and gradually helped us develop a more coherent understanding of teaching and learning.

How it happened: confidence, discovery, and reflection

A central concern that became apparent through the course was not only what early-career faculty learn about teaching but also how such learning occurs.

One notable change involved our confidence, especially regarding our expertise. At the outset, most of us believed that effective teaching relied on content mastery, and we felt insecure about teaching topics we did not fully know and understand. Engagement with literature on academic development that emphasises teacher development (e.g. Kugel, 1993; Åkerlind, 2007), combined with opportunities to plan and lead sessions, encouraged us to reassess this assumption. We started seeing teaching less as a demonstration of expertise and more as the design of learning experiences. The learning theories discussed during the course, initially seen as abstract, became more meaningful when applied to session planning and peer teaching. In this context, confidence arose not from knowing more content but from trusting pedagogical principles and the learning design itself. Backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) was crucial in supporting this shift, providing a clear framework for planning, while reducing the pressure to anticipate all possible content-related questions that may come from peers during class. This represented a shift in our emerging teaching identities, as we became more confident in moving from seeing ourselves as disciplinary experts to seeing ourselves as facilitators of learning.

Our focus also shifted from covering to discovering new content and ideas. Through discussion on *what the best university teachers do*, and thinking about teaching as creating conditions for learning, with less emphasis on knowledge transmission (Bain, 2004), we began to see teaching as an exploratory process in which uncertainty and dialogue were valid and valuable parts of learning. This shift encouraged us to think of teaching less as transmission and coverage of content and more as facilitating students' understanding of key ideas and relationships.

Reflection provided a space through which these conceptual shifts could develop. Reflective discussions and individual reflections enabled us to express tensions between our previous assumptions and new understandings of teaching. Over time, reflection contributed to a second form of confidence centred on development. Teaching expertise came to be seen as something that progresses through deliberate practice, feedback, and reflection. Across these conceptual shifts, we can see an ongoing change in our teaching identities, from expertise-centred conceptions of teaching towards more pedagogically grounded and reflective understandings of ourselves as teachers; from a focus on teachers and expertise towards a focus on learners and learning.

Conclusion

Overall, our experience as GTAs suggests that development occurred through an interplay of course design, conceptual challenge through content and practice, and reflection on our teaching conceptions and practice. The course enabled us to engage deeply with pedagogical theory while simultaneously enacting it in practice. We became more confident in ourselves as developing teachers as we learned more about learning principles and the learning design process. This helped us focus more on thinking about discovering and engaging with content we teach – rather than just covering it. Reflection on practice was a way in which we made sense of uncertainty and were able to reconceptualise what effective teaching can be – and how we can become (even) better teachers than the ones we had.

From an academic development and instructor's perspective, the course confirmed the value of creating a structured space where GTAs can talk about teaching, connect theory to practice, and question their assumptions. Rather than focusing solely on isolated best practices, this space helped participants understand why best practices work. Particularly important was creating opportunities for them to begin discovering and forming their teaching identities by trying out newly learned teaching strategies in a safe, positive, and encouraging environment – or, as Winstone and Moore (2017, p. 497) put it, “trying on the professional identity and experimenting with the ‘provisional self’”.

Our experience thus suggests that embedding such opportunities within doctoral education has the potential to support long-term teaching development, the formation of teacher identity, and, ultimately, the quality of teaching in higher education. If doctoral education is to prepare future academics for all parts of the academic role, then structured opportunities to develop as teachers should be considered as a core component of doctoral training rather than an optional addition.

Biographies

Dr Gorana Misic (SFHEA) is a Learning Innovation Officer (academic developer) at the Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow, where she leads and teaches in the Teaching Development Programme for Graduate Teaching Assistants. She is also a Visiting Faculty member at Eötvös Loránd University and the University of Rijeka. Her work and research focus on higher education teaching and learning, with particular interests in academic development and mentoring of novice teachers in higher education. Email: gorana.misic@glasgow.ac.uk. LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/g-misic/>

Sulemana Abdul-Karim, Ghaida Alhooshani, Ali Awad, Ahmed Farhod, Jifeng Hong, Nawawan Panburana, David Youssef, and Yifan Zhou are doctoral students and Graduate Teaching Assistants at the Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow. They were participants in the course *Foundations in teaching*, a part of the Teaching Development Programme for Graduate Teaching Assistants.

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