

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0354

Doctoral students navigating the borderlands of academic teaching in an era of precarity

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Research Domain: Postgraduate Scholarship and Practice (PGSP)

Abstract:

Neoliberalisation of academia has led to an increasing recruitment of doctoral students in teaching roles. Whilst there is evidence of doctoral students being engaged in university teaching and the reasons for doing so, there is a pressing need to understand their experiences to develop effective support practices for their emerging roles as teachers. Using borderlands theory as a lens, the thematic analysis of case study data from doctoral students in two English universities indicates that although they were navigating similar borderlands, the structural inequalities posed by their institutions led to differential support for their teaching roles and teacher identity development. The paper highlights the need for aligning doctoral roles to academic roles. It concludes by challenging the precarious support available for doctoral students and proposes recommendations for the holistic development of doctoral students as competent and successful teachers (and researchers) in an increasingly precarious academia.

Paper:

Introduction

Doctoral students, as new and emerging academics, have to navigate a precarity mire, that has arisen because of Western academia neoliberalisation which emphasises cost-effectiveness in the university work and practices (Williams, 2013). As a result, doctoral students are regularly recruited to teach undergraduates within higher education institutions (HEIs) and are commonly referred to as Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) (Park, 2004). GTAs see teaching as a positive experience which helps develop their academic identity (Jordan and Howe, 2018) and their employability (Mantai, 2019). Recently, there has been more focus on the development of formal teaching support programmes for GTAs (Chadha, 2013; 2015, Beaton, 2017). However, what is less understood is how informal and formal teaching support help doctoral students navigate their multiple identities as a student, researcher and teacher in an era of precarity.

Research approach

Within the context of neoliberalisation, we argue that GTAs occupy a liminal space as a doctoral student, researcher and teacher that can be likened to a borderland (Andzaldúa, 1987). GTAs enter a liminal state (Mayer and Land, 2005) that is transformative in their process of becoming an academic,

i.e. shifting from one state of being into another. Using two British universities (one with a well-established doctoral programme) as multiple case studies (Yin 2013), this paper explores GTAs experiences in the borderlands to highlight the support mechanisms available to GTAs during their early university teaching experiences. A combination of both deductive and inductive thematic analysis of eight interviews was undertaken (Braun and Clarke, 2012; 2013).

Findings and discussion

Overall, entering the borderland provides GTAs with hope for more secure academic futures, but also causes dislocations as their roles are often undefined with limited institutional support.

Entering the Borderland for Academic Career

Most doctoral students wanted to engage in teaching because of their ambition to pursue an academic career. This decision was also shaped by their awareness of the precarious academic job market (UCU 2018, Mantai, 2019). However, gaining access to this borderland was variable amongst doctoral students. Most students were able to gain teaching experience as a result of the contractual obligations of their doctoral scholarships or by serendipitous association with supervisors who offered teaching opportunities. This uneven access to teaching, where some students relied on close contacts with their supervisor (see also Maintai, 2019), demonstrates significant inequality in the borderlands where students compete for their academic futures.

Experiencing Liminality in the Borderland

The GTA borderland became a transformative experience for GTAs as they struggled between different roles and identities. They were entering a liminal state which was stressful because they had to navigate new discourse communities with diverse norms and expectations (Land, Rattray and Vivian 2014). Hence, undertaking a GTA role clearly reflects the borderland where doctoral students fluctuate between two worlds and where belonging (or lack of) becomes an issue (Anzaldúa 1987).

Support in the Borderland

The support provided to doctoral students depended on the institutional structures (such as a structured training programme) and informal relationships developed with supervisors. GTAs on the structured teaching programme were able to interact with academics who were already on the other side of 'the border' (Elenes and Delgado Bernal, 2009) and to meet other GTAs navigating the borderlands which provided them with a sense of belonging and recognition that they were not a lone borderland occupier. GTAs without the structured programme sought support from significant others within their immediate sphere, usually their supervisor. However, the structured programmes did not remove the difficulties that occur in the GTA borderland. As a liminal experience (Mayer and Land 2005; Land, Rattray and Vivian 2014), the early teaching encounters inevitably cause

uncertainties and issues of belonging as it is part of the doctoral student transition to academic work. However, such programmes appear to provide coordinated support, peer networks and a sense of belonging that GTAs valued (Rienties and Hosein, 2015).

Concluding thoughts/implications

This paper highlights structural inequalities in the support available to GTAs where established teaching development programmes offer coordinated guidance to GTAs (Rienties and Hosein, 2020) and those without may struggle to provide a more organised teaching support due to limited resource implications. This paper highlights the need for creating a closer alignment between doctoral training and holistic development of doctoral students as academics helping them transition into academia.

Discussion Questions

1. How far the experiences reflect the situation in your own institution?
2. What might be your suggestions to ensure all ECRs are appropriately supported in their holistic development?
3. Do we need an institutional/sectorial approach? Why/Why not?

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