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Labelling in the academy: identity renegotiation among postgraduate teaching assistants

Kristyna Campbell[1,*]

[1] Department of Education, Practice and Society, UCL Institute of Education, London, UK
* Correspondence: kristyna.campbell.19@ucl.ac.uk

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Abstract

In recent years, higher education has encountered a steep rise in the employment of postgraduate teaching assistants. While this has provided professional development opportunities to doctoral candidates, conflict around the perception of these early career colleagues has emerged. Notably, the role of the postgraduate teaching assistant is characterised by flexibility, by its existing between structures and recognised roles. This betweenness can be problematic, leading to regular identity renegotiation to gain a sense of stability. Employed at a research-intensive Russell Group university, the author of this autoethnographic article examines self-reported reflective journals to ascertain the adjustments encountered throughout their practice. The author considers a postgraduate teaching assistant as blended professional, based on their experience with merging cultures and identities while situated on the periphery. The discussion reveals how postgraduate teaching assistants are influenced and supported by their academic and social environments, determining who and how they are in relation to others. The author

also considers encounters that have helped to develop their third space activity, closing with a reflection on renegotiation pointing to the ways postgraduate teaching assistants can be anchored in the institutional structure.

Keywords postgraduate teaching assistant; higher education; labelling; community; professional development; belonging; early career

Introduction

The blended professional is becoming an increasingly common figure across the higher education landscape, with individuals partially participating in various complex practices and projects (Beer, 2022; Campbell-Perry, 2022; Obexer, 2022; Whitchurch, 2015). Primarily, this concept was founded on the premise that academic and professional individuals were developing skill sets and carrying out tasks beyond the scope of their job descriptors. To a greater extent, the landscape is now home to a multifarious supply of flexible, temporary and boundary workers with wide-ranging capabilities that allow them to contribute to a host of faculties and departments, both asynchronously and synchronously, supporting members to meet institutional objectives (Obexer, 2022; Whitchurch, 2008; White et al., 2020).

This piece of autoethnographic research observes the postgraduate teaching assistant (PGTA) as a blended professional in a research-intensive Russell Group university. Earlier work by Whitchurch (2009) coined the term 'blended professional' to refer to an individual who contributes to, and partially participates in, both the professional and the academic realms of higher education. Not dissimilarly, PGTAs are known to assume ambiguous roles within the academy, falling messily outside established institutional structures (Teeuwsen et al., 2014; Wald and Harland, 2018). Ordinarily, this role is fulfilled by an individual completing their doctorate, hoping to gain invaluable teaching experience. However, the PGTA rubric is vast and varied, with some individuals supporting established members of staff with teaching and assessment, while others might work exclusively on facilitating online platforms. Based on this, considerable flexibility is expected from them (Aparicio-Ting et al., 2022; Denney, 2022). The PGTA has been conceptualised as a blended professional, owing to their regular renegotiation of roles, their positioning within the academy, and the unfixed nature of their support network and community.

I write this article from the position of an early career researcher, of a PGTA, and of a final year PhD candidate, which has allowed me to identify subtle yet poignant events that shaped my self-definition within the academy. The role I reflect on began shortly after my return to campus in 2022. Although I had facilitated teaching and learning remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic, the experience of disseminating knowledge and fostering relationships on campus required a very different approach.

To illustrate this, three vignettes offer insight into the lived reality of a PGTA. These address the complications frequently encountered, including identity conflict, self-efficacy, institutional structures, relationship building, professional development and boundary crossing. At the heart of this article are the issues of uncertainty, unpredictability and unfamiliarity, as PGTAs are continuously thrown into a state of renegotiation. While this article only captures the experience of a single PGTA, the fact that this narrative contrasts with other reports by PGTAs is telling of the inconsistencies of the role. It is hoped that this understanding will be accounted for when members of secure academic identities collaborate with blended professionals, helping them to sustain their creative and complex work, while bringing them into the broader structure and community.

Literature review

Context

This research explores the PGTA as a blended professional, an individual employed in higher education to support and facilitate undergraduate provision. The multifaceted nature of the role often leads to difficulty in feeling connected to a community, in this case, existing in the space between a doctoral candidate and a member of staff (Teeuwsen et al., 2014; Veles et al., 2019). By transferring skill sets from their distinctive roles, the PGTA establishes a new practice (Whitchurch, 2008) 'between dimensions'

(Veles et al., 2019). While this creates space for blended professionals to engage and exist together, the transformative and hybrid nature of their post can also distance them from their colleagues, leading to academic insecurity and impostor syndrome (Akerman, 2020; Obexer, 2022; Teeuwsen et al., 2014). White et al. (2020: 161) refer to blended professionals as 'hubs in a metaphorical network of activity', suggesting that third space unites individuals to redefine their roles; to expand their portfolio of experience, knowledge and proficiency; and to discover new relationships.

Third space

'Third space' has become an accepted term in higher education, as more staff find their responsibilities creeping into the collaborative domain where individuals share expertise to accomplish objectives set by the academy (Veles, 2020). These partnerships require boundary crossing and identity renegotiation to benefit from the resources of the abstract space. Earlier conceptualisation by Bhabha (2010) illustrates third space as a site for cultures, communities and identities to come together, to exchange understandings and perspectives and to jointly reach innovative insight (Obexer, 2022). Bhabha (2010) suggests that third space is a platform for exchanging esoteric knowledge and beliefs beyond their intended situation, allowing shared concepts to develop; this process enables the individual to engage with and co-construct alternative identities (Ikas and Wagner, 2009; Veles, 2023). Veles et al. (2019) emphasise the blurring of boundaries in order to achieve this.

Bhabha's (2010) depiction of third space is reminiscent of the liminal, whereby an individual is between two fixed situations (Anderson et al., 2022; Turner, 1987); the individual occupies a space influenced by conflicting and complementary values and practices. The dynamic nature of the space, and the roles within, has proved difficult to fasten into formal university structures (Whitchurch, 2015), resulting in staff feeling unrecognised or undervalued.

That professionals congregate in third space illuminates its significance in supporting new knowledge to be discovered; this can include professionals between institutional departments, and even beyond the institution (McAlpine and Hopwood, 2009). Notably, participation has been found to facilitate innovation beyond the understanding of one person alone (Veles, 2023).

Institutions have begun perceiving third space as a catalyst for progression, and less as a site for temporary peripheral engagement (Whitchurch, 2013). Whitchurch has proposed that third space is multifaceted and plays host to many spaces within; in the context of this article, the PGTA community is just one collective identity occupying the site. As a result of the many identities moving in and out of third space, unprecedented relationships and collaborations will occur, spurring on new strands of identity and a renewed state of the space.

Postgraduate teaching assistants

The PGTA, dwelling in third space, generates much of their understanding of how to fulfil their teaching role from their supervisory encounters during their doctoral studies and through interactions with established members of the academy. In third space, these influences and professional experiences interweave, enriching the PGTA's understanding of the distinct roles, and how to meet the demands of a blended professional. Whitchurch (2015) acknowledges the ways that workers embellish their positions within the academic community, in particular in third space, by carrying out their assigned contractual duties, and by employing further knowledge and initiative. She explains that:

> Those who settle in *Third Space* roles, therefore, might be said to have a greater sense of authenticity than if they had been in a mainstream role in which they felt constrained, and to be extending ideas about what it means to be an academic or a professional in higher education. (Whitchurch, 2015: 8; emphasis in original)

This reveals how the boundaries of institutional roles are becoming less clear, as workers contribute to abstract projects that require additional expertise 'outside their predefined work portfolios' (Veles et al., 2019: 75). Bounded professionals (Whitchurch, 2009) are increasingly tempted into collaborative spaces, exhibiting characteristics of cross-boundary professionals or blended professionals. In earlier work, Whitchurch (2009) offers categorisations of the bounded, cross-boundary, unbounded and blended professionals, each characterised by the permeability of their role perimeters. The fusion of knowledge and skill sets in third space creates a centre for addressing challenge and instigating change

(Whitchurch, 2013). The frequent movement of academics and professionals in and out of the site indicates the breaking down of bounded roles, and the perceived value of different contributions to and within the academy (Henkel, 2000; Takagi, 2015).

While third space offers opportunity for growth (Whitchurch, 2015), it is also considered precarious and uncertain, pressuring workers to build relationships and competence with wide-ranging stakeholders, in unfamiliar environments, on complex tasks (Obexer, 2022). This can lead to the blended professional's identity being thrown into negotiation each time (Obexer, 2022). Fixing the PGTA community into the structure of an organisation is complicated by the casual nature of their contracts (Wald and Harland, 2018). While they offer benefits such as affordable labour and facilitators that can relate to students (Kendall and Schussler, 2012), in return, the experience offers doctoral candidates the required skill sets to continue developing within the academy (Wald and Harland, 2018). The literature on graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) is picking up momentum, to include work on identity and liminality (Adefila, 2023; Campbell, 2022), rising GTA employment (Fairbrother, 2012) and the lack of autonomy in novice teachers (Clark, 2021; Park and Ramos, 2002).

To further reinforce their connection to third space, GTAs have inadequately defined role descriptors, miscommunicating the boundaries of their position, which can create feelings of insecurity. Scholarship exhibits how their role has been questioned through reports on GTA self-efficacy and job security (Partin, 2018), on GTA identification with the academy, and by the students that GTAs facilitate who have challenged their qualification, competence and authority in the classroom (Kendall and Schussler, 2012; Wald and Harland, 2018).

Identity

Blume's (2010) theory of identity renegotiation forms the theoretical framework within the current study. Identity is conceptualised as co-constructed through interactions with others in the social world. This process is thought to be ongoing throughout the life course, present in each encounter between new and continued relationships. Blume (2010: 92) describes this as 'defining the self in relationship to Other'.

Identity is thought to stem from 'interpersonal narratives' (Blume, 2010) established through collaborative social, cultural and historical communication: the outcome of collective storytelling. It becomes vulnerable to modification in an exchange of knowledge, particularly as individuals can move freely in and out of the shared space, interfering with the transfer of beliefs, values and behaviours. Blume's (2010) Identity Renegotiation Counselling (IRC) homes in on affirmation and acceptance. His work supports individuals to accept the changing nature of identity, pointing to the significance of our varied identities in different spaces. Participation is found to facilitate individuals to overcome conflict in shared spaces and to reach a resolution (Blume, 2015).

IRC comprises four stages; in these, the individual or group considers why and how identities are susceptible to change, with guidance on developing strategies to manage influence on identity (Blume, 2010). Blume's work channels adaptation, emphasising the need for this quality in order to weather our evolving life trajectories. Some identities can give rise to conflict, as they are more firmly associated with a particular site or membership. The semantics projected through an identity may correlate closely with a distinct demographic, social or cultural group, or other beliefs stemming from our diverse lived realities. Based on this, individuals may protect facets of their identity, leaving less meaningful areas exposed to transformation. Inability to observe the advantages of negotiation can result in marginalisation.

To explore the experience of a postgraduate teaching assistant as a blended professional, Blume's (2010) IRC practice has offered insight into how an individual engages with and harnesses a multiplicity of identities in a fluid space, made up of inconsistent and simultaneously influential characters.

A blended professional, whose identity is continuously renegotiated in the professional realm, depicts a role that is regularly reconfigured based on the evolving nature of their responsibilities and contributions to a setting. Their roles are often a fusion of existing bounded roles, although these individuals are often suitably qualified to perform across various domains (Takagi, 2015). Their association with third space, and those intermittently passing through, is likely to encourage renegotiation of identity (Henkel, 2000). Bhabha (2010) claims that identity is never complete, something that rings true in the ongoing development of self encountered by these professionals on the periphery, although this can result in feeling unsure about where they belong (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011). Colleagues come together, pooling their skill sets in the shared space; through this, they can learn and grow, redefining their identity (Henkel, 2000). This experience is significant because upon departing third

space, they transmit their negotiated strands of identity back to their primary communities, triggering a transformation in others (Veles, 2023). The unfixed nature of identities in blended professionals has not been without criticism, because it has led to confusion over whether third space is in fact a space, due to its blurred boundaries (Whitchurch, 2018). This has made positioning these workers within existing structures more complex.

Methodology

This article explores the concept of a blended professional (Obexer, 2022) in the context of higher education, from the perspective of a postgraduate teaching assistant, my role at the time of publication. Based at a research-intensive Russell Group university, I was keen to understand how those operating in third space were supported by the institution to gain stability and recognition, and how their participation in third space enabled them to develop professionally.

Scholarship on the blended professional exhibits individuals in academic and administrative positions exchanging their competences in creative ways (Whitchurch, 2015). As demonstrated by Bossu et al. (2018), temporary employment of skilled individuals working across boundaries is increasing to preserve funds, and this has led to existing staff taking on more fluid roles with wide-ranging responsibilities to exhibit their value to the organisation. Acknowledgement of the PGTA as a blended professional is scarce, although PGTAs constitute a rapidly growing population of workers in higher education (Fairbrother, 2012). Literature demonstrates how PGTAs often facilitate teaching on undergraduate programmes in tandem with established staff, to expand their expertise. While opportunity knocks, these budding academics are challenged to navigate their liminal role as they move between identifying as student and staff.

Blume's (2010, 2015) practice on identity renegotiation forms the theoretical framework to explore my PGTA experiences in higher education. In his work, the stages of negotiation assist an individual to enrich their understanding of who they are in relation to others (Blume, 2010). From a collective standpoint, Blume (2010: 94) argues that identity is co-constructed, and that 'the interplay of emotional and social forces' reveals how the individual positions themselves within a relationship. The current study demonstrates the significance of the interactions between colleagues, supervisors and peers, and how participation in these multifaceted communities reinforces my presence in third space.

An interpretivist methodology was employed to explore the experience of third space. I employed the qualitative research method autoethnography (Adams et al., 2015) for this interrogation and self-study, so as to 'gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others within the same context' (Ngunjiri et al., 2010: 1), while depicting the interpretations, subjectivities and complexities of experience (Ellis, 2004). This process enabled me to speak for myself, and to understand the reflexive sense-making process (Lee, 2021; Sikes, 2022). It helped to clarify how I perceive and position my shifting self within different societies and cultures (Ellis, 2009; Hamilton et al., 2008; Pitard, 2019). Critically, this method requires the author to be both subject and object of the research, exposing the complex thoughts and feelings pertaining to the self and social (Anderson, 2006). Furthermore, Ngunjiri et al. (2010: 3) express that 'collecting data about self ultimately converges with the exploration of how the context surrounding self has influenced and shaped the make-up of self and how the self has responded to, reacted to, or resisted forces innate to the context'.

In autoethnography, researchers develop illustrations of meaningful lived experience (Lee, 2021; Pitard, 2019). Through these, the researcher must strive to remain visible (Anderson, 2006; Lee, 2021), sustaining their connection to the research and their surroundings. The act of writing is known to be effective for unpicking and learning about the experiences we have. Watt (2007) contends that this is the first stage of analysis. Reflexivity creates a space for internal dialogue to be exposed and inspected (Anderson, 2006). Often communicated as storytelling with interpretation, it is a rich description of context, community, self and the reaction of the self, told through retrospective eyes (Hamilton et al., 2008; Humphreys, 2005; Watt, 2007).

The data in the current study are presented as three vignettes. These reflect how my practice was influenced by the experience of teaching, participating in third space, and the interactions held between the self and other, emphasising the collective aspect of Blume's (2010) theory. The structure of the vignettes was inspired by Pitard's (2019: 1837) 'structured vignette analysis', which captures the context, anecdote, emotional response, reflexivity, strategies developed and conclusive comments on layers.

Vignettes have the capacity to capture the voice of the participant (Ngunjiri et al., 2010); however, the researcher-as-participant can offer insider knowledge (Berger, 2015; Lee, 2021). When these emotional responses are placed in the context of a particular social or cultural setting, the writer can offer critical interpretations which give meaning to the actions or responses provided (Pitard, 2019). The question of reliability has emerged in existing scholarship, asking whether researchers can transparently convey the experience of something that they have not encountered themselves (Berger, 2015), as such, enforcing the importance of researcher closeness to subject matter. I recognise that fault has been found in the self-indulgent nature of reflexivity, and its potential to make participants feel vulnerable and exposed (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Undertaking this process, I considered any biases that may influence the interpretation of the research (Berger, 2015), as well as the choice of language employed in the vignettes, and how this may influence access to meaning (Berger, 2015). Approaching the events retrospectively helped to widen my understanding of the PGTA experience (Hamilton et al., 2008), supporting me to capture accurate representations of the encounter, with the wisdom of hindsight.

Vignettes and discussion

Vignette 1 – 'So, why are *you* teaching us?'

In 2022, I was employed at a Russell Group research-intensive university as a postgraduate teaching assistant where I had been working towards my PhD. I had embarked on roles of this nature before, but not in an undergraduate setting, a gap I had identified on my CV. In this role, now labelled Seminar Tutor, I facilitated seminar group sessions for 10 weeks, carried out various forms of assessment throughout the term, and provided encouraging and critical feedback to students throughout.

My classroom was on the seventh floor, with a wall of windows overlooking a busy and particularly noisy street. The room was long and thin, which caused me to spend much of the seminar time pacing from one side to the other to ensure that I addressed the entire group. Needless to say, it was my classroom, my first classroom, for three hours every week.

After my first seminar, a wave of relief washed over me. I drew the class to a close with some quick reminders for the following week. I can remember smiling from ear to ear as the students clapped, and I almost took a bow. In a blink, the classroom emptied, and only a few students remained with burning questions. While most of the questions were related to the module content and schedule, a final question caught me off guard: 'So, why are *you* teaching us?'

This was telling of the students' expectations, and of how my identification as a PhD candidate had influenced how I was being perceived. The success of the session slipped away from me. I felt myself flicking through the module handbook in my mind for an answer, trying desperately not to appear unprepared or, worse, defensive. While clearly still animated from the energy of the seminar, I explained the many roles that doctoral candidates take on within the institution, and how these experiences had qualified me for the undergraduate teaching position. In the break between my seminars, I mulled over the judgement that had been made of me.

This feeling stuck with me for weeks following the event, but the students noticeably warmed to my teaching style, and they began displaying their trust in my contribution to their learning; many sought opportunities for additional feedback and showed great enthusiasm as they contributed during classes.

Returning to the classroom in autumn 2023, a year later, I met my new seminar groups and introduced myself. I was selective about the language I used, and, to my delight, a positive reaction was triggered. No longer referring to myself as a final year PhD candidate, I excitedly described how I expected to complete my thesis in the spring, offering the students a visual timeline, and briefly describing what this entailed and what it would mean. I created a mental image of my former teaching experience and training to establish trust and confirmation of my acceptance into the academic community.

My uncertainty about the PGTA role early on in my teaching, along with my insecurity about my position within the structure of the institution, had led me to feel vulnerable when the student questioned me in this way. It became clear that my journey towards developing an identity as a seminar facilitator had just begun, and the gradual affirmation I received from the academic community led me to feel better equipped and more confident about 'who I was' in future.

Discussion 1

This experience initially hampered my self-belief, and the confidence I had in myself to teach in the academy. Carrying out roles on boundaries and between formal structures, I often seek affirmation from the academic community to confirm the legitimacy of my position (Moran and Misra, 2018). In the process of becoming a legitimate peripheral participant, there were forces within the academy that appeared to sustain my separation from full membership (Teeuwsen et al., 2014). Although I was eager to prove the value of my contribution, legitimacy became complicated to evidence as a blended professional (Moran and Misra, 2018; Whitchurch, 2012).

Despite this, knowledge that third space was structured by various practitioners pooling their expertise was a reminder that I was not an impostor (Obexer, 2022; Parkes et al., 2014; Veles, 2020). While there was an expectation from the academy that I would fulfil my role, the students also had preconceived beliefs about their learning, including how and by whom this should be facilitated. It became clear to me that my blended role was built on the notion of mobility; this required flexibility, and the strength to draw on different knowledge, networks and strands of identity, to meet my demands (Whitchurch, 2018).

The dynamic relationships I developed with colleagues, peers and the students I taught confirmed that continued identity renegotiation was taking place. These interactions pulled me in different directions, as each meaningful encounter contributed to a different branch of identity (Blume, 2010). The loose-fitting identity of a blended professional challenged the possibility of having a dominant identity, as I intermittently stepped into distinctive roles. While each of these roles demanded authenticity, my altering positions within these relationships created feelings of inconsistency, and challenged my self-perception (Kendall and Schussler, 2012; Wald and Harland, 2018), in spite of their access to new and innovative considerations (Whitchurch, 2015).

Vignette 2 – the module handbook

When I began teaching on an undergraduate programme, my title was Seminar Tutor. This came to my attention as I began preparing for the role in 2022. It was the first time I had received a label that attempted to summarise the extent of my responsibilities and that offered some clarification of where I fitted into the structure of the university. Printed clearly on the cover of the module handbook was my title, followed by my name and email address; I felt myself become visible on multiple platforms.

In the opening of our first lecture, the seminar tutors were asked to stand as we were introduced to the cohort. We sat at the front of the theatre, in arms-reach from the lecturer, subtly separating us from the student majority. This short but significant introduction offered recognition; I felt like a valued resource that belonged to a community. These small actions had offered some certainty about who I was in that context. This community spilled over from the hybrid communal space of PGTAs into a secure and long-established body of academics and administrators; these individuals knew me by name, and they included me in programme-related emails, events and socials. I took direction from them and simultaneously provided dependable feedback and information to them about the module. Familiarising myself with these dedicated professionals was daunting to begin with, but gradually I became accustomed to the discourse of the programme.

Proudly claiming my title of Seminar Tutor triggered an emotional response in me. This title was a culmination of my academic endeavours. It was symbolic, and it confirmed that I shared a connection with a more secure identity, if not the collective institutional identity. I began employing this label beyond its initial context to represent my competence in higher education. The defined boundaries, responsibilities and expectations that accompanied this role were captured within my title, and I began to feel the force of others acknowledging that. On my CV, this title represented my ability to use the language of the institution; its semantics expressed sufficient information about who I was and what I was able to achieve. This helped me considerably in overcoming the sense of being an impostor, as implied in Vignette 1.

Discussion 2

The title I received portrayed attempts by others to present us within the academy. It shone a light on the often-overlooked work carried out by PGTAs, and it recognised my contribution. It also built a bridge between us and them. This provided a legitimate and recognised role descriptor, and it led me to feel more visible within the community; it was an uncomplicated way of exhibiting where I was situated within

the institutional structure. This was telling of the positive impact of 'labelling' on individuals; whereas labelling has predominantly been illustrated negatively in the literature, owing to its association with 'othering' (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011; Veles, 2023). However, in this instance, the label represented the credibility of my role; it was a currency that was communicated using the institutional discourse (Melling, 2019).

In some respects, this temporarily removed me from third space, as I crossed over the boundary into an established organisational space. When participating in the norms and activities set out by this community, I had socially meaningful interactions that helped to co-construct my teacher identity (Blume, 2010). On returning to the PGTA community in third space, I could contribute my new knowledge and perspectives captured in exchanges (Obexer, 2022) to enrich our collective competence and contribution to the institution. Melling's (2019) research on the influence of job titles on worker satisfaction found that many individuals felt misrepresented by their label, leading to them offering rich descriptions of their duties during introductions. The flexibility of the PGTA role is also known to create ambiguity and uncertainty as to the boundaries of one's position. In spite of this, being labelled as a seminar tutor helped me to align my pedagogical approach and academic identity with others in the community, as well as offering clarity to colleagues regarding the duties within my remit, which is notoriously difficult to achieve as a blended professional. Indeed, the blended nature of my role is conveyed in subtle ways to others; I carry with me a symbolic object, my lanyard, which qualifies my membership and crossing over into quite distinctive social worlds: as a student or as staff (Veles, 2023). As Whitchurch (2012) claims, these objects can simultaneously isolate and unite; they tell us apart as much as they grant access.

Vignette 3 – autonomous professionals

At the start of term, I entered my second year of teaching at this Russell Group university. A new global cohort of undergraduate students had arrived, with wide-ranging educational and schooling experiences, different expectations of quality and provision, and various motivations for pursuing higher education. Participation in our PGTA community had afforded me the opportunity to reflect on my pedagogical practice. We were encouraged to be autonomous in our sessions; permission to implement our unique pedagogic styles enhanced my confidence in disseminating engaging concepts, while simultaneously offering flexibility that supported the students to take part and feel included in the experience.

My supervisors had also encouraged me to become autonomous for much of the PhD. They asked that I became more independent, made decisions and justified my thinking; I evidenced this competence through timelines, exercising criticality and by selecting additional professional pursuits to enhance my skill sets. These behaviours informed how I organised myself and the boundaries I created for myself, which are reflected in my presence in different spaces, communities and roles.

As a seminar tutor, the freedom I experienced structuring my seminars allowed me to develop effective strategies that prepared me for other institutional pursuits. I felt capable of bringing together the knowledge I had acquired from the teaching community with my approach to learning as a doctoral candidate, to inform my unique taught sessions. Despite this proficiency I could feel developing, I was left pondering the institution's inconsistent perceptions of PGTA value and contribution, reflected in transient and precarious employment, and in modest wages. I had gone to great lengths to model the values and norms of the community, and so the uncertainty that remained was disheartening, particularly as the experience had felt so significant to me.

Discussion 3

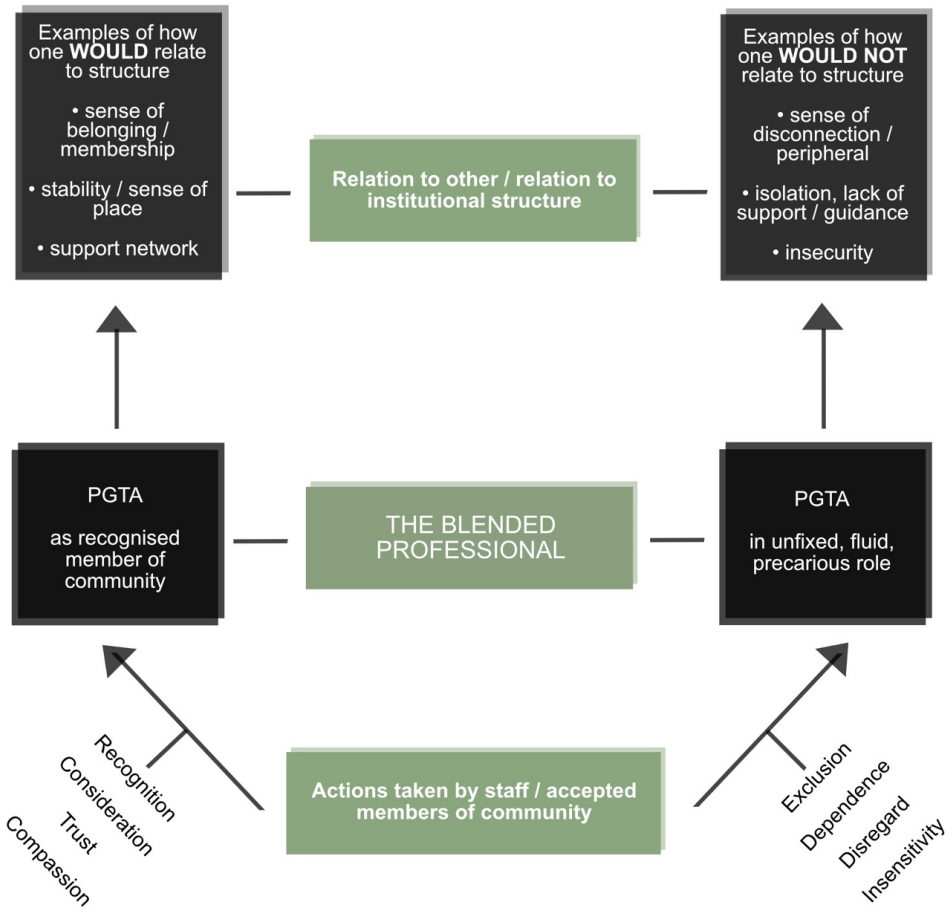
Individuals have been known to thrive in third space. Called to this collaborative site to facilitate innovation and creativity, it can bring together different identities, cultures, communities and skill sets (Obexer, 2022). By drawing on the expertise of blended professionals to accomplish complex institutional projects and objectives, colleagues are required to exercise their autonomy as they make independent judgements about the work (Moran and Misra, 2018). The blurring of boundaries in institutional roles has led to greater numbers of academics and professionals taking on responsibilities beyond their expectations (Bhabha, 2010; Veles, 2020). While this has led to efficiency in the workforce, it has also thrown individuals into unfamiliar territory, pressuring them to build new relationships, and to expand their capabilities (Veles, 2020). This overwhelming task can deprive workers of their autonomy, particularly when they feel unable to choose whether to carry out the demands.

Developing autonomy as a blended professional is known to be a conflicting process (Obexer, 2022); floating between institutional structures can be liberating (and unrestrictive), as individuals exercise their independence and multi-membership (Smith et al., 2021; Whitchurch, 2018), but it can also be isolating, as it can cut off workers from communities and from developing relationships (Akerman, 2020; Obexer, 2022; Teeuwsen et al., 2014). Interestingly, in the context of the PGTA as a blended professional, the multifariousness of interactions encountered appeared to enable autonomy to develop, as the distinctive relationships fostered through supervision and professional collaboration co-created identities that helped to reaffirm and define who to be in the many situations (Blume, 2010), based on the harnessing of new knowledge.

Conclusions

This article set out to provide a transparent narrative of an individual PGTA's lived reality at a research-intensive Russell Group university. In creating the reflexive vignettes, the many conflicts encountered have been illustrated, and through a synthesis of relevant scholarship, rich understandings of these issues within the higher education landscape have been reached. The vignettes retold first-hand scenarios that presented issues relating to identity, self-efficacy, institutional structures, relationship building, professional development and boundary crossing. In Figure 1, I capture this insight as a summary of personal reflections, detailing the responses and reactions of both accepted members of the academic community, and those participating in roles on the periphery.

Figure 1. Renegotiation of PGTA identity



Lessons for higher education institutions

This discussion offers insight into the effect that existing beyond institutional structures can have on the professional development and self-perception of an early career individual. I propose that established members of the academy work to create a network with which PGTAs can feel connected, in order to overcome the uncertainties that develop from this role. This may help early career individuals to find ways to relate to existing structures, through their association with experts and old-timers of the setting. The multifaceted nature of the PGTA role can offer stability and insecurity simultaneously, thus affirmation and recognition will likely foster their academic identity (Whitchurch, 2018). It is felt that recognition given to PGTAs by the academic community will play a considerable role in their self-definition. Finally, the blurred boundaries of the PGTA role may offer rich learning and development opportunities. However, as the PGTA role is not widely understood, this can hamper the way in which PGTAs are perceived and considered by members of the academic community (Ban, 2023; Kendall and Schussler, 2012). I suggest that practitioners receive richer and more timely information about the advantages of working with PGTAs, and that guidance is provided to ensure that their contribution to teaching leads to gains in their professional development.

Lessons for the PGTA community

While it can seem as though blended professionals exist only on the periphery of communities, the PGTA role is assumed by a number of individuals who might be wise to develop a network of their own. In doing so, these individuals can create hubs for compassion, understanding and weathering situations together. In my teaching, having a community of PGTAs helped to nurture my teaching competence, but it also functioned as a space for exchanging concerns and ideas (Campbell et al., 2023). This can help blended professionals to achieve a sense of belonging, and to identify more closely with a community. Despite being situated in third space, the changeable nature of this means being able to create a site with specific needs in mind. The fluidity of the blended professional can be advantageous too; not only are we at the heart of collaborative projects and sourcing new networks, but we can also become experts of the boundary. Based on this, individuals working in third space are known to exhibit hybrid practices and approaches that comprise 'an expanded repertoire of conceptual, social and dialogical resources' (Popov, 2023: 4), often helping to bridge the distance between discourses. The significance of these practitioners to the academy is reflected in their ability to respond to change, to assume supplementary services, and to transfer and apply their knowledge across boundaries.

In earlier research, I employed an autobiographic approach to exploring identity (see Campbell, 2022). This exploration of self comprised a series of narratives depicting the changing self-perception throughout various roles and life stages. The use of vignettes in this autoethnographic study, however, required a much deeper critical engagement with specific encounters and interactions. This process supported me to understand my role in the academy and my professional experiences in relation to others, to society and to culture. Inspired by Pitard's (2016) 'structured vignette analysis', three windows were opened, looking in at lingering snapshots. This method offered access to comprehension only obtainable through a reflexive and emotional process; for early career individuals, I advise this approach for self-development and professional development, as a way to enhance confidence and to make sense of one's outlook on one's situation.

The growing scholarship on PGTA contributors to the higher education experience exhibits a medley of job demands, adding to the continued lack of clarity regarding our input to the landscape. I hope to see the language of the role being used by institutions, so that they may recognise PGTAs within their existing structure. Indeed, an exploration of the support structures for PGTAs would also be helpful to blended professionals seeking stability. Last, consideration of the shared metaphorical space that PGTAs occupy as third space, by greater numbers of workers, would help to grow this area of the literature.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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