Advancing student-staff partnership through the unique position of GTAs

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Abstract

In this paper we argue that Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) are in a liminal position between taught students and fully fledged academic staff. This unique position provides the context for their knowledge about learning and teaching, which is situated in the particularity of their perspective. This singular perspective can be broadened through the kind of scholarly activity involved in student-staff partnership to better reflect the multiplicity of student experiences. GTAs' unique position allows them to better bridge the perspectives of staff and students, such that they can play an important role mediating between the two and providing invaluable insight to teaching and learning enhancement. Furthermore, GTAs have much to gain from working in partnership, in particular gaining a sense of being valued in a role that often feels dismissed. Nevertheless, there are particular dangers of the relationship falling into a familiar apprenticeship pattern and not fulfilling GTAs' expectations if staff fail to buy-into the ethos of partnership.

Keywords: liminality, situated knowledge, vulnerability, learning and teaching, power.

Introduction

This paper takes a reflective approach to consider how Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) fit into the concept of student-staff partnership. We argue that GTAs occupy a unique place, as neither students nor fully fledged academic staff. When they work in partnership with staff, the term student-staff partnership is therefore not fully apt: however, we argue that such partnerships form part of the family of student-staff partnership practices, and we explore how they can be extremely valuable to GTAs, staff and the outcomes of partnership work to enhance learning and teaching practices. We argue that some of the values and ethos behind student-staff partnership need to be kept at the forefront of staff minds when they work with GTAs in partnership because staff familiarity of discussing and working with GTAs on teaching may result in lapses back into an apprenticeship relationship. The significance of this paper resides in opening up discussions about the similarities and differences between staff partnering with taught students and partnering with graduate teaching assistants, and the applicability of concepts and concerns from the field of student partnership to this new context.

Theoretical background

Student Engagement in Higher Education has been revolutionised by student-staff partnership, in which students are considered as co-researchers, creators, evaluators (Nachatar Singh, 2019). The literature on student partnership has grown rapidly in recent years (Bovill et al., 2016), covering areas such as curriculum design (Peseta et al., 2016), assessment (Deeley &Bovill, 2017), and research (Bell & Mulrooney, 2016). However, there is very little literature on partnership between staff and GTAs, beyond a

case study which considered such partnership in the context of a collaborative writing project (Clark et al., 2019). In this piece, we focus on student partnership between GTAs and academic staff in order to enhance learning, teaching, and assessment. Such partnership can occur in many ways already familiar from the literature, for example, through the reviewing of teaching practice or enhancement projects. Our paper considers the extent to which the literature on student-staff partnership applies directly to staff partnership with GTAs and highlights differences that we have found from our experiences of such work.

Due to the variety of forms student-staff partnership can take, we understand it to encompass "a multiplicity of practices predicated on power-sharing and reflectivity from all involved" (Matthews, 2017, p.6). What these practices have in common is that all are "a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis" (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, pp.6-7). Student partnership goes beyond student voice in giving students the opportunity to contribute equally to the work/decision-making, but nevertheless builds on the student voice belief that students have unique perspectives on their learning experience and should have the opportunity to shape their education (Cook-Sather, 2006).

We believe that GTAs can also have a good understanding of student needs from their recent experience as learners (Bovill et al, 2016). Furthermore, their individual experience can be shaped into a broader understanding of the plurality

of student experiences through the scholarly activity that accompanies student-staff partnership work, such as undertaking enquiries into the student experience, or reflecting and discussing learning and teaching.

The fact that GTAs' experiences are situated in a particular context enables them to counteract the idea that there is a single student perspective or a coherent set of student needs (Peseta et al, 2016; Sabri, 2011). This relates to the arguments Donna Haraway (1988) has advanced about *situated knowledge*. She contends that *situated knowledge*, where context matters, is the way to counteract "totalization and single vision" (Haraway, 1988, p.584) as it opposes claims of objectivity that take the various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims. Here, she advances two arguments that are relevant to our discussion. Firstly, totalization is only possible because of existing hierarchical structures that allow the construction of the "single", "objective", "impersonal" viewpoint. Secondly, it is precisely the acknowledgement that our knowledge is situated, that makes us answerable for what we learn.[1] The first argument is important because if we are seeking ways to build up effective partnerships, which by definition are based on equality and mutual respect (Cook Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014), we also need to be aware of how hierarchies operate at different levels, sometimes ingrained in our own epistemology. The second argument is relevant to student engagement and partnership. One of the issues that usually emerges in the discussions on this topic is how to generate

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[1] Her point is that the perspective of the subjugated (women, in her discussion) is not exempt from critical re-examination, and that they are not "innocent" positions. Similarly, we believe that students do not hold "innocent", "impartial", or "unbiased" positions.

an environment in which the student's voice is heard without the lack of responsibility that characterises the consumer's voice. Partnership is based on mutual responsibility (HEA, 2014).

In a similar vein, Cook-Sather and Felten (2017) argue for a type of academic leadership that does not aspire for universally shared values but allows the development of practices that can acknowledge the contributions of people with different positions –what they call "embodied" or "rooted" leadership that does not aspire to be "abstract", "inhuman", "institutional" (Cook-Sather & Felten, p.184). One of these practices is the creation of liminal "as-if" spaces, in which "we behave the way we want to live in the wider world of the academy" (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017, p.180). To be in a liminal space is to be in-between two stages, which for that reason has a unique potential. They argue that student partnership is a powerful way to create liminal spaces, where neither students nor staff inhabit their traditional roles.

Furthermore, Cook-Sather and Felten (2017, p.179) assert that "teaching and learning require the creation of liminal spaces that foster uncertainty and openness". The creation of these spaces of liminality present a way out of the dichotomy between, roughly put, a model in which the all-knowing teacher delivers content to an empty-vessel learner, and a model in which the teacher offers "human capital training", and the student consumes it. The focus of this approach is to generate the appropriate environment (*i.e.*, of mutual trust, respect, inclusivity, responsibility) where students can build up their knowledge, creating, resisting, and imagining alternatives. The liminal space is conceived as

one in which "one can linger, from which one can depart and to which one can return" (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017, p.181). One important characteristic of the liminal space is that it brings together people with different experiences and perspectives, and those differences are acknowledged and valued.

GTAs can also be considered as being in a state of liminality (Compton & Tran, 2017). They inhabit an in-between space, between being students and academics. This liminality is different from that described by Cook-Sather and Felten (2017) in that few re-enter the role of GTA and it is recognised as the transitional space between student and academic, rather than a transitional space shared by students and academics to an undetermined point. Nevertheless, there are links between the two, with GTAs going "in and out" of the role of teacher, and both forms of liminality are spaces of uncertainty, vulnerability, and possibility. GTAs could be viewed as academics with a deficit, needing to complete the apprenticeship of the doctoral degree in order to become fully fledged academics. However, we offer a different, more positive, view of them as inhabiting a liminal space that is beneficial to learning and teaching. GTAs' liminality helps them to understand the difficulties of students, while also sharing some of the understandings and positionality of more experienced academics. As such, we argue that they can play an important role mediating between the two.

Methodology

This paper draws on our experiences as a means to discuss, exemplify, and problematise the role of GTAs and their potential as partners. We have worked together on a number of student-partnership ventures and discussed student partnership together over a number of years in the context of Manuela's role as a GTA and Jenny's role as a member of staff. The early conceptualisation of this paper was led by Jenny, who suggested theoretical lenses in light of our ongoing discussions. Our roles swapped when we came to writing, with Manuela taking the lead in documenting how the theory related to our discussions and drawing together our thoughts in an online, shared document. The discussions between us were unstructured throughout. During the writing stage we each asked the other questions, to gather thoughts and experiences, as we wrote and read each other's writing. Our experiences and reflections are set in our particular contexts and influenced by our positionality. As such, we provide an introduction to ourselves below.

Manuela was recently a PhD student and GTA at University College London (UCL). She undertook numerous partnership roles during her time at UCL, including that of Annual Student Experience Review (ASER) facilitator and Student Reviewer. ASER facilitators work in partnership with the Arena Centre at UCL to support departments with poor student satisfaction as measured by the UK National Student Survey (NSS). They meet with staff from a department and their students to discuss and investigate issues that are negatively affecting student satisfaction, and identify possible solutions. Particularly because departments are selected on the basis of poor satisfaction results, such work can be sensitive. Departments can feel that they are being treated as being in

deficit, with outsiders encroaching into areas of practice that are traditionally solely the preserve of academic staff. The Student Reviewers scheme differs from the ASER facilitator work, in that students work in partnership with a single member of teaching staff to review the staff member's teaching practice and is entered into voluntarily by all parties.

Manuela was also a Student Representative both for her department and her Faculty. Her experience illustrates the way in which a student can get important insights into education by conducting 'informal' queries as a part of her role as a student representative. From her experiences she realised that the deeper the involvement, the higher the level of awareness about education students get. The role of student representative differs from partnership (at least in most cases) in that while they get involved with members of staff attending meetings and reporting on students' issues, they do not normally work in collaboration with members of staff either to address those issues or to give advice on how to do that. In other words, we cannot say that student representatives actively participate with staff members collegially at the same level, as for example student ambassadors do (Nachatar Singh, 2019). Student representatives may have a role in decision-making, however this does not necessarily mean that collaboration involves the equality implied in partnership (Bovill et al. 2016, 197).

Until recently, Jenny led UCL's student partnership scheme and taught on both UCL's gateway-to-teaching workshop for GTAs and a short learning and teaching programme for GTAs. Her experiences leading UCL's partnership scheme brought her into contact with GTAs both through partnering with

them on enhancement projects and through their feedback on partnership work in general. However, it should be noted that her role as an academic developer is distinct from that of most academics in that most of her teaching was to staff and her contact with undergraduate students came through the partnership scheme.

Discussion

Liminality can be a vulnerable position

Liminality is a stage of transition. As Turner (1995) points out, a transition period includes a phase of separation, in which the subject can feel detached both from the previous stage and the following one. The 'necessary ambiguity' this brings can be both a source of anxiety and of creativity. My (Manuela's) experience as a GTA and working with GTAs reflects that situation. One of the main sources of discontent among GTAs was the feeling of unpreparedness for this new phase. They felt they had lost some of the 'protections' they had as students, and they were not given enough support and training to be teachers. As a Student Representative for the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, I conducted one survey that was built upon the insights I had gained from my experience as a student representative for my department (four surveys). This showed that there was a sense of a loss among GTAs regarding the protection they perceived they had as students. For example, until then they might have felt that the workload they had as students was challenging, but they ultimately understood it as being "for their own benefit". As a GTA they had to comply with the workload of the PhD, while at the same time respond to the expectations of a "boss" (the course leader), often feeling unprotected. GTAs' issues were largely about payment, but this only aggravated the feeling that their work was not appreciated -

one GTA involved in the campaign for better recompense said she was driven by having experienced depression after her first term teaching. Her payment for the whole term had not arrived making it impossible for her to travel to see her family over Christmas time. It was widely perceived that departments had a dismissive attitude towards GTAs. These challenges around time and payment for GTAs have also been found at other institutions (Muzaka, 2009).

The perception of not being appreciated particularly affected GTAs because, while they felt that they had a central role in teaching undergraduates (UGs), they often also felt insecure about their own performance. Although GTAs often hold robust ideas of what makes a good teacher (*e.g.,* how to interact with students) they felt they had not had the appropriate training for their job –this could range from how to deal with academic issues or, for example, a UG having a breakdown in the classroom and not knowing how to act and report it. These concerns were related to their liminal position. As a student representative and a GTA, I also felt that my work was not valued and that expectations were not clearly defined, which led to the feeling of being overstretched.

Manuela's reflections on the challenges of GTAs relate to my (Jenny's) experiences of working with GTAs. When I taught GTAs on UCL's gateway-to-teaching workshop I observed that many of them were concerned about their authority with undergraduate students. Some were concerned that their youth (or youthful appearance) would mean that they were not taken seriously by undergraduate students. The top question that we were asked by GTAs was how to deal with questions to which they did not know the answer. There was

a real sense that the GTAs felt they had not 'made it' yet. Although imposter syndrome is prevalent in both staff and students in Higher Education (Parkman, 2016), for these GTAs the sense of being an imposter as a teacher seemed to me to be arising from them inhabiting the liminal space between student and staff. My experiences are reflected in the research of Cho et al (2011) which found that the top concerns of GTAs were related to their dual role as students and staff, as well as communication and time.

Benefits of partnership work for GTAs

The space of liminality is a place where equal individuals experience something together, even though they might not be coming from the same place (Turner 1995). This reflects my (Manuela's) experience as an ASER facilitator, working with members of the Arena Centre to improve student satisfaction in academic departments. There was a shared understanding that we were all part of a hierarchical institution, but those hierarchies were left aside when working together. It is worth stressing, in relation to the discussion of vulnerability above, that this sense of partnership also involved a mutual recognition of the different stages we were at, with staff being supportive and receptive to potential issues. For example, as an ASER facilitator, I once had a meeting with a senior member of staff in a department I had been helping to tackle poor NSS results that ended in an unpleasant way - they complained that student-staff partnership looked nice in theory, but it actually resulted in heavier workload for the staff in senior positions who had to coordinate things. My main discomfort after the meeting was not so much about receiving that opinion, but the feeling that I had failed the ASER facilitator programme. The first thing I did was text the coordinators of

the programme (the people I was working with in partnership), and they immediately invited me to their office to chat about what had happened. Crucially, they showed me how, despite the meeting, I had helped that department by bridging them with their students and continuing with student-staff partnership projects. This experience of my work being valued, of looking at outcomes beyond the immediate ones, was hugely educational in the sense that it gave me a perspective I could apply to my work as a GTA and make better sense of the issues that as a student representative I had been hearing from other GTAs, such as insecurity about our roles and acknowledgment, even if not explicit, of our liminal position.

The benefits of GTAs' liminality for partnership work

Not only do GTAs benefit from working in partnership; they also have much to contribute to partnership work on learning and teaching. I (Jenny) experienced the benefits of GTAs' liminality for partnership work when I worked with a GTA to develop student guides to assessment and feedback. The intention was to produce accessible guides to assessment and feedback issues in language that students would relate to. The GTA had a better insight into the issues around assessment and feedback that taught students struggled with and was able to communicate more engagingly with them. Nevertheless, the GTAs' own experiences were expanded and enriched by conducting focus groups and working with staff members who had academic expertise in this area.

One of the interesting things about the guides is that they are scattered with student voices from the focus groups, but these have been curated and sit alongside advice from the GTA, which she developed in partnership with the staff

working on the project. As such, the GTA traversed a space between the staff and taught students. She related her recent experiences of assessment as a student to those emerging from the focus groups in order to identify concerns and good practice. She also drew on her experiences as a teacher to translate the advice being given by the staff project members into text that students could relate to.

Her recent experiences as both a taught student and a teacher allowed her to gaze in two different directions, towards studenthood and towards teacherhood. As Haraway (1988) argued, objective knowledge depends on partial perspectives and her perspective of both was partial, situated in her GTA-ness. Nevertheless, she embodied their coming together in the way that partnership work attempts through students and staff working together honestly, respectfully and with joint responsibility. Her gaze was not "innocent" or encompassing part of a single student or staff perspective, as argued earlier. Instead, she broadened this through the focus groups she conducted with students and her partnership with staff and a taught postgraduate student.

Challenges of GTAs working in partnership

Student-staff partnership is seen as a radical practice, "an act of resistance to the traditional, often implicit, but accepted, hierarchical structure where staff have power over students" (Matthews, 2017). Working with undergraduate students on learning and teaching can feel troublesome for staff (Cook-Sather, 2014) and lead to either transformative practice or a failure to act in true partnership. Trowler (2018) found "the pretence of equal partnership often hid the real disparities of power". We suggest that this issue could be even more pressing for GTAs. While the power relationship between GTAs and academic staff is profoundly unequal (Grant, 1999,

as cited in Deuchar, 2008), staff are more used to discussing both learning and teaching and their research practices with GTAs. This familiarity could potentially make it easier for staff to slide back into a supervisory, apprentice model rather than one of partnership. To some extent this is true of the example of the assessment and feedback guides, where the relationship was one more of supervision than partnership. However, Manuela's experience of this occurring is even more striking. When she participated as a student reviewer of teaching, she partnered with a member of staff to review his teaching practice. However, he saw this as an opportunity to teach Manuela, a GTA in the department, about teaching. This situation had the additional problem that the member of staff was in charge of appointing GTAs in the department, so Manuela felt she could not really say anything without risking a future job there. Their apprenticeship relationship as GTA/teaching staff thus overrode the relationship they should have been establishing as equal partners, and prevented them from honestly exploring and reviewing the staff member's own practice.

Conclusion

GTAs are in a liminal place between studenthood and teacherhood (Compton & Tran, 2017). This can put them in a vulnerable position, having lost the protection of their time to focus on their own studies and not yet being established as valued members of staff (Muzaka, 2009). This can lead to a loss of confidence and sense of not being appreciated, both of which partnership work can restore.

The feeling that GTAs are insufficiently supported in their teaching is an area of work that would greatly benefit from GTAs and staff working in partnership to explore and seek a

way forward. In such a project, it would be important to recognise the liminality of GTAs: the partnership would not be between students and staff, but staff and GTAs in their embodiment of the space "in-between". The terms "student partnership'" and "student-staff partnership" are probably unhelpful here, because they emphasise only one aspect of GTAs' identity. We argue that such partnerships are clearly part of the family of student partnership practices: challenging and repositioning the power, which normally resides with the staff; and drawing upon the situated knowledge that GTAs have of the problems that they experience. Such work has the potential to be beneficial both in its outputs but also in developing a culture whereby GTAs and staff work productively together.

We believe that GTAs offer something of particular value to partnership work for the enhancement of learning and teaching. The liminality of their position is an advantage for the outputs of such a partnership because of their proximity to both roles (staff and student) –being both while not fully being either of them. They embody a position that can gaze productively in both directions.

Nevertheless, while there is significant potential value in such partnerships, the process of partnership between the two is potentially more challenging: there is a real danger that staff will continue to treat GTAs as apprentices and fail to challenge the power dynamic between them, because they already have established ways of working with them on learning and teaching matters. Where this occurs the potential benefits from such a partnership will not be fully realised. Therefore, this is an issue that we believe requires greater awareness to prevent such partnerships from

perpetuating existing disparities in power rather than fulfilling their potential of dissipating them.

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