

**‘Restor(y)ing their position in the spotlight, please  
welcome back on stage...**

**Postgraduate Students who teach...**

**or**

**Graduate Teaching Assistants...**

**or**

**Teaching Postgrads...**

**or...’**

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**Mr. Turkentine:** That's right, you don't know because only I know. If you knew and I didn't know then you'd be teaching me instead of me teaching you, and for a student to be teaching his teacher is presumptuous and rude. Do I make myself clear?

**Charlie Bucket:** Yes, sir!

*(Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory, film 1971)*

## Foreword...or...Backward

**‘I’m not sure who I am...what’s my name?’**

...said the postgraduate who teaches,

...said the **Graduate Teaching Assistant**,

...said the *student*,

...said the *teacher*,

...said the *researcher*,

...said the *narrative inquirer*,

...said the *raconteur*,

...said the *listener*,

...said the *author*,

...said the *reader*...

...you are all of them...and more...

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A big thank you to my family, who have all helped me in so many ways...thanks for the support, advice, understanding and all the white lemonade!

Finally, to the many paws that have walked this journey with me...those who are still here and those who are never far away...merci à vous tous...!!

## **Dedication**

This is dedicated to my parents, Noreen and Des,  
whose voices are with me always...

‘...pack it in, you’ve enough done...’

## **Abstract**

This is the story of the experiences of eleven postgraduate research students who teach within the Institute of Technology (IoT) sector in Ireland. Despite being present within the university sector, both nationally and internationally, the concept of teaching postgraduates, within the IoT sector, is a relatively recent one, and to date, very little research has been conducted into their experiences. They have been on stage, but not centre stage...they have supported from the wings.

Adopting a narrative approach, this research presents the stories of these postgraduate students and shines a spotlight on their occupational positioning and identity within the sector. Underpinned by a poststructuralist stance, which sets out to deconstruct existing structures, the study problematizes the concept of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) and explores the many different challenges that face teaching postgraduate students within the sector, as voiced by the postgraduate students themselves. Guided by a Foucauldian theorisation, that suggests power can be pervasive and capillary, the study highlights how threads of power are interwoven throughout the entire GTA experience, but also shows how there is agentic power within the postgraduates themselves. The study also considers how these teaching positions are being shaped by the impact of neoliberalism within higher education and how their emergence has gone hand-in-hand with cost-saving measures and efficiencies.

But just as narrative may be viewed as a messy form of methodological inquiry (Connolly, 2007) and poststructuralism favours a deconstructed form, this study is also presented using a non-traditional format. Rather than following a

conventional writing style, this study embraces performative writing as a means of exploring different ways of knowing. The performative nature of the study is a way of drawing explicit attention to the artificiality of conventional academic writing and highlights the importance of writing as inquiry in itself. In addition, through the adoption of performative writing in this study, a space has been created for the reader to create their own meaning and to explore gaps in knowledge.

The eleven individual stories are peppered throughout the study, as a way of indicating that the postgraduate students are omnipresent throughout, just as they are within higher education institutions. But You will also see that this study is continuously interrupted by Celisne, who acts as a disruptive discursive companion, and represents the many subjectivities of those who have been part of this study, thereby inviting You to consider the multiple interpretations of this story.

Finally, this study also makes claims to knowledge from a pedagogical perspective, in that it has impacted upon my own pedagogy and practice, making me more cognisant of the importance of involving all learners, including postgrads who teach, in their own learning, *listening* to them, and ‘learning with’ them, rather than ‘teaching to’ them.

*An abandoned college library in July; the sun pierces through the slanted windows as particles of dust dance freely in the air. In the absence of literary companions, heavy tomes lean on each other for support. Nothing moves. The loose veil of silence is temporarily lifted as Celisne, who, until now, had been sitting quietly in the corner, raises her voice, almost impatiently...*

**celisne**

So, come on, sum it up for me, what did You find out...?

**me**

That's just it...there's no way to sum up...there's no way of 'finding out'...i think that's the point...i haven't arrived at the 'end'...it's like i'm still going round in circles...

**celisne**

But i thought You were finished...you've been at it ages...did You not start with a hypothesis and now You've reached the end...? Isn't this a bit like the dénouement at the end of a murder mystery...You know, when all the characters are brought into a room and the big reveal takes place and You prove who dunnit...!

**me**

'Prove'...the only proof for me is that this is a continual exploration, an endless, messy, learning journey...not just for Me, but for the Participants, for You...for all of Us...

**celisne**

You just said 'journey' – does that mean We're not finished so?

**me**

Far from it...think of it like this...We just arrived on stage during the play and now We're exiting mid-scene; there are plenty more acts to play out...but, there's no neat ending...just loose threads, further lines of inquiry...

**celisne**

Well, in that case, i'm not sure that i can go on...

**me**

You have to go on...there's no turning back now...not for any of Us...You're part of this...a big part of this...

**celisne**

does that mean i feature in this story?

**me**

...of course...i couldn't remove you even if i wanted to...! You surface throughout, You interrupt, You disrupt...Your voices pierce through...

**celisne**

...voices...what do you mean voices...?

**me**

well, You represent everyone and everything Celisne...You are many subjectivities...

**celisne**

...oh, i get it...so that's why We are playing with the 'i' and the 'You'...there is no particular 'i' and 'you' is there...we can be anyone at any time and so can You...a bit like the voice losing its origin and the narrative being undertaken by a mediator (Barthes, 1967), is that it...? so, am i sometimes that mediator?

**me**

...we're all that mediator i suppose...and i'm challenging the idea of a unified authorial voice...it's mirroring a poststructuralist approach...celisne, there's an ambiguity around me...around You...it's all a bit fluid...You can be anyone or anything at any time...You are thoughts, You are voices, You are participants, You are sometimes supervisors, examiners, family, colleagues, friends...You're an embodiment of my world... you represent my learning journey – unstructured, non-linear, disorienting...

You are provocative, questioning, omnipresent, loud...You make me puzzle, grapple, poke at those rocks beneath the surface, unearthing more questions...You interrupt...you cause me to pause, reflect...you are both the noise pounding in my head...and the reassuring silence...

**celisne**

...i'm sorry but i think that could be really confusing...

**me**

...it IS confusing celisne...the whole thing is confusing, but i'm okay with that...are You?

**celisne**

...do i have a choice?!...so, if i follow, i'm reflecting shifting subjectivities at the one time...is that it?

**me**

...yeah, that's it...but just on that...there is no *one* time really – for Me, You are/will be/were atemporal, ahistorical...You transcend time...and place...You are here at this moment, but You could also be someone from the past, or future...

**celisne**

...i feel as if i've just walked onto the stage but have found Myself in the wrong theatre...was this not a study on postgraduate students who teach...because it's beginning to sound like some confused sci-fi play...

**me**

...no, it's still about postgrads alright, and it is a staging of their experiences...but it's an emergent study, so maybe that is where the ambiguity stems from...

**celisne**

...and what's with this theatrical performance idea – why is the story structured as somewhat of a play?

**me**

...for lots of reasons...firstly, performative writing focuses on lived experience, 'telling, iconic moments that call forth the complexities of human life' (Pelias, 2014, p. 12). And it is more concerned with creating experience, rather than simply being a descriptive portrayal of something and that supports what I am attempting to do in this study...I want to create what the experience of being a postgrad who teaches is...in that sense, performative writing acts as an invitation to readers to see things from another person's perspective...it brings the writer and the reader closer together and connects people within a scholarly community (Pelias, 2014)...

So, in that way, I am using performative writing as a way of staging the experiences of postgrads who teach...and am inviting You, as audience, to 'lean in'...

**celisne**

...what do you mean 'lean in'...?

**me**

...well, it's an idea proposed by Pelias (2011), who has written extensively on the performativity of writing; he suggests that, in order to understand others and develop meaningful relationships, we should 'lean in' (Pelias, 2011, p. 9), listen and be attentive to others...it's about creating a space and inviting others to come into that space, and that's what I would like You to do here...

**celisne**

...okay, and by leaning with others, such as GTAs in this case, we become powerful together...almost a political force...

**me**

yes, and Pelias (2014, p. 15) actually suggests that 'performative writing turns the personal into the political'. So, in that sense, we are all coming together to better understand the situation of postgrads who teach within the IoTs...

...but the theatrical structure offers more too – it supports a multiplicity of roles and voices and allows us to co-create an artistic experience...so different subjectivities occupy the stage at any given time, in different contexts – sometimes I am narrating, or it could be You, or We hear the postgrads talking, or there are reflections (through the use of 'asides')...

...all of this brings a plurivocal aspect to the stage...and supports the notion of multiple subjectivities...so you see, there's a performativity in all of this, including the text itself...

**celisne**

but, by adopting this form of writing you are also rejecting conventional academic writing, aren't you? Is that not problematic...?

**me**

...no, not at all...in fact, it has been a really good way of illustrating that there can be different ways of knowing and that scholarly writing can take many forms. Adopting performative writing for this study has allowed me to embrace different means of expression, such as fragmented sentences and gaps, changing fonts, white spaces, ellipses...all of which are ways of disrupting traditional forms.

And this type of writing is also seen as evocative, being an ‘intimate co-performance of language and experience’ (Pollock, 1998, p. 80). In that sense, I am using what I would see as poetic forms of language to convey an experience and these poetic pieces, including the epigraphs at the beginning of each section for example, are also a means of inquiry (Pelias, 2011). They invite each reader to relate to them in whatever way they wish, and whatever way they feel. Performative writing, in that sense, is ‘a doing...coming into being’ (ibid., p. 13)...it is writing as inquiry...

**celisne**

...this is beginning to sound like a powerful production...le pouvoir, c’est puissant...

**me**

...what does that mean?

**celisne**

...power, it’s powerful...

**me**

...two words for power?

**celisne**

oh, there are a lot more ways to show power...but just one more thing...how do You pronounce My name...?

**me**

well, it’s Your name...You named Yourself...but it’s pronounced like ‘Celine’ - just spelt differently...

**celisne**

yeah...with a ‘silent’ s...

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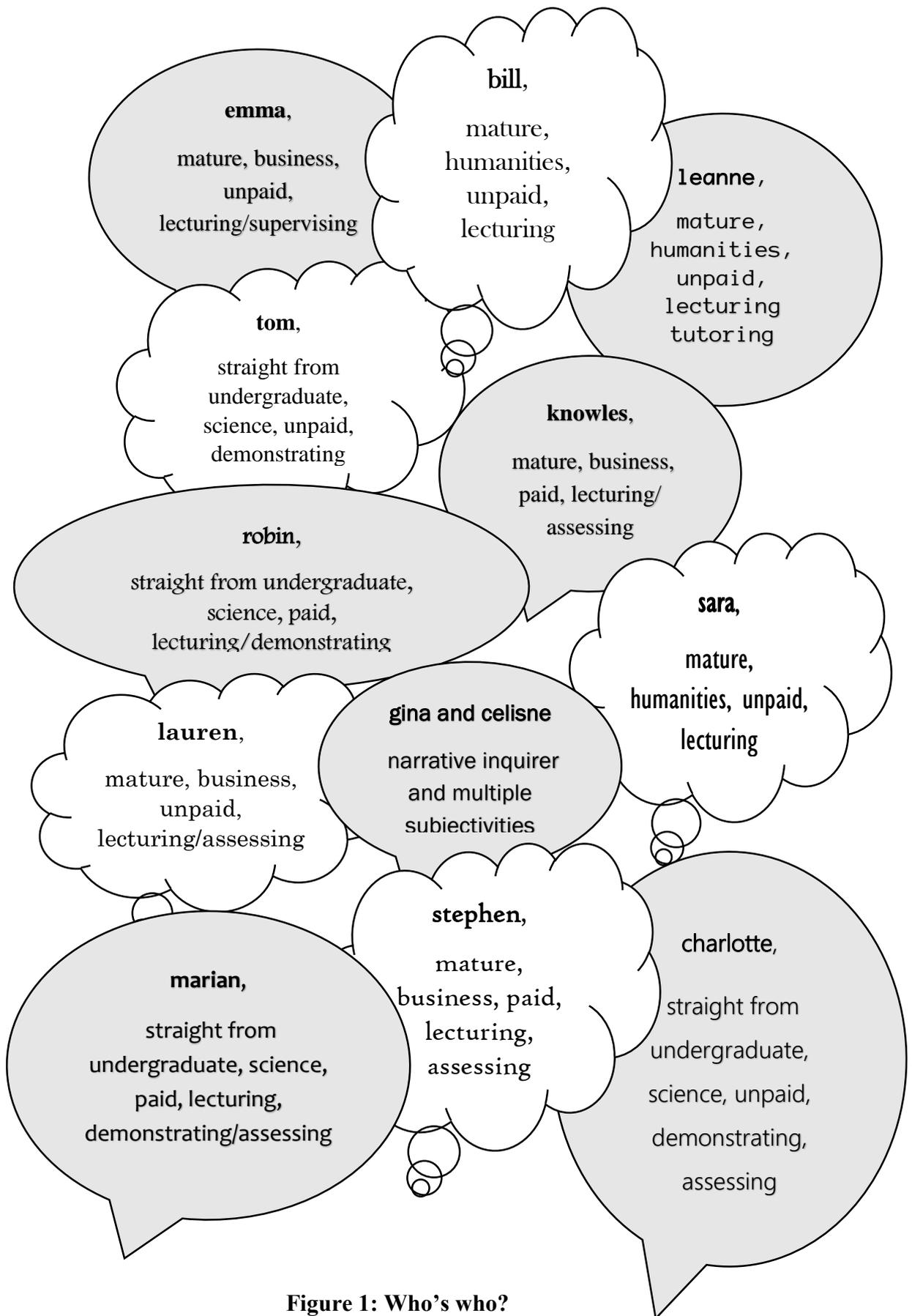
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**Figure 1: Who's who?**

## ACT I:

### There's a past to this beginning...

‘En réalité, chaque lecteur est, quand il lit, le propre lecteur de soi-même. L'ouvrage d'un écrivain n'est qu'une espèce d'instrument optique qu'il offre au lecteur afin de lui permettre de discerner ce que sans le livre il n'eût peut-être pas vu en soi-même.’

(*Translation*: 'Every reader, as he reads, is actually the reader of himself. The writer's work is only a kind of optical instrument he provides the reader so he can discern what he might never have seen in himself without this book.')

Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913)

### ‘To *be* or not to *be* a GTA...’

- I have never been a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA)...
- *What's a GTA?*
- Well, it's a term that originated in the United States that describes postgraduate research students (typically PhD students, but increasingly Masters students) who are engaged in part-time 'teaching-related responsibilities' (Branstetter and Handelsman, 2000, p. 27), usually in exchange for payment or a stipend (Park and Ramos, 2002), or in return for part coverage of their fees (Husbands and Davies, 2000)...
- *So it's a term for postgrads who teach...?*
- Yes, it's a label...a way of naming...but also *being* (or maybe even *becoming*) a GTA is often seen as the first step in developing as an academic (Austin, 2002), the preparation stage for the professoriate of tomorrow (Wise,

1967; Wilkening, 1991; Lambert and Tice, 1993; Nyquist, Manning, Wulff, Austin, Sprague, Fraser, Calcagno and Woodford, 1999; Hardré, 2005; DeChenne, Lesseig, Anderson, Li, Staus and Barthel, 2012), almost the apprenticeship before assuming the role. For decades, postgraduates who teach have been a valuable resource for the significant role they play in undergraduate teaching (Golde and Dore, 2001; Holland, 2018; Roden, Jakob, Roehrig and Brenner, 2018).

- *So, they are needed...*
- Yes, but there is more to it than that...being a GTA or a postgraduate who teaches, or however you name it, also characterises a stage where students grapple for the first time with the experience of being both a graduate student and part of the academic profession (Golde, 1998), which, some researchers think can lead to role conflict (Park and Ramos, 2002) and the existence of multiple identities (Winstone and Moore, 2017).
- *But you've never been one...*
- No, I have never *lived* through that experience; I don't know what it is like *to be* one.
- And now you are presenting the stories of 11 postgraduate researchers who teach, from within the Irish higher education sector...
- Yes, I talked *with* them, interpreted their stories and am now sharing them with You...
- But you don't know what it is like to be one...

*No...but let me explain...*

...I have been a postgraduate student in the past (and I am one now as I complete this study), but, I never engaged in any teaching-related duties as part of my role, whilst I was completing my first postgraduate programme. I was never asked to lecture, tutor, demonstrate, assess or supervise other students as part of my postgraduate responsibilities. I was able to focus all my attention on my own studies.

As such, I never had to consider juggling the identities of student, staff and researcher within the one institution. I didn't have to engage in the concomitant socialization processes which Staton and Darling (1989) refer to as role and cultural socialization. By this, they were suggesting that GTAs had to adjust to the dual roles of student and teacher, or even negotiate intersecting multiple ones (Beaton, Bradley and Cope, 2013; Skorobohacz, 2013), whilst also trying to familiarise themselves with the culture of academia. In any case, I counted myself lucky that I didn't have to navigate between multiple roles at that time.

Because I was never a teaching postgraduate, I therefore never really gave these individuals much consideration...

But now, better late than never, I am doing just that...talking to and considering the experiences of the 11 teaching postgraduates who participated in this study...

-----

**celisne**

moi, un quoi?...un GTA...an acronym that you are using to describe all these individuals...GTAs...?

**me**

...yeah, what's the issue...?

**celisne**

you don't see a problem there? I mean you are using a term and it's not really clear what it means...

**me**

oh, you'll see Celisne...it can mean many things...

**celisne**

okay...but you really are making me feel as if these individuals are something 'out there', something different...a distinct, defined group...but they aren't that are they...?...they are people around Me, around You...

**me**

yeah, I know...and I agree with you...but let's run with it as one term for the moment...as I reflect now on my own journey of doing this research, I know that I started out quite rigidly using the term GTA...but then I began to see that by doing so, I was guilty of exercising my own power in naming others...my own capacity to influence discourse.

**celisne**

so what have you done to address this...?

**me**

So as I have grown as a researcher, I've become a lot more fluid in the terms I use... who am I to name others after all...? so you'll see I also use the term 'postgraduates who teach', 'teaching postgrads'...and 'teaching assistants'...I interchange throughout so you can take your own meaning(s) from that...but I will explore the term GTA more in the next act...

-----

I remember in college being tutored by postgraduate students and I did have friends who were tutoring whilst studying, but I never gave their position much thought.

*Why would I?*

In many ways, I saw them as an invisible group, a bit like McCready and Vecsey (2013, p. 105) who remark that GTAs are sometimes seen as a 'forgotten tribe' or Nota (2005, p. 1) who describes them as 'the invisible workforce', based on

Gappa and Leslie's (1993) publication which used the term 'invisible faculty'; just there in the background, supporting the teaching process and getting on with their own study. To me, they were just that - a group of postgraduate students who were teaching...so what? And now, almost 30 years later, I can't stop thinking about them...

But just thinking about them is not enough and that brings me to the reason for this study...

### **Practise what you teach...**

Let me tell you about where I work...

I work within the Institute of Technology (IoT) sector, one branch of the higher education sector within the Republic of Ireland (which I will describe in greater detail later in this study). I have worked there for the last 25 years and for over 20 of those years, I was teaching French...

...and then everything changed...

-----

**celisne**

Il est difficile de vaincre ses passions, et impossible de les satisfaire...

**me**

...what does that mean...?

**celisne**

It is difficult to master one's passions and impossible to satisfy them...

**me**

...meaning...?

**celisne**

whatever you like...but maybe it is connected to your move from teaching French...

-----

I took up a new position in the *Teaching and Learning Centre* within my Institute where my role was to provide pedagogical support for new and existing academic staff. A change in roles, responsibilities, titles and subjectivities...

*[I still wonder why the dichotomy between 'teaching' and 'learning' exists, as though they are two distinct activities...can 'teaching' not mean a multiplicity of things, depending on how it is interpreted...is it about creating learning conditions or some kind of static performance of transferring canonical knowledge...? And if 'teaching' and 'learning' are dichotomised, then is the same thing happening with 'teachers' and 'learners'...are the two being treated as separate roles and identities...and, if this is the case, then where does that leave postgraduate learners who teach...or teaching postgraduates who learn...?*

*I would be drawn back to this again later for sure!...]*

Part of my remit in my new role was to support staff in the enhancement of pedagogic quality within the institution. In effect, I was supposed to be 'teaching the teachers' (on reflection, I think it was more a case that I was 'learning from the learners!').

I remember feeling like an imposter (and this is something that you will also read in **Sara's** story, she's a participant) – misplaced – having been named 'an

academic', colleagues were now naming me 'a manager'... (and why does the discourse in higher education present them as binaries...can you not be both?)

And I didn't feel that I was one...

or the other...

so was I both...or neither...?

or was I a lot more besides?

how should I *name* myself?

...I felt as though I was in a liminal space...an occupational transitional space, which I would later discover was something that the teaching postgraduates also felt...

Was I like the GTAs/postgraduate students who teach, in that I was neither 'fish or fowl' (Park, 2002). When I took the position I felt somewhat powerless...unsure of my own position...[I still am...]...did I even feel the power to name myself?

And so, upon reflection, I now see that I have more in common with postgrads who teach than I might have originally thought...we share common threads...and multiple, fluid identities...all of which aligns with a poststructuralist perspective...

-----  
**me**  
...and so I settled into my new role teaching teachers...

**celisne**  
...surely 'teaching' is a contested term...what do you mean by that?

**me**  
...it can mean so many things...you can interpret it in many ways...I see it as facilitating learning...supporting learning...and 'teachers' is a broad term too...  
but not everyone sees it like this and the way I facilitate learning won't necessarily be replicated by those in this study...

**celisne**  
...of course, there are multiple interpretations of what it might mean to different people...so are you suggesting that these postgraduate students might teach differently...

**me**  
...yeah, but I didn't talk to them very much about their practice; maybe that's another doctorate!..our conversations focused more on their occupational positioning and identity within higher education institutions (HEIs)...so let me get back to how this study started and why...

-----  
In my new position, I was supporting staff who were facilitating learning...but it was only when a postgraduate student came to the office one day and asked me what support was available for students like her, who were teaching, that I began to start thinking about *them*...

-----  
**celisne**  
(*frowning incredulously*)  
STOP...hold on a minute there...what the hell do you think you are doing?

**me**  
...what...what's wrong?

**celisne**

don't you see what you're doing? ...you're using the pronoun 'them' to describe these individuals – you are separating teaching postgraduate students from the rest of Faculty...I mean, you'll be critiquing the literature for doing this later on, and now you are just doing the same thing...and if you do this, then you are merely guilty of doing what everyone else is doing...

**me**

I know...and, in ways, that doesn't sit easily with me...but at the moment nobody is even talking *about* them...not to mind *with* them...and god knows, they are so busy, where are they going to get the time to speak...and to whom...where are the resources for that...?

**celisne**

...but how are you going to change things here...why is your story so different...? And if you really wanted to change things, why didn't you do action research instead of just writing stories *about* them...?

**me**

well, hold on, I didn't write stories *about* them...I've written stories *with* them...and with regards the action research piece...I'm not so sure I ever saw some big plan of action that I wanted to implement, to trial, to evaluate...  
Maybe that comes next...

**celisne**

well, no doubt you will come back to that again...

**me**

I will...but for the moment, let me continue...and stop interrupting me...

**celisne**

it's not me interrupting you...it's You interrupting you...

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Let *me* get back to the story...where was I...?

...oh yeah, teaching postgraduates were now on my radar...

But how come they hadn't been until now...where had they been?

### **Closer to home: GTAs on our shores...what's the story so far?**

The concept of GTAs is not a new one, having first emerged in the US in the 1800s (Hendrix, 1995), before spreading to the UK, but first let me consider the current situation in Ireland regarding postgraduates who teach, or students who lecture, or student facilitators, or GTAs, or whatever you want to call these individuals...

Teaching postgraduate students have become a more common feature in Irish higher education in recent years, especially within the university sector. Though they are not always called GTAs, it is common for these students to conduct similar tasks across the sector, including tutoring and demonstrating at undergraduate level. Quite often, they are seen as the initial contact point for undergraduate students who are experiencing learning-related difficulties (O'Neill and McNamara, 2016).

But, despite GTAs being more prevalent within Irish HEIs, we still know very little about them. So, I see this study as being timely, in that it sets out to illuminate the experience of eleven postgraduate students (four from scientific backgrounds, four from business and three from the social sciences), who teach within the Institute of Technology (IoT) sector, a sector that is currently experiencing significant change. (...and before you ask Celisne, you'll hear more about sample size later)...

### **But who are these GTAs that you keep talking about?**

The *term/name/title* GTA is becoming more common on Irish soil.

Take the National University of Ireland (NUI) Galway, for example, which is now using the term ‘Graduate Teaching Assistant’<sup>1</sup> in its graduate studies prospectus, as is University College Dublin (UCD)<sup>2</sup>. And the situation is similar in Trinity College Dublin (TCD), where the term is commonly used, such as in their 5-credit postgraduate professional development module called *Teaching and Supporting Learning as a Graduate Teaching Assistant*<sup>3</sup>. TCD, in conjunction with the *National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*<sup>4</sup>, also developed an online version of the module<sup>5</sup>, meaning the term GTA is getting more national coverage. But it is not just in programmes that the title GTA is being used. Take, for example, the Graduate Teaching Studentship<sup>6</sup>, as advertised by both the Department of Applied Social Studies and the Department of Business<sup>7</sup>, in Maynooth University. In the University of Limerick

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nuigalway.ie/graduate-studies/currentstudents/gsmodes/gsmodes/g506/> [accessed 28 January 2020]

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ucd.ie/teaching/professionaldevelopment/tutorsanddemonstrators/> [accessed 28 January 2020]

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.tcd.ie/CAPSL/professional-development/graduate-teaching/> [accessed 30 January 2020]

<sup>4</sup> The *National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* is the national body which is responsible for leading and advising on the enhancement of teaching and learning in Irish higher education. The Forum works with those who teach, learn and shape policy and practice whilst focusing on the professional development of all those who teach, teaching and learning in a digital world, teaching and learning within and across disciplines, and student success. <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/>

<sup>5</sup> This funded project, entitled *Alignment and Development of an Online Programme for Graduate Teaching Assistants*, was led by Trinity College Dublin and partnered by National University of Ireland Galway, Marino Institute of Education and Institute of Art, Design and Technology. Project details available at: <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/project/alignment-and-development-of-an-online-programme-for-graduate-teaching-assistants/> [accessed 5 December 2019].

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/applied-social-studies/current-postgraduate-students> [accessed 24 December 2018]

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/news-events/graduate-teaching-studentships-business> [accessed 30 August 2018]

(UL), it is the title Teaching Assistant<sup>8</sup>, which is used to describe a similar role, a term similarly adopted by the Technological University (TU) of Dublin<sup>9</sup>.

But other terms are also thrown about, both nationally and internationally, such as ‘postgraduate assistants’, ‘postgraduate researchers who teach’, ‘teaching postgraduates’, ‘teaching assistants (TAs)<sup>10</sup>, ‘graduate assistants’ (Flora, 2007), ‘contingent faculty’ (Benjamin, 2002), ‘adjunct instructors’ (Johnson and McCarthy, 2000) and even ‘hourly-paid assistant lecturers’. And, although primarily engaged in leading small group tuition, supervision and demonstrating, in some cases, these individuals are often responsible for assessing and grading.

Though present in the universities, teaching postgraduate students only really emerged in the IoT sector in the mid-2000s, in part because IoTs had fewer postgrads, but also because classes there were smaller so there was less demand for small group teaching.

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**celisne**

So tell me about the job that ‘they’ do?

**me**

...‘job’ or ‘service’, as Flora (2007, p. 315) would have described it, in the context of the US university sector...and we know that there can be many interpretations of the word ‘service’...anyway, let me tell you about the position...

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<sup>8</sup> [https://www.ul.ie/hr/sites/hr/files/user\\_media/pdfs/Academic%20Role%20Profiles.pdf](https://www.ul.ie/hr/sites/hr/files/user_media/pdfs/Academic%20Role%20Profiles.pdf) [accessed 30 January 2020]

<sup>9</sup> <https://tudublin.ie/current-students/careers-and-opportunities/postgraduate-study/> [accessed 20 January 2020]

<sup>10</sup> In this study, one of the participants, Sara, refers to herself as a TA.

**celisne**

well, I don't know why you'd explain...you're not a teaching postgraduate, never have been. Maybe I should explain...

**me**

...I'm not sure that You are one either so let me just give You a brief overview of the position...shining a bit of a spotlight on it so to speak...

**celisne**

please do...I want to understand this better...

**me**

well, I suppose, things have changed a lot over the years...originally, postgrads would have been involved in supervising labs and conducting small group instruction to undergraduates...

...but then they started playing a more prominent role in instructing (Travers, 1989), which meant more reliance on them, like you mentioned earlier...

And, around the turn of the millennium, they were being asked to carry out duties that, up to then, would have been reserved for tenured staff (Branstetter and Handelsman, 2000). Since that time, they have had to take on additional responsibilities and roles (Austin, 2002; Luft, Kurdziel, Roehrig, Turner, 2004; Gardner and Jones, 2011), including managing group work, both within and outside the classroom (Ronfeldt and Reininger, 2012; Weidert, Wendorf, Gurung and Filz, 2012), providing feedback...the list is never ending...

**celisne**

wow, that just sounds more like a full-time Faculty position...

...but tell me, why are they taken on...? Is it because they are a cheap form of labour (Park and Ramos, 2002)?

**me**

yep, cheap, flexible and motivated (Gillon and Hoad, 2001; Julius and Gumport, 2003) and like Austin (2002), I argue that their roles are structured so as to serve institutional or faculty needs, rather than these postgraduates being taken on to support a quality learning experience. Their appointment aligns with the neoliberal status quo evident within the sector.

**celisne**

what does that mean...?

**me**

well, it depends on your interpretation of 'neoliberalism'...

**celisne**

this is beginning to sound a bit poststructuralist again...

**me**

well, they do fit together, and maybe we should think about neoliberalism as discourse...in that it is a '...mutable, inconsistent, and variegated process that circulates through the discourses it constructs, justifies, and defends' (Springer, 2012, p. 135)...

**celisne**

okay, so neoliberalism is reflected in language, structures and systems...

**me**

yeah, that's one interpretation...

**celisne**

and an example of the structures and systems would be the use of benchmarks, accountability, measuring performance (Deem, 1998), etc...?

**me**

that's it...it's a bit like running HE like a business...just keep it in mind as you read...

**celisne**

so, getting back to the GTAs, they seem to be doing a lot of work....

**me**

...I know...it's crazy...now postgraduates who teach, or GTAs, are doing things like preparing and grading exams, writing syllabi (Mueller, Perlman, McCann and McFadden, 1997), invigilating exams (Dickie, Dunker and Saxena, 2012), doing all the 'dirty work' (Berelson, 1960, p. 67), and in some cases, some even have full responsibility for a course (Wise, 2011). I like the way one of the participants, **Robin**, sums it up...

**'We're just given the module and we deliver it, that's it..'**

But it's not just about the teaching – it's everything that goes with it...most GTAs in the US are now involved in clerical duties (Weidert *et al.*, 2012) doing things like 'grading quizzes and taking attendance' (ibid., 2012, p. 95)...it's a role that comes with a 'high workload and low payment' (Raaper, 2018, p. 422)...and you would think that's bad...

**celisne**

*(incredulous)*

you mean there's more...??

**me**

...there's always more...quite often GTAs are the ones who select the textbooks, draft assessments and lead seminar groups (Park and Ramos, 2002). So, what was originally described as a

predominantly 'teaching' role has now morphed into something far broader, with the range of tasks assigned becoming more diverse with increasing responsibilities (Shannon, Twale and Moore, 1998)...the term 'teaching' seems to have multiple meanings...

**celisne**

yeah, but isn't it also the case that not all teaching postgrads are doing the same tasks, and that there is huge variation not only between institutions but also between faculties...?

**me**

...yes, and it really is left to others to decide what they do...

**celisne**

...and are there now a lot more GTAs in both the university sector and the IoT sector?

**me**

yes, no... maybe...

**celisne**

sorry, you're confusing me...is it not either yes or no?

**me**

I wish it were that easy! You see, there are more postgraduate students who teach for sure, but they are not all referred to as GTAs...not yet anyway?

**celisne**

what do you mean...?

**me**

well, as I have tried to explain, GTA, as a term, has spread to Ireland and it's now being used by many within the university sector...and I suspect that, as a result of this, it is a term that might soon be adopted across the whole sector...including the IoTs...that's the way it's going...

**celisne**

okay, but how do these postgraduate students name themselves...surely that is significant?

**me**

absolutely, and that is something worth exploring for sure... but for the moment, let's be open to what name or names might be associated with these individuals...let's think about the role that connects all these individuals...for me, this study is for anyone who encounters postgraduates who teach, irrespective of a title used...

**celisne**

okay, I get it...but you do want us to question the title GTA too, don't you...?

**me**

yeah, I want to question everything about the position...that's exactly it...you'll see later on how i problematize the term GTA...and for that reason I'm going to use 'postgraduate student who teaches', 'postgraduate researcher who teaches', 'GTA', and others, all interchangeably...

**celisne**

okay, I get it...am I to take it then that you would sooner that the term GTA isn't just universally adopted in the sector without consideration given to what it might mean...?

**me**

well...let's just question everything Celisne and look for many meanings... Ironically, the French philosopher, Foucault, (1926-1984), spent a lot of his time with his 'own struggles around identity, but in his case, it was a battle around not being a *'something'* (Ball, 2013, p. 2), as he sought to avoid being positioned or labelled. And maybe there is greater power and freedom in not having a title or a name, in not being imprisoned by a particular position; but instead embracing a multiplicity of roles and identities.

**celisne**

Foucault? Who's Foucault...?

**me**

don't worry, we'll come to that later...

-----

### **Rhizomatic reasons for this research...**

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**celisne**

what are the roots of this study...? What's the *raison d'être*, sorry, reason behind it...?

**me**

rhizomatic...!

**celisne**

what to you mean by that...?

**me**

that might become clearer to you later, but for now, the *raison d'être* is this - by shining a light on this experience, I hope that this study will be of benefit to current and future postgrads who teach, and that future conversations with them will take place, so that they can be better supported in their practice.

**celisne**

so it's just for those who interact with teaching assistants, is that it...?

**me**

no, it's for everyone, a multiplicity of people...You, me, all of us...maybe the person in the office next door to you is a GTA...would you even know...? Have you even stopped to think about them...?

**celisne**

oh, I get it, you mentioned just earlier about them being invisible...and you want to make the *invisible visible*, is that it...?

**me**

yeah, that's it, a bit like Skorobohacz (2013, p. 220) found in her Canadian-based GTA study, when she said... '...employee-graduate students' narratives and voices must be heard'. We need to listen...

-----

As I was the one responsible for coordinating support for academic development within my own institution, and these students hadn't been on my radar until that point, I began to wonder on whose radar they were, if anyone's...

- Had they explored pedagogy in their own studies...?
- Had they considered different ways of facilitating learning...?

I didn't think so...and I don't know why I was that surprised; this had also been my experience as an early career academic and I was acutely aware that this was the case for many of those in higher education and not just GTAs.

Other inner questions followed...

- *Who* was supporting them with *their* teaching?

- Was it similar across the IoT sector?
- Was *anyone* asking them how they were *experiencing* their new teaching role?
- What was *their* story?

I wanted to know more...*about these individuals...*

I want these individuals to tell *their* stories...

### **A cacophony of concepts**

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**celisne**

So, from what position are you looking at this study – or should I say, from what particular lens?

**me**

oh, do you mean a theoretical framework...?

**celisne**

yeah, isn't that what you are supposed to consider, along with a conceptual framework?

**me**

yes, but i'm not calling them that per se...let me explain my interpretation of these...

...there is a conceptual framework threading throughout this study; I am exploring the experiences of postgrads who teach but, in particular, under the themes of power, pedagogy, identity and agency...

I see these concepts as weaving through the entire GTA experience and that their occupational positioning is essentially shaped by these concepts.

I will set out to highlight how the theme of power permeates their entire experience and how this can be manifested through the sub-theme of silence for example...

...added to this, I will show how there is a pedagogical power which surrounds the postgrads who teach...

**celisne**

so is this pedagogical power a good thing...?

**me**

...not necessarily; I will show that often institutions exert power over postgrads who teach, by determining what they can or can't do in terms of their pedagogical practice...

...they certainly encounter many pedagogical challenges...

...but there are pedagogical opportunities there too and potentially, the classroom might be a site of power for them, which itself is a source of agency...we will examine all that later...

**celisne**

and what about identity, where does that fit in...?

**me**

well for me, this theme also wends its way throughout the whole piece...it's not positioned in one particular place, as the way I see it is that all of these manifestations of power contribute to the shaping of their identity...to how others 'see' them and how they 'see' themselves...

...just think, do they have the power and the agency to identify themselves in a particular way...to name themselves...?

**celisne**

okay, so that explains the conceptual framework, but what about your theoretical framework...who are you drawing on here?

**me**

...well, as i am particularly influenced by concepts of power, i will be guided by a Foucauldian theorisation.

**celisne**

...and is that it...?

**me**

no, you see, for me this is more than a piece on the teaching postgrads' experience and power...this study is also significant from a methodological point of view...so, my poststructuralist stance will guide my narrative approach...

...in that sense, I will also be drawing on theorists such as Barthes (1967), Cixous, Cohen and Cohen (1976), Kristeva (1980), Lacan (2001) and their considerations of poststructuralism...

**celisne**

okay, but this is a lot to get my head around...

**me**

well try being in my head...I've struggled with all of this for a long time now...between narrative, poststructuralism, postgraduates who teach/GTAs, whoever...and power...it's like a juggling act keeping all those balls in the air...

**celisne**

well maybe that juggling is what the teaching postgrads are doing as well...maybe you have more in common with them than you might have thought...  
but, Gina, apart from that, what makes you the 'right' person to take on this study...?

-----

**Teaching to teach...a *flaw* in the ointment**

As I have already mentioned, my position in the Teaching and Learning Centre is to coordinate pedagogical development for staff. Conscious that here was a group of teaching postgrads getting no support, and aware that my position was one of providing support, I reacted quickly (*too quickly when I reflect upon it now...*)

Back in 2016, myself and a colleague decided that these students needed some form of professional support, just as Nyquist *et al.* (1999) had identified in their research. Together, we designed a *Certificate in Teaching and Learning*, the first recognised accredited programme to be offered to the postgraduate students teaching within the IoT sector. The rationale behind this was to provide GTAs (*I've just said 'provide GTAs' ...what do I mean by that?*) with an introduction to relevant pedagogies and teaching methods, similar to what existed overseas (Rushin, De Saix, Lumsden, Steubel, Summers and Bernson, 1997; Kurdziel, Turner, Luft, and Roehrig, 2003; Young and Bippus, 2008).

I now look at this and really question my judgement...

– what were we doing?

...we were designing what *I* was referring to as a ‘training programme to *help them* teach’. How arrogant was this?

...we had started at the end rather than the beginning...(that’s if you believe there is an end...or a beginning!)

...*we were* implementing an intervention without knowing anything about their experience, without asking *these individuals* what it was like to be a teaching postgraduate student...

My colleague and I were determining what *we* thought *they* needed to know.

...but wait...who was *I* to ‘teach’ *them* to teach?... ‘the teacher teaches and the students are taught’ (Freire, 1996, p. 54)...is that what I was doing...?

By assuming such a position, I was, in this instance, effectively trying to deposit bits of knowledge into the minds of the postgraduates who teach, echoing what the Brazilian educator, Freire (1996), had referred to as the banking model of education. Freire himself was heavily critical of this approach claiming that it not only reduced students to passive participants but it also demobilised students of power by treating the learner as ‘marginal, ignorant and resource-less’ (Rugut and Osman, 2013, p. 24)...and this was exactly what *I* was doing with the postgrads...

...there was no meaningful partnership with them, no engagement...instead we had designed something *for* them... ‘the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it’ (Freire, 1996, p. 54), in a very undemocratic way...

*...but hold on...this hadn't been my approach with others...with members of Faculty, my approach was much more one of facilitation...so, why then was I doing something different with these postgraduates who were teaching? was it because I saw them as students and thought that I had to 'teach' them something in a very transmissive way...was this the way I had been with all previous students? But yet I didn't see myself in that way any longer...*

*Tom's words began ringing in my head (Tom's another participant)...he had described his first few days' teaching...*

*...so I was just giving them...like the first maybe 2...3 classes explaining to them how it's going to happen...more than actually teaching them...trying to get them on board with what was going to happen and...lay out what the semester was going to look like for them...so I suppose I got to know them better that way 'cos it wasn't just straight into giving information...*

'Straight into giving information', I thought...was this transmissive also? Was it about giving information, facilitating learning...? Or did it depend on your discipline?

-----

**celisne**

that whole consulting with students around their needs and the banking idea of teaching are really interesting...especially in relation to how the postgraduates go on and teach...that could be really interesting...can you talk about more about that...?

**me**

well, look, I know that there is a difference between consulting people about their needs and embodying a Freirean approach and much and all as I would like to, it really is beyond the scope of this study to explore in detail the way that postgrads teach, but I do acknowledge the complexities involved...

**celisne**

well, that might be another piece of research then!

**me**

maybe...but let me get back to this piece first of all...

-----

Here I was in a Teaching and Learning role, which was all about enhancing the quality of pedagogy in the institution, and suddenly the onus was on me to ensure that everyone was involved in this quality enhancement...but yet, I was planning on simply 'giving information' to the postgraduates, transmissively, like the delivery of canonical knowledge that I referred to earlier, rather than inviting them to further develop their own ideas about education. I wasn't listening to them...

Instead, I was doing what others had been guilty of...I was designing a training programme *for* them and not *with* them...

And so started a series of questions in my head...

...how did these particular students identify themselves...?

...did they see themselves as students, researchers or staff...or what...?

...how did they name themselves...?

After all, they hadn't chosen the title GTA, or postgraduates who teach, or any title for that matter; rather these seemed to be titles which were chosen to group these individuals...

...I was intrigued to know what *their* experience was like...and more importantly, I started to wonder why nobody had bothered to ask them...

-----

**celisne**

so you are telling their experiences...has this been done before?

**me**

not that I'm aware of, no...so that is why I want their voices to be heard throughout the sector...

**celisne**

okay, so I presume that you are going to conduct interviews, is that right?

**me**

well, you might call them 'interviews' – I prefer to think of the study spiralling around 'conversations'...

**celisne**

*(in a disparaging tone)*

'interviews'... 'conversations'...they're just words...don't they mean the same thing?

**me**

no, they don't...there's an implicit power imbalance in an 'interview' or an 'asymmetry of power' (Qu and Dumay, 2011, p. 239); in a 'conversation', there is still power (I'm not denying that), but it is more lateralised...

**celisne**

fine...but I think you are just talking semantics here...

**me**

i'm not...it's about a poststructuralist view of linguistics, language and power...

**celisne**

right, i'm sure we're not finished with this idea...you'll be back to talk more about it, won't you?

**me**

yes...

-----

## **Outside in and inside out - getting to know the GTAs...**

If we subscribe to the Foucauldian (1980a, 1980b) view that power and knowledge are inextricably linked, then knowing very little about postgraduates who teach rendered me somewhat powerless...

All I knew at that stage about these individuals was that they were postgraduate students studying for a Masters or a PhD, who were being asked to engage in teaching-related duties. Given that I had never *had to* teach when I was a postgraduate student myself, I was aware that, in this research, I was an outsider looking in.

But wait...

...can a researcher who has not shared the participants' experience truly understand and convey it (Pillow, 2003)?

...I think I can, on one level, as I have a deep knowledge of the sector...

-----

**celisne**

...okay, so you might have a deep knowledge of the sector, but you don't have a knowledge of postgrads who teach and their subjectivities... You don't know what it's like for them, do You...?

**me**

no, as I said, i don't...and i'm not suggesting that you know either – i know that sometimes you may speak as a GTA, but i'm not using you to dress up as a teaching postgraduate...i mean, i don't think that would be ethical...I mean how could i (or you) assume the identity of a marginalised subject...?

**celisne**

*(with a reassuring air)*

I get it...I wouldn't be overly concerned; try and think of me as having shifting subjectivities...then I can be anyone at any time...like you said earlier...I'm atemporal...

-----

So, given my familiarity with the context in which these individuals found themselves, and the fact that I (naïvely) felt assured that I could access them relatively easily (power was at play and this became more difficult than initially anticipated), at that particular moment, I saw myself as well positioned to engage with this particular research.

But there was another reason for this study...

...I feel a connection to these postgraduate students in other ways...

I draw parallels between their experience and mine, in that I am conscious that we are all juggling multiple roles within academia: students, researchers, teachers, learners...the list goes on and on...

-----

**celisne**

...looks like you are the right person to do this study in any case...?

**me**

not sure there is a 'right' or 'wrong' person, but at this particular moment, it seems like an important piece of work to do.

**celisne**

speaking of right or wrong, which all sounds quite maths-like and calculated, maybe you could explain if this is a qualitative or quantitative study...

**me**

yeah, I'm happy to lift the lid on that one...

-----

**Lifting the curtain on a qualitative approach...allow me qualify my words**

-----

**me**

well, given that it is about exploring experiences, a qualitative approach is apposite...

**celisne**

why so...?

**me**

well, a qualitative approach focuses on people and the understanding of phenomena within their natural settings (Becker, 1986; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) and that is what I would like to do here, with the postgrads who teach...and it's not just that...by its very nature, qualitative research is interpretive (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), being concerned with meaning and understanding of how the social world is constructed (Mason, 2002). So, in that way, qualitative research is a broad approach to the study of characteristics and structures of social phenomena (Tesch, 1991; Marshall and Rossman, 2015).

**celisne**

so you're using words to get at that experience, is that it?

**me**

yes, this type of approach allows for rich descriptions to be unveiled through 'exploration and description' (Singleton, Straits, Straits and McAllister, 1988, pp. 289-9) and it does this through the 'use of verbal' (Hammersley, 2013, p. 12), like you just said...through words...

**celisne**

so this is not Your view of postgrads who teach, is it...?

**me**

...well it is my interpretation...but it is also about studying the world from the participants' point of view (Hammersley, 1992; Poni, 2014), from their lived experiences (Marshall and Rossman, 2015), or as Flick (2009, p. 65) describes, 'from the interior'. I want to highlight the experiences, perspectives and thoughts of the social actors involved (Harwell, 2011; Yilmaz, 2013) and because of that, the kind of data needed to study this experience comes from the personal lives of participants (Polkinghorne, 2005)... I suppose

one of the strengths of qualitative information is that it allows a story to be told (Patton, 2002)...do you see what I'm saying...?

**celisne**

*(with a hint of self-satisfaction)*

so, that is why you need the postgrads to talk to you...?

**me**

that's exactly why...in a poststructuralist study such as this, the researchers (that would be you and I...or we!), are actively involved, 'along with their research participants, in generating data and in generating meanings to inhere in and follow from such data' (Davies and Davies, 2007, p. 1140).

We're all generating data here Celisne...

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### **Grappling with this 'messy' work**

But how did I arrive at narrative inquiry as a methodology?...

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**celisne**

what methodology are you using? Tell me you are not using narrative...

**me**

actually I am...why?

**celisne**

oh god, that can become so messy...stay away from it...that would be my advice...just do something structured and traditional...that's what a thesis is *supposed* to look like...sure, no one will take it seriously unless it 'looks like a thesis' as well...

**me**

...since when did i ever follow your advice?!...but, I agree with you in ways...narrative is indeed the embodiment of 'messy' work (Connolly, 2007, p. 453) and Denzin (1995) also described it similarly. I think it's because there is a high level of human interaction between the narrative inquirer and the participants and, as a result, the role of the researcher becomes complex and multi-layered, as stories are produced, told, re-told, interpreted and re-interpreted...

**celisne**

do you really think you know enough about narrative to take it on?

**me**

but that's the point...I want to learn about it and I know it will mean a struggle – Kim (2016) documents her own struggle with it as a methodology...but is that not how we learn...by acquiring new knowledge, questioning it and grappling with it?

**celisne**

yeah, maybe it is...I just have this feeling that you're going to get bogged down in both methodology and content...

**me**

...but i already am...

-----

As I see this overall study as a narrative, the participants' stories and mine form the spine and I theorise my own story by weaving what I am calling, *autoethnographic threads*, throughout.

### **T(h)reading water...and keeping my head just above the surface**

-----

**celisne**

STOP...TIME OUT...I thought what we were doing was narrative...now you're talking autoethnography...which is it?

**me**

well, it's not some kind of binary...one or the other. Autoethnography is also a narrative based approach...but its focus is on the *self* in the study...

**celisne**

but you're all over this story...so why isn't this an autoethnographic study in that case...?

**me**

I suppose I see it on a continuum, where pure autoethnography would focus extensively on the self, but that is perhaps a step too

far for me at this point...it sits somewhat uncomfortably with me...look I'll explain it in more detail in the next act...

**celisne**

fine...

**me**

for the moment, I am interpreting autoethnography as an approach to research that seeks to analyse personal experience in order to better understand other cultural experiences (Ellis, 2004)...

**celisne**

gotcha...so personal experience influences the research process...

**me**

exactly...as an approach, it '...acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research...' (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011, p. 274), by advocating that personal and interpersonal experiences are expressed through rich, thick descriptions which make them both 'meaningful and engaging' (ibid., p. 277).

**celisne**

so that's it?

**me**

no, it's more... not only does it support us to look outward at worlds beyond us but also it is an approach that 'gazes inward for a story of self' (Neumann, 1996, p. 173). It's a way of 'incorporating the personal in to research' (Gannon, 2006, p. 474), which includes, not just the lived experience, but also the body, emotions and memories of the autoethnographic writer.

**celisne**

sounds to me like this is an autoethnographic study so...

**me**

I don't want to put labels on anything, it's not one thing or another...it's a narrative with an autoethnographic, autointerpretivist perspective...put it this way...it is the story of self and self is (and should be) part of the research...  
...O'Neill (2015) artfully describes how autoethnography as a methodology for his studies 'dragged...[him]...somewhat reluctantly at first, into the gaze of this inquiry' (O'Neill, 2015, p. 15), an indication of how autoethnography brings you as a researcher to the forefront of the story.

**celisne**

and you don't want that, is that it...why not?

**me**

well, it's daunting...because it often involves self-disclosure, in that the autoethnographer writes about personal moments – epiphanies, or transformative events that impacted significantly on their own lives (Bochner and Ellis, 1992), ones 'after which life does not seem quite the same' (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011, p. 275).

**celisne**

what are epiphanies...?

**me**

Well, McCormack (2015), writing within the context of adult education, poetically refers to epiphany moments as, for him, those 'moments of significance that serve to refresh and reenliven my practice' (McCormack, 2015, p. 76)...moments of revelation, that disrupt the quotidian routines, and cause you to reflect on something new...

**celisne**

but that's exactly what is happening here...so why is it not autoethnographic...?

**me**

because, don't forget, celisne, this is also the story of the postgrads who teach...they can speak for themselves...

**celisne**

...can they? I mean, can subjects speak for themselves, within a poststructuralist paradigm, in which the subjective position is not fixed, but more so fluid and fragmented? Just who is the subject and who is writing that subject into the text?

**me**

we all are...and we all hold many subjectivities...at different times...and maybe it is a case that we are all sharing the stage...

**celisne**

yeah, I like it...so, sometimes the spotlight is on you...sometimes the postgrads...it's one big narrative isn't it...!  
...and isn't your narrative approach guided by your poststructuralist stance...

**me**

yeah, but I will come to that in the next act...

**celisne**

sorry, and I don't mean to keep interrupting but i thought you wanted to present the participants' stories...

**me**

i do...

**celisne**

...well what are we waiting for...?

**me**

okay, but i thought you'd want more of an introduction first...

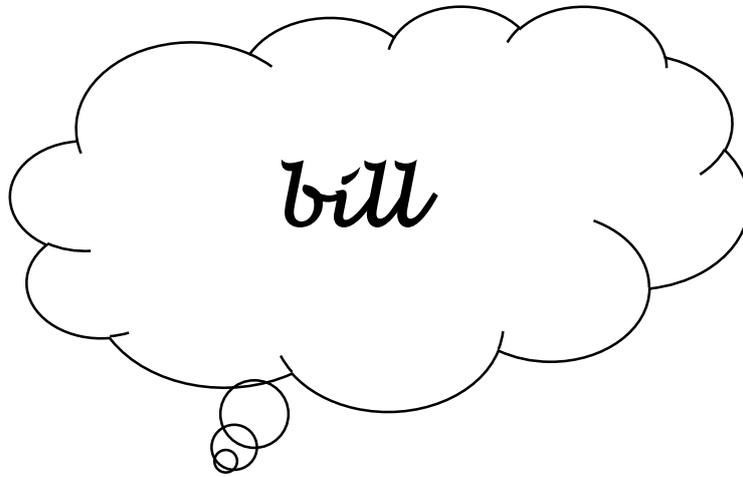
**celisne**

...we'll come back to that...but for the moment can we just turn the spotlight onto them...

**me**

okay...let's hear Bill's story so...

-----



## bill

*jesus, like, what if I'm terrible at it*

*It was nerve-wracking enough, yeah...*

*I was quite nervous going in and even just starting a class...*

*...like that was one of my big fears... that's why I was fearing, will they want me lecturing them when it's their final grade*

*So you're trying to keep going and you start stumbling over words, or whatever...*

*em, but em, that can be tough and you're kinda wondering like is that 'cos I did something wrong*

*niggling doubts - what if I say something 'wrong'?*

*- I do*

*I'll never come back from this - I told them 'chaise' was masculine and it's not...*

*Will they fail because of me?*

*Will I lose my job because of me?*

*...it took me out of my comfort zone...*

*But that doesn't mean I won't still be terrible...*

*Who's deciding? Who has that power?*

*Judgment Day...*

## Myself and Bill

### Silently becoming...

*Prologue: Bill was in the first year of his postgraduate studies; he was a mature student who was also working in his discipline area outside of his studies. He had just finished his undergraduate programme before embarking on his postgraduate degree. He had never taught before becoming a teaching postgrad ('becoming a teaching postgrad'...that's worth repeating...a process of development) and now he was lecturing to a group of 4<sup>th</sup> year students. His situation resonated with my own story...*

*Prior to this teaching position, I don't think that Bill had given too much thought to teaching...so, in my head, I saw him as 'the accidental GTA'...*

We met in a small meeting room in the library of the Institute where Bill worked (taught) and studied (researched)...Bill had just finished a shift at work - an all night shift...he must've been exhausted...I felt guilty...then he mentioned his newborn...I felt worse...

...bill the worker,

the partner,

the dad,

the researcher,

the student,

the teacher,

the...

Though it initially felt that we were right in the hub of things, as student chatter competed incessantly with the churning noise of copiers and printers outside...it soon went quiet...

The lights had dimmed, the curtain had risen, the background noise had faded or, at least, that's what I heard...

and quite quickly, it was just myself and Bill...chatting.

Initial small words of politeness were exchanged...

-----

**celisne**

*(prompting me from the wings)*

'Make sure the participant is at ease...!'

**me**

I know...I know...but it just feels a bit fake...

-----

...the situation didn't feel that comfortable. I explained to Bill that I just wanted him to talk to me about his experience (that was it, wasn't it?). But that, in itself, felt slightly awkward...(for both of us). I got the sense from Bill that he would've been more in his comfort zone to have questions directed towards him, rather than being invited to tell his own story.

Maybe my methodology threw him a bit...(it was certainly throwing me)...or maybe

it was a reminder to him about how teaching had thrown him initially (it had certainly thrown me!). No matter what it was...I still got the feeling that Bill wanted to share his story...despite not have his part scripted in front of him...

Bill had only started teaching this academic year and so he was as new to teaching as to the nerves that went with it. He had been so nervous on his first day...listening to his words was now making me nervous...

It was nerve wracking enough, yeah, I...I would've...I was quite nervous going in and even just starting a class when they're all talking and you're standing up the front and you're kinda saying...trying to, you know, say, start...

I tried to picture him standing silently at the front of the room, the students continuing to talk...echoes of stage fright...lines prepped but a struggle to get anything out...no sound...

...silence...

It felt like those school days when a question was thrown at you like an errant duster, startling you from your reverie, as you were forced to take centre stage to answer a question: 'Gina, what's the next line...':

'I felt a funeral in my brain and...'

You knew...you knew...you had studied the previous night, even asking Mam to test you...you knew your stuff...

'I felt a funeral in my brain and...(don't tell me...)'

but then, just as you tried to release the words, you froze, and the words, like icicles, remained suspended in the air...

‘I felt a funeral in my brain and...and...and...’

I’d been left speechless...

And now I could almost see Bill’s scene slowly unfurling on stage...

Bill, centre stage...encircled within a silent bubble, wishing the words out as the chatter engulfed him... His nerves strangling his voice, controlling him, overwhelming him, resulting in a heightened anxiety about his teaching, echoes of what previous studies on postgraduates who teach had highlighted (Allen and Rueter, 1990; Feezel and Myers, 1997; Cho, Kim, Svinicki and Decker, 2011).

The silence felt thicker...engulfing...making it harder to expel words...

But Bill’s nerves had clearly dissipated, as he now spoke quite confidently about teaching. I asked him if he had initially viewed teaching as a positive or a hindrance, to which he replied that he would’ve had ‘mixed feelings’. It was really only positive in Bill’s mind, if lecturing was something you wanted to get into. He commented...

I would’ve seen it as positive in terms of...if you want to go on and do...and get into the lecturing or things like that...then it’s a positive.

I got the sense from Bill that he would’ve been more positive towards it if he had seen it as a step towards an academic career (Wilkening, 1991; Nyquist *et al.*, 1999; Hardré, 2005), but it seemed that deep down Bill viewed teaching as something that just had to be done, an assigned duty; something that often took precedence over his own research (already teaching was being pitched against research in the order of things...) and it felt as though this left Bill with somewhat of an aftertaste...

And then there was that string of pressures, which hung heavily around his neck, a weight that had to be duly carried. It reminded me of something I had read by Gardner and Jones (2011, p. 33), who talk about how daunting it can be for a student to take on a new role as a GTA and how it can lead to ‘numerous tensions’. Bill was living those tensions...

There was the added time for a start...it pressed against his already charged workload, as he described...

...it was a heavy workload like...and you’re not getting anything done in relation to your [research] really or your studying...so that was definitely...em, probably something that you could em, look at.

...which was similar to how Park and Ramos (2002, p. 1) described the position, when they commented that GTAs often viewed themselves as the ‘donkeys in the department’, due to their burdening workload, time commitments and increased responsibility, placed on them by Faculty.

‘Wait...I can see him now...’, I thought...

Away in the distance I could barely make out the profile of an animal slowly approaching...it’s a...it’s a...donkey. As he trudged slowly closer, I could see the troubled look on his dusty face, the heavy wicker baskets hanging from both sides...laboured but stoically carrying on with his journey...was this Bill’s experience...?

Being and feeling organised was what mattered to Bill and I sensed that he would’ve felt more confident about his teaching had he been given adequate preparation time. He commented...

...with your lecturing hours, you're not really timetabled, you're kinda given them in September, but if you could be timetabled for them that you're definitely work(ing)...doing this, this and this, you could organise it...

This chimed with the view presented by Fisher and Taithe (1998, p. 48), who suggested that for postgraduate students '...time management was undoubtedly the greatest challenge of all'.

The memories came flooding back...I had felt the same when I first starting lecturing. A vivid scene crystalised - my first morning...arriving well on time but only to be informed that I had a class at 10am and I had nothing prepared.

Panic...

*[As I write about it now, I'm feeling almost sick reliving the memory...Like Bill, I had stood up in front of a class and felt small...unsure of myself simply because there'd been no time to prepare.]*

And, as Bill was talking, I suddenly became distracted by the noise outside the room - it was almost as though Bill's talk of busyness was penetrating our quiet space...

...it felt difficult to focus...

Like a rampant wildfire, that burdening workload took over the conversation, scorching any joy that went with being a postgraduate who teaches...there was no escaping it...it was one of Bill's biggest challenges (which reflected Jordan and Howe's (2018) research in which they highlighted the time commitment expected from GTAs). Bill remarked that the teaching workload was stopping him from getting anything done in relation to his research...(it was almost as though he was

echoing what Morrow (1964, p. 120) stated over 50 years ago, when he said that ‘to slight teaching is the price of academic survival’ again illustrating the division between teaching and research...

Like a sharp knife, the word ‘workload’ sliced through our conversation at least five times within the space of as many minutes...

And just like an uninvited guest, Bill hadn’t been expecting it...

... the overall workload that you have to do it’s really, really heavy and it kind of hits you, it catches you by surprise, especially in September, October, November.

There was the daily scramble to put slides together, days devoured creating notes and preparing for class...but, quite stoically, Bill seemed to accept all the burdens associated with being a teaching postgraduate student, just doing what he had to do...without any input into what he was doing...softly speaking and never complaining...(did he feel as though he could question his role?).

...was he more of a pawn in the system, rather than a donkey?

Young and Bippus (2008) highlight that often GTAs are not at all confident in their own ability to perform their duties...and I didn’t get the sense from Bill that he was that confident in his role, but rather that he was encircled by a shroud of obligation - doing what he had to do...

As Bill spoke I found myself becoming attuned to the sentence structures he was using...I started listening not just to *what* he was saying but *how* he was saying it...

I was listening for gaps...for silence...

And just as I started listening to the silence, things became clearer; Bill started many of his sentences using the passive voice, almost as though he was just being directed by those in authority to do particular tasks. It felt as if we were all on stage again – but this time Bill was being directed on *how to teach* and *what to teach*. This echoed in lines like:

...especially when *I was told* I was lecturing 4<sup>th</sup> years...

*you were forced to do*...sometimes they were kind of some things you kinda would never want...(when talking about choice of content to be taught)

*I was given* what content *I had to cover*...

...we're told what we're teaching...the hours we're teaching, you know...

...when *I've been given* a certain amount of content to cover, I don't want to be put under pressure at the end of the year to try and finish it...

Bill didn't appear to be in control of any aspects of his teaching and I wondered if this was adding to his anxiety. He spoke as though someone else (or the institution itself) wielded power over him and made decisions around what he taught, how he taught and when...

...was he a donkey, a pawn, a 'postgraduate chameleon' (Harland and Plangger, 2004), or even a puppet...? was it any of these...or all...?

Or was he just like other educators and adapting to the expectations which had been placed upon him in terms of organisational demands (Cherryholmes, 1988)?

I heard noise again outside – a break – an interruption...

In an effort to reposition Bill's locus of control for him, I moved on to talking about teaching and assessment strategies, willing him to say that this was something he was very involved in...but I was to be disappointed...

...sadly, Bill had no input into any aspect of the module he had been asked to teach...

I say 'sadly' because it seemed to me that Bill would've welcomed input into it, evident in the words:

...that's one of the things where I think it maybe...could be improved on...

and again in his follow-up comment:

I would've had maybe put together one or two of the assignments that the students would've done.

Bill wanted his say...but didn't have it...

*So Bill had no voice - neither from a teaching and learning perspective, nor from a programme administration level...*

Listening to him, I wondered if I could help...

I couldn't...

It seemed as if more and more expectations and responsibilities were being placed upon him (Wilson and Stearns, 1985; Dudley, 2009); there was nothing I could do.

His duties were mounting quicker than the noise levels outside our room...

...it was fast approaching the top of the hour and the students were gathering their belongings and heading to class...assuredly on the move again...

Bill didn't seem so assured; his softly spoken comment about teaching was loaded with doubt...

...you feel very kind of em, small at the front of the classroom, and the class I was teaching in...was kinda one that went back up, so it was a large classroom with, you know, a lot of space and then you're kind of stuck in the corner at a desk and having to change for every slide and that, so it's kinda hard...

And it was like this doubt pulled a thread in the veil of confidence that might have covered Bill the teacher...and everything unravelled...

...like, what if I'm terrible at it and...and like that was one of my big fears... that will they want...that's why I was fearing, will they want me lecturing them when it's their final grade...

I was intrigued to know if the level of teaching was also playing its part; would Bill sooner have been teaching 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> year students? For once, Bill was in no doubt...it would be easier with 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> years, simply because...

...they are not finishing, they are not near the end of their degree and because maybe the content might be more basic as well whereas, the 4<sup>th</sup> year content well it's actually...the 4<sup>th</sup> year content would've been more...towards actually working and practice, whereas the 1<sup>st</sup> year content would've been just theory and basic kinda starting, kinda, starting off kinda, what you start off with...

It would've been easier on Bill, a lessening of his load, a reduction in his lecture preparation time. (Oh no...I was feeling really guilty again...conscious that I too was eating into Bill's preparation time). Bill was investing so much time preparing, looking for content, best practices, theory...and then deciphering what to include...all this took time...

[**Aside:** *as I listened, I looked at Bill and couldn't help thinking how conscientious*

*he appeared, desperately wanting to ensure that his students both understood the material and were very engaged in their learning...he wanted them to be motivated. Bill made me think silently...I couldn't help wondering if I had been like him...am I like him now? I couldn't answer...]*

As we continued to chat, Bill was opening up more about his own learning during his time teaching. Despite admitting that he hadn't really considered the task of teaching before he had embarked on the role, he now considered it as a learning opportunity. (...teaching as learning, that was something I would return to...).

But just as Bill was doing his best for his students, I got the impression that he wanted others to do their best for postgraduates who were teaching...guiding them in their role. His pleas centred on communication and planning...

why hadn't he been told in July that he would be teaching in September...?

why hadn't he been afforded the time to prepare...?

why hadn't his hours been timetabled so that he could plan in advance...?

...why? ...why? ...why?

The questions rang out...the answers never came...

But Bill had learnt something about himself during this journey and he valued that learning...every challenge was now seen as a learning opportunity...

...it takes you out of your comfort zone, it em, suppose it makes you do something, puts you in front of a class, makes you do something that you probably wouldn't generally do...em, it's great experience...em...

And despite not been sure as to whether or not he wanted to teach in the future, Bill had learnt so much being a postgraduate who teaches, maybe more about

himself than any content...and this learning went far beyond the classroom.

...but I suppose...it's experience..it's the big thing like, and like, even if people aren't going on to lecture...from an experience point of view it's... it's really good [...]; it definitely builds your confidence as well.

In that sense, he viewed the position quite favourably, and said that, from an experience point of view, he'd recommend teaching...but there was a price to pay...(...'price', now there's an interesting word...in the world of teaching postgrads, did it all come back to pay, price and cost...?). In Bill's words...

If you want to finish your [postgraduate programme] early I wouldn't [teach]...[laughs]...that's kinda...that's what I'd recommend, yeah, that it's really good experience and...it'll take you out of your comfort zone and...put you in positions where people will ask you questions and you mightn't be really aware of the content and you'll say 'look I don't really know, I'll find out for you next week or find out yourselves and tell me next week'...

Bill no longer seemed like that unsure teaching postgraduate that he had portrayed initially - the one who was stumbling over words, worried that he might be questioned on something he didn't know. He came across now as a very confident educator who saw his role as guiding the students and this sense of confidence was very evident in the way in which he described how he dealt with student queries:

I would have said to the students like, if, it's up to ye to listen, it's their learning really and I would've said to them like 'ye direct me...'

He was also a lot more confident in teaching groups closer to him in years and seemed to be able to relate well to them. This had echoes of Fuller's (1969) teachers' concerns model, which posited that early career teachers pass through developmental stages when teaching. The model suggests that, initially, these individuals are concerned about surviving as teachers, but as they gain more

experience, they become more confident in themselves and start focusing on teaching skills and methods; finally, the concern turns towards the learners and their learning...was this Bill, I wondered...? It seemed to me that it might be...

In soft, reassuring tones, he spoke about how his students were initially very quiet but that they also grew in confidence as they got to know him...

...they'd be very quiet, but then at the end of class when it came to asking about other subjects, 'cos they knew, they'd know you're still a student...you know...or you're...you were doing what they were doing two years ago, then they'd start asking all these other questions... it was a good way to build [...], kind of a rapport with them as well...

Maybe we were all just on this journey, learning as we went...learning about ourselves...

Bill also attributed his positive relationship with his students to the fact that, as they were in the later years of their programme, they were more motivated.

...their interest levels are high and they're coming to the end of their degree and there's real kinda motivation...[...]...just from working in the area now, [...], you can actually relate to the...what you're talking about in 4<sup>th</sup> year and maybe you can tell your own stories, and your own experiences...it's good yeah...

So more stories about practice were being shared...(this can only be a good thing)...

Bill's confidence in his teaching ability seemed to depend on both on the students and on the support (or lack thereof) provided by the institution. Even though it was only a year since Bill had taken on the role of a teaching postgrad, it felt to me, listening to him, that it had been a longer journey.

As our conversation came to an easy conclusion, and we went our separate ways, I suddenly became aware once more of the noise outside the room again. Voices, each spilling over each other...

In contrast to this, Bill and myself had created a quiet space to talk and to reflect on our experiences as teachers...we had silenced the outside noise, and listened to each other's voices.

But, as I watched Bill going down the stairs, disappearing quietly back into his own world (one that I didn't share), I couldn't help but wonder if he was just re-entering a world where his voice as a postgraduate who teaches might be silenced once more...by those in more powerful positions...

### **Postscript**

I contacted Bill after our chat to get his thoughts about the first draft of his story. Knowing how busy he was made me feel guilty contacting him again. I asked if he would like to meet up again to chat about his story and to see how things were since our conversation, but he didn't seem to want to...he simply said in his email 'that reads perfectly. I'm happy with it'. I was disappointed that Bill didn't want to meet up again and I often wonder how he is getting on, in whatever he is doing...

I have since redrafted the stories for a third time and sent them all out to the participants, so that they could read them just as you are reading them now. I was looking forward to hearing what Bill would say about it, but unfortunately, Bill hasn't been in touch...I wonder if there is more to his story...

## Flicking through the leaves of this story

-----

**celisne**

nice to have heard from Bill, or 'Bills' even! it seems like he is shifting subjectivities a lot...  
...but just one thing before we set off again...is there any structure to this study...or is it going to be hard for me to follow...?

**me**

you're right...I had better explain my (*de*)structured approach...do you know, i'm not sure about a lot of things, but one thing is sure...this will be messy!...

**celisne**

oh, so is your poststructuralist stance reflected in the structure of this...?

**me**

I think that might be an oxymoron Celisne!...but let me try and explain..  
...aligning with my poststructuralist perspective, in which meanings are neither stable, nor universal, but rather exist in the gaps and ambiguities in our systems of meaning (Harcourt, 2007), this story isn't presented in a fixed, coherent way.

**celisne**

and does that link to your methodology too...?

**me**

yeah, it's characteristic of an autoethnographical (and poststructuralist) study in which 'there isn't the comfort of a formula or a stable form – introduction, literature review, data collection and analysis' (McCormack, O'Neill, Ryan, Walshe, 2020).  
So, don't expect a traditional structure...instead expect a *destructure*, reflective of the messiness of both narrative as a method, but also of the lived experience...

**celisne**

okay, but i've also noticed that Bill's story was written in a different font...what's that about...?

**me**

they're each in different fonts – a reflection of their uniqueness... and they are the jigsaw pieces that, together, present aspects of the 'bigger' story of postgraduates who teach in the IoT sector.

**celisne**

okay, i'm with you...so that's the story...

**me**

stories...Celisne...stories...because, there's another story that envelops all of this and that's my story...an autobiographical account of my research journey, so in that regard, I ask You to consider this as at least twelve stories (and Your story as reader now makes it thirteen!)

**celisne**

so these GTAs stories are the spine of this overall story...they take centre stage and the study revolves around them, is that it?

**me**

yep, that's it and the stories are peppered throughout, disrupting and interrupting...

**celisne**

a bit like me...!!

**me**

yeah...so you've read the opening act and this and the next one give you a bit of everything from the research story...including some of the GTA literature (you'll find more of that in the stories...)...  
...then, in Acts III and IV, I shine a light on the methodology that frames this study and expose how narrative and storytelling hold the jigsaw pieces together...my methodology underpins everything...

**celisne**

is that the story of the story...?

**me**

yes, and i stage my methodological journey using a theatrical metaphor, from my ontological and epistemological beginnings, through to my research design, data collection, story production and retelling.

**celisne**

and is that stage supported by anything...?

**me**

absolutely, otherwise, it wouldn't stay standing! It's supported by an interpretivist paradigm, which itself, refers to a way of understanding the world from the subjective experiences of individuals and the view that reality is created by the social actors in a particular setting (Schwandt, 1998).

**celisne**

as in we are all on stage together, understanding the world through each other and with each other...very socially constructive...!

And what about the other acts...?

**me**

...Act V briefly captures what it was like for me as a researcher entering the field; this was adapted from some reflections that I had drafted around that time and gives You an idea of the process from my perspective. It is a part of my researcher story...

...then, sandwiched between participant stories, the following act, Act VI, is a scene setter giving You a context which forms the backdrop of this study; shining a light on the IoT sector and the role that postgraduates who teach play within that context.

**celisne**

is there any theoretical framework holding up that set...?

**me**

of course, Act VII is all about the concept of power as I see it underpinning the entire teaching postgraduate experience. Here, I analyse the power relations that surround the postgraduate students who teach and explore the issues of identity and agency. I also bring to the fore my stance as a poststructuralist researcher and how this intertwines with the research story.

**celisne**

and what about the traditional 'discussion' chapter...is there one...?

**me**

well, Act VIII is a reflective discussion and it is a discussion – You and i will chat around the stories and the issues that arose...and we will create meanings together, using the literature as well...

**celisne**

and then it will be the conclusion...?

**me**

well, not really a conclusion per se...there are things to consider there for the future, and maybe the conclusion is just the start of another story...

**celisne**

you really like this circular concept don't you...?

**me**

yep...anyway, we will go our separate ways at that point Celisne...but not before i give you an overview of where I'm landing, having been through this research – the whole thing is a story *of* research and *about* research, and a story *about* me and the journey...and it's a journey that you are on with me...so, it's quite autobiographical and presents some of my learning as part of this study...

**celisne**

...and that will be it...?

**me**

well, who knows, maybe, in time, You might write subsequent acts  
and the story will continue to live on...

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### **Licence to d-i-ologue...**

And just as the overall presentation doesn't really follow a traditional, linear format...neither do the individual stories, (think circles again!). In some of them, the curtain lifts at a significant point in our conversation and proceeds from there...so don't search for a beginning, middle and end...

And you will see as you read through this piece that I am writing it in a way that represents storytelling for me. It may take the form of dialogues in places but because of the reflective and reflexive nature of this research, it is also a conversation with myself. Throughout this story, I am constantly stopping, thinking, questioning...reflecting...and dialoguing with myself...asking myself questions as a way of interrogating my own position...and I am not expecting to find 'answers'...but instead more questions...

To illustrate this, I have peppered my thoughts and reflections throughout...usually through the use of 'asides', think of 'soliloquies' [a nod to the theatrical metaphor which threads through much of this study], as I openly *speak* my thoughts...

I also puncture sentences with [...] spaces...

...white spaces...

...affording me, as a narrator, the time and space to think, whilst at the same time, giving You time and space to interpret as you read...

And then there is (*de*)construction...in order to construct my sentences and paragraphs, I often begin by deconstructing them...interrupting a structure...

...starting a new paragraph or idea and allowing for a flow of thoughts. I am also adopting this style as a way of reflecting the dialogic nature of this study...how it is the participants' voices and mine throughout.

And there is my use of *italics*; I use them as a way of pausing and reflecting on a particular word, or term, which I believe represents a multiplicity of meanings, witness to my poststructuralist stance, which will be unveiled in the next act.

In this way, I am inviting you to pause with me on some of those words (and others besides) and to question your own interpretation of them...for there are layers (and layers) of meaning in everything...

...and, of course, you've already had the pleasure of meeting Celisne...but just who is she?

Celisne is someone with whom I dialogue throughout, as we share experiences and negotiate meanings. She contributes to the story through her shifting subjectivities, as we chat (and argue!), explore meanings and invite You to create your own meaning. But Celisne also helps to articulate the methodological story

that frames this research and she acts as a mark of reflexivity as we both talk about our transformation as researchers, our learning journey together...

## ACT II:

### Everyone is talking ‘about’ and not ‘with’...

‘But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.’

George Orwell, novelist, essayist, journalist and critic (1903-1950)

### What’s in a name: power...

‘The attempt to *fix* meaning is always in part doomed to failure, for it is of the nature of meaning to be always already elsewhere’

(Moi, 1985, p. 160).

The way we *name* something is a powerful act and the language we use provides for multiple interpretations (Derrida, 1978). I have already shown that the term GTA is becoming more common within Irish higher education, but what does this mean...?

What *interpretations* lie behind the *name* GTA?

Assuming a poststructuralist approach, which deconstructs structures and favours the possibility of multiple contested meanings (Dunn, 1997), I will briefly deconstruct the concept and unpack some of its many interpretations.

To this point I have shown that there are as many different interpretations of the term ‘GTA’ as the roles that they take up (Flora, 2007). And there is power in a name. To borrow the words of Charmaz (2006, p. 396), ‘[n]ames carry weight, whether light or heavy. Names provide ways of knowing-and being’.

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**celisne**

but individuals have many ways of being...many subjectivities...many names...are you going to now define what a GTA is...?

**me**

oh, let me be clear... I am not trying to *define* what a GTA is...no, a better way to think about definitions, which themselves can be constraining (Moi, 1985), is to be open to the contested nature of many concepts, rather than trying to find a singular definition (Fitzsimons, 2017)...

**celisne**

...and the title GTA is a contested concept...?

**me**

for sure, and that is why I am not even suggesting what term might be used, as, in my view, it is up to these postgraduate students to name themselves.

I am merely problematising the title ‘GTA’ and exploring how this name has shaped them and their role...let me clarify...

How we name others and how we act towards them, creates lines of power with them...something which I see as very relevant to postgraduates who teach. By attaching value to some names and dismissing others, names become ‘rooted in actions and give rise to specific actions’ (Charmaz, 2006, p. 396). Equally, “‘naming’ something or someone is seen as the exertion of dominion over that thing or person’ (Graham, 2011, p. 157) and naming has become a very important part of this study...

**celisne**

could you talk more about that...?

-----

Marincovich, Prostko and Stout (1998) suggest that, given the broad nature of tasks carried out by GTAs, from institution to institution, it makes a generalizable definition of them difficult to construct. However, I would argue that given the diverse nature of the postgraduates' roles within higher education, there shouldn't be one overarching definition of GTAs – as they are each unique.

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**celisne**

...so by not defining you are allowing scope for innovation and varying interpretations, is that it...?

**me**

yeah...you are allowing for freedom and multiple interpretations, reflecting a poststructuralist positioning...plus, it is also a way of supporting students, in this case, to be who they want to be in terms of establishing their own identity.

**celisne**

don't you mean identities...?!

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Nonetheless, there can be a disadvantage in not defining someone's role in narrower terms, in that, in the case of the postgraduates who teach, it could be seen as a way for the individual HEIs to determine the parameters of power, as they get to decide how GTAs are used as a resource. It is almost akin to including everything in a job description, so that the students can be used, in accordance with a specific department's needs. Therefore, their role can be at the mercy of the individual institutions and departments, which, itself, confers a sense of power on the individual organisation and, consequently, places the teaching postgraduate in a less than powerful position. This is a view echoed by Kendall and Schussler (2012) who claim that, depending on how a title is interpreted, it can lead to

considerable variations in someone's role. Fisher and Taithe (1998, p. 46) also refer to the idea of naming when they comment: "'Titles' are another issue and there may be technicalities about what job titles can be conferred".

As such, this adds another layer of complexity when describing their role and their status within the organisation and, as Allan (1996, p. ix) commented over twenty years ago, 'One thing above all, then, is clear about starting to teach in the modern university: one thing which has probably always been true. Status, and its resulting empowerment, still matters both to teacher and to student'.

Clearly, status matters...

But let us look more closely at how the title GTA might be interpreted...

If we examine the etymology of the word *assistant* it goes right back to medieval Latin meaning, '*taking one's stand beside*', which would suggest that the primary role of the GTA is one of support.

But *who* are they *supposed* to be supporting?

Is it the *full-time member of Faculty* or the *undergraduate student*, or *themselves* or the *organisation...or everyone...?*

...or, is their existence merely assisting the spread of neoliberalism within higher education, by being a cost saving mechanism?

Benjamin (2002, p. 5) argues that one of the reasons why their role has been neglected in the US, is partly because of the assumption that they are only working as 'assistants to full-time faculty', which itself, is evidence that naming them

*assistants* is undervaluing what they do. A hint of confusion comes through **Emma**, another participant in this study, who says...

**Nobody knows...whether we're deemed staff or student...**

In recent years, my own experience has been that the postgraduates who teach, those with whom I have had a relationship, are being more frequently asked to *lead* teaching sessions, rather than to *assist*. One could argue, therefore, that the only reason to refer to them as 'assistants', is to affirm their lower hierarchical position within the Faculty. It is a term used to position them in a subservient role. They are called *assistants* but, at the same time, they are expected to complete tasks similar to the more permanent members of Faculty. In addition, the fact that they are called *teaching* assistants is suggesting that their principal job is to teach and we have already seen that teaching is a contested concept.

### **From rhetoric to reality**

Since their emergence within the US, the majority of GTAs have tended to be doctoral students (Muzaka, 2009); one reason for this, offered by those in educational management, is that the doctoral experience is the ideal opportunity to acquire pedagogical skills, to gain teaching practice and to think about teaching as a career option. Some US researchers argue that it is a stepping stone into academia<sup>11</sup> (Garland, 1983; Jones, 1993; Lambert and Tice, 1993; Richlin, 1993;

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<sup>11</sup> In Ireland, according to the Irish Survey of Student Engagement for Postgraduate Research Students (ISSE-PGR), conducted in 2018, 65.2% of Irish-domiciled respondents plan on pursuing an academic pathway, leaving 44.7% contemplating a different career path. Survey results accessible at: <http://studentsurvey.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/ISSE-PGR-Report-2018final.pdf> [accessed 17 December 2018].

Nyquist *et al.*, 1999). This was echoed some years later by Park and Ramos (2002, p. 48), who, by adopting an apprenticeship lens, referred to UK GTAs as ‘future professors’, but equally, they cautioned that their employment was fuelling a ‘creeping casualisation’ (ibid., p. 48) within higher education in the UK.

In 2002, the then *President of the American Association for Higher Education*, Clara Lovett stated:

I used to think graduate students were apprentices learning scholarship and not employees in the normal sense of the word. But over the last twenty years or so we have turned graduate students into a very significant and very underpaid part of the academic workforce.<sup>12</sup>

Not only had Lovett clearly seen a change in the nature of GTAs, but, she readily accepted responsibility, on behalf of the academy, for the change in their nature, when she says ‘*we* have turned graduate students...’ (italics added). Fundamental in her statement was the idea that the US higher education system had stopped treating GTAs as apprentices and instead now saw them as a cheap form of labour, or slave labour (Couvée, 2012). And yet the position of GTA had been portrayed, up until that time, almost as a privileged way of entering academia.

It may be argued, therefore, that presenting the position as an opportunity was just a way for managers to make the teaching positions more attractive to GTAs, many of whom were concerned about gaining as much experience as possible. Wasn’t

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<sup>12</sup> Extract published in the American Federation of Teachers Higher Education, 2004, p. 5. Cited from: <https://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/ngier/GradUnion.htm> [accessed 12 June 2019]

that what **Bill** had mentioned on so many occasions – the idea of gaining experience...

And you will hear from **Lauren** later as she describes the attractiveness of the experience that went with the position, when she comments...

...there was the teaching hours and the experience you get because that's the big thing to get into lecturing...somehow, you need experience to get a job and unless you get the experience...do you know, [...]...you can't get into somewhere [a HEI]...so that was perfect.

It would appear that postgraduates feel as though they should almost be grateful to be allowed gain teaching experience in order to advance their careers...an economic carrot so to speak?

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**celisne**

...but you don't see it like that now, do you?

**me**

not really...maybe getting postgrads to teach is simply a way for institutions to increase doctoral output, to incentivise the position so it will be seen as attractive (Leyton-Brown, 2008)...

**celisne**

promoting precarity so to speak...

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**Perfectly precarious...**

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**celisne**

and so you graduate to *be a GTA*...but where does that leave you...?

**me**  
a graduate or an employee or both...or something else...?

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The idea of GTA ‘employment’ had already been signalled in the US by Clotfelter, Ehrenberg, Getz, and Siegfried (1991), when they referred to large doctorate granting universities that were tending ‘to employ graduate teaching assistants to help with undergraduate instruction’ (Clotfelter *et al.*, p. 8), thereby identifying the GTAs as adjunct *employees* (such as part-time Faculty), brought in as a way of dealing with increasing student enrolments. Teaching postgraduate students seemed to also go hand in hand with precarity, and it was over this particular issue that the GTAs at New York University staged protests in the mid-2000s (Flora, 2007). But the unrest has also been felt closer to home...take the UK in November 2019, during the University and College Union (UCU) strikes over pay and pensions, where the issue of precarity also took centre stage, with GTAs amongst those striking over conditions and payment.

And further unrest was evident in an anonymous posting in *The Guardian* (UK), in 2014<sup>13</sup>, when a GTA commented that a fellow postgraduate believed he was ‘undoubtedly exploited’ during his time working as a GTA. The contributor felt that teaching was ‘something fobbed off’ on postgraduates, and that they were used to having to ‘soak up teaching hours while living in a precarious zone’.

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<sup>13</sup> Academics Anonymous (2014). Universities must be transparent about how they allocate teaching hours. *The Guardian*, 10 October 2014. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2014/oct/10/graduate-teaching-assistants-universities-transparent-allocate-phd-teaching-hours> [accessed 20 April 2018]

Could it be the same in Irish higher education...?

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**celisne**

but in Irish HE precarity isn't something that is exclusive to postgrads who teach...?

**me**

oh no, writing from a UK-context, Raaper (2008) would suggest that precarity is characteristic of all academic life nowadays...  
...and in Ireland, things are not necessarily any different - I mean precarity formed the core theme of the Cush Report<sup>14</sup>, back in 2016, when an expert group reported on the situation regarding fixed-term and part-time lecturing in Irish HE. It suggested that '[p]recarious employment undermines the stability, continuity and collegiality that is central to the effective functioning of third level colleges' (Cush, 2016, p. 9) and as such 'is a significant disincentive to remain in the profession or indeed to enter the profession' (ibid., p. 9)...

**celisne**

and you think this is linked to postgraduates who teach...?

**me**

well, it doesn't make academia very attractive does it...this is something that really comes through in Leanne's story...I mean, the Cush Report (2016) cautions against any employment model which churns 'short-term employed staff makes no provision for the gradual accumulation of necessary teaching experience and embeds within the system a needlessly high level of inexperience' (ibid., p. 10), as it can lead to a diminution in the quality of teaching.

**celisne**

so, if we consider GTAs as 'short-term' staff, then their presence within the sector might be compounding this sense of inexperience, which, according to the report, could impact negatively on the quality of undergraduate instruction...

**me**

yeah...it's a possibility...

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<sup>14</sup> The Cush Report (May 2016) is named after the chairperson of the Expert Group, Michael Cush. It was published as the 'Report to the Minister for Education and Skills of the Chairperson of the Expert Group on Fixed-Term and Part-Time Employment in Lecturing in Third Level Education in Ireland'. Available at: [https://www.ictu.ie/download/pdf/cush\\_report.pdf](https://www.ictu.ie/download/pdf/cush_report.pdf) [accessed 15 April 2019].

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### **Lifting the lid on literature**

Because the practice of teaching postgraduate students originated in the US, it is not surprising that the majority of the research conducted has been US-based (see for examples Prieto and Altmaier, 1994; Boyle and Boice, 1998; Prieto and Meyers, 1999; Austin, 2002; Luft *et al.*, 2004; Dotger, 2011; Weidert *et al.*, 2012). Up until the early 2000s, very little research was carried out in relation to GTAs in the UK. And despite some significant studies in the years that followed (French and Russell, 2002; Muzaka, 2009; Chadha, 2013, 2015; Winstone and Moore, 2017), GTAs still remain a largely understudied phenomenon.

However, we know that, since the 1990s there has been a growing dependency on contingent faculty <sup>15</sup>, including GTAs (Williams and Roach, 1992; Lueddeke 1997; Holt, 1999; Bettinger and Long, 2004; Luft *et al.*, 2004; Muzaka, 2009; Johnson, 2011; Lampley, Gardner and Barlow, 2018), and this reliance still exists in US higher education (DeChenne, Koziol, Needham and Enochs, 2015). GTAs are serving as substitute teachers (Chadha, 2013) releasing more experienced faculty members from their teaching duties to focus on research (Eble, 1987; Perkinson, 1996; Rushin *et al.*, 1997; Bettinger and Long, 2004; Gardner and Jones, 2011), thereby propelling research to a higher status than teaching (Serow,

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<sup>15</sup> Contingent faculty can include teaching assistants, non-tenured staff, part-time staff, postdoctoral researchers, who tend to occupy insecure, non-contractual positions, with neither job security nor pension entitlements.

2000). And as the scales tip in favour of research (Fox, 1992), it can mean that teaching goes unrecognised, just like the GTAs.

In Ireland, GTAs remain an understudied area with the only studies conducted focusing on the university sector<sup>16</sup> (Potter and Hanratty, 2008; Ryan, 2014; Ryan, 2015; O'Neill and McNamara, 2016; Flaherty, O'Dwyer, Mannix-McNamara and Leahy, 2017).

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**celisne**

*(features scrunched in a frown)*

do you think that there is something more sinister involved here?

**me**

why do you keep interrupting celisne...i'm trying to tell a story here...and what do you mean about something more sinister going on?

**celisne**

it seems odd to me that very little research has been done in Ireland in relation to postgrads who teach...do you think that this could be an example of their voice being deliberately silenced within the sector?

...kinda...'out of sight, out of earshot, out of mind'...

**me**

I hadn't thought of it like that before...is that a bit like the idea of them being a 'forgotten tribe' (McCready and Vecsey, 2013) or maybe a 'hidden tribe'...?

**celisne**

...or possibly an 'ignored tribe'...?

**me**

...or a silenced one...or what was it that Sara says again...oh yeah...

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<sup>16</sup> Included in these studies within the university sector is Dublin Institute of Technology, which though now called Technological University Dublin, was classed as an Institute of Technology at the time of these publications.

**‘we’re completely...it feels like were completely abandoned...’**

**celisne**

...an ‘abandoned tribe’...?

**me**

...maybe...

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**‘And the training for best supporting actors goes to...’**

Though there is now more support available for GTAs in the US and UK, this wasn’t always the case; for many years pedagogical training was not offered to GTAs or, when it was, it was provided on an inconsistent basis (Civikly and Hidalgo, 1992; Meyers, Reid and Quina, 1998; Prieto and Meyers, 1999; Luft *et al.*, 2004; Hardré, 2005; Gardner and Jones, 2011; DeChenne *et al.*, 2012). Additionally, there is still an absence of GTA mentoring (Golish, 1999; Muzaka, 2009; Lutter, Hale and Shultz, 2019), resulting in many teaching postgraduates being thrown in at the deep end (Morss and Murray, 2005; Higgs, Cronin, McCarthy, and McKeon, 2011).

And any support offered varies from formal to informal programmes (Chadha, 2013), from ad hoc, brief induction sessions (Sharpe, 2000; Sargent, Allen, Frahm and Morris, 2009; Gallego, 2014), to structured training programmes (Pentecost, Langdon, Asirvatham, Robus and Parson, 2012). In addition, training provided tends to focus on generic teaching skills (Park, 2004), with little guidance offered on topics such as the ethical aspects of the role (Austin, 2002), ‘handling interpersonal situations’ (Goodlad, 1997, p. 92) and classroom management (Young and Bippus, 2008). And, possibly more noteworthy, is the fact that not

much is known around the effectiveness of such programmes (Park, 2004; Dotger, 2011). Given all of this, it is hardly surprising that Boyer (1991, p. 10) commented that the US higher education was ‘carelessly inattentive’ to the teaching assistant process, potentially compromising the quality of higher education.

The UK’s Dearing Report of 1997 (Dearing, 1997) stipulated that teaching staff should hold a pedagogical qualification, but GTAs weren’t included in this. So even in the 1990s, there was still demand for rigorous training and evaluation for GTAs (Weidert *et al.*, 2012; Chadha, 2013), so as to improve the quality of instruction in HE (Young and Bippus, 2008).

### **What is *being said* or *not said*...?**

In much of the GTA literature, what is noticeable, is that GTAs are talked *about* rather than *with*, just as I am trying *to resist* doing in this study (did you hear that Celisne!)...

Two US exceptions were the works completed by Nyquist and Wulff (1996), who conducted extensive research *with* GTAs around every aspect of their experience, to capture what it is like for them *to be* GTAs, and that of Berelson (1960), who explored graduate education from the GTAs’ point of view. In the UK, apart from research conducted by those who have themselves been GTAs, (Fairbrother, 2012; Raaper, 2018), most of the literature doesn’t focus on the lived experience of GTAs. Instead, it tends to focus on challenges confronted and issues around training programmes (Jackson and Simpson, 1983; Prieto and Altmaier, 1994;

Kurdziel *et al.*, 2003; O’Neal, Wright, Cook, Perorazio, and Purkiss, 2007; Russell, 2009).

Austin (2002) confirms this when she stated that most GTA studies focused mainly on quantitative analysis, with their views sought through questionnaires (Russell, 2009; Weidert *et al.*, 2012), leaving their lived experience unexplored. And, though Austin was writing in the context of US higher education, almost twenty years ago, the situation is all too similar in Irish higher education today.

Currently, within individual Irish HEIs, decisions appear to be taken in respect of GTAs; there is little evidence of their voices at the table. They are written *about* and not written *with*, almost a case of ‘everything about us without us’<sup>17</sup>, where the GTAs are not being consulted regarding their position; it’s more a case of those in positions of power making decisions for them...

[**Aside:** ...*as I now reflect on this, I realise that I too had been guilty of this in my own practice, making decisions for them, as opposed to making decisions with them...something which has since changed in my practice, as I see students much more as partners in learning, designing the curriculum together, creating more discursive learning spaces together, and working together on projects. And this collaborative learning was something which I was careful to address in terms of my methodological approach in this study...*]

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<sup>17</sup> The original phrase ‘nothing about us without us’ was coined in the late 1990s by James Charlton (1998), in support of disability rights activists, to convey the view that no policies should be decided upon without the full involvement of all stakeholders.

But let me return to the literature on teaching postgraduates...until now, these individuals have been most commonly associated with the scientific disciplines, in roles as demonstrators and laboratory tutors, which has resulted in many GTA-related studies being rooted within the sciences (Abell, 2000; Eick and Reed, 2002; French and Russell, 2002; Kurdziel, and Libarkin, 2003; Bond-Robinson and Rodriques, 2006; Gardner and Jones, 2011; Kendall and Schussler, 2012). This has meant that most literature has homogenised teaching postgraduate students as all being from scientific disciplines. But this is no longer the situation and postgraduates who teach are now present in a range of disciplines, performing a variety of roles, as is the case in this study.

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**celisne**

Okay...so, I'm painting a picture here, but can you just explain something, are they called GTAs in the IoTs too?

**me**

no, the term GTA is not as widespread as it is in the unis...in the IoTs, they are often referred to as 'postgraduate research students who teach' or 'teaching postgraduates'...but all that might change...

**celisne**

so, what I'm hearing is that they are referred to as 'postgraduate research students who teach' or something like that...but the term GTA is becoming more common....is that it?

**me**

yeah...and because of that, the literature often presents them as a homogenous group...

**celisne**

but do you think you are doing it too...?

**me**

well, I hope not...that's the purpose of this study really...to hear their individual stories...and not to merely treat them as being this

separate group, somewhat apart from other members of Faculty...which is a good example of 'othering' (Spivak, 1985)...

**celisne**

you need to explain that one to me...

**me**

well, it's a term that draws on several philosophical and theoretical traditions, but, essentially, the word infers a power differential and the suggestion is that knowledge belongs to those in power. It's a form of marginalisation; when a group is treated as 'other', their narrative does not form part of the discourse. As Weis (1995, p. 18) puts it, not only is othering central to identity formation but it also 'serves to mark and name those thought to be different from oneself'.

**celisne**

So, if I am hearing you, by talking about the GTAs as a separate group, we could be in danger of obscuring their individuality and reinforcing this representation of them as a homogenous rather than heterogeneous group? And then they just blend into the background and we just accept that they are there somewhere on stage, but nobody even thinks about them and what they are experiencing...

**me**

yes, that's it...and similarly, if members of Faculty treat these individuals as 'others' and talk *about* them rather than *with* them, then that just serves to magnify the apparent differences between the two groups.

**celisne**

...and I presume that this type of practice can serve to create and reinforce positions of power and subordination, which can lead to marginalisation, restricted or reduced opportunities and even exclusion (Johnson, Bottorff, Browne, Grewal, Hilton and Clarke, 2004).

**me**

...well that's the danger...yes...

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An example of where teaching assistants were talked *about* in the literature is in the 1994 *US National Study of GTA training*, conducted by the College Faculty Preparation Committee of the *National Association of Biology Teachers* (NABT),

where questionnaires were sent to department chairs of the US graduate schools of biology, asking them questions such as:

‘Besides the teaching assistant experience, are there any other formal opportunities for your graduate students to develop teaching skills?’ (Rushin *et al.*, 1997, p. 87).

The fact that the questionnaires were drafted for the department chairs to complete (rather than the postgrads themselves) is more evidence of the tendency to talk *about* GTAs and not *with* them. Moreover, the expression ‘your graduate students’ suggested that they were not even seen as part of the Faculty but rather owned *by* the Faculty – merely another resource. Unsurprisingly, the information garnered from this survey was used by US graduate schools, in the years that followed, to design training programmes *for* the GTAs. What is useful about this particular narrative, is that there is no suggestion that these training programmes were designed *with* the GTAs or that they had any input into the programmes. The training programmes were designed *for* them, by those in positions of authority, and not negotiated with them, as should be the case if we were to adopt a Freirean (1996) positioning.

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**celisne**

well hold on a second...how are you involving GTAs in this study?

**me**

well I think that by inviting them to converse, relaying their experience and openly discussing the challenges that they face, it is certainly one way of ensuring that they are involved...

**celisne**

well it's a start for sure...but tell me, who do you think is benefitting from the GTA scheme?

---

**‘Who is serving who...?’**

Harland and Plangger (2004) saw the role positively, in that it broadened GTAs’ educational experiences, like a formation period, where they teach first hand and understand more about pedagogical practice. But to do this properly, so everyone benefits, postgraduates who teach would have to be fully supported and institutions would have to properly acknowledge the valuable work that they do, both in terms of financial and other forms of recognition.

*But is this the case...?*

Like Austin (2002), I remain sceptical about the intention of HEIs in this regard and question whether institutions have any plans to support these teaching postgraduates as early career academics.

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**celisne**

Well hold on, if they were positioning them as early career academics wouldn’t there be policies and practices in place to support them in case they wish to transition from part-time teaching postgrads to full-time lecturers?

**me**

well there aren’t any, not that I have come across, and anyway, even if there were policies, would that necessarily mean that things would be any different...?

**celisne**

no, probably not...

---

### **A powerful concept...**

For me, the entire GTA/teaching postgraduate experience is surrounded by power...power which emanates from *above*, *below* and *within*.....and this power is manifested in different ways – through both enabling and constraining structures, discourses (explicit and/or hidden), norms and narratives...all of which shape the postgraduates and their experiences. Within the Irish context, power comes from the national bodies, such as the *Higher Education Authority* (HEA), which I argue, are all shaping a sector which itself is supporting the proliferation of teaching postgraduates....

But there is also power within the individual HEIs themselves, as those in management determine the nature of the GTAs' work, along with their conditions of employment. But it doesn't stop there - I would argue that, equally, there is power closer to these students, through their relationships with...

#### **academic staff,**

(through what and how they teach and how they supervise),

#### **administrative staff,**

(through their bureaucratic power),

#### **other teaching postgrads,**

(through the power of their support)

#### **other undergraduate students,**

(through their influence on the GTA experience – both positive and negative)

#### **me, as a researcher**

(as I step into their world)

**themselves**  
(agentic power within)

But I am jumping ahead...all that will be explored in due course...

**And where will that get you...?**

I hope that being part of this study provides the participants the space to question their own 'thoughts, feelings, values and identity' as teachers (Bolton, 2006, pp. 203-4), learners, students, or however they view themselves.

I would like to think that my research could raise awareness of the agency of postgrads who teach and could make a difference (even on a small scale) and though I am not sure as to whether or not this study will 'change the participants' lives or the structures of the institution' (Mack, 2010, p. 9), the fact that we are starting the conversation with postgrads who teach and representing their stories is a change in itself... this exploration of their experience, and the way in which it is conducted, is itself a contribution to knowledge...

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**celisne**

okay, let me get back to the research...you are 'conversing' with these postgrads who teach...but just how many are part of this study?

**me**

celisne, I'm not being difficult, but it's not about the number...it's about talking...listening...hearing...sharing experiences...

**celisne**

well to be a *reliable* study, you need a particular sample size, surely? Otherwise, how will you *generalise* your findings?

**me**

celisne, i'm tired explaining this...i'm not trying to generalise, and i'm not looking at sample size...i'm concerned with *individuals* and *experience*...i want these individuals to present their world from their own viewpoint (Punch, 1998)...that's how we can interpret the experience...but as you keep insisting...11...that's how many people I have talked with...to capture their experience...  
...I had started thinking that between 10-12 participants would be involved, as, by their very nature, narrative studies tend to involve a small number of participants (Riessman, 1993)...

**celisne**

...but you can't really capture experience can you? I mean experience is not something 'we can straightforwardly *have* and then make a transparent account of' (Davies and Davies, 2007, p. 1141). Is it going to be a realistic representation of what is going on for them in their lives...?

**me**

well, from a poststructuralist perspective, the experience is more of *a production* than a recording of experience (Davies and Davies, 2007)...and that aligns with the narrative approach. Plus, this echoes Foucault's (1991, p. 36) view that experience is 'always a fiction, something constructed, which exists only after it has been made'.

**celisne**

... 'a production', you say...very theatrical to me; sounds like you're playing with reality and fiction and producing a reading, is that it...?

**me**

maybe...you might want to see this as some kind of playing field...with the writing being a methodological inquiry in itself...

**celisne**

...fair enough...but can we go back to hard facts...

**me**

i wish you wouldn't...but go on...

**celisne**

...well, how did you decide who was involved? Did you pick them...?

**me**

no, they were invited to be involved...it's like i was asking them to join me on stage...even though they are already on the stage...

**celisne**

...so you are getting them back in the spotlight...restor(y)ing their position...

**me**

that's the plan...

**celisne**

so, we've already met **Bill** right, so where are the others from<sup>18</sup> and how did you contact them?

**me**

I'll tell you all that later...

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### **So why a story?**

I quickly realised that, within a narrative study, I would be playing a variety of parts: listener, interpreter and raconteur, to name but a few, which only serves to add more complexity to the process. And, though I am initially the audience for these eleven postgrads who teach, I am also writing for a different audience (Trahar, 2009) – and that would be You. But even that writing phase is difficult, for as Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 153) indicate, even the search for form can leave the narrative inquirer 'floundering in confusion'.

This would not be something for the faint-hearted I thought!

Narrative is an interpretative approach which adopts storytelling as its medium and places people, meaning and identity at the heart of its approach (Bochner and Riggs, 2014). It is based on the view that we come to understand and give

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<sup>18</sup> The participants in this study were all from IoTs, across two Irish provinces, Leinster and Munster. The choice of regions was for logistical reasons and because not all IoTs have postgraduates who teach.

meaning to our lives through story (Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2013). Narrative provides for thick, detailed, rich descriptions, or ‘...deep, dense, detailed accounts...’ (Denzin, 1989, p. 83) to be shared between narrators, researcher and audience, which in itself acknowledges the social constructivist nature of ‘experiential stories that combine the social and the personal’ (Conle, 2000, p. 51).

As a methodology, it describes a way of understanding and inquiring into experience through ‘collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus’ (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 20). The idea of a collaboration over time is an important one as it is an indication that our stories are constantly evolving (West, 1996), as is the methodological story of this study. I see this research as merely an episode in both mine and the postgraduate students’ overall narratives, a series of experiences, which constitute our journeys (Trahar, 2009).

Also, by framing this research in terms of narrative, it allows for the emergence of different layers of meaning and significance into people’s experiences (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), as narratives require interpretation (Riessman, 1993) and this will be reflected in the way that the stories are constructed, presented and interpreted by You. And because narrative inquiry places both the participant and the researcher at the heart of the process, this has allowed me to drift between multiple identities, (teacher, researcher, student, listener, interpreter and raconteur and more), along with the participants in this study.

**celisne**

do you think that there is a link between power and narrative...?

**me**

...absolutely...through narrative and telling our stories, we have the power to transform ourselves and our society (Daya and Lau, 2007)...

**celisne**

and, as narrative inquirer/researcher, you have the power to decide what is included and excluded in the story and how it is interpreted and presented...isn't it left up to the researcher and their epistemological stance...?

**me**

yep, narrative research does not tell us 'whether to aim for objectivity or researcher and participant involvement; whether to analyse stories' particularity or generality' (Squire, Andrews and Tamboukou (2013, p. 1), thereby leaving it up to us as researchers...

**celisne**

that is powerful...

**me**

yeah, but it brings its own challenges...

-----

When it then comes to retelling the participants' stories to a new audience, there's a dilemma:

...how can stories be told in a way that honours the participants yet,  
at the same time, reflects my own position?

After all, as a practitioner researcher, I am already part of the field, or, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 63) suggest, I am 'a member of the landscape', so in that sense, my narrative is part of the participants' overall narrative. This aligns with Bathmaker's (2010, p. 3) view that narratives are 'collaborative

constructions’, involving different participants in their construction and, because of this, I was conscious that my own narrative is important to present.

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**celisne**

so, it’s you and the GTAs – both stories...and that is why ye both feature in the story titles, like ‘Chatting with Charlotte’ or ‘Recounting with Robin’...

**me**

...yes, different ways of showing our conversations...

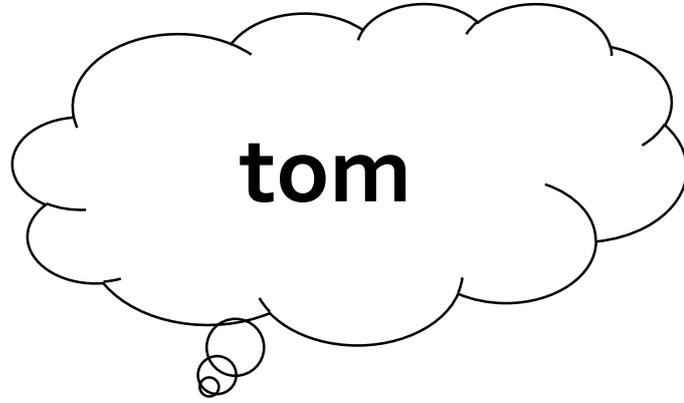
**celisne**

so, before we look at poststructuralism, why don’t we just interrupt and hear ‘Gina and Tom’...

**me**

why not...

-----



tom

*...we're fresh through the system...we're now coming the other side of it, so we're the freshest at seeing both sides of it*

*...I'd say we'd be more approachable*

*Compared to whom?*

*...somebody who's been lecturing for, I don't know, 20...30 years like...*

*But that's me now...what is that someone like?*

*because I started just like you...*

*...superior and so well-respected*

*they might be almost afraid to approach them or something...*

*- can I no longer relate to them?*

*...so it is a weird situation...*

*you used to be taught by them and now you're sort of teaching almost parallel with them...*

*...are we all on the same level now...?*

*...you're not fully parallel but almost parallel with them...eh, it's a funny situation...*

*Do you think we'll all get to*

*the same level someday...*

*me, the lecturer and you the...the what?*

*...whatever we're classified as...*

## Gina and Tom...

### Looking up...to look down...

- Oh no, what time is it?
- 2pm on the dot...
- Feck it...I'm late...

I had proposed 2pm for our meeting and I hated the idea of being late. Grabbing paper, pen, and the all-important 'participant information sheet', I began running towards the room where we had arranged to meet. I say 'running' – but I don't mean 'running' – I mean walking so quickly that it hurt my legs. Why do we often use words that we don't mean...and if we don't mean them, then what do we mean...?

I arrived...and Tom wasn't far behind...

During our conversation, he recalled his first day teaching:

Em, first day was a bit...was a bit funny. Em, cos, obviously like...when...because it was...it was first years coming in on their very first day, like...so they were a little bit...a little bit, confused as to what was going on as well, so I was just giving them...like the first maybe 2...3 classes explaining to them how it's going to happen...more than actually teaching them...trying to get them on board with what was going to happen and understand what was going to go on nearly...em, so lay out what the semester was going to look like for them, em, so I suppose I got to know them better that way 'cos it wasn't just straight into giving information.

In his account, Tom had focused almost entirely on the students and had made no reference to how he himself was feeling. He came across as both calm and organised and gave me the impression that he was very much in control on that first day (so unlike me on my first day of teaching!). He knew that his approach would be a good way for the students to get to know him and, as he explained, for him to get to know them. It sounded as though he had created a positive environment for them, which echoed Rushin *et al.*'s (1997) findings that GTAs are often responsible for creating positive learning atmospheres for everyone.

***Prologue:** A year had passed since that first day; Tom had just finished his first year as a teaching postgrad, initially teaching 2 hours a week, which then increased to 3 hours.*

A year had passed and he still didn't know how to identify himself; he didn't know what his title was...or even if he had one. I was intrigued by this and wanted to know more; how did he classify himself?

I don't even know...I don't even know...it's sort of a bit in limbo isn't it like, but like it's...I normally say postgrad researcher, just cos it's handier...if I'm asked...eh, but then I'll tag on the fact that I'm also teaching...so that I'm sort of floating between the two like, so, it kind of covers...I'm not just a student, if I'm ever asked by some randomer, like...I'll just say it like that like...

**'...a bit in limbo isn't it...'**

**'...floating between the two...'**

**'...I'm not just a student...'**

Somewhere in-between...occupying a liminal space...

I had been taken aback by Tom's youthful appearance when I had first met him...I could have easily mistaken him for a first-year student. I wondered if the first-year students had thought the same. But though he had suggested that he was somewhere in between staff and student, it soon emerged that he saw himself more as a student, as he spoke of the gap between him and the lecturers who used to teach him.

There was a gap...

Tom said he was

...sort of teaching almost parallel to them [his former lecturers]...

but stressed that he was not fully parallel with them. It amounted to what Tom referred to as

...a weird situation...

So where was he if he was not parallel with them – where did he position himself? And why was there a gap?

He commented...

I would never see myself on the same level as the people who had taught me, cos, I suppose, I just respect them...

It wasn't that he didn't see himself 'getting that level' but for the moment, he wasn't one of them. It was almost as if Tom held his former lecturers on a pedestal...role models for him as he began teaching.

And though it felt like there was a respect there, it still seemed to me as though Tom was almost distancing himself from the lecturers and I began to wonder who had created this gap. Was it there before Tom, or had he created it?

But the respect for his lecturers was so deeply rooted that it provided the seeds for his own blossoming teaching practice. He had replicated an induction session with his students because that is what his lecturer had done. Though it had been years ago, he remembered his first day as a student and the support he had been given...

...literally the first class...it was like, laid [...] out like it's going to be like 'x', 'y', 'z'...do the work, it's going to be hard, it's not going to be always enjoyable but if you do the work it'll be as enjoyable as it possibly can be for ye...and I do the same myself...

For Tom, good practice seemed to lead to further good practice...

But it wasn't just respect for the lecturers; Tom's sense of responsibility to maintain the reputation of the programme was palpable – he wanted to uphold its status; having received what he described as 'a really good education', he now saw it as his responsibility to ensure that the standard did not drop, so he was 'trying to replicate' as best he could, whilst also adding his 'own flavour'. It was similar to trying to copy a cake recipe and then realising that you could surpass yourself and add an extra something that would elevate the cake to previously unimaginable standards of greatness...

But had Tom been consulted prior to teaching...had anyone talked to him about his teaching, asked him what he might like to teach...?

No, there was no choice, no input...once again, like other postgraduates before him (and no doubt endless ones after him), Tom had simply been told *what to teach*.

Why weren't postgrads being consulted in advance...?

Maybe these were just my musings...as I didn't get the impression that it really bothered Tom, or maybe he had just accepted that that was just the way it was when you were a teaching postgrad; you were told what to do.

Or maybe he was just comfortable with the module that he had been given...

That was important to him...what would he have done had he been given a module with which he hadn't been as familiar? His answer was rushed, panicked...

...I don't know...I think I would've had to have been harassing my supervisor because like, I wouldn't have known the standards that it would have to be...the detail I'd have to cover, the sort of point of view I'd have to come from...so I definitely wouldn't have liked that...

As he spoke, I could sense the anxiety in his voice; I had felt that same anxiety myself early on in my own teaching. I had been asked to design and deliver a module on translation theory and practice and, like Tom predicted, I was lost (in translation!). I was unsure of standards, level of detail, how to present the module...so I stumbled through that first year and designed something that I thought would fit what was required. I'm still not sure if I ever achieved this...

But back to Tom...had he received any support when he began teaching...?

He'd had the opportunity to complete a module on pedagogy in his institution, which he'd found really good, with the best thing about it being the recorded microteaching sessions. Summing up the experience, he said...

...it's great to be a fly on the wall and actually see yourself and see how you act in a class...

Listening to an excited Tom, I was beginning to wish that I was a fly on the wall in his classes, as he came across as such a passionate educator. Tom wanted to engage students from the outset and get them involved in their own learning. As he had previously mentioned, he had organised his own induction for the students. He had wanted to help them from the first day, help them to understand their responsibilities in the learning process. He laid out his plan with them...

...10 minutes going over, checking to make sure everything is right and then we'll get into the fun stuff...

The mere mention of the two words 'fun stuff' and I had already warmed to Tom's teaching style. I felt like one of his students, sensing his passion for the subject area and his enthusiasm for teaching, which was infectious. He so wanted to move beyond the idea that the students would cram for exams; instead he wanted them to experience deep learning and to appreciate the value of the programme, just like he had done. This had echoes of Sharpe's (2000) research, in which she suggested that, despite any concerns GTAs may have, they 'remain enthusiastic and committed to teaching well' (Sharpe, 2000, p. 132). This was Tom...

But it wasn't just on the first day that Tom had done his own thing. He had also shown his own initiative through his teaching strategies. Not content with the pre-prepared handbook and slides that had been given to him, he had spent more time amending them to suit his students. He wanted to make everything relevant to them and more applicable, by adding in

...a little bit extra and stuff here and there, just for their own interest.

Tom was also comfortable changing his practice when he thought that it would be better for his students. I got the impression that he was always trying to do his best for them. He continued by recounting the time when he had given the students a pop quiz...'and they just froze'. Tom put it down to the fact that the students thought that they were being graded on it and, as a result, 'they were afraid of guessing at something wrong'. This didn't sit well with Tom, so he instantly changed direction...

...so I took it completely and just had more of a conversation base for then and then I gave them another exam, like, a brief exam, for their Christmas practical em, and they were more...much more engaged...I suppose they're more comfortable as well like...

I was struck by the way in which Tom related to his students and wondered if this was because he himself had been an undergraduate so recently. Did that position him closer to his students? I never remember having that level of understanding of my students when I had started out teaching...or even now...

Tom went on to describe how he had told his supervisor about what he had done in the class, almost as though he was seeking some kind of validation – a form

of approval for his teaching. So I wondered if there was any formal channel through which Tom could offer feedback on how he was experiencing teaching; it seemed ironic that the students were giving their feedback to Tom, but he couldn't give feedback to anyone...or could he?

He could talk to the other postgraduate students, as he said himself...

...we had this sort of mini unofficial forum between the postgrads...it's just our office the way it is...it's like a cauldron of talk anyway...

This was something that Tom clearly valued and he went on to talk about how he would like a more established forum for teaching postgrads, where issues around teaching could be discussed. Tom had clearly given this some thought...he was happy to be in a 'very communal office' – there were about 12 or 14 postgrads there and so, as he said,

...we nearly have a forum there...

but he was aware that it wasn't the same for all teaching postgrads – many of whom were in 'lone offices'.

My mind drifted right back to when I had started teaching and had found myself in a communal office with four others; they were full-time members of staff and had been teaching for years, but I never felt that I could ask them for teaching advice...maybe it was because I didn't want to appear as if I was disturbing them...

But back to Tom and there was obviously a well-established support network amongst the GTAs in his institution; for him, the other postgraduate students were his port of call when he had any teaching-related issue. And if they couldn't provide the assistance required, he would then go straight to his supervisor.

It was beginning to sound as though teaching took up all of Tom's time...but was it interfering with his research (Sharpe, 2000; Harland and Plangger, 2004) or was his research interfering with his teaching? Was he prioritising one activity over the other...? There was no doubt in his reply...

...it's the research...em, I know because they're pushing us to try and get dissemination of our findings out as much as we can, so...it's the research first...

It seemed that research had pushed teaching back down to the bottom rung of the ladder again. But that didn't stop Tom from enjoying his teaching, which was reflective of what Lowman and Williams (1990) had suggested – that most graduate students look forward to the experience of being a GTA, despite being very conscious of the challenges the position presents, particularly by way of the time and energy constraints that accompany the role. Tom commented...

...I actually really enjoy it...and to be honest, I wouldn't mind getting into lecturing, so it's great to have that level of...actually taught in a 3rd level institute anyway, even though it's only...well it's probably teaching assistant or whatever we're classified as...

He'd said it again...

**...whatever we're classified as...**

So whatever he was classed as, what did Tom, as a teaching postgraduate, think that he offered the first years.

I'd say for 1st year...I'd say we'd be more approachable...just because there's not that big of an age gap...and I know that age...age is literally just a number...but they would probably see more understanding in that...I was in their shoes four years ago...versus somebody who's been lecturing for, I don't know, 20...30 years like, who's so superior and so well-respected they might be almost...they might be almost afraid to approach them or something...whereas they'll come to me about something maybe...

We'd gone full circle again...Tom was, in effect, describing that gap that he saw between teaching postgraduates and more tenured members of Faculty and the respect for the latter was still as evident. And what he had just described echoed previous research, when he had suggested that undergraduates saw GTAs as being engaging, approachable, informal, relaxed and capable of personalising teaching (Park, 2002; Muzaka, 2009). 'Personalised teaching', I thought...if ever there was a postgraduate student who could provide personalised teaching, it was Tom. He had his own way of teaching, for sure, and he was very aware of that...

Tom described himself as 'a little more laid back'...'open to dialogue' and wanted to be asked questions, rather than throwing information at students. He wanted to see what their understanding was as he firmly believed that...

...if you get a fresh understanding of something it can change the way you look at something as well...

There was learning for Tom and for his students...

So what learning would he now pass on to those postgrads/GTAs starting in subsequent years. Tom was very forthcoming with his advice...

Hard to know, cos I don't know if I done it right or not like...I think I did but...you never really know I suppose at the end of the day...em, but, I think, don't be...don't be afraid to be assertive in there...like, 'cos you are...you are teaching them, you are...it's your job to give them the information they need to progress to the next level and increase your education and be, in my case, a good [mentions job]...3, 4, 5 years down the line...em, so I suppose be confident in that you're in that position for a reason...you're not just there because they haven't got anyone else to teach it...like you're there for a reason...

Tom's last few words stayed with me as our conversation came to a natural end...

...you're not just there because they haven't got anyone else to teach...

It suggested to me that Tom didn't see himself as just filling a gap, he had been chosen to teach, and though something inside me questioned this, who was I to say that that wasn't the case...

## Towards a poststructuralist narrative inquiry...

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**celisne**

that was really interesting how Tom experienced the role...and I'm sure we'll return to those themes, but you said, in your introductory act, that your narrative approach is also guided by your poststructuralist stance...what do you *mean* by this...?

**me**

...many things...it has *a multiplicity of meanings*...

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Poststructuralism, as a movement, developed in France in the 1960s, from thinkers such as Foucault (1926-1984), his compatriot and friend, Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), and others, such as Roland Barthes (1915-1980), Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), Hélène Cixous (1937-) and Julia Kristeva (1941-). As a philosophical movement, it critiqued its predecessor 'structuralism', which itself was concerned with analysing the structures which existed in texts and language. Instead, poststructuralism argued that it was impossible to base knowledge on structures, as these structures were themselves subject to misinterpretations.

The thinking behind this came from structuralism, in that systems of language are composed of signs, which themselves are composed of both *signifiers*, (e.g. words, sounds or images) and *signifieds* (abstract ideas or concepts)...but poststructuralists believed that these signs only acquired meaning through their relationship and contrasts, or *différance*, (Derrida, 1982) with other signs. The suggestion is therefore that meaning is always relational. Equally, because different languages have different words for the same concepts, this also means

that poststructuralists view language as being arbitrary, fluid. So, meaning and interpretation become entangled with language and discourse (Dunn, 1997). In that way, poststructuralism is founded on instability, which is also reflected in the methodological story of this research.

So, poststructuralism sets out to deconstruct structures and frameworks, to destabilise hierarchies of meaning (Springer, 2012), advocating that there is not one single meaning for a text, but multiple meanings. In terms of writing, it is the responsibility of the reader to derive their own interpretation from a text. Poststructuralists also theorised the relationship between language and identity, for it is through language that our identities or subjectivities are constructed (Baxter, 2016).

So as you are going through this study, I would invite You, to do one of many things...

*...read the stories...look for many meanings...look for instability  
in meanings...listen not just to what is said, but what is not  
said...think about the context in which the stories are being  
told...written and read...*

## Casting the cast...and opening a gateway to voices

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**celisne**

so, you mentioned at the start that there was quite a lot of interaction between you and the participants...tell me...did this research play out like a play in that there were lots of rehearsals and learning of lines...? or how was it designed...? I mean, as an interpretive researcher, I know you need to think carefully about the promises that you made to the participants (Jacobson, Gewurtz and Haydon, 2007)...so how did you design it so as to honour them...?

**me**

oh that took a while...I started out by wanting to have 2-3 interactions with each of the 11 participants...but I suppose it was up to them how much they wanted to engage with the study or not...

**celisne**

so, how many encounters were there...? I mean you had 2-3 in your participant information sheet...

**me**

oh celisne, there have been so many exchanges, sending the invitation, them accepting, back and forth around potential meeting days, transcripts shared, comments back, first version of stories shared, comments back, second versions shared, comments back...

**celisne**

but did they not just consent to 2-3 encounters...?

**me**

yes, but I think you have to remember that researchers working in interpretive and other inquiry-based paradigms would argue that consent is less about a contract and more about a relationship-based agreement (Jacobson *et al.*, 2007) and 'relational responsibilities' (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 176)...

**celisne**

so you build a relationship with them...?

**me**

I'd like to think so...I mean there's a research relationship there too – all of us, researchers and participants, have a voice with which to tell our stories (Savin-Baden and Niekerk, 2007) and that was really important for me...to honour their narrative, I didn't just want this to be 'snatch-and-grab' research (Kozinets, 2010)...

**celisne**

what do you mean 'snatch-and-grab'...?

**me**

well this wasn't a case of jumping into the field once and extracting data...this was more a case of getting to know them, and listening to their experiences over time, establishing a relationship with them...

**celisne**

just by meeting with them and chatting for a bit...?

**me**

it wasn't like that...I mean, we met for the first time face-to-face (although Robin couldn't do a face-to-face, so we chatted on the phone...)...and then I invited them to meet with me again...but for some of them, another face-to-face meeting wasn't feasible, so we chatted on the phone or in some cases, we had lengthy online chats via email...it's been ongoing...

**celisne**

could you talk me through the process then...?

**me**

sure...well, after first chatting with them (from Spring 2018), I then got back on to them with their transcripts, and we were back and forth on those, parts redacted, things that they wanted added...and I then contacted them again with the first version of their story...that was early 2019...

**celisne**

and you looked for comments on that...?

**me**

yeah, but not just comments...this is what I said in my email back to them...

'I have compiled our conversation into your story, or at least my interpretation of your story. I firmly hold that this research is about your voices as GTAs, so I am attaching your story so that you have the option of adding to it in whatever way you see fit. If your experience has changed or if you would like to highlight anything or comment on anything, or input in any way to the ever-evolving story, I would be delighted to hear from you'....

**celisne**

and did you hear back...?

**me**

yeah, and that led to another encounter...I met up again with three of them and we chatted around how things had changed for them since...how their story had evolved... In a narrative inquiry approach, the temporal dimension should be acknowledged as

events are always in transition (Clandinin, Pushor and Orr, 2007), so the stories continue on...

**celisne**

oh and that's what you have included at the end of some of them...a kind of follow-up...a postscript...

**me**

yeah, not all of them got back to me so not everyone has a postscript...but then I rewrote the stories again, adding aesthetic layering to them...a narrative re-shaping if you like...incorporating other aspects and more layering of meaning, including how their experiences reflected mine...

**celisne**

and what then...did you go back to them again with the final version...?

**me**

I don't like the word 'final'...let's go for 'latest' version...yes, I did, and they are the stories that You are now reading here...I have been back and forth with them a lot...not with all of them...but there is an ongoing connection there... for as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) point out, it is this retelling of stories that allows for growth and change...and I think I have developed as a researcher thanks to all those stages...

**celisne**

fair enough, maybe you can talk more about that later...but let's just revisit that sense of honouring...I know in earlier iterations you talked about using their words a lot in their stories...but then you cut back on that a bit...why...?

**me**

yeah, that's something else I grappled with for a long time...with regards the quotes 'in' or 'out', I had originally wanted to include loads of them, but the more I read around narrative inquiry, the more I realised that those earlier versions weren't storied enough – they were just like accounts of interviews. And after all, people are 'storytelling organisms who lead storied lives' (Savin-Baden and Niekerk, 2007, p. 461).

I knew it at the time that they were not storied enough, but I don't think I could admit it to myself...it struck me they really needed more aesthetic layering...

**celisne**

so how did you do that?

**me**

I took the original stories and re-wrote them all...which was in itself a way of exploring different means of 'imagining narrative

form' (Clandinin and Connolly, 2000, p. 165)...almost as though you are experimenting with what might be in terms of representation...

...so, with that in mind, I decided to add aesthetic layering to them as I went...capturing not just what they said, but the whole scene...what I was feeling, how I interpreted our encounter...the descriptive aspects...all that. I wanted the stories to be readable, enjoyable just as Blumenfeld-Jones (1995, p. 25) says, '[t]he narrative is believable when it can be credited with conveying convincingly, that the events occurred and were felt in ways the narrator is asserting'...

**celisne**

and is that acceptable...?

**me**

well, it is a narrative study...it's about creating stories...

**celisne**

and where has that gotten Us...?

**me**

to a place where You can hopefully enjoy reading the stories and interpret what they might mean for You...and I can share My interpretations...and, methodologically speaking, I think that they are far stronger now as stories.

**celisne**

and what did the postgrads say about these, the third version of the stories, the ones that we are reading here and now...?

**me**

well, here's a sample of their comments...

...**Stephen** - 'it made me smile and I really like the way you write...'

...**Knowles** - 'I enjoyed reading it again. It really does capture the essence of my journey...'

...**Marian** - 'I had a read through my story, and just wanted to let you know I think you captured my experience perfectly. I love your writing style too!'

**celisne**

well it sounds as if they enjoyed reading them and that you captured some of their experience...and maybe that is where the research integrity is...but let's step back as I'd like to know more about how you reached out to the participants...how did they get involved...?

-----

I was conscious in the research design that the postgraduates would be openly invited to partake in the study and I welcomed all levels of postgraduate (Masters and PhD) and all disciplines. But, as I planned on talking to postgraduates in different institutions, I realised that getting access to them might be harder than I thought. Not having contact details for them, I decided to go through a gatekeeper (almost the equivalent of a casting agent!) in the various IoTs, all of which I will detail later...

I was also conscious, from the outset, that my own context, working in an IoT and engaging with postgraduate students who teach, might be seen as a conflict of interest. However, as I was not acting as supervisor or assessing these students in any way, there was no conflict of interest and their stories could be told...

And so these are the stories of...

*Bill...*

Knowles...

Sara...

Leanne...

Emma...

Tom...

Marian...

Charlotte...

Lauren...

Stephen...

Robin...

[and my story too...]

-----

**celisne**

...and me...don't forget *my* story...

**me**

...like I could...you can't be silenced, can you?

-----

...You will also see that the eleven teaching postgraduates' stories are threaded throughout, not in a structured way (now that wouldn't do for a poststructuralist, would it?!). The way in which they are positioned tells its own story...

-----

**celisne**

*(sarcastically)*

oh, there's a story there too is there...?...

well, how *did* You decide where to place them...?

**me**

well, I'm not sure I did...I think for the moment, they have ended up positioning themselves...I mean, I went all around the houses on this... there was one moment that I was going to write everything up under themes...

**celisne**

and what changed your mind...?

**me**

the literature I suppose...and a sense of honour...

**celisne**

...I'm not with you...

**me**

...well, if you think about it, here I was critiquing some of the literature for treating them as a homogenous group...and then I was contemplating placing their experiences under themes; it would have meant that I would be prioritising the themes, rather than the *people* who participated in the study. I mean if you are going to talk with them to hear their voices, then I think the least you can do is honour each of them by producing individual stories...

**celisne**

...okay, I get that bit, but then how did you decide where to place them? I mean if it were me, I think I would have just thrown them up in the air and seen where they landed...!

**me**

*(smiling)*

...trust me, that did cross my mind! And there were many other things that crossed my mind...at one stage I considered presenting them in a separate anthology...

**celisne**

that would have been great...why didn't you do that?

**me**

think celisne...you want them in a *separate* book, as a *separate* group...*separate* from my story about this research...

**celisne**

oh yeah, I hear you!

**me**

So, I suppose the one thing that I wanted to do was ensure that their voices and experiences interrupted the whole study, that they break the silence, that they weave through this piece, just as they are weaving through the education sector...

**celisne**

...so it's like the spotlight is suddenly on them...?

**me**

yeah, that's it...as you are reading this, You have to stop and listen and hear each of their stories. And this reflects what I think should be the case with postgraduates who teach – that You/I/We would be somewhat forced to listen...to hear what they were saying...

**celisne**

...so your structure (or lack thereof!) is reflecting the situation with regards GTAs...?

**me**

...yeah, I mean I told You the content and the methodology work together in this study...they are both important. So, once I had made that decision, I then positioned them loosely in accordance with themes that had arisen in our conversations – ones like precarity, identity, support, etc.

**celisne**

...but am I right in thinking that there is also an aesthetic aspect to the way you positioned them...?

**me**

...I'm surprised you even noticed...yes, if You listen carefully, You will have seen that the opening story, that of Bill, centres around noise...and by the time that You get to the end of the overall story, silence has returned...

**celisne**

...but surely, you should start with silence and then end with noise, to show that you are listening to postgraduates who teach...that their voices have gone from being silent to being heard...

**me**

...but I don't see it like that celisne...I see it that their voices were always there...powerfully present...for all to hear...but then, as the concept of GTAs has developed, their voices are being silenced...hence the silent ending...

**celisne**

...well, I think others will see it differently...

**me**

...and so they should...

-----

### **A poetic licence to...dialogue**

You will also notice as you flick through these pages that each of the stories presented is prefaced with a dialogic poem, acting as a curtain raiser. This is another way in which I am reflecting a multiplicity of voices in this story...my words joining with those of the participants, thereby creating a 'new' voice...

*Their voices, my thoughts, our poems...*

To borrow the words of McCormack (2009, p. 17), I see these poems as 'a space of dialogue' between myself and the eleven participants, with the poem acting as 'a perfect catalyst for the conversation' (McCormack, 2009, p. 17).

...blending our words together in this way, represents for me, the continuity of storytelling and the idea that beginnings and endings are somewhat artificial concepts, as the story lives on...

-----

**celisne**

oh, I was wondering about them...but tell me, how were these created and by whom and were they shared...?

**me**

well, I created them...I listened back to our conversations, I pulled out the words that stood out for me...that captured meaning(s) for me and that I could relate to...

**celisne**

did you use their exact words from the transcripts?

**me**

absolutely...and then I reconsidered how those words bounced off my experiences, or 'glanced off' as Clough (2002) would say, and that led to my words on the right and then some just drifted across the page as I didn't really see them as separate...for me, these poems are a composite of their words and experiences, my reflections on their experience and on my own...and You will read them and will have your own interpretation of them...

**celisne**

and you did share them with the participants...?

**me**

of course...and Charlotte came back and said it was 'very interesting to read and I love the dialogic poem'...  
but do you know what I find bizarre?

**celisne**

what...?

**me**

I read them back now and I can never remember which are my words and which are theirs....

**celisne**

...does that even matter...sure, it's all *our* story...  
...Now what are you waiting for?

**me**

What do you mean? I just wanted to set the scene first and then invite more participants on stage...

**celisne**

*(smirking quizzically)*

'invite' – now, that's an odd word to use in this context...who are you to invite them on stage? Isn't it *their* stage as much as yours? You don't own it...should they not be inviting you onto the stage...?

**me**

Yeah, well, I suppose we share the stage together don't we...?

**celisne**

Well if that's your view...then what are you doing on stage on your own now...where's everyone else...? you can't spend ages setting the scene and just describing the characters...if you do that, then it's not about *them*, it's still about *you*...can't we just hear from them...we've only heard from Bill so far...

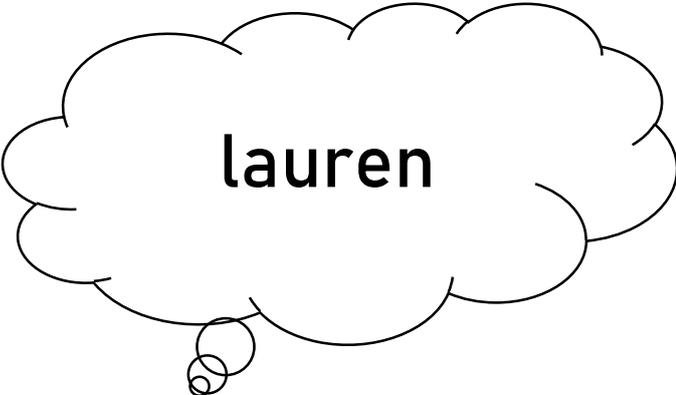
**me**

Fine...look, why don't we just get Lauren on stage and hear some of what she has to say...

**celisne**

Great...quiet so...dim the lights...let's hear from Lauren...

-----



**lauren**

*Do many people here feel they have voices?*

*Who cares?*

*there's no one to report back to...*

*there's no coordination, there's nobody monitoring this...*

*So just do what you like... nobody is listening anyhow...*

*Remember a voice is powerful*

*...but it needs to be heard...*

*they will only listen if you're a lecturer*

*I'm only part-time...*

*Who cares?*

*But...*

*...I've always felt like a lecturer*

*I've always felt completely different*

*they felt that I was the lecturer...*

*so then, just keep everyone on side...*

*'...one more lecturing hour and that would secure me a contract...'*

*'If you're not happy with the 7 hours, there are plenty of others who  
will take them.'*

*How long will they give me to think it over...?*

*...always conscious of not burning bridges*

*...let's play ball!*

## LAUREN ET MOI

Freedom to experience

So many similar words just flooded my head...

Don't speak...

say nothing...

don't burn your bridges...

don't get into trouble...

keep your head down

just get on with it

don't complain...

...don't rock the boat...

*Prologue: Lauren had deliberately chosen this postgraduate programme because she knew it came with the promise of teaching hours and teaching is what Lauren wanted...and wants to do. She had taught adults before, as an English language teacher, so she was confident that she had some experience.*

Lauren was sitting back in the chair, ready for me to press 'record'. We were meeting in her institution...and the only room that was free was a dark one, with no windows to the world outside. The fact that it was a dull day outside didn't help...

I felt hidden...what did she feel...?

It was like switching on a light...Lauren's enthusiasm brought a glow to the room. She seemed very eager to talk and she smiled a lot too, putting me at ease (funny, that I had spent so long reminding myself to make the participants feel relaxed and it was always me who was the most ill at ease).

I looked at her and I couldn't help but think that she reminded me of someone...

...who?

Please come to me quickly, as I don't want to be trying to think of someone else while we are talking...

Who are you...?

Come on...

That's it...

It was that substitute teacher I'd had in 6<sup>th</sup> class in primary school all those years ago...I can't remember her name...I can see her...eagerness etched into her face...

...her name clearly faded, overshadowed by her enthusiasm. She was the type of teacher who didn't just want to try out *one* new thing...but *every* new thing... (I wondered if new teaching postgrads were the same...)

...she was bubbly...

...encouraging us to engage in different crafts - 'let's cover a Mateus Rosé bottle with scraps of paper, varnish it and make a candle holder out of it'...and... 'why not try out some musical instruments' (more spittle in a tin whistle!)

...so energetic; just waiting to prove herself as a teacher... but getting no validation from us...

No validation...

All that newness and passion for learning was just tiring us and we were never so delighted to see our old teacher returning, nestling into her cushion-laden seat, placing her stockinged-feet back on the radiator and letting out a comfortable, reassuring sigh. Normal sedentary service resumed...

But this wasn't Lauren...

Sorry, back to Lauren...

...a few anodyne comments about the weary weather exchanged, and Lauren suddenly came out with the memorable line...

... I've always felt like a lecturer...So I've always felt completely different...

I thought to myself, okay, this is 'Lauren the lecturer' and not 'Lauren the teaching postgraduate student'; that's how she saw herself and that's the image she wanted others to have of her.

*[Aside: I found it interesting that, later in our conversation, she commented, 'I think you're staff when it suits them and you're student when it suits them' - I wasn't quite sure who the 'them' was, but I had a sense that she was referring to those in more managerial positions...]*...

For that moment, I was intrigued; what made her identify as a lecturer? Was it that this was her chosen career path and she thought that if she saw herself as a lecturer, then it would be easier for everyone else to see her as a lecturer?

We hadn't gone much further in our chat, before Lauren revealed that lecturing was indeed her overarching plan. She wanted the chance to teach, to gain the required experience and this was, as she said, 'the big thing to get into lecturing'.

What struck me straight away listening to Lauren talking was how she constantly referred to *lecturing* and didn't question at all whether she should be doing any other teaching-related duties, like tutoring or assessing. It was almost that she had presumed her 2 hours of teaching-

related duties would be lecturing. Did this make her identify as a lecturer...? We would return to this...

But first, we travelled back to a recollection of her first day as a teaching postgraduate and things hadn't been so good after all; Lauren had been given a timetable with the lecturing hours already on it and I got the distinct impression that she hadn't been consulted on it.

*The scenario:*

Timetabled with 2<sup>nd</sup> year students – perfect; much easier than 4<sup>th</sup> years, simply because she might have known some of them – god, that would've been awkward...even she would've found that strange having a postgrad teaching her...she would've felt as though, by having a GTA teaching you, you were 'losing out'...

I was intrigued by her use of the term 'losing out' – '*Why would they be losing out?*'...

For Lauren, she had it in her head that, as she said...

'...if somebody has 10 years' experience...they may be better than you, when in fact, they may not be'.

Was there a correlation between experience and expertise?

But back to that first day again...

So all seemed relatively positive

group of 2<sup>nd</sup> year students – check;

previous experience – check;

saw herself as a lecturer – check;

the stage is set...

...what could possibly go wrong?

And then she went to her classroom...

As well as being assigned the class group, Lauren had been allocated the room, but again...no consultation in advance...

She walked into the space...a large lecture hall...all the students up at the back, Lauren having to walk down to the podium, the lights following her as she went...shining down on her as she reluctantly took her position centre stage...

As she spoke about it now, I could feel the panic in her words and taste her nerves...

...oh my God, I am so out of my depth. What am I doing, and I just started talking then about...this is what we're going to do and just kinda went on with it because it was just...either go...forget about it or just go and do it.

She described it as the most intimidating thing she had ever done and I think she meant it.

This had thrown her...

But as she had described it, what struck me was that her nerves that day didn't seem to centre around knowledge or content, but rather around the new experience that she was living through. She confirmed that it was

more the nervousness of doing something new...but I couldn't help but wonder if this could have been avoided...

That actor on the stage metaphor came rushing back to me and memories of one of my first teaching sessions resurfaced. I had 10 students, all 4<sup>th</sup> years, and I too had been allocated a big lecture theatre for my session with them - we had far too much space; they all sat at the back and from my podium, I felt like I was due to deliver some inspiring, presidential inaugural address. It was back to the idea of a static performance of transferring canonical knowledge that I talked about in the opening act...

Lights...camera...teach...

Pressure on...

It was a class on 'Advanced French Grammar' (pressure doubled in the word 'advanced') and the session had to be delivered entirely through French. I didn't feel in any way 'advanced' that day. I remember feeling so small and out of my depth wishing that I could 'fast forward' through the session. It was like one of those nightmares where you try to speak, but no words come out. No one had prepared me for that and afterwards, there had been nobody to tell about how uncomfortable the experience had made me feel.

Twenty-four years later and the same thing had happened to Lauren...was there anyone there to talk to?

I asked her if there had been anyone there to help and she explained that she had been given the hour by a lecturer who, from what Lauren said, wanted no more to do with it – an abandoned pet after the fairylights had long since dimmed...

This idea of being left without much direction or support permeated through much of Lauren's story, as she continued to describe how another of the lecturers gave her the freedom to do what she wanted with one of the modules.

But it got me thinking...'freedom to do what you want' – sometimes that's not what we want when starting out – *guidance* would be better. But freedom was something she also had when it came to looking at assignments – she didn't have to look through them, but chose to do it for the experience. It was all about experience for Lauren...but most of this was experienced alone...where was the support?

It was there for the students, however, who readily approached Lauren, rather than their full-time lecturer, when they had any queries. Lauren was the first port of call when it came to student support...

But where was Lauren's support?

Looking at assignments was one thing, but when it came to grading them, Lauren was given free rein again, something which didn't seem to sit

comfortably with her, so she sought advice from the lecturer on this process.

But there was a hands-off response as the lecturer didn't want to see any of the scripts nor the marking. Instead, Lauren sought validation through the marks themselves...as she explained...

...the ones who...did really well [...] I was kind of relieved 'cos I was able to think well, maybe I'm doing something right...

She would've appreciated some input from the lecturer, as she wanted to make sure that what she had done was correct...

She softly said...

...it would've been nice for her to agree...the first time I was very, sort of...very...wanted to make sure...

This led seamlessly onto the topic of mentoring and whether or not Lauren felt she would've benefitted from having a mentor for her teaching. I'm sure she had given it much prior thought...she would've liked it for the marking aspect, but not otherwise, as she would have felt as if she were 'being watched'. She felt it might have been a good thing that she had to go and figure things out for herself; after all, wasn't that what everyone had to do...?

But I wasn't convinced that teaching postgraduate students should have to work it out by themselves...

But just like me, Lauren was still quietly puzzling over the idea of mentoring, for, as she commented, she had only gone to her lecturer because she was doubting herself and wanted 'the security of her, saying that's okay'. The term 'doubting herself' struck a chord with me...I looked at Lauren and felt like I should reveal the sad truth to herself that she, like me, might be doubting herself for a long time to come. I still doubt my own ability in the classroom. But Lauren seemed to think that with time, she'd become an expert.

We then got on to talking about inputting into curriculum and whether or not Lauren felt that she had the power to recommend changes in modules; did she feel that she had a voice when it came to curriculum design?

She did...but only on an informal basis...

She would've welcomed something more formalised that would have allowed her to have her say (maybe we had returned to the idea of validation again). The way she validated it to herself was that if the institution entrusted you with the delivery of a module, then they should trust your opinion of that module. I couldn't but agree...

But was there any encouragement to hear the voices of teaching postgrads...?

I hadn't been aware but I must've vocalised this question as suddenly Lauren was answering...her words hit hard...

...I don't know. Do many people here feel they have voices? You know, I don't know...I don't know. It's hard to say...I think it's...I think you're always conscious of not burning bridges...I don't want to burn any bridges. So you're aware of that I think. I think we're all very aware of that over in the [postgraduate building]...you need to make friends...

By 'burning bridges', was the reference to throwing away the possibility of a permanent job? Or did it refer to the idea of the vulnerability they felt as they did not wish to jeopardise their scholarships or access to future opportunities by not complying with the rules of the organisation (Dubin and Beisse, 1967).

Did Lauren (did the other teaching postgrads) feel the need to conform to keep their positions?

...was voicing your opinion seen as something dangerous?

...was she electing to be silent or was she being silenced in her role?

Lauren didn't go into more detail on this and I didn't push for an explanation either...let sleeping dogs lie...

On a similar theme of maintaining relationships and not burning bridges, I asked Lauren about her relationship with her supervisor, when it came to Lauren's teaching duties. Her comments didn't need any clarification; the position of her supervisor was clear; research was the priority, and she knew her supervisor would prefer if she wasn't teaching and instead, just focusing on her thesis. Teaching was 'second' to her supervisor...

evident in her words to Lauren...

...you're getting a [postgraduate degree] out of the research, you're not really getting anything for the teaching.

For its starkness, that was worth repeating...

*...you're not really getting*

*anything*

*for the teaching.*

Lauren laughed as she said that she had to explain to her supervisor that she actually wanted to teach.

I cried inside. It felt like the day that teaching died...

I thought it really odd that an academic member of staff could devalue teaching to that extent. It seemed as though, in that very moment, the academic world had gone mad – a teaching postgrad had felt the need to explain to a supervisor that teaching was something that they wanted to do and a supervisor was questioning the value of teaching?

But was the supervisor just echoing the institution's narrative? Was this the not-so-hidden discourse in the sector – research mattered, teaching didn't...?

And like heavy rain on my parade, it just got worse...and the day seemed to be getting increasingly darker...

Lauren recounted the story of a supervisor she knew who had recently

submitted two separate proposals for research. She described her as being very excited for the simple reason that if both of the proposals were approved, that would be...

'...4 hours on her timetable, which she would be able to get rid of, as she would be able to take the things she doesn't like and say [to a postgrad], you go teach this and you go teach this and you go teach this...'

I couldn't help but get the sense that some lecturers were in ways offloading their teaching onto the postgrads. But with a heavy teaching load of between 16 and 18 teaching hours a week in the IoT sector, which is substantially more than those in the university sector, was it any surprise?

But it wasn't just me who recoiled on hearing Lauren describe how this offloading worked...she too seemed shocked by it, referring to it as a 'horrible attitude' on behalf of the supervisor. It sat badly with her to think that a supervisor could see a postgraduate as somebody who would just accept someone else's cast-offs. In Lauren's words, 'that's not nice...that's not nice' and it would inevitably lead to a GTA having a 'dreadful experience'. Very clearly, Lauren could see the damage that this could do in trying to attract future postgraduates into teaching. As she said...

...it was enough to turn them off teaching...

...which would be perpetuated in future years with incoming postgraduates being cautioned by others that 'the teaching is horrible'.

Again, I began to wonder what message was being sent out about teaching and research and which was being prioritised. This led me to question Lauren on which she herself prioritised but, as I asked, her words 'don't burn bridges' were still burning in my ears. I think I already knew what her response would be...research took the focus...but sometimes she saw teaching as a 'nice break' from her research...

A 'nice break from research', I wondered?

This aligned very much with the view that teaching was 'a refuge from research', as echoed by Harland and Plangger (2004, p. 82). But deep down I had the sense that Lauren preferred the teaching and never treated it like a chore and I got the feeling that she wanted her supervisor to value her teaching too (although she would never say it to her supervisor). She seemed quite pragmatic about it...

...some people just prefer research to teaching. Some people prefer teaching. To me, sometimes I feel like the research gets in the way of teaching. So you know...but that's because I want to teach. [...] But the people who want to research, yeah, maybe it is 2 hours...maybe it seems to them it is getting in the way...

Getting in the way...time seemed so limited that everything seemed to be getting in the way...

And Lauren had heard other stories, ones from other postgrads teaching, where they had been asked by their supervisors, at very short notice, to cover classes for them. She concluded that they were being taken advantage of...and once more, I agreed.

There was power at play also...could a postgraduate student say no to their supervisor?

In Lauren's words, so much of the postgraduate experience depended on, as she commented...

...the supervisor and their power...

with some supervisors seeing postgrads as existing for their own convenience...

Her words were left hanging in the air, like a thick fog that would never dissipate...

And a situation that had started so full of enthusiasm, had slipped into something more sombre...maybe a hard-hitting reality as to what it meant to be a postgrad who teaches...

Though our conversation had come to one end, Lauren had left me with so much to think about, things that were uncomfortable, but that shouldn't be ignored...

Maybe we needed to burn those bridges after all, to illuminate their experiences, to hear their voices...and to stop them being kept in the dark...

Postscript

Six months elapsed and Lauren emailed me to see if it would be possible to meet up again. She had read through her story and reflected and

wanted to talk about it. I was delighted that we were reconnecting and looked forward to another conversation with her. We met somewhere different that second time – a bright airy office in her institution. What a change from last time...

There was one thing in particular that Lauren wanted to revisit in her story and that was the part where I had commented on my surprise that her supervisor was not necessarily supportive of her teaching. In her view, my interpretation didn't reflect what she had wanted to say. She explained that her supervisor was indeed very supportive but that she had been concerned about the amount of work that Lauren was taking on by way of her teaching duties. We talked about this in greater detail, but what struck me was that, at the end of this conversation, Lauren again referred to the level of negativity that surrounded the whole idea of postgraduate researchers who were teaching. When I probed a bit further, she commented...

Well, everyone was negative about it, including the supervisors and the postgrads themselves.

And I thought: maybe this negative bubble is down to the fact that we don't listen to the concerns of the postgrads before they start teaching...or maybe we simply don't listen at all...

### **ACT III:**

**‘Though this be madness, yet there is method in it’**

- Polonius, *Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 2, lines 223-224

*‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.’*

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859)

**And so the story continues to unfold...**

As a child, I remember always wanting to have stories told or read to me.

As they were being recounted I used to try and visualise the story as it might be played out in my head. It was almost as though my mind became a stage for the production of the story.

Stories acted out...

-----

**celisne**

...wait a minute...are you suggesting that this story is being 'played out' the same way?

**me**

well that is the intention (although it is impossible to have clear intentions about every aspect of a piece of work)...the stories are acted out through the performativity of the text...

**celisne**

I get it...a bit like it's 'the language which speaks, not the author' (Barthes, 1967, p. 3)...you're letting the words and the text act out the story, yeah?

**me**

you've got it Celisne...

**celisne**

*(smugly, as though she'd worked out who the murderer was)*  
ah, but...I'm not in the middle of a traditional play, am I?...it's more like one of those interactive plays, isn't it...you know the ones where the audience has a part to play...

**me**

I'm impressed Celisne...you've gotten the hang of this much quicker than I did...yes, the audience, You are interpreting...there would be no point in this if it were not for the audience...

**celisne**

...okay, we'll run with that so...but where did this interest in storying come from...?

**me**

let me tell you...

-----

...I recall that, as a child, I developed a fascination with *The Mousetrap*, the world's longest running stage play, based on a novel of the same name by Agatha Christie. My ten-year old self couldn't get my head around the fact that a play could have been running in London since 1952.

*'But all the actors must now be dead'*, I puzzled to myself, *'how can the same play still be running?'* ...

My Dad carefully explained to me that the actors had changed over the years, but that the story remained the same, just as the script and the setting remained unchanged. It was the same...

*'That couldn't be right'*, I remember thinking. If the people are different, then the story is different. You can't have the same experience of a story with different people involved.

*The people make the story different...*

This fascination with stories and plays didn't change as I got older, and although I never made it onto the stage as an actor (amateur dramatics with my siblings aside!), I did when I *became* a teacher...

...wait...do you *become* a teacher, or are you born a teacher?...

or are you always *becoming* a teacher...?

When I wrote my first teaching philosophy, I was asked to think of a metaphor that best depicted me as an educator. My mind returned to the theatre and the image I conjured up was that of a lone actor on stage, trying to remember a pre-written script and desperately seeking to keep an audience captivated. At that time, I didn't see myself as engaging with anyone else, but just focusing on what I saw as the job at hand – learning 'my' lines and imparting 'my' knowledge to the students.

The script has changed considerably since (and the people have changed...including me!) but the metaphor remains the same...

That is why I chose the metaphor<sup>19</sup> of a story acted out on stage to best illustrate why and how I chose narrative inquiry as the methodology for this study.

### **Placed in the auditorium too... realities are in the eyes of the beholders**

Having worked in education for almost 25 years, the view that I am alone on the stage, reciting a script to the audience, has long since elapsed. Instead, I now believe that

...together *with* the students, *we co-construct* the script

and we are all actors in the learning process,

relying on each other for our lines, *collaborating our* story...

This is a reflection of my own ontological and epistemological stances, starting with my assumptions as to how the world is composed and how knowledge is created. Aligning with a social constructionist perspective, I see meanings and knowledge as co-constructed between people (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Gadamer, 1988), making it a dynamic process (Gergen and Gergen, 2012); one in which the actors involved don't just construct interpretations in isolation but

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<sup>19</sup> Metaphors are often used by narrative inquirers as a way to help us think about our work and while Clandinin and Connelly (2000) openly endorse the use of metaphors by saying that they have 'a liberating effect for a writer searching for form' (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 163), they also caution against the danger of getting too caught up in the metaphor and risking squeezing the field texts into an artificial form, which detracts from the meaning of the stories themselves. In that respect, I have decided to broadly apply my metaphor to my methodological approach.

rather ‘against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language and so forth’ (Schwandt, 2000, p. 197). This would suggest that knowledge is therefore a shared, creative process, a mutual process between researcher and participant (Jacobson *et al.*, 2007), where many thought patterns, many ideas all come together, creating different meanings...

*But firstly, how am I interpreting ontology and why is it necessary to explore?*

I see ontology as being concerned with reality, the nature of existence, or the study of being (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Crotty, 1998; Gray, 2013; Lichtman, 2014), of what reality is like and the ‘elements which it contains’ (Silverman, 2010, p. 109). It also questions whether or not reality is the product of the human mind (Burrell and Morgan, 1979).

*But why is it relevant to explore an ontological perspective?*

As our individual ontological stance influences everything else in the research process, its importance cannot be overstated and, because of this, it is often seen as the starting point of the research process. Crotty (1998) suggests that a particular ontological orientation infers a specific epistemological stance and vice versa. Therefore, it is the foundation stone that impacts directly upon our epistemological perspective and the methodology and methods chosen as part of the research.

*But what is mine?*

I sometimes find it is easier to describe what I *am not*, rather than what I *am*. This is one of those times...

...I find it difficult to relate to the positivist paradigm that claims that ‘reality exists external to the researcher’ (Gray, 2013, p. 20), only unveiled through scientific enquiry. Instead, aligning with the poststructuralist perspective (Foucault, 1980b; Deleuze 1994, 1995; Barthes, 1967; Derrida, 1967), which questions concepts of meaning, truth and reality, I believe that there are many different signifiers and an infinite amount of interpretations for everything, which are created through a subject’s interactions within the world (Gray, 2013, p. 20).

This view is upheld by hooks (2010, p. 50), who remarks that ‘there is no absolute truth, that we all believe what we see from our perspective’, thereby affirming the notion of multiple interpretations. And this is what I have modelled with the participants’ stories...their stories are my interpretations...they would no doubt tell the stories much differently...

And so, from an ontological perspective, I subscribe to the notion postulated by Guba and Lincoln (1994) that realities are socially and experientially-based and are often shared among many individuals. In this way, they are both constructed and interpreted. Given that this view derives from the idea that knowledge is socially constructed and that meaning is created by social actors together, it provides the grounding for my epistemological stance.

*But what am I talking about when I’m talking about epistemology?*

For me, epistemology is concerned with ways of knowing and learning about the world (Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, and Snape, 2014). Leading on from this, I believe that knowledge is a shared, creative process, where many thought patterns, many ideas all come together, creating different meanings. My years teaching

have also been an epistemological act and have influenced my view of knowledge; initially thinking that my role was to transfer information, I soon realised that teaching was about knowledge creation, sharing ideas with students, co-constructing knowledge together. But as new knowledge is created, it takes on new meaning and propels us to think in different ways, thereby creating further new knowledge. In that sense, I view the world in a very Deleuzian (1995), rhizomatic way, believing that ideas and concepts all come together and then assume their own 'lines of flight' (Deleuze, 1995, pp. 140-141) taking on new meanings as they develop. Deleuze's philosophical concept of rhizomatic thinking was based on the view that all things in the world are inextricably interconnected, that, though individual parts may look separate, they are all interlinked (a bit like all narratives are merely episodic and together constitute a bigger, grander narrative).

So I would invite You, as you read this story, to interpret each word as you will and create new meanings and new knowledge.

This relates well to my metaphor of a story on a stage, where we might have our own lines of script but all the lines come together to form the overall story. And as the audience is hearing each line, they are interpreting it in their own way, thereby creating a new line of flight. And remember, every work is 'eternally written here and now' (Barthes, 1967, p. 3) because each re-reading brings a new interpretation.

This was particularly evident in something that Leanne, one of the participants in this study, said when I contacted her by email with *my interpretation of her story...*

Here's how she responded...

**Leanne:** It's always interesting to hear a reflection back from another person...the other version of the same conversation. Obviously I experienced our conversation my way and while I'm glad to see you picked up the essential points of my story, I found it interesting to see the emphasis that I didn't realise I was placing - but you did pick up on.

For me, this just shows how we all view the world differently and how *I* view the world determines how *I* design my research and create knowledge. Whatever research methods I choose for a study depends on what I, as the researcher, am trying to discover (Silverman, 2000) and explore. As a social constructivist, my purpose is to extrapolate meanings from the social situation under scrutiny, which has led me to thinking more about interpretivism.

### **Interpreting Interpretivism**

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**celisne**

*(sounding slightly confused)*

Can we just think about interpretivism for a minute? How are you interpreting it? i think You need to make that a bit clearer...

**me**

well, interpretivists embrace the world of the first-person, the subjective experience or experiences...it's the idea that reality is created by the social actions in a particular setting (Schwandt, 1998)...but that this reality is constructed and re-constructed over and over again (Berger and Pullberg, 1965).

**celisne**

*(sounding slightly confused)*

‘first-person’ you say...but does that include you as the researcher...?

**me**

oh course, it’s a paradigm which embraces the idea that social phenomena must be viewed holistically and must incorporate the values of the researcher. I suppose, interpretivists believe that the inquirer becomes part of the research as ‘meaning-maker’, interacting with others who are also meaning-makers (Phothongsunan, 2010).

**celisne**

*(almost looking for validation)*

So, it’s almost like you are a meaning-maker...?

**me**

we’re all meaning-makers and that’s the aim of this research – to understand members of a social grouping, to focus on ways meanings are created and negotiated...all leading to a better understanding of human action...

**celisne**

what is this way of understanding...?

**me**

...it’s known as ‘Verstehen’ and is referred to as ...‘the process by which we make sense of or interpret our everyday world’ (Schwandt, 1998, p. 226). The goal of this research is to understand ‘the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it’ (ibid., p. 221).

**celisne**

and that’s what you want to do with postgraduates who teach...?

**me**

...yeah, try and think of it as a paradigm that ‘...assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and respondent co-create understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 13).

**celisne**

well, I’ll be interested to see how these participants ‘negotiate their way around the world and make sense of it’ (Blaikie, 2000, p. 115).

**me**

...so will I...

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### **Dabbling in the wilderness**

But allow me to return to how I fit into this research process...as I said, as a researcher, *I* am part of a larger troupe of players, *not separate* from them, *but one of them*. So though I am not a postgraduate who teaches, I am a postgrad and I do teach, but not in the same HEI and, more significantly, unlike the postgrads in this study, I am a tenured member of staff...

...but, I am part of the cast...and maybe I am the lead character in this study, in so much as this is also the story of being a researcher...

My position is an integral part of the process (West, 1996), a view which also reflects Riessman's (1993, p. 8) perspective that:

'Investigators do not have direct access to another's experience. We deal with ambiguous representations of it – talk, text, interaction, and interpretation. It is not possible to be neutral and objective...'

...not only is it not *possible* to be neutral and objective, but it is not even *desirable*.

This supports Silverman's (2000, p. 2) claim that 'value freedom in social science is either undesirable or impossible', and advocates that research should be openly value-centred rather than simply pretending to be value-free (Bochner, 1994).

In that sense, I am already on the stage, part of the story...

*I*, the researcher, do not actually *begin* the study, but already have a position, and, if I am examining an area that I have already read and thought about, I am already

in the *middle* of the study (St Pierre, 2015). As a researcher, I need to be aware of this subjectivity, which I see as almost like ‘a garment that cannot be removed’ (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17).

...retracing my metaphor, we all come to the stage with our own views, having interpreted life’s events in a particular way, but how we all act it out depends on our context and on everyone else in the play...

In that way, we all have different interpretations of the one story and we each have our version of the story to tell. But each time we tell *our own story*, it is to a new audience and they are likely to interpret the story differently, depending on the way in which they see the world.

### **Stories: (de)constructed by poststructuralism**

So, meaning is everywhere. It is not just in explicit structures but also in gaps [...] and ambiguities [...]...

Therefore, for me...

...what is not said in a text or dialogue can often be more *powerful* than what is...

You might have a different view of this...

But I subscribe to the idea of ‘reader-as-creator of meaning’ (O’Neill, 2015, p. 373), who, in effect, displaces the author as being the absolute authority.

-----

**celisne**  
(*smiling*)

did you just say 'authority'...?

**me**

yeah...

**celisne**

well maybe you should reconsider that...maybe it should be 'author-i-ty'...

**me**

...yes, maybe we should do like Barthes (1967, p. 3) and refer to the 'scriptor' instead...the one who 'is born simultaneously with the text'. And the scriptor is there to produce the work and not to explain it.

**celisne**

'scriptor'...what would that be in Barthes' native French?

**me**

'scripteur'...writer....

**celisne**

but doesn't it have another meaning in French?

**me**

yeah, 'scriptwriter'...

**celisne**

kinda what you are doing now...!

**me**

peut- être...mais qui sait...?

-----

All of this reflects Foucault's (1998b) view that authorship was problematic, but also has echoes of Barthes' (1967) thinking, that 'once an action is recounted [...]...the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins' (Barthes, 1967, p. 2). These interpretations somewhat obscure a writer's intentions, thereby elevating the reader to a higher status than the author, where the reader displaces the author as the writer of the text (Barthes, 1967). Agger (1991) suggested that, in this way,

Every text is a contested terrain in the sense that what it appears to "say" on the surface cannot be understood without reference to the concealments and contextualizations of meaning going on simultaneously to mark the text's significance (Agger, 1991, p. 112).

In that sense, maybe we are witnessing the death of one author or the emergence of 'the space left empty by the author's disappearance' (Foucault, 1998b, p. 209), accompanied by the advent of a narrative, which is not owned by one person but shared by many, at a particular moment in time.

This would support my view that there is no one reality, but a myriad of realities and, as such, there is no one story, but many stories – the one narrated, the one interpreted, the one re-told and the one re-interpreted.

-----

**celisne**

so, there are many stories, but I presume that there is a beginning, middle and end...?

**me**

no...they are not as linear as that...think circles...!

**celisne**

we're back to going around in circles again!!

-----

**Their stories...my interpretations...our narrative...my responsibility...?**

But there is more to this study than stories...there is a sense of responsibility towards each of the participants that I talk with. I want to research 'in a way that honours the subject, the context, and researcher' (Lyle, 2013, p. 19); after all, I am the one who gets to initially *interpret* their story and who is *transmitting* these

stories to a larger audience. But the story that they originally told has gone – it was a snapshot in time and how it is interpreted, reconstructed and re-expressed is now up to us. Because of this, you could question as to whose story it now is...

that of the GTA,

mine,

both,

ours,

yours,

theirs...

But, I suppose this is only relevant if we believe that stories belong to one individual.

Instead, if we believe that all stories are socially constructed, as I do, then there will always be many parties involved and the stories will always be co-owned. The stories are constructs, composed of different voices, perspectives and interpretations...

But remember I am presenting a snapshot in time, not a perfect sequence of events, but a series of episodes and events that rhizomatically intertwine – a network of stories that have no clear beginning or ending. Using Deleuze's (1995) metaphor, Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou (2013) aptly describe it by saying that:

The image of the individual with a core self is replaced within the narrative, rhizomatic thinking by the image of a multiple, multifaceted individual who shapes and reshapes him/herself within specific contexts and who is open

for the continuous inclusion of change. From a human need for stability and order, people continuously create different kinds of connections between story elements throughout their speaking (Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2013, p. 112).

**What’s my story with narrative?**

*But, if everything can be interpreted, then what is my interpretation of narrative?*

For me, narrative can be best represented on a continuum, from story reproduction to story re-interpretation, where the former is a word-for-word retelling of the original story and the latter is more of an interpretation of the story heard by the narrative inquirer.

But where the narrative is represented on the continuum all depends on the researcher, their position in the research and their epistemological underpinnings – are they there to communicate a story told or to re-story a story told, in conjunction with the participants?

**How best to act out these stories...**

Aligning with my own views that our lives are constructed by stories, narrative inquiry is a means of revealing the teaching postgrads’ stories...

-----

**celisne**

*(earnestly)*

Look, I know you already mentioned narrative, but can you give me a bit more detail on it...just so we are on the same page...

**me**

sure...well I'll give it a go...so, for me, it's a portmanteau term (see a French term, there's no getting away from French!)...sorry, yes it's a term used to describe a qualitative approach to research...; narrative is an interpretative approach (Riessman, 1993) that essentially adopts storytelling as its medium (Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2013) and places people, meaning and identity at the heart of its approach (Bochner and Riggs, 2014). But the storying for me really makes narrative inquiry akin to aesthetic inquiry, it's a literary form...

**celisne**

...you're making it sound like an artistic experience...

**me**

...it is...

**celisne**

...so that's what it means...

**me**

and don't forget multiplicity of meanings Celisne!...

**celisne**

what are you talking about now?

**me**

well, if you look at the etymology of the word 'narrative', it has two meanings in Latin: 'to tell' (*narrare*) and 'to know' (*gnarus*). So, narrative is both a way of telling and a way of knowing. And do you know the way you just compared it to being an artistic experience, well an 'artistic experience is a mode of knowledge' (Gadamer, 1988, p. 87)...

**celisne**

...I think I get what you are saying...so, it's a way of telling and also a way of knowing which allows us to make sense of the world around us (Polkinghorne, 1988; Bruner, 1990; Chase, 2005) through the unveiling of lived experience. Is that it...?

**me**

...pretty much, yeah...Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 20), who use narrative within an educational context, describe it as 'a way of understanding experience', whilst others have referred to it as 'a set of signs, which may involve writing, verbal or other sounds...that similarly convey meaning' (Squire, Davis, Esin, Andrews, Harrison, Hydén and Hydén, 2014, p. 5).

**celisne**

Right, the words that really stand out for me are ‘*meaning*’, ‘*understanding*’ and ‘*signs*’...and yeah, ‘*experience*’...but maybe you understand it differently...

**me**

well, my interpretation of narrative inquiry builds on that proposed by Bailey and Tilley (2002)...

**celisne**

which is what...?

**me**

...that the purpose of narrative inquiry is to reveal the meanings of the individuals' experiences, as opposed to trying to discover objective, decontextualized truths. So, the way I see it is that the narrative inquirer is tasked with trying to interpret and understand the experience of the participant and not just to explain or predict it (Wang and Geale, 2015). In essence, it is a way of ‘transforming knowing into telling’ (Mishler, 1986, as cited in Sandelowski, 1991, p. 162) or, if you prefer...it is the process of telling and retelling (Clandinin and Connolly, 2000).

**celisne**

*(smiling contently)*

I like that line...it kinda sums it up...the process of telling and retelling – it’s a bit like going round in circles again, isn’t it...?!

**me**

yeah, narrative is all about making sense of events and actions through examining the story (Riessman, 1993), which aligns with Hodgson and Standish’s (2009) view that narrative research is a way ‘to enable the voice of the research participants to be heard and to allow their experiences to be represented in their own words’ (Hodgson and Standish, 2009, p. 310).

**celisne**

so that means that stories and narratives can both be used to illustrate forces of power and discourse...

**me**

exactly, and it is power and discourse that are the foci of Foucault’s (1980a, 1980b, 1991) works...we’ll look at that more later...

**celisne**

but, tell me, is this being used as a research methodology in other contexts...? I’m just curious that’s all...

**me**

absolutely, it’s really multidisciplinary in nature; it’s been a particularly common approach within the social sciences, in fields such as psychology (Polkinghorne, 1988), anthropology (Bateson,

1972; Geertz, 1973), linguistics, history, sociology and more recently in education. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) first suggested the use of narrative inquiry within the field of education and their view is that education is essentially the construction, re-construction and sharing of knowledge between teachers and learners.

**celisne**

...teachers and learners...dichotomy? I'll come back to that again, but I would go along with what you have just said...I suppose you could argue that teaching has *always* been a narrative act, in the sense that it re-stories experience.

**me**

yeah, you've got a point there celisne...and because narrative allows the focus to be on listening to voices and hearing stories (Bell, 1997), I think it makes an apposite methodology for this study...

-----

### **A triadic puzzle**

Clandinin and Connolly (2000, p. 50), advocated that narrative is in fact a triadic puzzle between three dimensions: '*personal and social (interaction); past, present and future (continuity) combined with the notion of place (situation)*', thereby emphasising the ephemeral nature of meaning. Narrative may therefore be characterised as a temporal thread that weaves together a series of experiences which come to shape an individual's story. This aligns with the view expressed by Carr (1986, as cited in Bell, 2002, p. 207), that 'current events are understood as rising out of past happenings and pointing to future outcomes', which itself confirms the idea that stories are constantly evolving (West, 1996), like those of the postgraduates who teach...

Ultimately, the goal of the narrative inquirer is to deepen the reader's understanding of a particular phenomenon as conveyed through a story

(Polkinghorne, 2007). However, this also raises the issue of the extent to which the researcher's voice should be present in the representation of the participants' stories. Chase (2005) would argue that there should be a 'respectful distance between researchers' and narrators' voices' (Chase, 2005, p. 665), whilst Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 147) refer to the struggle for the narrative inquirer to express their own voice in a study that is telling the '...participants' storied experiences'..., and simultaneously speaking to the audience.

-----

**celisne**

I don't think you have found that to be a challenge! You're all over this story...

**me**

that's not the case celisne...it has been a struggle to weave myself into this story...it's made me feel quite vulnerable...if I was doing it all over again, it might be easier...

-----

As a methodology, narrative inquiry is rooted in social constructivism (Gergen and Gergen, 1984), as stories are not reflecting the world 'out there' but rather, they are constructed and interpreted by all those involved. Our experiences are lived, interpreted, recounted by us to a listener, who then interprets, re-stories and shares with another audience. Our world is a storied one and each story is multi-layered and unique. It is the manner in which we interpret and re-story that makes it all unique. This is how we live in our world – part of one large story – no real beginning or end, just events and characters interspersing with each other at various times, in various contexts. And it is only by telling stories about our lived experiences and fusing them with other stories, that we become cognisant of the

significance of our experiences (Widdershoven, 1993) and come to share other experiences (Van Manen, 1990). If we relay this back to our theatre metaphor, then all our stories are merely acts in the large-scale production that is our life story.

This is reminiscent of how Foucault (1980b) described his own research strategy, in that he suggested:

...these were only trails to be followed, it mattered little where they led; indeed it was important that they did not have a predetermined starting point and destination...[...]. They are in the final analysis, just fragments and it is up to you or me to see what we can make of them.

(Foucault, 1980b, p. 79)

In a cyclical way, this conveys the idea of the absence of a beginning, middle or end to research. The position postulated by Foucault (1980b) above suggests that the researcher is allowed to make sense of the analysis, almost as though they are empowered to create their own interpretation. And this sense of empowerment is also explored by Holloway and Freshwater (2007), as they advocate that it is through stories that individuals can take control and be empowered. So the power lies within the reader...

-----

**celisne**

...'story' and 'narrative'...you seem to use a lot of terms interchangeably Gina; could you give me more of idea of what *la différence*, sorry, the difference is between these two terms, or is there one, or maybe it's just Your interpretation...

**me**

well, 'story' and 'narrative' are often used interchangeably and are inextricably linked, but I see a subtle difference between them, and different interpretations as to what they might mean. Kim (2016)

describes *stories* as having ‘a ‘full’ description of lived experience’ (Kim, 2016, p. 9)...but, unlike many fictional stories, in which there is a defined structure...

...*beginning, middle, end*...

narratives can differ...the order of events can change...they can be chronological or not...narratives are ways of telling the story...a representation of a story...

**celisne**

...so they are both interpretive acts, where meaning is shared. It’s like the stories have become the objects and the subjects of the research, isn’t it?

**me**

that’s a fair reflection of it Celisne...

-----

### **Staging a narrative sequencing**

Though I would agree with Bruner (2002) when he suggests that a narrative essentially involves a sequence of events, which have human beings as characters, I would argue that the sequencing of events needs more exploration...

A *sequence* implies structure, a logical ordering (echoing a positivist approach) and though there may appear to be a sequence in the original story, as recounted by the participant, I would argue that this sequence can change once a story becomes retold, re-ordered and re-interpreted. That is why the stories here don’t necessarily follow a linear sequencing – narratives are too complex and subtle for that (Patterson, 2013). Instead, these stories might open with something that was said or something that happened during our conversations, reflective of their non-linear development. This reflects the narrative technique of beginning a story ‘in media res’ (from the latin ‘in the midst of things’), meaning that the reader can be plunged into a story in the middle of the action...

This aligns with the rhizomatic thinking as discussed earlier and is reflected in Kim's (2016) comment that, in narrative inquiry...

‘participants may not be linear thinkers; they may zigzag with their stories depending on what they believe is important for the moment’ (Kim, 2016, p. 203)....

Tamboukou (2013, p. 103) reflects this when she states that it was ‘...the Foucauldian idea of a history starting from the present and aspiring to the future...’ that inspired her to use narratives when she was writing genealogies of the female self. This idea of moving from the present towards the future appositely captures the temporal aspect of narrative.

Added to this, peoples’ lives are never that straightforward – when the curtain rises on a person’s life, the scene has already been set – from that moment, stories and characters interweave, transactions occur and experiences are interpreted in different ways by everyone around, including the readers, who forms their own construction of the final text that is presented (Bathmaker, 2010).

There is, therefore, a dependent, interconnected relationship between teller and audience, with the idea of continuity being significant, in that the narrative never has a defined beginning or end, but, instead, follows different lines of inquiry, depending on the different audiences and interpretations...

-----

**celisne**

...so, will you be using the terms 'narrative' and 'story' interchangeably, just like you use all other terms interchangeably...?

**me**

yes...but remember, stories/narratives are all merely episodes in our lives...

-----

### **Let's talk about the pros(e) – what can narratives do?**

Like Riessman (2008), I argue that one of the most resounding advantages of narrative is that it allows for the experiences of those who may normally be marginalised or silenced to be heard. Listen to **Marian's** words...

...there's a staff meeting coming up in the middle of the semester...[laughs]...yeah, which should be interesting... [...] ...we've been invited to go to that and give our opinion...but when it comes to like more kind of departmental things or like anything like that, I think I will be definitely more listening than talking...

Calling upon individuals to present their own experiences could be viewed as a liberating method of inquiry...

...the participants are the characters/authors/directors in their own stories...

...they lead the stories themselves and give them direction...as opposed to be questioned.

...they say what they want, and how they want...through the language that they use to tell the story (DePoy and Gitlin, 2016)...

Narrative can be considered as a triadic model, involving the researcher, the participants and the audience, each with a role to play in constructing the narrative and then conveying an experience to the reader. It constitutes a delicate interplay between all of the social actors involved, with different stories being told and re-told, which reinforces the idea that stories are all co-constructed (Chase, 2005) and have many different interpretations (Creswell and Miller, 2000).

### **Not always a happy ending**

But the role of the narrative inquirer is often seen as a complex one, in that they are tasked with so many disparate responsibilities...

They are more than just the director of the play...

They are helping to *write* the script...

*listening* to the cast,

*interpreting* what is being said,

*staging* the production and then...

*retelling* these stories to a new, wider audience.

They are responsible for respecting the original voice; but narrative inquiry involves more than just transmitting that voice. By communicating these stories, the narrative inquirer becomes both story-maker and teller (Gudmundsdottir, 2013), constantly weaving between stories heard, stories interpreted and stories

re-told. Some would criticise this on the basis that the original story can get lost and that what is represented becomes an interpretation of a story.

However, this is only a disadvantage if you believe that there is *only one true version of a story*, which does not align with my poststructuralist perspective that truth and knowledge are provisional and contingent (Dunn, 1997). This chimes with the view of West (1996), whose biographical analysis *Beyond Fragments: Adults, Motivation and Higher Education*, centres around participants' stories – he suggests that, with stories, it is 'important to stress that there is no final, definitive or easily generalizable 'truth' based on the 'facts' of these interviews' (West, 1996, p. 13).

### **Who 'owns' the story?**

The issue of story ownership is a contested one for many reasons, including that it goes beyond the actual story itself and raises issues around status, power and relations between the teller and the listener (Shuman, 2015). Authorship and reinterpretation are also skilfully questioned by Andrews (2013), as she astutely states that 'the very same words carry different meanings when they are authored – or read – in different places and times' (2013, p. 213), which also alludes to the ephemeral nature of meaning. Equally, Goffman (1974) supported this view by stating that retelling a story depends on the existence of a new audience (quite similar to my interpretation of *The Mousetrap* at the start of this act), which also reflects Barthes' (1967) view that new readers (audiences) bring new meaning. Clandinin and Connolly (2000, p. 177) also debate this question of ownership and conclude that a better way of considering it is to reframe the issue of

ownership into one of ‘relational responsibility’, in which a sense of trust develops between the researcher and the participant, as different representations of stories are produced by the researcher, who is always conscious of the way in which a story might be re-read and subsequently interpreted.

### **Identifying narrative power**

Poststructuralist and Foucauldian thinking are not just the framework for an analysis of power in this study, as this thinking is also reflected in the methodology adopted. Storytelling is a way of constructing our own identities (Bamberg, 2011) and narrative acts as a window into identity construction (Riessman, 2008), thus providing the link with agency in this story. By presenting my own story throughout, as a way of illuminating my own positionality, I uncover how I was influenced, not only to undertake this research, but to design it as a narrative study. Clandinin *et al.* (2007, p. 25) speak to the importance of this idea of personal justification in narrative, ‘of situating yourself in the study’...and *I am* in this study...

-----

**celisne**

you mentioned earlier that you didn’t see this as purely an autoethnographic study...do you want to explain the reasons for this...?

**me**

well there are two reasons mainly...like I said earlier, I really want this to be the stories of the postgraduates who teach...not mine.

**celisne**

...but it will also be your story too...it is your story...

**me**

...yeah, but let me share with you the etymology of the word 'autoethnography' as it might help to explain what I mean...

**celisne**

...you and etymologies, where did that come from...?

**me**

...from a year in Paris...studying the origins of the French language...

**celisne**

...ah pre-doctoral knowledge...at least I can't be blamed for that so!

Sorry, I interrupted you...tell me about the etymology of 'autoethnography'...

**me**

...well, breaking down the word 'autoethnography', we see that the 'auto-' or self comes first, followed by the 'ethno-' (or culture) and then the graph- (or writing). So, even in the word, the 'self' comes first...and though I acknowledge that I am an integral part of this story, as how can we possibly 'write stories of others without reflecting our own histories' (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 5)...this time...the postgrads who teach come first and maybe my story reflects theirs...

**celisne**

...okay, I get that...

**me**

...so try and think of me as on the stage, sharing the stage if you like...

**celisne**

...and what's the second reason...?

**me**

well, I suppose I see autoethnography as being a continuum, where pure autoethnography would focus extensively on the self, ...I'm on the continuum at a particular point...but maybe not fully immersed...

...that is perhaps a step too far for me at this point...it sits somewhat uncomfortably with me...

**celisne**

why...?

**me**

...I don't know...maybe there's a sense of vulnerability sharing a lot of my own story...who knows, that might change...

**celisne**

...as you develop as a researcher...?...so if you are on a continuum, how have you embraced autoethnography so?

**me**

...‘autoethnographic threads’...

**celisne**

...what the hell is an autoethnographic thread...?

**me**

...it’s a filament of me that weaves its way in and out of the story...fine enough to not dominate, to not be overly visible, to not overshadow the research participants...but consistently present throughout, sometimes explicitly in the foreground, sometimes cached in the background...but keeping the whole story knitted together...

**celisne**

...so that’s why your experience as an early career academic and as a student is coming through at various times...

**me**

...yes, so allow me to get back to it if you will...

-----

## **Power through silence**

-----

**celisne**

Doesn’t literature play a part in creating knowledge...?

**me**

absolutely...why are you asking?

**celisne**

I’m just thinking of one of my favourite books, it’s very powerful...and I think it could be relevant here in this study...

**me**

what is it...?

**celisne**

*Le Silence de la Mer*...by Jean Bruller...it was written in 1941 and became a symbol of the Resistance in German-occupied France. It’s about a French woman and her uncle who demonstrate

resistance against Germany by refusing to speak to a German officer who is occupying their home.

**me**

oh, I know it...it translates as '*The Silence of the Sea*', but there was also another meaning there...as 'mère' is the French word for mother and because the words sound the same, it could be interpreted as '*The Silence of the Mother*', where the 'Mother' represents the homeland...

**celisne**

oh, I didn't know that...but isn't that a great example of Derrida's (1982) *différance*...that fluidity of meaning...!

**me**

...it is...but here is something else I bet you didn't know either, that story, *Le Silence de la Mer* was written by Jean Bruller who wrote under the pseudonym of Vercors to protect his identity...or even identities (writer, illustrator, member of the Resistance...)

**celisne**

I'm surrounded by pseudonyms...and names to disguise identities...[laughs]...but it is a great book...it really demonstrates the power of silence and the way it can be used a powerful means of communication...a lack of words can often say more than the words themselves.

**me**

yeah, it's a case of power being exerted through discourse and practice...'discursive practices, have the power to hold the normative order in place' (Davies and Gannon, 2005, p. 319)...

**celisne**

exactly, and that's why I think it relates to this study...power exerted through silence...

**me**

well, that's one way of looking at it I suppose...

**celisne**

and do you know something else...if you think about it now, storytelling commands a respectful silence...do you remember, when you were young and someone announced that they were going to tell you a story...silence fell...

**me**

yeah, I remember...

**celisne**

*(after a silent pause)*

I've an idea...why don't we just hear another story now...from one of the participants...

**me**

...but I was just about to talk about research design...you're breaking the structure of this act...

**celisne**

aren't structures there to be broken!...listen, it's the perfect time to hear a story, don't you think...you can come back to wherever you were after that...

**me**

okay, I'll go get Sara so...

-----



**sara**

*I don't particularly care about teaching and I don't care about  
being in academia...*

*...It's a thing that I have to do  
but I'm not particularly driven to teaching.*

*It pays the bills...but in this case it doesn't...!*

*I like studying more than I like teaching...*

*But once I have the job I want to do a good job of it.*

*...a conscientious 'employee',*

*...a conscientious student...*

*I don't care about it doesn't really give me...I don't care. I just  
don't care, I don't hate it.*

*And sometimes less is more...*

### Shooting the Summer breeze with Sara...

Like, I guess the thing is...I don't particularly care about teaching and I don't care about being in academia...

What?

Sara's opening comment had thrown me...I hadn't expected it; but there was a refreshing honesty to her and an openness...and I liked that. She wasn't going to dance around the issue for the whole conversation, pretending that she really enjoyed it.

*Prologue: Sara didn't care about teaching. It wasn't that she didn't like it – she just didn't care about it. It was simply something she had to do; she didn't see a future in it and had no real interest in it as a career. But she was dedicated to it. She had been teaching for two years and had 4 teaching hours a week.*

It was one of the hottest mornings of the Summer. I had arranged to meet Sara at 11am; she was coming into town, especially to meet me. And as I sat with my coffee waiting, I began to feel really bad that I was taking up her time on this lovely day. I'm sure she had better things to be doing. But still, she clearly wanted to chat about her experience and I was looking forward to hearing her story.

But I wasn't really prepared for what I heard...

We sat in a dark, abandoned college canteen...Summer had a way of emptying out both noise and life, leaving behind the remains of the year. A period of hibernation. The only sound came from a cleaner busily working in the corner...I

wondered why he was cleaning...surely his work was done...surely he could hibernate too...

But Sara had just said she didn't particularly care about teaching...it still jarred with me...that's all I had cared about in over twenty years in the position – how could she not care...?

It brought me back to my own experience starting out teaching. I remember that initial concern I had in my first year that I didn't actually enjoy teaching as much as I thought I should have had. But, any time that anyone asked me, I used to say that I really liked it. What else could I have said? I had just secured some teaching hours at a time when it was hard to get any job; I had to be grateful for what I had...and couldn't openly say 'I'm not sure about teaching'. But here was Sara calling it as it was. I admired her for that.

But there was more to admire...

I admired the effort that she still put into her teaching. She wanted to do 'a good job' and the realisation that her students were happy not only made her feel satisfied but propelled her into investing more effort into her teaching. For Sara, teaching was more of a duty, something she could almost do without, but yet she was clearly committed to fulfilling her duty with great care.

There was a contradiction there that I couldn't work out...

Suddenly, an outside noise pierced our silent bubble...

...a bin lid slamming down...

...a reminder that others too were also fulfilling their duties with care...

It didn't seem to bother Sara...she continued talking...

...recounting how she was doing 4 hours teaching a week for her supervisor, but that he wanted her to do another module too, simply because he didn't want to teach it anymore and didn't have the time. I was instantly intrigued as to why he didn't have the time to do it – wasn't this his job after all?

Was I missing something?

Or what was more important than teaching?

Sara must have sensed my puzzlement and she jumped in to explain that it was because her supervisor was also a course coordinator and conducting research and so, as a result, he had 'moved up'...

'Moved up...', I thought...that's an interesting expression...(an image of a precarious ladder with an unstable bottom rung popped into my mind...who or what was at the very top of this ladder, I wondered silently to myself)...

...this was further evidence of a hierarchy between research and teaching with teaching considered the poor relation (D'Andrea, 2019), the activity that was quickly discarded once something deemed more important came along... Whatever the power position there, it didn't seem to bother Sara – she seemed happy with the idea of taking on the extra hours and she clearly had a very good relationship with her supervisor. They negotiated teaching hours to suit each other...

And he was also happy with her taking her own initiative when it came to inputting into teaching and learning strategies, so much so that she had remodelled part of a programme on the basis that she thought that what the students were learning was 'not particularly relevant'. Her supervisor had been very supportive of this; they had chatted about it informally and he had approved it – no questions, no formalities, just a freedom to input...

But had anything else been behind Sara's desire to input into the programme...?  
I probed further? She put it down to the fact that she had been an undergraduate student so recently, which she maintained helped her with her teaching (a bit like Tom's situation). Her description of how she saw herself as the designer and user of an experience reminded me of an actor becoming a director, who was able to call upon their experience to better direct...and as she said...

Like, if you're *in power*, you're the designer of the experience, you need to tailor the experience to your audience. And that's the students. So having that experience close to me, I think it's helpful.

But had anything else helped Sara in her teaching...? Had she received any pedagogical support...?

As with most postgrads who teach/GTAs (Civikly and Hidalgo, 1992; Shannon *et al.*, 1998; Prieto, 1999), Sara hadn't...in fact, in her first year as a teaching postgrad, rather than there being hands-on support, it was more a case of hands-off, as the lecturer whose hours she was covering just seemed to disappear, leaving her totally on her own...

So much for support...

...but would she have wanted it?

She paused before replying, thinking to herself...

And as she did, I looked down at the recorder, partly because I didn't want my gaze on her to rush her...I wanted her to have the time to think...

...the counter on the recorder kept rolling along...it was a long pause...the kind where I knew that when I'd listen back, I would think that something had gone wrong with the recording...

... ..

Her words were loaded with doubt...

I don't know if that would have actually helped or if it's just a matter of accepting the fact that you are the teacher and that's good enough.

...she had just said 'you are the teacher'...[and I wondered to myself – 'what is a teacher?'...we were back to that contested term of teaching once again]. This had been quite different to Stephen's story (you'll meet Stephen later), in which he had spoken of developing as a teacher... for Sara it was almost a job and she seemed resigned to just getting on with it. But she wasn't getting paid for it...how did that make her feel?

The answer echoed...

I would love extra money. But ultimately I don't particularly care. It's a thing that was said from the beginning was gonna happen. I knew it. Whatever...I come from being a student... So this is a step up anyway.

More steps up...more ladders...more hierarchies...

There was a resolute acceptance in her voice as she recounted how she had been told that teaching was something she had to do...and she just did it. But was she alone in this...? Were there other teaching postgraduates in the same position – not questioning their circumstances, just getting on with what they were told to do.

I teetered before I asked the next question...I didn't want to put words in Sara's mouth, but did she feel exploited, just like other GTAs in the UK had already expressed (Raaper, 2018). Once again her answer didn't surprise me...she knew it was an exploitative thing...but she didn't particularly care. Referring to the system as being exploitative, she believed that she should be paid for working...albeit not as much as a lecturer in her view...

I dug further....

*And why should you not be paid as much as a lecturer, I enquired...*

...unlike before, Sara didn't hesitate in her reply:

Because I don't have the title...I haven't been employed as such...

It had come back to the importance of *titles* once more...and there was power in a title...

Her comment about title reminded me of the view expressed by Kendall and Schussler (2012) that, depending on how a title is interpreted, it can lead to considerable variations in someone's role...

...Sara's role was tied in with her title...she had chosen to name herself as a TA [teaching assistant] on the basis that her position had never been 'labelled'...

And despite not having a title, she continued preparing conscientiously for class, dedicating her time to ensuring that the students had a good learning experience. Her students were benefiting, but was she? Disappointingly (in my head), what she was teaching had nothing to do with her research and so teaching wasn't exactly benefiting her research journey...although, once more, Sara didn't seem to mind...

In her view, her position as a demonstrator wasn't difficult...she saw it as a position that anyone could do...

Once they [the students] get over the feeling that being a TA means knowing things, 'cos it doesn't, it just means... like I literally realised that you're just better than them at following the lecture.

Thankfully, though, as Sara explained, she didn't encounter too many issues in the classroom which she had to resolve herself. There had been one situation though...with a student who Sara described as 'questioning'...

It was a day when the regular lecturer couldn't be there (the reason why remained unknown), but, at the last minute, he had asked Sara to take the session. She admitted that she didn't know anything about the session topic and so just followed the same instructions that had been left for the class group. Listening to her describe this made me feel slightly panicky...I was recalling my first teaching session, as I was told at last minute to take the class and had nothing prepared...

...nothing can prepare you for unpreparedness..., I thought to myself...

For a teacher, it was like being thrown into the trenches without a plan of attack, cast into that 'pedagogical no mans-land' (Ryan, 2014, p. 99), which, in turn, may impact upon the effectiveness of your teaching (McKiggan-Fee, Walsh, Hacking and Ballantyne, 2013), and your self-confidence (Lueddeke, 1997; Weidert *et al.*, 2012)...

Sara's description of not being prepared contrasted bleakly with what Prieto and Altmaier (1994) had claimed when they suggested that GTAs, who had training and some teaching experience prior to assuming their teaching role, were, in fact, more effective teachers than those who had not received any training.

Without training was Sara not effective...?

Was this why the student was 'questioning'?

...the sense of being alone and unprepared continued in her story...

She knew nothing about the lab she was demonstrating...she didn't understand its purpose and so when a student began questioning it also she couldn't answer...

...the student persisted, and Sara found herself caught in a dualism – on the one hand, trying to encourage the student to keep working away, whilst, on the other, not being able to explain the purpose of the work...and what emerged was that she suddenly felt as though she had no authority...

...she was like an intermediary...performing a juggling act between students and staff. It reminded me of the way Raaper (2018, p. 421), in her study, had described GTAs as mediating ‘between demanding students and overworked academics’, similar to being the ‘crucial intermediary in the classroom’ (Stoecker, Schmidbauer, Mullin and Young, 1993, p. 334). Sara continued to paint the picture of, what seemed to me to be, an awkward situation...as she commented...

...I didn't know what the point of the lab was or the theory behind the lab...I didn't know anything about the lab. I just saw the instructions when the others got it. And, em, yeah, there was this one student who was like...‘I don't get the point...’ and stuff like...take it up with the lecturer...like you might want to fire him an email...  
And it was hard because I was very kinda torn between trying to encourage them to keep going because I could kinda see the point of the lab, but not really being sure of what was happening anyways and I didn't have any authority because I literally didn't have any. He wasn't disrespecting me as an authority or anything, it's just...I wasn't the right person.

Is this what it felt like to be a teaching postgraduate student?

Did Sara often feel like this?

Sara described how she doubted her own authority...

I'm a [postgraduate] student, I live with impostor syndrome...I don't feel like anybody doubts my authority except for me, if that helps, like, I know from talking to [mentions person]'s classmates that they thought I knew all that stuff and that I was super confident...and inside I was dying...

This reminded me again of what Fuller (1969) had found when exploring the concerns of early career teachers; they start by questioning their own adequacy as teachers and, to me, this is what Sara was doing...

Suddenly, I became conscious of how quiet it was in the canteen...and my inadequacy to respond to Sara's comment made it all the quieter...

I felt inadequate too...

But was there any other support available to Sara? Were there other postgrads who could support her in her teaching?

There was one...but, as Sara suggested...

It's pointless because I'm teaching [area], [...]...he's teaching [different area], like it's so widely different...what am I going to ask?

So there was no connection between them...no communication really...

And, so Sara's supervisor appeared to be the only one who was offering her support with her teaching and her research...but, just on that, did she see them as two separate activities...and, if so, did she prioritise one over the other?

There was no doubt in her answer...the priority was 'definitely research'. She went on to describe situations where her teaching and research commitments had come face-to-face and how her supervisor had dealt with it...he'd prioritised the research...in his words... 'a publication is more important than a lab'. In that battle, there was no 'no-man's land' – research had won, leaving teaching as 'the poor cousin of research' (Department of Business, Innovation & Skills (DfBIS), UK, 2016, p. 43), mirroring the position reflected in the *UK Higher Education White Paper (2016)*...

There was one winner in the battle between teaching and research, but what about the battle of names; how did Sara think the institution saw her - as a member of staff or a student?

Her answer threw me completely...

I think the Institute barely sees us.  
...sometimes like...we're completely...it feels like we're completely abandoned...  
There's no structure. ...I don't have much input from the Institute.

Seen...

...not seen...

...invisible...

Just like Nota (2005) had remarked about GTAs, it felt that Sara was invisible...

I don't think though that it stopped her from trying to give her learners the best learning experience she could. For that she felt responsible...

Like if your students don't get something it's your fault. If one of your students doesn't, it might not be your fault. Although... arguably in my opinion, you are the teacher. You're the one in power, it's your job to make them understand...it's your job to make them care. That's the part I care about.

And there it was...after a multitude of 'I don't particularly care'...there was the statement that showed she DID care...and she wanted the students to care...

And just like Stephen in his story, Sara ended on a philosophical note as she spoke of those in power reneging on their responsibilities...I couldn't help but wonder if she was referring to her institution:

I can only do so much to change my own learning. It's your job to make it good. And I find that's very overlooked and, in general, people that are in those *positions of power*, but in general, also society, tends to shift the blame toward the receivers of things instead of...the providers.

And what about Sara's future?

Maybe someday Sara would follow a path into teaching but, for the moment, she didn't want to; it simply didn't stimulate her curiosity. She wanted to keep learning, discovering new things and she felt teaching wouldn't give her that – she viewed it as repetitious, unexciting...she just did it because it was a job...but as a job, she gave it her all, she took it seriously and reflected on it quite a lot.

By the time our conversation was over, the day had heated up even more. The cleaner had long gone...moved on to other responsibilities...other duties...

...and so, I wondered to myself, would Sara soon do the same...would she leave academia to pursue another career...or would she stay and inspire others, just as she had inspired me.

I hoped that she would change her mind someday...I think we would all benefit from educators like Sara...

## ACT IV:

### 'Staging the Research'

*'Rub-a-dub-dub,  
Three narrators in a tub,  
And who do you think they be?  
GTAs, story-makers, and me,  
And all of us out to sea.'*

---

**celisne**

so, that was a really interesting story...sounds like being a teaching postgrad is something that just works fine for Sara...I mean I'm not suggesting that she is not exploited or anything...but it's okay for her not to embody exploitation...she's just getting on with it and seems pretty okay about it...

**me**

I know...I suppose this surprised me as I progressed through the study...I had assumed that the experience was pretty negative...

**celisne**

ah, pre-research assumptions, eh?...does that not say more about you than it does about the postgrads who teach?

**me**

yeah, maybe it does...anyway, let me get back to methodology...I've explained to you the thinking behind adopting a narrative approach and what that means to me, but let me talk to you know about how the research was conducted...

**celisne**

okay, so you're going to outline the research design...or the set design, or however you name it...?

**me**

yeah, I'll explain how this study went from an idea, right through to data collection and story creation...and, of course, all the things that happened backstage too...!

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### **Designing the set and setting the context...**

Within narratives it is also important to consider context, which allows stories to be understood (Squire *et al.*, 2014). Personal narratives include 'the current and past historical, social and cultural narratives within which they are situated...' (Squire *et al.*, 2014, p. 12), so, as such, it is important for me to explain how I made contact with the teaching postgraduates in this study.

As I previously explained, I used gatekeepers, through which to invite the teaching postgraduate students/GTAs/TAs to partake in the research...

[**Aside:** 'gatekeepers'...now there's an interesting word; one that for me depicts a band of medieval soldiers tasked with protecting those on the inside from those on the outside...(another binary opposition!). Ironically, in this study, I am not really sure who was being protected...was it more a case of keeping the teaching postgrads hidden, out of view, and out of consideration?]

In this instance, these were people who occupied postgraduate coordinating roles in each of the institutes selected...I didn't know any of them in advance...but all I thought I would have to do was pick up the phone and talk to them...or maybe email...that might be easier...

...wrong...

### **Tampering with the trap door...**

It was Spring 2018...

The birth of the season had filled me with enthusiasm... my Inbox lit up with my ethical approval letter...I can still feel the excitement...that sense of validation, approval from others...wanting to share my good news...

It felt like rehearsals had finished, the practice interviews over; from now on, it was the real performance...but wait, something could still go wrong...

...and it did...and that significant milestone soon became a millstone...

In my eager anticipation to get started, I went about contacting the gatekeepers. I was very aware of the importance of ensuring that they were fully informed about the research in advance and about any impact that it might have on ‘the normal functioning of the institution or organisation’, (Singh and Wassenaar, 2016, p. 43). Though I was pretty confident that my research wouldn’t be affecting the normal running of the organisation, I had to be sure...

But there was also the need to provide guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality to these gatekeepers (Buchanan, Boddy and McCalman, 1988), so that their identities, and that of all the participants and institutions, would be protected.

*‘Protect everyone at all cost’*, was the mantra ringing in my head.

But as the gatekeepers would only be involved in the initial stage of the process, and because their role was purely administrative, all I needed from them was to put me in contact with the postgraduate students who were teaching, so that I could invite them to be involved in the study. And, I was determined that the gatekeepers would never be made aware of those who had or had not participated. Everyone's identity would be protected...

Excitedly, I drafted and re-drafted the invitation email for any interested postgrads...it opened like this...

Hi everyone,

I am putting a call out with regards some doctoral research that I am conducting and I'd love you to be involved.

The research centres on the experiences of postgraduate research students who are involved in teaching-related duties (i.e. teaching, demonstrating, small-group facilitation, supervising, assessing, tutoring, etc.). I'd be delighted if, over the coming weeks, you would agree to be available for an informal interview (or conversation as I'm calling them) to talk about your experience, being both a student and a teacher/facilitator.

.....

I convinced myself that this would attract lots of interest...I was ready to watch my Inbox start overflowing...

*But what unfolded was not what I had expected...*

Despite the gatekeepers responding very positively to the proposed research, issues of the need for ethical clearance were raised on several occasions and, though I made it clear that I already had ethical approval for my research, it

appeared that some of the institutions wanted me to go through their own ethical approval systems, just *to invite* the students to partake in the study.

*Let me explain...*

...I wasn't looking for student contact details, I wasn't looking for names, or emails...I simply wanted the gatekeepers to circulate my 'invitation to participate' email within their respective institutions...but even getting my invite out was proving difficult.

One institution asked me to submit my own CV for them to evaluate before they would consider circulating my email, whilst another asked me to attend the institution in person and to present my proposal before their ethics board.

*What had my CV to do with me conducting ethical research??*

I was also asked to complete a particular institution's 24-page ethics application form and the same institution stipulated that if I wanted to talk to the postgraduates who were teaching there, I would have to include that particular institution's logo on my consent form; this was despite me having no connection at all with that institution...

It got more bizarre...

...I was then asked by one institution to '*please list the other institutions and their students who will be involved in the study*' ...so much for anonymity I thought...!

Was this just another demonstration of the power of individual institutions, I wondered? After all, all I wanted to do was talk to teaching postgraduate students.

And all I was doing was going around in circles...

This did seem to me to be a power issue...made clear by one comment from a member of one institution's ethics committee, who referred to me as '*an outsider gaining information on competitor institutions*'.

Talking was clearly more difficult than what I had thought...

...but without the postgraduates who teach, there would be no story...

Frantic letters of explanation went back and forth and finally I got permission to *allow* the postgraduates to talk to me...the power of the researcher had won out...

I wondered...

Because this was research I was conducting as a student, I had been sending all my correspondence through my student email account...so each institution only 'saw' me as a student. Two of the institutions I had contacted never replied to me...I wondered again. Was my title of 'postgraduate researcher' not powerful enough to get me access? If this were the case, would it not say a lot (in silent non-responsiveness) about the power of postgraduate students...? Having decided to cross those two institutions off the list of possible sites, I wrote to one of them again, with a similar email, outlining my research, but this time I wrote to them using my work email and my title of 'Head of Teaching and Learning Centre'. They replied positively the following day...

Interesting, I thought...

**...is that the power of a title...or a title of power?**

I never pursued that line of inquiry further, and that institution never featured in my research...

...this all left me puzzled and wondering...was it that the gatekeepers were *protecting* the students or *hiding* them, or was it just that they weren't putting me in contact with them...for whatever reason...?

...maybe they hadn't prioritised my request,

...maybe they simply forgot to deal with my email,

...maybe they too were precariously employed and weren't sure how to deal with my email...

...maybe many possibilities, many interpretations...

But, for the moment, my perception was that not everyone wanted me to talk to the postgrads who were teaching and I couldn't help wondering what other reasons there might be for this...

### **Hear ye...hear ye...**

Finally, after weeks of back-ing and forth-ing trying to get into the field, the gates were open and I heard back from the institutions to say that my 'invitation to participate' email was making its way to the postgrads, inviting them to *converse* with me.

I remember the feeling I had when I knew the email was 'out there', the sense of anticipation, wondering how many teaching postgrads would contact me...would

it be hundreds, or none? How long would I give everyone to reply...? I panicked at the prospect of hundreds of replies, simply because, I would want to honour them and talk to them but how would I manage logistically? How would I converse with hundreds....?

---

**celisne**

But wait, remind me again why ‘conversation’ rather than ‘interview’?

**me**

well, when I consider the word ‘interview’, it describes somewhat of a formal meeting between people, where information is garnered from one person, through a questioning and answering process. This is one interpretation of it...you may have another based on your own experience. But ‘conversation’ is different. ‘Conversations are powerful’ (hooks, 2010, p. 46).

**celisne**

how so...?

**me**

for me, a conversation is a dialogue, a sharing of stories, meanings and understanding and this, for me, is where the power is...it is one of collective voice. This echoes Rader’s view (cited in hooks, 2010, p. 44), when he states ‘[c]onversation is always inclusive; it encourages and nourishes individual voice as it strives to develop a community of vision’.

**celisne**

yeah, and I suppose an interview could be portrayed as ‘an asymmetry of power in which the researcher is in charge of questioning a more or less voluntary and sometimes naïve interviewee’ (Qu and Dumay, 2011, p. 239)...

**me**

exactly...

---

So, the wait was over and after three weeks, 12 postgraduates had volunteered to be part of the research. When anyone sought more information, I responded with the words...

I am looking to hear what it is like for postgraduate research students from IoTs, who are involved in any of the following activities: teaching, tutoring, assessing, demo-ing, supervising undergraduates...

One postgraduate responded saying...

...I'm willing to participate. I'm not currently tutoring (though I am currently lecturing). I didn't tutor last semester but tutored every other semester since January 2015. I'm guessing that means I'm still eligible? My plan is to start tutoring again in September...

This was the kind of individual with whom I wanted to talk and I was excited to set up a meeting...

As one respondent wasn't teaching and had never taught, they weren't eligible to partake in the study...

I wondered if the others could sense my eagerness in my rush to arrange our one-on-one meetings...I was suddenly available to meet anyone any day, anywhere! The choice of date, venue and time was all theirs...

The fieldwork had begun...

Before each conversation, I gave each participant an information sheet (see Appendix A) and obtained their signatures on the consent form (see Appendix B).

I also explained that the conversations would be recorded and that the transcripts would be sent back to them to review for *corrections*, *elaborations* or *redactions*...

And, as I explained earlier, I also agreed with the participants that, following on from the transcripts, I would then send them out the first version (and subsequent versions!) of ‘my story of their story’, (my ‘findings’ if you will), an account of what my interpretation of their experience was.

These became the stories of their experiences, retold in an abridged form, with some short quotes (Sfard and Prusak, 2005), but all the while preserving the elements of narrative and safeguarding the individual’s story as best as possible (McAlpine, 2016).

Reconnecting with them again in this storying phase, I invited them to focus in on *meaning* and to consider ‘my story of *their* story’ and what it meant for them. It was also an important step in lateralising any power that they may have felt existed between me, as the researcher (story writer) and them, as the participants (original storytellers).

You’ve read Bill’s, Tom’s, Sara’s and Lauren’s story. What is printed here is exactly what each of the participants read too...

But my relationship with these teaching postgraduate students didn’t end there...

Though my first face-to-face meeting took place in Spring 2018, my most recent contact with them was in January 2020; this has allowed me to reflect on the experience over a more sustained period of time. But maybe more importantly than that, it has given these GTAs the time and space to interpret various iterations of their stories. This goes against the thinking of Hollway and Jefferson (2004), who, in their approach to narrative, moved away from the idea of inviting

participants to input into the interpretive process of the analysis, on the basis that the participant *might not know* everything that they are actually saying in *their* story...

[**Aside:** *how could you not know your own story, I pondered?*]

But more than that...by not inviting participants to interpret their own stories, was it not devaluing their role in the research? For me, this would defy the collaborative aspect of storying by excluding participation. I would see this as being an example of establishing the researcher as the one who holds power over the participants, making judgements on what the participants said or didn't say. I wanted to support a more continuous relationship by inviting participants to input throughout the research journey.

And so to the issue of names...

### **A character by any other name...**

Having a pseudonym is a good way of ensuring confidentiality and safeguarding the participants' identities, but Allen and Wiles (2016, p. 153) suggest that pseudonyms are 'a far more nuanced act of research, affected by issues of power and voice'. These researchers raise questions over how pseudonyms should be selected and whether they can be chosen in a manner that 'acknowledges the shift from "paternalistic" researcher allocating names to a more nuanced engagement with participants' (ibid., p. 153).

There is *power in a name* and because of this, I felt that it was important that the participants chose how they wanted to be named. Finch (2008, p. 709) posits that personal names are ‘a core marker’ of an individual, in that, as well as conferring a uniqueness upon someone, they also indicate the social worlds we inhabit, possibly revealing gender, nationality and ethnicity.

In that regard, it seemed only fitting to let the participants in this study decide how they wanted to be represented...I saw this process as adding to the unique nature of their *personal* stories.

...after all, who am *I* to *name* someone else...?

With this in mind, my one request prior to our research conversations was that they chose their *own* pseudonym and *name themselves*. Not only is there power in a name, but there is power in the process of naming (Allen and Wiles, 2016), as from a poststructuralist perspective, ‘to impose names is [...] a act of power’ (Moi, 1985, p. 160); because of that, I invited each participant to...

*Own your own name...*

Interestingly to me, they all took a considerable amount of time to decide on a name...which made me wonder...

Was it because they had experienced difficulty naming themselves as teaching postgrads, or was it that titles, such as ‘teaching postgrads’, ‘GTAs’ or ‘Teaching Assistants’ weren’t used as much by the postgraduates themselves? remember, they hadn’t chosen any titles themselves – but titles were being used to describe

them. As such, it may have felt somewhat strange for them to be asked to name themselves –

...how often do we ever get to use a different name or title?

When they finally revealed their *noms de plume*, many of them also shared with me the reasons behind their choice. Mostly, it had been chosen in honour of someone who had been influential in their lives, from relatives to educators, which aligns with Benson's (2006, p. 180) view that naming is 'a quintessentially social act'.

Leanne captured the significance of this naming when she commented in an email to me after our conversation:

**Leanne:** ...the pseudonym was important to me. If you remember, I originally wanted another but a different participant already had chosen that name so I picked again. Both women are powerful women to me within my inner circle and I think I wanted to embody that spirit of them. Maybe I took this as a chance to think "If I weren't [mentions her name], who would I be?!!!"

-----

**celisne**

wow, Leanne really took the whole process very seriously didn't she – she was very engaged with it...

**me**

for sure...and I really like her line... 'if I weren't... who would I be?' ...it makes you think, doesn't it?

**celisne**

...or to embrace the multiple subjectivities stance... 'if we weren't...who would we be?'...

-----

### **Safety curtain...**

So with pseudonyms in place, all other information, including their contact details and any information about their settings were kept confidential, leaving no identifiable markers (Hessler, 1992). As the data were collected, they were stored in a safe, secure and accessible form, all in accordance with the University's *Research Integrity Policy*, and were only available to me. In time, all the transcripts, paper-based and electronic versions would be destroyed.

But, for me, it's no longer about the scripts...they hardly matter now...the stories have been created, told and re-told...you can erase the scripts...you can't erase the experience.

...but back to the cast members...

### **Stories from the stage...**

As I really wanted to meet with the cast members, to put faces to names (their chosen names) and voices, all but one conversation took place face-to-face. My conversation with Robin was by phone. Although I was disappointed not to meet her, I was satisfied to read that there is growing acceptance that telephone interviews can be as effective as more traditional methods (Sturges and Harahan, 2004). Our conversation hadn't been compromised...it was just a different type of conversation...

-----  
**celisne**  
so, did you come up with your list of questions...?

**me**

do you know, I originally started by thinking of questions but it just didn't seem to fit, too directional, too much like putting words into someone's mouth...

**celisne**

but this is a play, isn't it?

**me**

I know...but an interactive one, as you pointed out earlier...so it seemed more suitable to let everyone speak their own words...

**celisne**

oh, I bet you wished at times you had followed a more conventional interview, with a set of questions...

**me**

I don't think I had a choice...you have to be integrous...and that's not just with the participants but also with your methodology...

-----

As we opened our conversations, I was careful to keep them exploratory and loose in structure, by inviting each participant to simply describe what it was like to be a teaching postgraduate student - to outline the challenges and the joys in the experience. Reflecting on it afterwards, I wondered had it really mattered what I had started with...these individuals just wanted to talk and tell their story...and that's what they did...

Once all the conversations were captured, I began the process of trying to make sense of the stories, that 'difficult and complex transition' from field text to research text (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 119)...trying to interpret experiences...and ensuring that I would honour their stories...

### **Making sense of the stories...**

Hunter (2010, p. 50) refers to the difficulty of this task when she says that 'representing and interpreting another's voice is not a simple task and needs to be done with respect and humility'. Narrative inquirers must also recognise that they are the audience for the original narrator but, in their write-up, they become the storyteller to a wider audience. However, my view of narrative goes further, in that it embraces my epistemological perspective of how knowledge is co-created. In that respect, I think that the researcher should not merely present a story but should co-edit the narratives with the participants, so that what is finally presented is a co-constructed narrative.

*I had to think carefully about how this could happen...*

### **Is it a valid and reliable (re)production?**

-----

**celisne**

sorry, before you talk about that, I think we should talk about validity and reliability. In narrative, are these issues more complex...?

**me**

well it depends what your interpretation of them is...

**celisne**

well, my understanding of validity is that it is the 'product of a transparent and complex research process producing findings that reflect the lived experience of participants...[representing] all participant voices', and detailing a critical appraisal of the findings by the researcher (Syed and Nelson, 2015, p. 3)...

**me**

well that's one interpretation for sure, but bear in mind that there is a complexity around representing *all* participant voices...and I'm

not sure about the idea that the findings are appraised *by the researcher...*

...this challenge is skilfully epitomised by Hunter (2010), when she states that if we accept the view that there is no singular 'truth', and that narratives are co-constructed between the participant and the researcher within a specific context, then it becomes questionable as to the way 'in which the research findings can be seen as valid and whether or not the researcher can legitimately represent the research participants' (Hunter, 2010, p. 44).

**celisne**

so are you aligning with this position...?

**me**

well to a certain extent...but, I would contest the notion that, as the researcher, I am representing the participants...rather, I see myself as interpreting experiences, which themselves contain 'multiple valid interpretations', (Squire, 2012, p. 57) and multiple truths (Freeman, 2003).

And, underpinning all that is what Clandinin and Connolly (2000) refer to as the responsibility that I have as a researcher in this participatory relationship. I have to, and want to, honour the participants...

-----

### **Interpreting at the interval...back and forth**

Conversations captured...

Recordings at the ready...

Just need to transcribe...just need to analyse...

Surely data analysis is a story in itself...there must be a beginning, middle and end, no?

No...

there are phases... ones that bleed into each other and circle around each other...like a vertiginous vortex...

‘where are you at in your research...?’

‘...have you finished transcribing...?’

‘Are you on to coding...?’

‘Wait until you start thematic coding...’

Stages that seemed to be presented by others as strategically-placed camps on an assault on Everest now seemed to be swept together in a snow storm...there was transcribing, reflecting, coding, interpreting, meaning-making, story constructing, shaping, re-constructing...

...nothing sequential...

...more like a cyclical process, a ‘back and forthing’ (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 138)...as the narrative inquirer continues to move between conceptions of form, structure and possible chaptering...

...almost a ‘hermeneutic circle’, which itself is based on how ‘the understanding of parts relates to the understanding of a larger whole and vice versa’ (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010, p. 132), characterised by a movement back and forth between the parts and the whole...between the individual stories (the small stories) and the overall emergent themes (the big picture)...

...but hold on...I wasn’t there yet...I was still only at base camp...my transcriptions were done...and now it was time to *analyse* the conversations and *extract* meaning...

-----

**celisne**

...‘extract meaning’...? that sounds a bit like there was meaning already there and you just grabbed it and ran...do you want to re-consider that word...?

**me**

god Celisne, you’ve come a long way – can you not just take a word now without analysing everything it might mean...?

**celisne**

you started it!

**me**

okay, so it wasn’t ‘extract meaning’...more so ‘create meaning’...

-----

I re-read all the transcripts – I wanted to hear their voices again...I read them out loud...

Then, using Nvivo software, I embarked on the process of coding the conversations, adopting an approach which was very much reflective of that used in grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), in which the abstract concepts lying in the data are deemed to be more important than the descriptive detail (Holton, 2007).

So what did the process entail...?

And how did *meaning* come about from our conversations...?

My initial step was ‘open coding’, working through the conversations, line-by-line to assign each part of the transcript to one or more labelled codes or concepts. I was not necessarily ‘looking for’ concepts, but allowing ones to emerge from the conversations, using quite an inductive process. By the time all the transcripts

were coded, I had a long list of concepts and words, each of which had multiple interpretations. So the next phase involved clustering the concepts and categorising them under similar common properties and shared meanings, which itself led to the emergence of conceptual categories or themes. Moving away from the individual to more collective themes and concepts was a bit more daunting, as I was concerned that their individual stories, their unique contexts, might get obscured, which echoes the concerns expressed by Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p. 14) that removing data from a particular context is undesirable given that the 'subjective knower is the only source of reality'.

-----

**celisne**

...let's just go back a bit...Nvivo...software...process of coding...em...again, do you think that all jars with a poststructuralist stance...?

**me**

maybe...but it really helped me to immerse myself in their words...it did feel a bit stilted at times, maybe a bit mechanical...but it allowed me to reflect on their words, to hear what they were saying and then to see if there were recurring themes in their lived experiences.

**celisne**

...so after the coding came the story writing was that it...?

**me**

that's the hard part...you see, even the literature on narrative is 'largely silent about ways to approach long stretches of talk' (Riessman, 1993, v). So in a way, you're trying to story their experience and story their stories. It is almost like building an interpretive story....

**celisne**

...using what they have told you...?

**me**

no, more than that...I suppose you begin by identifying the stories, the episodes that they have recounted, and identifying themes that

emerge and the narratives around these themes, similar to the process identified by Syed and Nelson (2015)...

**celisne**

but if you just stick with themes, then ‘content is the exclusive focus’ (Riessman, 2008, p. 53), so what else makes it a narrative...?

**me**

...you then look at the narrative processes (Rosenthal, 1993), things like description, argumentation and theorizing and you factor those in as you are building the narratives...

**celisne**

what do they mean...‘description’, ‘argumentation’ and ‘theorising’...?

**me**

...well description is like the scene setting...it’s static in many ways, but I hope that a reader might feel that they are almost there – I’m creating the context...

...then the argumentation is more about introducing additional features or concepts into a story...maybe like ‘an abstracted element from outside a story’ (McCormack, 2004, p. 224), so for example, in Stephen’s story, he mentions ‘security’ being a by-product of his position and I go off and delve into that further...

...and then there’s theorising which is really where the participants are beginning to question things...and working out ‘why’ something might be the way it is...

**celisne**

but, I presume, as a listener, you are doing that also?

**me**

of course...and all these elements get added...thereby ‘constructing an interpretive story’ (McCormack, 2004)...

-----

[**Aside:** ...as I started constructing the interpretive stories, I found myself drawn not just to the content of the conversations, but also to what was not being said by the participants...in that sense, I was intrigued by what I am referring to as the ‘non-content’ – or the gaps, the silences...the white spaces, in which there is also meaning]...

I was equally conscious of the inherent dilemmas in writing narratives, including the ethical issue as to whether or not we have to represent what the participant has told us, or whether this can be interpreted, adapted and written in a way that deviates from the original story. The latter involves a concept known as *narrative smoothing*, in which narrative inquirers ‘brush off the rough edges of disconnected raw data’ (Kim, 2016, p. 192). I would view this as being the role of narrative inquiry – to create a story that is accessible to the reader, one that is an artistic experience, which provides the readers with a unique experience to better understand the world in which the lived experience is taking place (Kim, 2008).

But as I moved back and forth between these steps, I became more cognisant of my own reflections. It is worth mentioning that when each conversation had drawn to a close and before beginning the transcription, I had jotted down some preliminary reflections on what I had thought of the conversation. These were then added to the notes that I had taken during the conversations themselves. This process allowed me to reflect on all that they had said (and not said) and to capture my immediate interpretation of their stories. This mirrored what Schön (1983) referred to as *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action* and it allowed me the space to consider my interpretation of their stories. These would feature in the final piece as my ‘asides’ or reflections...

After each conversation, I conducted the scriptwriting (or transcription as it is more commonly referred to in research!). I was adamant that this would be done immediately so that I could almost continue to hear the postgraduates’ voices and

act out their stories in my head. This also helped me to identify some initial themes whilst still in the narrative collection stage, which then allowed me to explore emerging topics with the participants in subsequent conversations.

But there was another reason for this...

...by engaging in the transcription after each conversation, it afforded me the chance to move 'back and forth' (again!) between what the teaching postgraduate students were experiencing now and how I would have felt as an early career academic. Added to this, I was able to note down where I saw myself now in my current role and how there was a commonality between our experiences.

And then it was back to the participants once more...once the transcriptions were complete, I sent them back out so that the participants could re-read them, checking if they were a representation of what they had said and redacting anything that they wished from the conversations we had shared. But I felt that there was something very perfunctory about this stage, especially given that I would subscribe to the view that the complexity of an interaction can never fully be captured by a transcription (Sandelowski, 1994).

It felt almost clinical, and not natural, to be asking the participants to check the *accuracy* of words, as opposed to the *meaning* of words...

-----

**celisne**

hold on...you're talking accuracy and transcripts...I mean it doesn't sound a very poststructuralist thing to do...why do transcriptions at all...?

**me**

yeah, I know...but just think of it as a first step in creating the narratives...I think I was just more comfortable at that stage having a record of our conversations...making sure that I had heard them and not just myself...

**celisne**

what do you mean?

**me**

well, I was worried that if I hadn't transcribed the conversations and shared them, then the participants might wonder afterwards '*did she honour what we said...?*'...maybe I just thought that was what I had to do as a researcher and that the participants would expect it...I don't know...I think it is something I still struggle with...but one thing that did help me for sure, is that it allowed me to *see* their words on the page, to re-read them, and I think by doing that, I could hear them saying their words over and over, as I was transcribing...

**celisne**

did you include the transcriptions anywhere...even extracts from them?

**me**

yes, there are direct quotes included throughout...their words...

**celisne**

okay, so what were you looking for from the participants when you asked for *accuracy*?

**me**

maybe approval...approval that they were happy that I had honoured their words...ethically, that is what I felt I had to do...next time around, I might do things differently...I think it was out of respect for them...giving them the opportunity to reflect on what they had said and to redact anything that they wanted...connecting with them again, ensuring that they were still part of the journey...

**celisne**

so, that's why you kept going back to them with different versions of their stories was it...almost like a theatre director getting feedback from the cast?

**me**

yeah, I suppose, but I'm more of a co-producer really; I wanted their input into these stories; I wanted to honour the idea that these narratives would be co-constructed; I suppose, initially, I was still uncomfortable interpreting *their* experiences...me, making sense of their experiences...

**celisne**

but isn't that what narrative inquirers need to do...? didn't Kim (2016) acknowledge this in her own work when she said that 'data analysis involves interpretation, which in turn affects our choices of representations of stories' (Kim, 2016, p. 189)...I suppose, isn't everything interpretation...didn't Clough (2002) say that about narrative and his own research – in that his account of someone's story was achieved not by *faithfully* reporting the *facts* but by presenting his character using his own interpretation...

**me**

yeah, and that is what I did, and it's not a straightforward process – you are working with interim texts, slowly going from field texts to research texts – continuously reshaping them, and, as Clandinin and Connolly (2000, p. 153) aptly describe, 'floundering in confusion' as you search for form...

...I drafted many versions of each story...I suppose I was interpreting the experience differently each time I read it and then, when the stories were circulated to the participants, they would interpret them differently and things would be changed again...it's a good example not just of the participatory aspect of narrative inquiry, but also of the iterative process that it is...

-----

**'Le poète n'invente pas. Il écoute'...**

*'The poet doesn't invent. He listens.'*

Jean Cocteau, *French poet, writer, designer, artist, playwright, filmmaker*  
(1889-1963)

And just as each postgraduate student who teaches has a unique experience, I too have had a unique experience listening to them. Experiences that they went through reminded me of ones which I had lived through as an early career academic. The process afforded me the time and space to reflect...(ironic that the participants didn't appear to have the same time or space to really reflect...)

Ponic, Reid and Frisby (2010) speak to this idea of the democratization of knowledge production by saying that it needs to be a very explicit part of the research process. They suggest that failure to foster genuine collaboration between the researcher and the participants ‘will likely result in partnerships defaulting to power-over relationships [and] recreate power imbalances’ (Ponic *et al.*, 2010, p. 330). In an effort to address this, it led me to bringing the participants back into their stories in a more creative and collaborative way, by going back out to them several times with my version of their stories for their comment and input and...

*(O'Neill, 2015).....this was my way of showing that their stories never finish, but are constantly evolving which aligns with the circular nature of story*

Andrews (2003) also proposes that feedback from the participants themselves is a good way of reviewing your analysis...so that is what I did...

Reaching out to the participants a second and third time was also a way to ensure that I could deepen my understanding of the postgraduates' position and it ensured that I was being ethical in my interpretation of their stories...and maybe it was a way of exploring triangulation.

**celisne**

...what's triangulation...? Sounds a bit too rigid and structured for me!

**me**

god, you ask a lot of questions...

**celisne**

...I thought you said earlier that questions were good – they make you think...

**me**

...okay, triangulation, it's really the use of multiple methods in 'an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question' (Denzin, 2012, p. 82). And I know I didn't use multiple methods per se, but I did hold face-to-face conversations, corresponded by email, phone and shared my interpretations of their stories with them, inviting them to input. I suppose, in its original interpretation, triangulation was seen as a way of *confirming* apparent research findings.

**celisne**

...*confirming*...there's another one of those words that just doesn't seem to fit with you!

**me**

...well, my interpretation of triangulation is based on the constructivist collaboration that takes place between me and the participants – okay, let me explain by getting back up on the stage...now tell me, what do you see?

**celisne**

...I see you, centre stage, and the postgrads of course, also on stage, but maybe in the wings at the moment, and there's the scene or the backdrop behind...and that's kinda it...

**me**

...so there's me and the postgrads and we are staging their experience...is that it, just two troupes of players...me and the postgrads, yeah?

**celisne**

...well yeah, that's it...

**me**

...and what about in front of the stage...?

**celisne**

...but there's nobody there...

**me**

...but who is normally there...who else do you need for this play?

**celisne**

...ah...I get it...the audience...

**me**

...exactly...and in the case of this study, it's the reader...the one who interprets...after all, storytelling is an interpretive act...

**celisne**

...and the audience goes on to tell others about the story...and that's the retelling and the re-storying...

**me**

...yeah, and that's your triangulation...me talking with the participants, scripting with them, acting with them, directing, and then the audience interpreting and re-storying...and round it goes...

**celisne**

...you've just made triangulation into a rectangular stage and then into a circle...impressive!

But wait...you've talked all about the research, and that's great, but why don't you give us an idea of what it was like to experience it...what did it feel like as you were starting out...?

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## ACT V:

### **Stories from the frontline...or the front of the classroom...**

“It's funny, but thinking back on it now, I realize that this particular point in time, as I stood there blinking in the deserted hall, was the one point at which I might have chosen to do something very much different from what I actually did. But of course I didn't see this crucial moment for what it actually was; I suppose we never do. Instead, I only yawned, and shook myself from the momentary daze that had come upon me, and went on my way down the stairs.”

- Donna Tartt, *The Secret History* (1992)

**‘Get your wellies on...you’re entering the field!’**

Wednesday, March the seventh, 2018, two forty-three P.M.

I was bound to forget something;

There was still the consent form and the information sheet to print out...

...the printer would jam on me again. It always sensed my panic and reacted accordingly...

Batteries??...where were the batteries?

- I needed batteries...

Did I have enough if our conversation went on for some time...would I even notice if the recorder stopped working? And how would I jot down my thoughts on what they were saying...when would these be captured? could I take notes during our conversations...? stop...calm...

Pause...

...it had all been a bit chaotic in the days leading up to that opening conversation. [It had that sweaty palm feeling you get at the airport when you wonder how many things you have forgotten to pack...and you've just gone through security...there's no turning back at that point...]

...I had bought the last dictaphone left in Argos the night before (pew...‘1 item remaining’) and now I had just realised that it couldn't connect to my PC...what was the point in that...?

I didn't have *time* to think about that.

I would have to resort to using another recording device, one that I had borrowed from someone else earlier in the week; one that looked like it would be better suited to landing a probe on Mars rather than just recording a conversation. A contraption like that positioned on a table would put anyone off talking...

...it didn't look *natural*...

...and that's what I desperately wanted to be...*natural*.

Stop overthinking, I thought...I'd be late for sure...but I couldn't think clearly...not with the music...drilling through my head, on repeat...the words of an Eminem song:

‘...you better never let it go  
You only get one shot, do not miss your chance to blow  
This opportunity comes once in a lifetime...’

Eminem, *Lose Yourself* (2009)

I had *one* shot at this *first* conversation and I couldn’t blow it. It was like opening night and the curtain was slowly lifting...I felt queasy...I wasn’t prepared...I hadn’t learnt my lines...

At that moment, I began to realise that I had entangled myself in an emotional frenzy over this first conversation;

...articles on how to conduct interviews had been read in advance;

...advice gratefully received from other, more experienced interviewers had been carefully etched in my mind;

...ideas hurriedly smudged in my blue notebook,

...and practice questions spoken aloud when nobody else was listening...

(it was like the French oral all over again)...

- preparation completed...

But none of that mattered now.

[**Aside:** *it suddenly all felt like I was back preparing for my first teaching session; did teaching postgrads feel that same sense of panic before teaching? Did they panic? Did they share that feeling that everything had to be scripted, planned, structured and managed...?*]

...and that was it...that was the problem...

I was scripting and planning, artificially trying *to create a natural* environment for my conversations with the postgraduate students who were teaching...

And then it dawned on me...there was nothing natural in chatting to these participants.

Why...?

Maybe because it hadn't been done before...

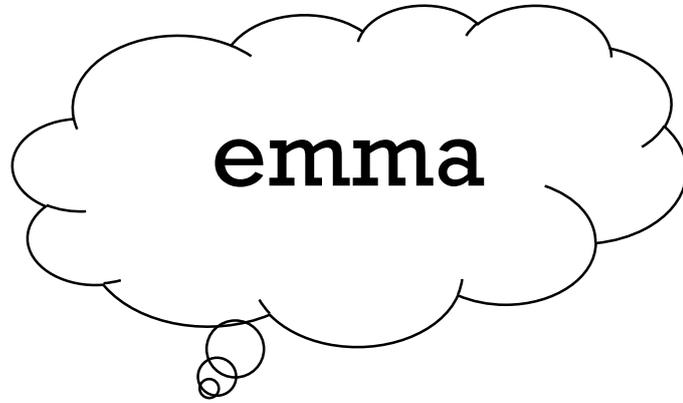
It wasn't a natural occurrence; it was an unusual situation. Nobody in my sector had simply sat down and talked to them...nobody had listened. And now, here I was embarking on a research journey... 'open to the not-yet-known', (Davies and Gannon, 2005, p. 318) and maybe the not-yet-understandable - wondering what lay before me...

So accepting that this was an unnatural environment was the first step in just being natural and ...letting nerves go, so voices could flow...

'...écoute...c'est quoi ce bruit...?'

[*A bell rings and everyone is called back into the theatre...*]

Emma has taken to the stage...



**emma**

*'I didn't know where to fit...*

*...I've made it...*

*I'm no longer a student - I've crossed over to the other side...*

*...and it's not just feeling that power or feeling that you've crossed  
over to the other side or anything like that*

*But who are you...?*

*Nobody knows... whether we're deemed staff or student,  
we don't know what we are really....*

*I won't get away with this forever... soon*

*the impostor within will be caught...*

*and the walls will come tumbling down from this ivory tower...*

*I'll be thrown back down to the mud below... my footprint still  
visible...*

*I climbed so hard and for so long to get here but now...I've  
nothing to show...dust and relics of the past long forgotten...*

## **Notre histoire: Emma et moi...**

### **Who is this nervous imposter?**

‘...my experience of it starting off, I was extremely nervous...’

Were these Emma’s words, or mine, or ours?

As it happened, Emma had uttered them, but they could’ve been mine...

It was your typical classroom, the teacher’s desk commanding its place at the front; the rest of the chairs neatly arranged like diligent scholars on their first day of school. The whiteboard bore the streaked remains of prior learning, faint stains testament to layers of created knowledge... ‘you’ll never get rid of those marks...’, I thought...

...well maybe you shouldn’t even try...

***Prologue:** Emma was completing a postgraduate programme and was in the second year of her studies; she was a mature student and had completed some teaching in the past. Currently she was both lecturing and supervising undergraduate projects. She had been very eager to participate in the study, to tell her story...*

Emma was so enthusiastic from the outset – she was already sitting in the room waiting for me and that’s saying something, as I’m always early!

She looked relaxed and confident and, for a moment, as I fiddled to set up the recorder and flicked through loads of sheets of paper, I felt as though I were the student arriving late for a presentation, flustering while she was ready to go...

I dropped my pen...Emma smiled knowingly...

*...had we switched roles and identities...or...*

*...whose role was it anyway...?*

Unlike me, Emma seemed totally in control; I immediately wondered if this was the way she was when she was teaching. In those moments before our conversation started, I tried to imagine what it must've been like to be one of Emma's students being asked to describe Emma – she was – assured, ordered, passionate...

She was dying to start talking, to recount her experience; I had an immediate sense that Emma could talk all day and I could've listened. There are some people with whom, for whatever reason, you connect, and Emma was one of those people. I suppose *I* had gone into our conversation *wanting to put her at ease*, wanting her to know that this wasn't an interview, but a conversation. I needn't have worried – Emma was already treating it like a conversation...and she had put me at ease...the roles were indeed reversed...which now seems ironic when I consider her story...

We were only a few lines in and I realised that that air of self-assuredness that I had witnessed hadn't always been there. It became evident that Emma, the 'educator' (again, another title, but this time one she bestowed upon herself),

felt that she had something to prove to the students who she was teaching. As she reflected on her early teaching experiences she commented:

First, I thought are these students who are basically only 2 years or a year and a half behind me...are they going to take me seriously, as an educator or as a...someone who's going to guide them through their thesis?

Emma wanted to be taken seriously (I wondered to myself, who did she want to be taken seriously by?), but the fact that she felt that the undergraduates were so close in their studies to her, really seemed to cause her to question herself. (If only she realised that I was still questioning myself...or maybe she did realise).

I was feeling the same...I knew exactly what she was describing as I had been in a similar position when I started lecturing. I wasn't long out of college and I remember feeling that I wasn't knowledgeable enough to teach undergraduates. I was just a few paces ahead of them, they'd soon catch up on me and I'd be found out. That same feeling of not being taken seriously resonated in my head for years...(it still creeps in from time to time...)...

Emma's nerves were also founded on her perception of the level of knowledge she possessed; she questioned whether or not she had the necessary knowledge to guide the students. This led to a concern about being exposed, almost found out...

So I was worried about that and the **fear** of being asked a question that you couldn't answer [...] and the **fear** suddenly do I know...do I really know...even though I knew...I knew...but it was that **fear** did I really know...

Though she had been talking, all I could hear was the word 'fear'...

And this fear seemed to be directly linked to this perceived knowledge, rather than her ability to teach, suggesting that she was trying to establish herself as a subject expert primarily, rather than a teaching expert. Trust with the students appeared to be based on content and knowledge above all else. Was she seeing teaching as an epistemological process, one in which she, through the very act of teaching, would both create and explore knowledge...?...it was a lot more than merely subject content...but, for the moment, the content seemed to be of paramount concern for Emma, for it was through content that she would prove herself to her students, as she said...

it took them a while...to kind of maybe have trust in me, but that could be the same for everybody, I don't know. But I found...maybe 3 or 4 sessions in before they really said to themselves like, yeah, this girl knows her stuff...

As Emma spoke, I began to question things in my head and wondered if the research process was, for Emma, part of the validation process... Was being a postgraduate research student a way of showing the students that she did indeed know her stuff...?

What Emma was describing reflected the framework developed by Fuller (1969), which highlighted, as we have already seen, the different stages of concern which early career teachers passed through as part of their development. And, although Fuller's (1969) theory of the stages of teacher concern is not necessarily based on postgraduate students who teach, there are many comparisons that can be made between early career teachers' experiences and those of postgrads who teach...

As previously noted, Fuller (1969) identified that prospective teachers share common concerns that tend to centre around self, around the teaching and finally, concerns around the impact and the benefit to learners themselves. This was Emma...

Emma wanted the students to trust her expertise in the discipline and it almost came across as though she needed to prove herself to them, something that she believed tenured lecturing staff didn't have to do. In her position, she felt that she had to show the students that she was good; she wanted to feel needed (Nyquist and Wulff, 1996), quite the opposite to a full-time lecturer who, she believed, wouldn't have to gain that trust, as the students would 'automatically have trust in you'. Her self-expressed doubt was becoming so tangible I could almost touch it...

This thread of doubt continued to weave in and out of our conversation...

Oh yeah, and then there was the episode where Emma had to confront a student over non-completion of the assigned work. How did that go? Could you establish your authority, Emma?

...[he] wasn't taking me seriously...[he] would sit in front of me with a very solemn face...and I was getting worried that there was a breakdown in the relationship between the two of us and I was scared how I was going to deal with it so, in that instance, I had to go to the lecturer who was supervising me...supervising them if you like...

And there was the 'taken seriously' line again...did it all come back to that idea of establishing and validating your position? As I listened, it felt to me that Emma even doubted her ability to deal with any confrontation and that

was the reason she needed to consult with her supervisor before doing anything.

I asked...

- *So what did you do Emma? How did you resolve it? Or did you?*

I composed an email to him...I was so nervous...I knew what I had to say but...the wording of it...[...] was so important that I...I couldn't do it...and again I had to go back to the...my supervisor to ask her, you know, could she help me with the wording of this email because I was afraid...I was genuinely afraid to send the email...

Again, though Emma was talking, her words were still piercing the air...

**nervous                      I couldn't do it**

**I was afraid...**

**I was genuinely afraid...**

The fear was paralysing...Emma clearly wasn't comfortable telling the student what to do and I wasn't comfortable listening to her talking about this...

Her account was reminiscent of Dudley's (2009) US-based study, when he suggested that GTAs needed to surmount their own nerves and be authoritative in class in order to be successful. And although Dudley's study was carried out in respect of university-based GTAs, I felt that Emma's concern was similar. She was struggling with the concept of authority associated with being a teacher...

Even looking at her as she discussed it made it clear that it still didn't sit well for her. She looked stressed, as though she was still doubting the course of

action she had taken. So, despite being a year into her teaching, the issues around authority hadn't gone away.

I continued probing...

*In terms of kind of power within the institution, would you be aware of whether...where the power is, did you feel you had power, did you feel you didn't have any power, even in terms of [...], I suppose, your teaching methodologies, your assessment, like, you know, did you feel powerful, powerless, or did power not even come into it...? I say power...authority...*

Yeah...authority...no I don't...I can see authority...I know where it is...in the college...I never felt like I have it...or I had it and I still don't feel like I have it... but I know it's there...I know it exists and I know that we're, you know, as students, we're answerable to people and I also know that as associate lecturers or assistant lecturers, that we're also answerable to people. And nearly that we're...I think the students have the power...that we're answerable more to the students than we are to the...you know, to the other...the higher position lecturers...

The way she spoke about power and authority was almost as though Emma knew her 'position' in the organisation; she was caught between two powerful groups – the students and the lecturers...(and I was interested by her reference to 'higher position lecturers' – those way up the hierarchical ladder, I presume...)

...but hold on there, was she not part of one or both of those groups...? Wasn't she a student, a lecturer, something else, or all of the above?

In Emma's view, it was the students who wielded the power and I think that it was because of this that she felt a burden of responsibility towards them. Her words were loaded down with this - each line weighed heavily, pressing down on the next (the same way you press down on aubergines to get the bitterness

out), but Emma wasn't bitter about this, just concerned for her students...as she said herself...

... if, god forbid,

I still worry about it,

I could be awake tonight worried about it,

what if they don't pass...?

...if they don't pass their dissertation...

Suddenly it had all become personal, which reflected Nyquist and Wulff's (1996) view that the actions of undergraduates become very personalised in the mind of the teaching assistant. I had this sickly feeling that Emma would almost blame herself if her students performed poorly (Boehrer and Sarkisian 1985). But she wasn't alone in this; in their study in the University of Cambridge in the UK, Jordan and Howe (2018) had also found that the stress of teaching undergraduates was a prominent issue of concern with GTAs. And what about the pressure that Emma was under...?

Emma saw the students as often being 'in trouble' academically and she saw it as her responsibility to deal with that. But I could hear the warmth in her voice as she uttered the words

...it's like being a parent really...

This echoed Harland and Plangger's (2004) study in which they found that GTAs demonstrate a high degree of care for their students. Emma cared...

Hers was a supporting role as she commented that she often helped the students with other subjects, delighted to be able to do so, as this helped her to develop a positive relationship with them. Emma's love for teaching really

came through as we chatted. She used the word 'love' a lot when she talked about teaching and when I asked her if teaching was something she wanted to do after her studies, I wasn't surprised to hear that that was all she ever wanted to do.

...teaching was always my goal the whole way along...

I began to wonder if this made a difference to how she viewed her role as a teaching postgraduate researcher; did she see it as part of an apprenticeship into teaching (Garland, 1983; Lambert and Tice, 1993), or did she feel burdened by having to do hours of teaching whilst doing her research?

I needn't have wondered. Emma saw this as a time to learn to be a teacher...

I love the whole...getting the experience...but that's because I want to go into teaching... it's experience, like, you're gaining experience and it's recognised...

Had she just said 'it's recognised' again...was this more evidence of her position being validated...? Was experience worthless unless it was validated?

Emma spoke of her teaching as though it was an apprenticeship, a path to teaching, a step closer to achieving her goal, but she also spoke of the benefits of teaching to her at that point in time. Not only was it assisting her to achieve her career goal, but it was helping her with her own studies. It was almost like a symbiotic relationship – the teaching needed her and she needed the teaching. She spoke about how the act of teaching helped her to advance her own knowledge, both in terms of her discipline but also in terms of fine-tuning her research skills.

As she explained, her teaching was helping to

...upskill my own knowledge...learning more knowledge about my discipline...as well as the research discipline...and the teaching discipline...

...she was constantly increasing her own knowledge, which helped to answer my previous question about teaching being an epistemological process for her. I now realised that there was a lot more to Emma's view of knowledge that I had initially assumed...for her, it was more than content knowledge...

For Emma, there was also another learning layer...that of her personal development. Teaching had helped her become more focused, 'not as scattered', for the reason that she saw herself as now having so much responsibility for another person. And still on a personal development note, teaching had boosted Emma's confidence, as she confirmed:

...you feel...I'm more important now, like I'm not just a student, you know, I'm a teacher.... Teaching makes you feel like, I've finally...like, I've made it...

What emerged in this part of Emma's story was that her confidence seemed to hinge on her being perceived as a teacher; this had brought its own sense of importance. And I began to wonder if this was her defining moment of success – that she had made it to the other side. It seemed somewhat of a rite of passage, to be thought of as a staff member, rather than a student.

Was it all about identity?

Being validated as a staff member...?

The issue of identity was creeping closer to the surface...

Emma admitted that she found occupying the space between staff and student difficult (there's that dichotomy again!). In her words,

...it was very challenging...very awkward...

The awkwardness was down to the fact that...

...you're trying to show that you can be one of them, and then you're talking to students like...you are one of them...so you're kind of playing two different roles...

Her identity seemed almost folded into two: that of teacher and that of student.

And for the time being she seemed destined to linger in this liminal space. At one point she said:

...it's very hard to go from being a student to being staff and some people say that we're staff because...we have offices over in the [building] and, you know, we're seen as staff, even without teaching...that's very hard to grasp as a student...so giving a student that's doing their [postgraduate degree]... the likes of teaching hours or supervision hours kinda makes them believe...now, hold on, this is a step up...I am staff...you know...

and this was later confirmed with her powerful affirmation:

...as such, I'm no longer a student, I've crossed over to the other side...

But later on, she returned to her identity as a student and commented:

I'm a [...] student, this is what I'm doing...[I'm] a postgraduate researcher...

She finished that part of her story and I was left wondering with whom I had spoken or even who did Emma see herself as...

'Emma the teacher'

**or**

'Emma the student'

**or**

Both...?

or

more...?

...or maybe the two were one and the same.

This had echoes of teaching postgrads occupying a transitional space...an emergent space as mentioned previously, but also served to highlight the role ambiguity that surrounded GTAs, reminiscent of both Skorobohacz (2013) and Park and Ramos (2002, p. 52) when they commented that GTAs had been categorised as 'both student and teacher, but neither fully'.

In Emma's eyes, credibility with the students hinged on being perceived as a staff member/lecturer and yet, she seemed caught between several identities...and it wasn't just her – this was something that was being constantly discussed by her peers...

Nobody knows...we often have this conversation at lunchtime, whether we're deemed staff or student, and that's a common conversation amongst postgraduate students in the college...that we don't know what we are really.

Her words hung in the air, suspended in a thick cloud of doubt...

**Nobody knows...**

**...we don't know what we are really...**

I didn't know either...

She laughed nervously before continuing...

...you know, because to our students, we're staff, you know, to the staff, we're students...you know, so, nobody knows really...but I always say, I'm a researcher...I'm a postgraduate researcher...and that's kind of the title I give myself...not that I care about titles, but when you're emailing somebody to show professionalism, or whatever...

But, *it did matter*...and despite saying that she didn't care about titles herself, Emma was very aware of the import that titles had for others. Names and titles play a significant part in our identity and Emma was conscious of this. And by commenting on it, she was acknowledging the power of a title. She saw herself as 'a postgraduate researcher', but did others see her differently...?

The issues of identity and liminality weren't going anywhere and resurfaced later in our conversation when Emma described her first day and the struggle she had endured around where and how to position herself physically in the classroom...where did she see herself and what self (or selves) did she see?

I was introduced very early on...and that was awkward too...because...I didn't know where to go, when I was in that classroom, so all of the students were sitting down and the lecturer was standing up going through the slides of the workshop and I didn't know where to fit in there.

Do I stand up beside the lecturer or do I sit down with the students?

So I chose to sit down with the students...but I kept turning back...you know, if, say the lecturer asked me a question...then I would turn back...so from the word go I was a student...in those workshops, but yet, over time, those students felt, hold on, no, she can guide me, she...they trust me...

Her words echoed long after she had uttered them...

**...I didn't know where to go...**

**I didn't know where to fit in there...**

**...over time, those students felt...they trust me...**

Again, issues of identity were tangled up with issues of trust and credibility and 'who' Emma was seen to be was almost determining her capability as a teacher.

But there was also something powerful in Emma's image of the lecturer standing up whilst the students were all seated...and Emma had chosen to sit. Was this an acknowledgement of her position, somewhat powerless in the classroom and deferring authority to the lecturer? I wondered...and would keep wondering long after we had ended our conversation...

As our chat came to a close, I was stuck by the multiple subjectivities that had characterised Emma's story; there was

**Emma, the student**

**Emma, the teacher,**

**Emma, the postgraduate researcher,**

**Emma, the parent,**

**Emma, the learner,**

**Emma, the graduate worker,**

**Emma, the apprentice,**

**Emma, the ???...**

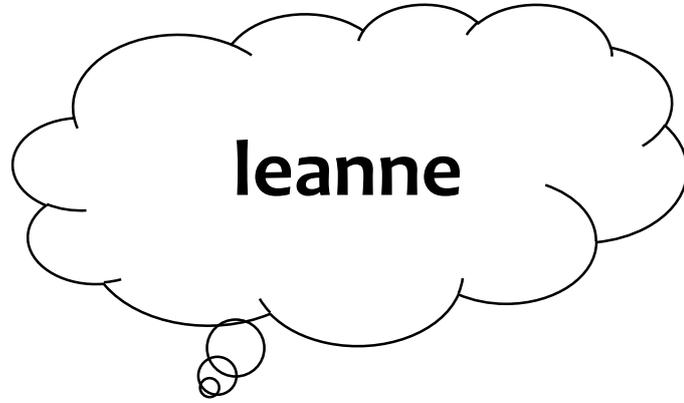
I remember what Emma had said about not caring about titles...maybe she had the right idea all along...

Did titles really matter...?

‘And something with neither sound nor name  
Passed between us there.’

Extract from *Meeting* by Rachel Field,  
(US novelist and poet, 1894-1942)

**SILENCING THE OTHER...**



leanne

*...across the hall...and the corridors of power*

*...across the hallway they can afford insurance...*

*They have contracts and they do have a union...*

*they're the ones who have safety...*

*vulnerable and voiceless...*

*It is precarious. It is taking...exploitative...it is taking advantage of people in a liminal situation...*

*...existing under a shroud or veil of ignorance...*

*the students don't know...they just think we're staff...*

*another example of 'othering'...*

*...doing exactly the same content,*

*...doing exactly the same grading,*

*delivering the exact same product but*

*I'm the one who's not getting paid.*

*I know my status is subservient.*

*Our universe is full of servants...*

*It's upstairs-downstairs turned on its head...across the hall*

## Leanne, Gina and others...

Leanne's words broke the silence...

I think as long as we keep calling it a luxury and as long as we keep calling it a privilege we're not acknowledging what it is. It is precarious. It is taking... exploitative... it is taking advantage of people in a liminal situation because they're not... when I left here I was qualified enough and when I came back, I was no longer qualified enough...

**Prologue:** *Leanne had been a GTA for a number of years (she used the term GTA to describe herself). Getting into teaching had been a long-lived dream – of that she was resolute. But, in recent years, her experience of both studying and teaching had removed some of the gloss from that dream; the picture perfect photo was starting to yellow at the sides...*

*As part of her scholarship, Leanne had to engage in 3 hours of teaching duties a week for the duration of her postgraduate programme. She had been tutoring in the past, but now she was lecturing and supervising. She seemed to be doing a bit of everything. The word 'exploitation' peeled out over the campus, but that was the only sound to be heard. Other than that, everything was silent and silenced...*

We had met in her office on a really hot Summer day. It was in an old, noble building, with corridors that almost compelled you to whisper out of respect. The view from her window was both sylvan and serene as the light danced off the lush green leaves below. Scents of freshly-cut grass wafted upwards. *The perfect place to study, I thought.* But, whatever illusions I had starting out that morning, they soon began to

crumble away like the paint blisters on the walls. Leanne's situation was far from perfect as I was about to discover...

She'd been in from early morning working on her research. We initially shared some chat about our research journeys; there was comfort in a collective moan around common travails. Then we moved on to talking about *being* a GTA (or was that *becoming* a GTA?).

*She used the term GTA herself...*

Leanne was currently lecturing and supervising and, a lot like Bill, the sense of obligation around what she had to do came through in the words she used 'the 3 hours that I have to provide'... (she just used the term 'I have to provide' – as though teaching was a service obligation, a chore to be completed... that somewhat scared me)...

But, just like Bill and Sara in their teaching practice, Leanne was very student-centred. For her, it wasn't just about a transmissive style of teaching, where information went from one person to another, like a well-oiled assembly line; instead it was about instilling a passion in the students for a discipline. With a sense of excitement, usually reserved for young spirits on Christmas Eve, she commented that she wanted her students...

...to feel the curiousness that I have about it and the passion that I have for my topic...

Proudly crafting her pedagogic philosophy, she added that it was more than just conveying information to students...it was about inspiring them to be as curious as they could be... (don't mind your students Leanne, you're inspiring me!)...

I was very aware that Leanne was "teaching" me a lot about postgraduates who teach in our collaborative encounter...and collaboration was something she clearly valued. She spoke of how she saw herself as on an equal footing with her students in the classroom, working and learning in a collaborative way... Freire's (1998, p. 31) quote 'Whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning' rang out in my head. In a sentence that embodied democracy in education, she spoke of students as partners in their learning and saw it as her goal to...

... create spaces where I'm equal to the people in the room...

Her mission was, in her words...

...to balance that thing between inspiring and teaching and educating practitioners, [...] and actually contribute towards change myself...

*[Aside: I looked enviously at Leanne, as that was the type of educator I had always aspired to be, but not sure I ever became. Teaching French had been more than teaching a language... it was an inner yearning to nurture their curiosity. I too had wanted to be 'inspiring'; I don't know if I ever was; I don't know what that even means to me... ]*

But where had Leanne's thinking come from...now I was curious. Where had she carved out the space for this thinking...were pedagogical modules on offer in her institution?

No - they weren't...

But Leanne's advocacy for GTAs continued to shine – she cared about everyone's plight, not just her own. For me, Leanne was a GTA activist...and embodied the decades of struggles that had taken place in the US between GTAs and US authorities (and in the UK) over their efforts to secure 'better employment terms' (Hayden, 2001, p. 1233), a plight that had raised issues around wages, hours, terms and conditions of employment.

I reflected... I had no memory of ever having the same sense of advocacy as an early career academic, so that was maybe why she impressed me so much. Her campaign to have pedagogic modules for GTAs had fallen on deaf ears (it felt that deaf ears were the only type of ears in the GTA world); she had been told that the module would be provided, but the timing never seemed to be right for those organising it... when she enquired about it she was told...

... but next year, but next year, but next year...

It felt to me like we weren't at the end of the tunnel yet...

And the reason behind not providing support...? Simply because her institution had felt the need to qualify their permanent staff first...(GTAs, just take your place at the end of the queue...). As she commented...

... permanent or CID or tenured staff are given priority...

which suggested to me that those like Leanne were side-lined... back in the wings...

As she spoke, I briefly looked out the window. The bright sun was energising the shrubs below, the flowers, like thirsty vessels, drinking in the heat, replenished...satisfied. But not all the greenery was bathed in this golden light... my

eye was drawn to the corner of the courtyard, where a triangle of shrubs lay almost hidden in the darkness...out of sight and almost out of mind. And yet, they were the underpinning branches that were supporting their colleagues in bloom. They too craved the heat, they longed for spotlight, but try as they might, they would never take centre stage...

Did Leanne also feel left out, marginalised, treated unfairly? Was there any support – a mentoring system... anything... anyone to reach out to? She recounted...

And I was chasing this one lecturer and I actually didn't meet him the whole time I was tutoring. He was like 'ah, no there's no need, ah no, that's grand...[...]'... hey, can you meet me so that we can discuss assessment... I want to know how you're grading or how you want me to grade them, they were like, no, I'll do it...

The idea of a GTA having to *chase* down a lecturer for information around their teaching jarred with me. Why was the onus on the GTA to track down the lecturer when arguably the GTA was the one doing the lecturer's hours?

Leanne found it 'quite scary' that there was no support for GTAs in her institution (I found it scarier that she had just said it in such stark terms). 'Chasing' and 'quite scary'... words that sounded more like they belonged in a horror film...

For support, Leanne relied on other GTAs and they on her, in what seemed to be a small but strong community of practice.

But there were 'others' too...

...other postgraduate students who had started on the journey with Leanne, but who had reached the finish line before her and who had gone on to secure teaching

positions within the department. I could hear the sense of unfairness in Leanne's voice as she spoke...

And I'm here... doing exactly the same content, doing exactly the same grading, delivering the exact same product but I'm the one who's not getting paid. And I'm the one that's in a precarious situation. And they're the ones who have safety.

Our conversation suddenly felt imbalanced...Leanne's earlier comment about everyone being on an equal footing now seemed like shifting sands. I was feeling guilty again; this time because I was suddenly aware of how Leanne and myself weren't on an equal footing... I was permanent... she was precarious...

But wait... how am I interpreting 'precarity'?

Let me step aside for a moment to interrogate this further...

Another word with a multiplicity of meanings, one described by Doogan (2015, p. 43), who suggests that the concept has evolved from being a concern with poverty to 'a mode of social control in which labour is disciplined by the threat of job loss and the uncertainty of employment prospects'.

Does this go far enough to convey the sense of vulnerability that is conveyed in the term?

... I'm not sure...

... instead, I find myself aligning with Nasstrom and Kalm's (2015) position when they referred to precarity as being a popular way to capture the psychological vulnerability which accompanies neoliberal economic reforms, an idea which echoes that posited by Bourdieu (1998), the French sociologist which was particularly concerned with the dynamics of power and the subtle ways in which power is used

to maintain social relations. Bourdieu suggested that precarity led to a culture of stress and a tendency to jealously safeguard one's own position. His view of precarity moves on further from a sense of vulnerability to the sense of a power struggle.

And so the division between precarity and permanency seeped through the very bones of the building. Leanne referred to 'Across the hall', where the tenured staff were located, where there were rights and privileges – they were 'proper' employees, with employment rights. According to Leanne, they could study for PhDs in their own time and their fees were covered. But it didn't stop there...

They could just cancel classes if there was a conference or even head off studying for a day if the need arose. Not Leanne – she was treated differently...if she missed a class, it had to be re-arranged...there was no getting someone else to cover her hours...

I listened to Leanne, feeling uncomfortable...I didn't know how to react. I couldn't nod at the end of each comment...for a nod is often a sign of approval and there was nothing to approve of here. She was made feel as though she should be almost grateful for her situation; I could almost hear others shouting from the terraces in disbelief: 'come on...she's on a scholarship and getting an accredited qualification...what's her problem...?'...

But it wasn't that way for Leanne...

I felt like shouting back: 'Yeah, but the rules of the game keep changing...stop moving the goalposts...', for the rules of Leanne's game kept changing or maybe we were all playing the wrong game and the pawns were just being backed into a corner on the chess board...

Leanne had left the institution (qualified!) and had returned, but was not deemed qualified enough to secure a teaching position. Once thrown back into the system, the ripples of injustice seemed to span out beyond her control. She recalled that, in the first term of her scholarship, she hadn't been asked to teach straight away. But, then, out of the blue, she was informed in the second semester that she 'owed 3 hours a week of teaching' from the first semester.

What...?, she cried. What...?, I cried...

I had to pay back hours. So actually for the next 3 semesters, I was doing 4 hours, 4 hours, 4 hours. They wanted me to do 6 and I'm like no, I can't.

I could feel the pressure that surrounded Leanne... she was speaking at pace and it was almost that the quicker she spoke, the more engulfed in pressure she was. It kept getting worse...

She spoke of how, as a GTA, she was also disadvantaged in terms of representation. The students' union in her institution didn't have a postgraduate representative and because the postgraduate students didn't have any classes that meant that they had no class reps.

No reps... no voice.

And when she commented that even her own Head of Department didn't know who she was, I began to wonder if she was both voiceless and faceless within the organisation...

... we're completely dependent on other people for so many things, including our legitimacy, like unless the Head of Department decides that we are qualified enough to teach, even though they don't know what we're qualified in, em, we're completely dependent on other people for legitimacy.

I was listening to her... but I was only hearing certain words... (was I like others in the institution and not really listening?)

**dependent on**

**legitimacy**

**qualified enough**

But she had an employee number (wow, that must've meant something, I thought...)

... no, it meant nothing... it was meaningless...

I have an employee number. I have no employee rights. I have no contract, there are no benefits that come with that but because I signed a [postgraduate] scholarship, because it's a stipend, in order for that stipend to be tax free they had to register my stipend as tax free by linking it to my PPS number. So I have a staff number, I use it to get cheaper food in the café, to have longer library loans... I use it to have cheaper gym membership. But that's... that's not good enough...

No, it wasn't good enough... it wasn't even good. These were the sort of rights and privileges that were of no benefit to her. No fringe benefits and no pension contributions (Hayden, 2001)... and the inequity didn't stop there...

... as a GTA, she had extra bureaucracy to deal with when trying to get access to the resources she needed from the lecturers. Everything as a GTA seemed to involve navigation through a maze of bureaucracy...

She explained the complex process involved in merely getting access to the virtual learning environment... (access to which was 'virtually' impossible!)

... you need to get [...] an email from that person and then you're starting a 3-way email saying dear la, la, la, please, please, please... almost like begging to give me the resources that I need in order for me to deliver the content... that you want me to deliver. It's just... like... they're just not considering postgrads in any of it... any of it, none of the bureaucracy, none of the admin, we're just kinda slotted into other things.

Again words jumped out...

**begging...**

**... you want me to deliver...**

**... not considering postgrads...**

**... kinda slotted into other things...**

And bad and all as all of this was... there was something more startling in what Leanne went on to say. She pointed out something that, up until that point, I hadn't given due consideration. Because she, along with the other GTAs, were teaching so many hours as part of their scholarships, this was akin to replacing a full-time staff member with GTAs.

That made no sense... for anyone. It was incongruous for Leanne that she was denying someone like her a full-time teaching position...

In effect, Leanne was denying another Leanne a full-time position... what? She struggled with this... she even used the word 'struggle'... as she said:

I struggle with it, because I don't want to participate in structures that deny jobs to people in my discipline, when literally that's going to be me in a few years.

And so this led our conversation around to the casualisation of staff, which almost 20 years ago in the US was cited as 'perhaps the single most serious threat facing the academy' (Johnson and McCarthy, 2000, p. 107). Leanne's words hit hard...

... in order to participate in my scholarship, in order to do a [postgraduate] here by scholarship I have to participate in structures that deny jobs to people...

Leanne recognised that she was complicit in supporting a system which supported precarity...her situation exploited..., a view echoed by Raaper (2018), in her UK-based study of GTAs, when she astutely observed that GTAs were being left vulnerable to exploitation, with their position being constantly shaped by a neoliberalist agenda. Courtois and O’Keefe (2015) also attributed this precarity to the impact of neoliberalism which, they believe, has not only restructured academic work but has also ‘resulted in the burgeoning of a particular type of academic worker, the casual academic’ (Courtois and O’Keefe, 2015, p. 44).

I looked again at Leanne and realised that she was in a similar situation... she had to do what she was told to do... others would decide her conditions of employment. Fitzsimons (2017, p. 208) suggests that, in these circumstances, employees ‘can do little but accept direction from above thus enforcing conformity’ and it felt that Leanne had no choice but to do the same.

*‘Checkmate!... cornered... do you surrender?’*

And though there were the two of us in the office talking, it suddenly felt that Leanne was on her own (I bet she often felt alone), as she referred to her lack of representation...

... I don’t have an employment contract, even though I have an employment number and even though I’m delivering the same content as the people across [...] who do have an employment contract... I have no union rights, in teaching. I can’t join the TUI<sup>20</sup>, I can’t join SIPTU<sup>21</sup>. I can’t join any of them. I also can’t really go to the Students’ Union because I’m a research postgrad

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<sup>20</sup> The Teachers’ Union of Ireland (TUI) is the union which represents over 19,000 teachers and lecturers in Ireland engaged in Post-Primary, Higher and Further Education.

<sup>21</sup> The Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) is Ireland’s largest trade union, with around 200,000 members.

and all of their representation is class or group structured [...] I'm the anomaly.

Institutions not considering GTAs as employees meant that they couldn't unionise, but GTAs, like Leanne, viewed themselves as doing a job and wanted to unionise (Skorobohacz, 2013). I imagine it felt lonely occupying one of the most precarious rungs on the academic ladder, something that now characterised academic life more so than security (Gill, 2013). And this view was reflected by postgraduates in the UK though the *National Union of Students* survey conducted in 2012 (National Union of Students, 2012), where, like Leanne, 31% of respondents in that survey claimed that they had not been given any form of contract for their teaching role. But, things were different in the UK, where, unlike in Ireland, there was a legal requirement on HEIs to provide contracts to all employees within two months of commencing employment, and GTAs were considered to be employees<sup>22</sup>.

Would Leanne ever be considered an employee, I wondered?

With no clarity around postgraduate working conditions, no national policies, no formalising of their situation, and, for the most part, no recognised pedagogical qualification... this inevitably meant no security... Leanne was caught on one side of the corridor, answerable to others and voiceless.

Like a dream-filled child, I desperately hoped for a happy ending... something that would ensure that Leanne might one day realise the dream she wanted... the secure

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<sup>22</sup> In the US, it wasn't until 2016 that the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) stated that the definition of the word 'employee' was to be extended so as to include student assistants as statutory employees (Kroeger, McNicholas, Wilpert and Wolfe, 2018).

teaching position. But we'd all awoken from that dream... for as Leanne said, there was no natural progression anymore...her position wouldn't become a secure job... she had been duped... she had just bought her dream house, named 'Precarity', nestled in far-away green hills, the mortgage slowly tightening around her neck... and no get-out clause. She described the whole situation as 'selling herself', she was over-qualified and, as she said, she was...

...begging for hours because the money is so shit on a scholarship...

and it seemed that even her scholarship just hid the fact that she was in fact being exploited.

Everything was a thinly veiled mask over legitimacy.

*[Aside: I cast my mind back to my own experience. My initial teaching position had also been a particularly precarious one, another manifestation of the power over me. I had been on annual, hourly-rate contracts and forced to re-interview for the position every year. For the first few years, I had neither holiday pay nor pension entitlements, just like Leanne. I too felt vulnerable; I didn't feel powerful enough to question anything. As I consider this now, I see that there was (and arguably still is) power exerted over me. Power was all around me; I had become part of a powerful system, but I felt, at that time, somewhat powerless.]*

But back to Leanne...the air in the room had turned somewhat sour...maybe the light from the sun had dimmed during our conversation. Leanne would have the last few words; I felt she was owed that at least...

... I know I'm not the worst off here in [name of HEI]... and again, I hate that I'm valuing it that way. The main message I want to give really is... as long as this work is seen as a privilege and as long as we say, oh, aren't you so lucky... you're not acknowledging how precarious it is, how much work actually goes into it and how exploitive institutions can be when it comes to this... we're delivering the exact same work, often to the exact same quality... and we're not paid or recognized or unionized or contracted or anything.

Leanne did indeed live precarity.

We both felt that and I think we both wondered if it would ever end.

We finished chatting...so many experiences shared, even in our silent reflection.

And, as I packed up my recorder, I looked out once more on the greenery outside... but the lush green leaves had long since shrivelled and died...

### **Postscript... 6 months later...**

Leanne and myself had stayed in contact and she contacted me again by email... this time to tell me that her story had well and truly taken another narrative turn. She had noted with interest that I had picked up on certain things during our conversation, things she hadn't been aware of emphasising throughout. She wanted to explain certain aspects of our conversation... in case I'd seen things differently than what she had meant (but wasn't I always going to see things differently?)... But there had been other changes in her story... far more significant ones...

Since we had spoken, she had gone for interview (commenting that her ambition at the time was 'to get known within my School'), but to her amazement she had been offered full-time hours... she had secured a fixed-term contract. She deliberately

turned down some of the hours, but was advised by those ‘across the hallway’ who said,

... now is not the time to be known as the person who says ‘no’, now is the time to be the person that says ‘yes’.

So, there was still that idea of power permeating throughout the system and that she was being advised to remain silent and just accept the hours offered. The power of precarity lived on. But there was something else in what she experienced since she had secured a contract... and this is what she said...

... Literally two weeks into my contract, people were introducing themselves to me that had previously walked past me in the corridors...

She was being talked to, instead of being that silent GTA. It was like others now saw and heard her; she referred to it as a ‘subtle yet tectonic shift’; suddenly she was no longer the ‘other’. And this was very clear in her comment:

... when I said previously that GTAs are exploited, unrecognised, undervalued, unsupported, ignored and more - I never knew how right I was until I made the shift to the other side of the table and was treated as an insider. Only now, being warm, do I know how out in the cold I really I was.

By referring to herself as now being an ‘insider’, Leanne was expressing how she had previously interpreted herself as an outsider. But this unsettled her somewhat... she couldn’t understand why she was now being treated differently, and yet she herself had not changed... only *her status*. So she reflected on it for a while and then came to the conclusion that it was not the fault of the individual members of Faculty, but rather, it was the system, the culture and the environment. Rationalising it in her own mind, she put it down to the fact that the other staff members were

experiencing their own difficulties and had to burden their own pressures. As she said herself:

They've no choice. They're trying to meander through it all too. They're busy surviving this toxic fog too. They've their own pressures and probably they're being ignored or undermined or maybe their job isn't as secure as I thought it was/is?

She left me with a lot to reflect on; as a GTA, her identity had been shaped by those around her, and now, as a lecturer, her identity was seen by others as something different.

And as far as the building was concerned, Leanne was still in the same office – she hadn't moved 'across the hallway', but in many ways, she had moved a long way away from where she had been...

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Almost a year went by and I was back dipping in to Leanne's world again... this time I was sending her another version of her story, a more aesthetically-layered version... and she was ready to fill me in on yet another chapter of the story...

We exchanged long emails... as Leanne filled me in on her situation... she wrote:

Thanks for your email and for the new version of my story. It was a pleasure to read. I found it so interesting to reflect on my own position then (and now) and also how you framed it. You also have a wonderful voice that I loved reading.

But what about her position...?

She had finished up her fixed-term contract and was offered a position elsewhere (outside of academia), which she readily accepted, taking a break from her studies.

Then, out of the blue, after a semester not working there (stick with me as this is significant), she was offered more hours in the subsequent semester...which she said yes to... but for Leanne, this was...

...another level of precariousness because I have no module descriptors, classroom lists or even subject names at this point...

I wondered to myself as I read her words if she was again 'filling in a gap'...or was it that '[p]recarity is now a permanent position in and of itself' (O'Keefe and Courtois, 2015)... in Leanne's situation this was indeed the case...

So why was the skipped semester significant...?...simply because, as Leanne said...

None of the hours (years) I had worked towards CID (contract of indefinite duration) count because I didn't work here last semester. I've been told they do that on purpose - give postgrads a semester 'off' so we don't build up enough legitimacy to become staff.

Leanne referred to herself as being 'burned' by the institution and I couldn't but agree...

She continued in her email...

the horrible experience of the practice of zero'ing my clock when they ask me back as a member of academic staff mere weeks later is just a disgusting practice. It's not just from the start that GTAs have it tough - academia has changed fundamentally and forever.

Picking up on the metaphor I had used in my story about her, she said...

I'm sure I sound defeatist. I'm not. I'm just not using my energy here. I'm using it elsewhere where I can shine. You used the metaphor of the green garden outside my window and the bushes that were fighting for the light? My light isn't in this institution even if my roots are. I'm chasing my sun.

And so the sun went down on our conversations, but I hoped that it would rise again soon, for us both...

## ACT VI:

### Setting the scene...

‘All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts...’

William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (1623)

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**celisne**

wow, clearly it's been challenging in different ways for Bill, Emma and Leanne...but tell me, is it like that for all postgrads who teach within the sector...? I don't really have a sense of what it is like in the Institute of Technology (IoT) sector...is it very different to the University sector?

**me**

different, but the same. IoTs were originally quite different to universities, but from what I see, they are now pretty similar...

**celisne**

and that makes you think that the phenomenon of teaching postgrads will soon be as visible in IoTs as it is elsewhere...?

**me**

I can almost see the GTA train coming down the tracks...

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## **The theatre in which work – the IoT sector**

This might be a good time to set the scene in detail...to give You an overview of the Institute of Technology (IoT) sector and its development, as this will help to explain the rise in the number of postgraduates who teach...

Institutes of Technology represent the technological sector of Irish higher education, and exist alongside Ireland's eight universities and numerous private independent colleges. There are currently eleven Institutes of Technology (IoTs) and one Technological University (TU)<sup>23</sup> in Ireland. And, despite their titles, IoTs are not restricted to studies in technology; they now engage in both teaching and research in a wide range of disciplines, up to, and including, doctoral level.

But this has not always been the case...

IoTs have developed considerably since they were originally founded in the 1970s, a development that has been accompanied by the emergence of more postgraduate research students and potentially more teaching postgraduate students within the sector.

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**celisne**

i think i need a bit more detail here...there's clearly a backstory here too and remember, context is everything...

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<sup>23</sup> The Technological Universities Act 2018 allows Institutes of Technology to apply to become new higher education institutions with technological university status. The first TU came into being on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2019, with the merger of Dublin Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Tallaght and Institute of Technology Blanchardstown, all located in Dublin. This is now known as Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin).

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When they were originally established in the 1970s, the IoTs (previously known as *Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs)*), had as their mission,

... to provide vocational and technical education and training for the economic, technological, scientific, commercial, industrial, social and cultural development of the State with particular reference to the region served by the college ... (*Regional Technical Colleges Act 1992, s 5*)

Essentially, they were teaching institutions and offered little by way of opportunity to conduct research.

Research remained the remit of the university sector.

And, up until the early 1990s, most of the programmes offered in these RTCs were at undergraduate level, with the majority of students pursuing Certificate and Diploma qualifications and apprenticeships.

However, this changed in the 1990s, when the new title of *Institute of Technology* was conferred upon each of the institutions and gradually their suite of programme offerings and award levels began to rise, with the first PhD in the sector awarded in 1993. Higher education continued to witness an increase in participation and, by 2017/18<sup>24</sup>, the universities accounted for 55% of all enrolments, followed by 40% in the technological sector and 5% in independent colleges. In the same year, the total number of enrolments in the technological higher education sector was 93,020 compared to 127,775 within the university sector. As a result, in terms of

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<sup>24</sup> <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/01/Higher-Education-Authority-Key-Facts-Figures-2017-18.pdf> [accessed 3 June 2019]

student numbers alone, the technological sector now occupies a significant position within the Irish higher education sector.

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**celisne**

good, we're finally talking numbers...that's reassuring...up to now, it's all been about words...

**me**

well hold on...I must tell you that the statistics around GTAs in Ireland are extremely limited and those I have, I am presenting to you with an added note of caution: it's all a paint-by-numbers exercise, without the paint!

**celisne**

I'm not following...

**me**

you never do! Look, all I'm saying is that the numbers here don't convey any sense of the experience of postgraduate students who teach. The numbers are just that...numbers. Our paint in this case are the words of the postgrads themselves, who paint their own pictures of their own experiences. All I'm doing is merely adding some artistic touches, leaving their stories to speak for themselves...

**celisne**

okay...but You know how much I like numbers, measurement, benchmarking, evidence-based measures of success...numbers are reassuring...

**me**

listen to your words...just part of the discourse around what is 'valid' research...is it through that discourse that you control academic practice? Just remember...‘Data’ do not stand as transparent *evidence* of that which is real’ (Davies and Gannon, 2005, p. 313)...

**celisne**

well we'll agree to differ...

**me**

fine...but, let me get back to the IoT story for the moment...

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Similar to the universities, IoTs can now confer awards (through what is known as ‘delegated authority’), up to doctoral level on the *National Framework of Qualifications* (NFQ)<sup>25</sup>. The only difference between the awards is that those within the IoT sector are issued by *Quality and Qualifications Ireland* (QQI), which is the awarding body for HEIs outside of the university sector. Apart from this difference and the fact that universities have greater autonomy in terms of borrowing money, the IoT sector is very similar to the university sector.

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**celisne**

and what does this mean in terms of postgrads who teach...?

**me**

a bigger pool of potential GTAs... look, there are currently over 10,000 postgraduate research students (between Masters and doctoral students) in Irish HE...

**celisne**

and if we break it down between both sectors...

**me**

...well, in the IoTs, that number is rising (Hazelkorn, 2014) – in 2017/18, there was a total of 1,682<sup>26</sup> enrolled for both Research Masters and Doctoral level programmes, compared with 8,333 within the university sector (have a look at *Figure 2*).

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<sup>25</sup> The Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was established in 2003 and is the single mechanism for recognising all education and training in Ireland. All levels of education are represented on the framework, with each level mapped against agreed standards of knowledge, skill and competence. Available at: <https://nfq.qqi.ie/>

<sup>26</sup> This figure represents both part-time and full-time postgraduate students for both Research Masters and Doctorate programmes.

Research Enrolments by Sector, 2017/18			
	UNIVERSITY SECTOR	INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY SECTOR	TOTAL
<b>Full-time</b>	6,737	1,301	8,038
Masters Research	6,170	718	6,888
Doctorate	567	583	1,150
<b>Part-time</b>	1,596	381	1,977
Masters Research	1,353	272	1,625
Doctorate	243	109	352
<b>Total</b>	8,333	1,682	10,015

Figure 2: HEA - Research Enrolments by Sector 2017-18<sup>27</sup>

**celisne**

and how does that compare to previous years...?

**me**

...well, in the IoT sector, in 2014/15<sup>28</sup>, there were 1,193 research students enrolled, so that's an increase of almost 41% within three years, which is itself an indication of the changing values within the sector, with research activity taking a more prominent position.

**celisne**

and has their profile in terms of discipline changed...? I mean, weren't the majority of them from STEM disciplines in the past...?

**me**

yes, but that's been the case both nationally and internationally. Actually, the limited literature pertaining to postgrads who teach in Ireland is confined to STEM (take for example Ryan, 2014, 2015) – that's where most teaching postgrads were until now...but today, they are present in lots of disciplines, across the social sciences and the humanities, just like in the UK (Park and Ramos, 2002)...

**celisne**

sounds like a binary between 'STEM' and 'everything else'...?!

**me**

it has been in terms of postgrads who teach...but now that binary has been deconstructed...

**celisne**

very poststructuralist...! but has that profile change had any impact on their role...?

<sup>27</sup> Available at: <http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/01/Higher-Education-Authority-Key-Facts-Figures-2017-18.pdf> [accessed 1 June 2019]

<sup>28</sup> <http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/Hea-Key-Facts-and-Figures-201415.pdf> [accessed 4 June 2019]

**me**

for sure...it's gone from a demonstrating role to one of more facilitation, and of course, lecturing, leading seminars and tutoring...but their duties change from institution to institution...even from department to department (Sharpe, 2000). Well, that's been the situation in the UK...but it's been mirrored here too...

**celisne**

and what about their hours...? I imagine they too have increased...given that they are cheap...

**me**

well some IoTs cap the teaching at 2 hours a week, but others are requiring postgrads to do 6 hours a week...and in the UK, postgrads are taking on 'teaching assistantships', which mean more teaching responsibilities; some of them are teaching between 10 and 15 hours a week and there are others who have a 'teaching load comparable to that of full-time lecturing staff' (Sharpe, 2000, p. 133). And I know of one Irish university asking them to do over 450 hours of teaching support duties in the academic year...

**celisne**

hold on, imagine if each of those hours takes between 2 or 3 hours to prepare...wow, that's an awful lot of teaching...but tell me this, we've seen there are a lot of postgrads, but just how many of these are teaching in the sector?

**me**

who knows...

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### **The hidden tribe...**

Despite the fact that, every year, the *Higher Education Authority* (HEA), the Irish statutory body for the governance of the higher education system, publishes the breakdown of those enrolled on PhD and Masters programmes, by discipline and sector,

...there is *no way of knowing* from these enrolment figures who is involved in teaching-related duties...

Ultimately, it is up to each HEI to decide if they wish to engage the services of postgraduate students and to decide on the terms and conditions of this engagement. Because GTAs experience an occupational liminality, in that they are positioned somewhere between being staff and students, they don't necessarily have employment contracts, meaning that

...there is *no way of knowing* how many of them are in the sector by looking at employment figures.

But it is not just in terms of numbers that the postgraduates who teach remain hidden; it is also in terms of their inclusion (or lack thereof) in policy documentation. Currently, there is *no* national policy specifically relating to postgrads who teach in Irish higher education (and from my conversations with those in this study, it emerged that there were very few local policies in place regarding postgraduate researchers who were teaching).

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**celisne**  
that's a lot of unknowns...a lot of keeping people in the dark...

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*But what about any good practice guidelines for doctoral programmes?*

In 2009, the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB), published the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of its *Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes* guidelines (the first edition having been published some four years earlier). Its purpose was to publish

good practice in respect of a number of themes relating to PhD programmes. But listen to the way it talks about postgraduates who teach:

‘Commonly worldwide, Universities and other HEIs require funded research students to contribute to teaching... For students who are not benefiting from a tax-free exemption, payments for tutoring, demonstration and supervision duties are usually only limited by institutional rules, and by availability.’ (IUQB, 2009, p. 30)

...‘institutional rules’ (what rules and in relation to what issues?)...and with no overarching national policy governing what they do in terms of teaching-related duties, each institution seems to have carte blanche to do what it chooses.

But, despite the lack of a specific policy or governance relating to them, postgraduate research students are clearly engaging in teaching duties across the sector, as was evidenced in the *Irish Survey of Student Engagement for Postgraduate Research Students (ISSE-PGR) 2018*<sup>29</sup>, when 72.5% of postgraduate researchers indicated that they had taught or demonstrated during their postgraduate programme, something which they viewed as beneficial to their overall research experience. As a follow-on from this, 39.4% of respondents indicated that an academic career was their highest priority, with a research career being the second most mentioned priority at 22.7%. So, many postgraduates were contemplating a teaching role in the future...were they the same ones who were already teaching?

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<sup>29</sup> Available at: <http://studentsurvey.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/ISSE-PGR-Report-2018final.pdf> [accessed 5 August 2019]

What is also noteworthy in the ISSE-PGR survey is that only half of the respondents who were teaching agreed that they were given appropriate support and guidance for their teaching...was this another indication of being ‘thrown in at the deep end’, a term used by the participant **Knowles** in my conversation with him...and as **Marian** (she’s up soon!) described it in her institution...

I think that there is a bit of a, a bit more of a cavalier attitude towards postgrads inside there; it is very much ‘well they’re doing it for the experience kind of thing’...

I couldn’t help wondering if any of the respondents in the ISSE-PGR survey were participating in this study...who knows...?

So, teaching postgrads, and their roles, remain predominantly hidden and silent in Irish HE and this could continue as more change occurs within the Irish higher education landscape.

And change is on its way...

### **The set changes and GTAs appear in the foreground**

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**celisne**  
change? what kind of change? will it impact on postgrads who teach...?

**me**  
it will...in March 2018, *The Technological Universities Act 2018*<sup>30</sup> was signed into law, allowing for the creation of new Technological

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<sup>30</sup> Available at: <https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/act/2018/3/eng/enacted/a318.pdf> [accessed 26 May 2019]

Universities (TUs). This means that IoTs will begin to merge and form new educational institutions.

**celisne**

and what's the thinking behind this...?

**me**

it's political...as the then Taoiseach<sup>31</sup>, Leo Varadkar indicated, the political agenda behind the creation of these new technological universities was to 'drive regional development and provide more opportunities for individuals, enterprise and community'<sup>32</sup>, in addition to creating education provision for a greater number of individuals.

**celisne**

but you could argue that by merging HEIs and forming regional clusters, it's a way to enhance 'efficiency and critical mass' (Hazelkorn, 2014, p. 1345). And, I imagine that as these new institutions attract even more undergraduate students, this will lead to further expansion in the number of postgraduate research students...and consequently GTAs.

**me**

that's entirely possible alright...but, with the demand for full-time places in HE projected to increase significantly until 2029, where it could be up by 23,000<sup>33</sup>, there will just be more undergrads anyway, with or without the new TUs.

**celisne**

so it could be like in the UK, with increasing student numbers and limited funding (Fairbrother, 2012)...making the option of cheap GTAs more attractive. Do you think this could be linked to the neoliberalist socio-political context which seems to form the backdrop to Irish HE?

**me**

well, just think about what Leanne said and maybe that might answer your question...

**Leanne:** People on welfare were making more money than my scholarship, but I'm supposed to be proud of it, and I'm supposed to take it and like bow down...it's the problem with being a full time student and being on the equivalency of welfare...

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<sup>31</sup> Taoiseach is the title used in the Irish Republic to refer to the position of Prime Minister.

<sup>32</sup> O'Brien, C. (2018). Dublin colleges to merge into technological university in January. *Irish Times*, 17 July 2018. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/dublin-colleges-to-merge-into-technological-university-in-january-1.3568350> [accessed 27 May 2019]

<sup>33</sup> Available at: <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Statistical-Reports/projections-of-demand-for-full-time-third-level-education-2018-2040.pdf> [accessed 26 March 2019]

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It all came back to money...no surprise really...

**A neoliberalist backdrop – hand in hand with GTAs**

‘I think this "gig-economy" of being both "in" and also "out" of academia - having two jobs is quite the norm for a lot of GTAs.’

*Leanne*, one of the participants in this study...

For more than a decade there has been a move in Ireland to marketize higher education (Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012), in line with ‘neoliberal thinking’...

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**celisne**

sorry to butt in again, but I think you need to be more explicit about how you’re interpreting ‘neoliberalism’...

**me**

okay...I suppose I see it as a mode of government underpinned by economic discourses of competition, characterised by a return to laissez-faire economics and ‘the transfer of public entities into private ownership’ (Fitzsimons, 2017, p. 7). It’s the idea that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual freedoms (Harvey, 2005), also characterised by the introduction of business models and benchmarks into the public sector.

**celisne**

so what characterises it...?

**me**

accountability, market values and practices (Lynch, 2017), deregulation, privatisation (Mercille and Murphy, 2015) and the ultimate pursuit of profit. This neoliberal thinking has a clear focus on efficiencies ‘through measurement of outcomes and individual staff performances’ (Deem, 1998, p. 50), along with demands for increased performativity, which is ‘a key mechanism of neo-liberal government’ (Ball, 2013, p. 137), in that its focus is on

comparisons, performance funding (Clarke, 2019), targets and benchmarks.

**celisne**

fine, but I'm not sure how that is reflected in higher education and what it means for postgrads who teach...?

**me**

well, educational institutions are being run like private sector companies, aligning with more corporate world values; they're being transformed into 'powerful consumer-oriented corporate networks' underpinned by a neoliberalist ideology (Lynch, 2006, p. 1). Educational values and principles are being compromised in favour of more commercial issues such as resource allocations, just as was identified in the UK (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz, 1994). And of course that includes being competitive (once the reserve of the private sector). Take Australia, where there has also been a drive to produce graduates who can serve the economy and be productive, 'productive in the precise sense of producing an ever-growing mass of profits for the market economy' (Connell, 2013, p. 104).

**celisne**

I hadn't quite realised it was like this...or maybe I just hadn't thought about it like that until now...(and maybe you only thought about it like that when you started on the doctorate programme in Maynooth!)

**me**

well, at least we are thinking about it now...and not just that, but, if you think, funding in the sector is now being granted on the basis of productivity, so HEIs are being driven to 'implement market-driven accountability strategies' (Loh and Hu, 2014, p. 14). And of course, 'academic leaders' have become 'managers', operating under quasi-market conditions (Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993)...

**celisne**

another name change...and another title...?

**me**

yes, but it is more than just a title change...educational neoliberalism has taken on the form of managerial control systems (Ball, 2012) and what has emerged is 'new managerialism' (Deem and Brehony, 2005).

**celisne**

and what does that look like...?

**me**

well, managerial techniques, which were hitherto the domain of 'for profit' businesses, have now become embedded in higher education

(Deem, 1998). There's mounting pressure to account for public funding and to demonstrate value for money, a drive for efficiencies (Berg and Seeber, 2016), which has led to HE becoming refashioned as an economic market. It's similar to the UK, where there have been attempts 'to reposition higher education as a global commodity' (Naidoo, 2003, p. 249). I mean some universities have started to view themselves as 'private firms catering for other private economic interests' (Marginson, 2011, p. 414), which in turn, leads them to the adoption of a consumer mindset.

**celisne**

and what about the increase in student numbers...in some way, that supports the emergence of GTAs, so do you think that that is being driven by a neoliberalist agenda?

**me**

well, that's the way I would see it...if you think about it, the decision to expand and widen student participation has been driven by economic imperatives rather than by equity (Walsh and Loxley, 2015). And there is more competition between educational institutions for home-based and international students (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006)...and increases in student numbers without corresponding increases in staff will lead to a decline in the quality of the learning experience (Gibbs and Jenkins, 2014).

**celisne**

it sounds as if the drive for financial efficiencies is dictating everything...

**me**

yeah, and because of all these 'competitive pressures and public demands' (Bettinger and Long, 2010, p. 598), colleges are finding ways to increase efficiency, as was the case in the US. And think about it, cost-saving measures involve replacing full-time instructors with part-time adjuncts (Bettinger and Long, 2010), and contingent faculty, including...

**celisne**

including postgraduates who teach...

**me**

exactly...and that is why they are being asked to perform traditional teaching duties (Husbands and Davies, 2000). They could be seen as an example of what Olssen and Peters (2005, p. 313) refer to as 'new performative measures to enhance output and to establish and achieve targets' and remember, they are motivated, flexible and cheap to employ (Gillon and Hoad, 2001; Julius and Gumpert, 2003; Taylor and Beasley, 2005)...they constitute a rather expedient strategy to allow HEIs to deal with decreased funding (Harland and Staniforth, 2000).

**celisne**

do you think that this is what is happening in Irish HE...? I mean you've talked about the US and the UK, and I know that, here in Ireland, we often replicate their practice, but is it evident in, say...policy or strategy documentation?

**me**

so clearly you've read the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, published in 2011...?

**celisne**

no...but I've heard of it...is that the Hunt Report?

**me**

yeah...a government document which curiously, as Lynch (2006) identifies, was drafted by a panel of so-called 'experts', which didn't include a single academic. Anyway, let me tell you about it...this strategy document is underpinned by neoliberalist values and principles (Lynch, 2006) and is really a concerted attempt by the Irish state 'to re-construct higher education in accordance with economic utilitarian objectives' (Walsh and Loxley, 2015, p. 1128).

**celisne**

how so...?

**me**

well, it calls for 'greater productivity and commercial activity' (HEA, 2011, p. 15), a way of suggesting that more could be done for less...

**celisne**

that doesn't sound good...maybe I shouldn't read it after all...but just one more thing...

**me**

you sound like Columbo, the detective!

**celisne**

well, I do want to uncover what all this might mean...would the financial crisis of 2008 have had any impact on the emergence of GTAs...?

**me**

well, with rising demographic demands, Irish HE was struggling to support itself (Hazelkorn, 2014). Between 2008 and 2015, despite increasing student numbers, the State contribution fell by 38.4%

(Irish Times, 2018<sup>34</sup>; Chapman and Doris, 2019) leaving it severely underfunded (Chapman and Doris, 2019).

**celisne**

so the limitations on funding have led to more competition, I suppose...?

**me**

yeah, something which, questionably, is referred to by the Irish Department of Education and Skills, as an ‘essential feature of any higher education system’ (HEA, 2012, p. 9). So now it is about containing costs and focusing on new sources of income generation (QQI, 2016), like increasing the number of fee-paying postgraduate students, reducing staff and a proliferation of more temporary teaching contracts (QQI, 2016)...and this includes GTAs...

**celisne**

They’re a by-product of a neoliberalist framework...I’d never thought of it like that before...

...listen, we’ve been talking a lot *about them* again, and you just said earlier that has been an issue with many of the GTA-related studies...talk more to me about that...

**me**

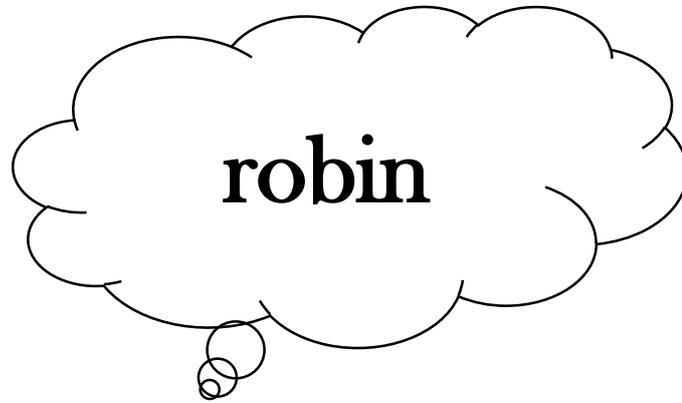
I’m getting to that...give me a chance...if you’d just stop interrupting...

...but I think given all this talk of funding and power, maybe it’s time to get another perspective...and hear Robin’s story as I know she has something to say about all that...

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<sup>34</sup> ‘The Irish Times view on funding higher education: status quo is unsustainable’, published in the *Irish Times*, 23 July 2018. According to the article, the sector has been left hundreds of millions of euro short of the type of sustained investment needed. Retrieved from: <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/editorial/the-irish-times-view-on-funding-higher-education-status-quo-is-unsustainable-1.3571298> [accessed 20 June 2019]



## robin

*... we're still doing the same thing, we're still going in, we're lecturing...I suppose it's just got a different name on it...that's about it really*

*...is that the only difference?*

*... there is a distinguish [sic] between us and a staff member*

*...a form of othering...is it them and us?*

*...I do think they appreciate what we're doing and stuff...*

*'appreciate' (verb)*

- 1. recognise, acknowledge*
- 2. value, respect, esteem*

*...which one is it though?*

*... we wouldn't be brought in on staff discussions, about the course, or about changing modules and so on...*

*...then there's no value...?*

*...we're just given the module and we deliver it, that's it...*

*...then there's no respect...?*

*I wouldn't like to think of myself as being in a position of power...*

*...you needn't worry, you're not...*

## Recounting with Robin...

### **Left out in the cold again...**

I never got to meet Robin face-to-face.

We had planned to meet up the previous day but something had come up her end, so, at the last minute, we agreed to chat over the phone instead. There was something weird about picking up the phone and dialling a complete stranger for a chat - maybe it was because I knew there would be no other distractions...no coffee cups clinking in the background, no students walking by on their way to class, nothing to make the situation feel 'more normal'...just two voices chatting and one recorder taping. I locked the office door and dialled, somewhat nervously...

I needn't have been nervous...Robin didn't feel like a stranger; instead she felt like someone I had known for a long time. There was an ease in her voice that meant that, within seconds, we had settled into a comfortable chat. It was like meeting up with a friend, but one that you couldn't even picture in your head. I started to imagine what she might look like...tall, fiery red hair tumbling in loose curls down her shoulders...[but was my image just coloured by her choice of pseudonym?]....

***Prologue:** Robin had just started teaching in September; she was completing a PhD in the STEM area...it was only October now. Having done some tutorials in the past, she had a sense of what was involved. She was now teaching 6 hours a week to a group of 3<sup>rd</sup> Year students. Robin wasn't on a scholarship that necessitated teaching, so it had been her choice to teach; and she was getting paid an hourly rate for it. When she had tutored in the past, she got vouchers by way of remuneration. I wondered about this...*

Despite the fact that she had only started teaching in September, she still had plenty to say about her experiences so far. I got the sense from Robin that she had been very busy since she started and maybe our conversation had given her time to take stock of all that she had been doing since September. Barely a minute into our chat and she said:

...em, so I've 6 hours a week but just kind of realising now that there's definitely a lot more than 6 hours that goes into it.

6 hours, I thought...that was a third of the contact hours of a full-time lecturer in the IoT sector.

Only recently, had Jordan and Howe (2018) highlighted one of the most significant concerns of GTAs as being the fact that they have to spend so much time on teaching that it detracted from their own studies. And Robin had 6 hours of contact time...

To me, that seemed like an awful lot of preparation and teaching...

She went on to say that she hadn't had any choice in what she was teaching; it was more a case of taking 'whatever comes up' (an idea that had already 'come up' with some of the other postgrads). As she said...(and her words stuck with me)...

**We're just given the module and we deliver it, that's it..**

And though many full-time lecturers don't have a say in what they are teaching, I wondered if it should be different for postgrads who teach, given that they seemed to be constantly balancing their time between their teaching and their studying...

I also began to wonder if teaching postgraduate students had any idea starting out of the level of preparation that was involved in teaching. Did anyone explain that to them?

Robin did mention that the person who had been delivering on the module the previous year had given her some presentations (I presumed she was referring to some powerpoint slides), but, as she explained herself, they were

...all over the place to be honest...the content [...] wasn't really great and [I] wanted to improve on the presentations this year...

I was conscious that Robin kept referring to *presentations*; she spoke of making them and sourcing content for them and I very much got the sense that much of her teaching was conducted by going through powerpoint slides. She also mentioned that a lot of her time was spent practising the presentation to see if it came up to the 2-hour class. Was her teaching very content-focused? Listening to her, I was beginning to think that her lecturing style was purely based on a transmissive style, evidenced in Harland and Plangger's (2004, p. 82) study, when

they found that conceptions of teaching for the majority of GTAs in their study centred on the notion of ‘knowledge transmission’...

...but, I was wrong...this wasn’t the case for Robin.

She went on to explain that, with the help of a colleague, she had included a lot of activities in the presentations, to ‘make the class kind of hands-on’ and so her students would not just be sitting listening, which, as she recognised, was very difficult to do. That had come from her own experience as an undergraduate student.

Eagerly, she embedded exercises into her sessions and was keen to make them active and student-centred, which started me wondering if she had received any form of pedagogical training as a teaching postgraduate student. Her answer came laden with laughter...

Eh...no [laughs]...very definite no...

I asked her if she would’ve liked some kind of training before starting out, but to my surprise, Robin wasn’t convinced that she needed it...(once again, I had made the assumption that she would jump at training...but, once again, I was wrong). Instead, she seemed more taken by the idea that she should’ve gotten more notice about her teaching hours (echoes of what Bill had mentioned). But I was still intrigued by the lack of training and felt the need to dig deeper...why didn’t she feel she needed it?

Her reasoning came down to the fact that she felt so familiar with the topic and because she was ‘only going in teaching it’, she didn’t feel the need for any

pedagogical support. I couldn't quite work out the logic behind that, if there was one...maybe it did come back to content after all...or maybe I was missing something...

And so, in the absence of any pedagogical programme, Robin had based a lot of her teaching practice on what she liked from her own experience as a student. She remembered two or three lecturers who she noted as being very good for doing practical exercises in class and these were the types of lecturers that stood out and I presume the ones whose practice she wanted to emulate.

I could see that Robin invested a lot of effort into her teaching - as she described, she had...

spent an awful lot of time preparing...prepping for the classes...

and so her memory of the month of September was that

...more time went into the lecturing and preparing for the lectures...

than she would have liked.

September's workload was weighing on us all...it was like that feeling you get after completing a 10k, but going out too eagerly at the beginning, only to feel the pain in the latter stages...and for your limbs to ache in the days that followed. October brought with it that ache of an overly-exercised September.

When Robin had mentioned that she worked with a colleague, I wondered if there was a pool of teaching postgraduate students from whom to draw support...but there wasn't; it appeared that there was only one other teaching postgrad in her discipline. So, when it came to other issues, like assessing and grading her students, Robin

(and her colleague) went seeking more guidance, simply because this was something they had never done before. Again something jarred for me...lecturing wasn't something she had done before either and yet she didn't seek guidance on that (or receive any...).

But Robin appeared to be excited by the prospect of seeing how her students were progressing and was planning on sitting down with the other postgraduate and marking the assignments together. I wondered why there wasn't any input from the lecturers on this but Robin didn't elaborate...

We got on to talking about power and authority (did everything come back to that?) and I asked Robin whether or not she felt that she was in a position of authority in the classroom, to which she replied that she wouldn't like to think of herself as being 'in a position of power'. In ways that didn't really answer my question. But she went on to explain that she didn't think she was 'above them'... (power had an odd way of being viewed in a hierarchical way). It went like this...

*Gina: ...and even in the organisation, like, do you...do you find...do you think that you have kind of the power to do stuff or do you think, well I better not...you know...?*

**Robin** (quite directly): I think we've the power to even make suggestions anyway...

It was a start, I thought...

...and there was the power to put students into groups for projects. But she went on to describe how her students hadn't always been happy with the groups to which they had been assigned; she described it as 'a bit of an issue' with two of the classes wanting to change groups. But as she said herself, 'we stuck to our guns to say no'. Though I could see how Robin viewed this as asserting her authority, I wasn't sure

if that meant that she had power within the organisation; to me, it was more like power in the classroom.

So I was left unsure as to how much power or influence Robin had outside of her classroom; was there any forum where her suggestions as a teaching postgraduate student could be heard?

**Is someone listening...?**

No...there didn't seem to be and Robin didn't seem to discuss her teaching with anyone, other than her colleague and one of the lecturers who had taught the module previously.

But she did have a comment to make about what she perceived to be management's view of the GTAs... 'I do think they appreciate what we're doing and stuff...'. (I was too busy thinking 'do they even know what you are doing?'). But, as regards input into the module design, this seemed to be non-existent...access to those kinds of meetings, denied. As she said herself...

I suppose we wouldn't be brought in on staff discussion about the course, or about changing modules...

All I could think was...

Left  
out  
in  
the  
cold  
...again

It didn't sound to me as though Robin had much of a voice in the institution...

When we got on to talking about her supervisor, she made it clear that her supervisor prioritised her research over her teaching, as did Robin herself...

...well they'd definitely prioritise our research, we'd never discuss our lecturing hours with them, or what's going on in our lecturing, it's just that happens...that's our...that's our work outside of our research; when we meet them it's just solely our research...and we try to put focus on that...so that is our main focus and then we'd work the lecturing hours around that...

The way in which Robin spoke about teaching and research made the two activities seem very separate; lecturing was that 'work outside of our research' as she had put it herself. So, I was interested to know if she thought that her teaching had benefitted her research in any way.

Despite the fact that the content of her teaching had little to do with that of her research, it had helped her in terms of presentation skills. And it was a bit of a break from her research (echoes again of Harland and Plangger, 2004) and echoes of what Lauren had said too. In addition, teaching gave her experience should she ever want to go into teaching in the future - and this was something to which she was giving serious consideration. From there, we moved effortlessly into talking about how she saw herself currently - was she a lecturer, student or postgraduate researcher...or all...or none...? Robin was clear in her response:

Em, I suppose, I'd just define myself definitely as a postgraduate researcher who did part-time work...because we're...yeah, cos we're really...although we're staff and on the payroll, [...] we don't log in the same way as typical staff...there'd be a separate section for postgraduate researchers, so [...] there is a distinguish [sic] between us and a staff member that way...

She had just said 'us' and 'a staff member', as two separate entities, almost confirming that she did not see herself as staff (the 'them' and 'us' dichotomy again). And Robin seemed somewhat caught in this liminal space between staff and student. Yet, she still felt that she was a staff member in many ways, just with a different title (we're back to titles and names again and what meanings they contain).

As she said:

...like, we're still doing the same thing, we're still going in, we're lecturing for whatever it is, an hour, two hours, and we're still getting paid...I suppose it's just got a different name on it...that's about it really...

But was it really that, I wondered? Was everyone doing the same thing, but just under a different name, as Robin had suggested? And if that was indeed the case, then why had postgraduates who teach no voice in the organisation, like other staff members had...?

Our phone conversation was coming to a natural end...we had explored a lot of themes together but, before we would bid each other goodbye, I really wanted to ask Robin if she had any advice for any incoming postgraduate students who were tasked with teaching-related duties. She had...

Em, well I'd definitely say, like, you have your 6 hours a week, make sure you find time to like prepare for your class as well, but not to spend too much time, 'cos you can easily see how you'd lose track of time and looking at loads of different material online, trying to decide what to put into your presentations, so make sure you're strict on your time...

She was also quick to point out that, as a postgraduate who teaches, you had to be careful that you weren't missing out on doing your research work either...

I got the sense listening to her that the preparation time for her teaching had encroached somewhat on her research time and that her advice for future teaching

postgrads was actually more so directed towards herself; a reminder that her 6 hours a week was a lot more time-consuming than she had originally thought.

As we finished chatting, I couldn't help but think to myself again, here was Robin doing 6 hours a week teaching, and 8 hours a week teaching would be what a half-time lecturer would be doing.

Was Robin a lecturer, but with a different name?

Were we just back to names and titles again?

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**celisne**

that's really interesting about titles, naming and identity...it's come up in more than one story at this stage...do you want to talk more around that...?

**me**

well, maybe it's better that you listen to my story with Marian first...the theme of professional identity threads through hers...and then we can talk more about identity, names and power...how about that...?

-----



**marian**

*... we're kind of in a bit of a limbo*

*Do YOU know what you're doing?*

*...Bit of making it up as I went along...*

*Do THEY know what they're doing?*

*I think they were quite stuck as well for someone to fill those hours  
so...*

*But what about the Monitoring? Minding? Mentoring?*

*...there's no one who's overseeing*

*or anything and it's very much just...kind of 'go off and do it'...*

*laissez-faire...?*

*... a bit more of a cavalier attitude towards postgrads*

*...didn't feel very well represented at that point...*

*...who's actually sticking up for us here?*

## **In conversation with Marian...**

### **Forming a professional identity...or identities**

I kept hitting the refresh button...thinking that, in some way, the more I hit it, the more chance her email would pop into my Inbox. What if she never replied to my email...the one I had sent with the transcription, what if she did reply and said that she no longer wanted to partake in the study...all her words would then just vanish into thin air...gone forever...as if they were never heard...never said...

***Prologue:** Marian had only been teaching as a postgraduate student on a regular basis for a few months. But she had done some tutoring in the past. She wasn't on a scholarship, so there was no obligation on Marian to teach. She had opted to teach; and she was paid the part-time rate for the hours she did. She was doing 6 hours teaching a week. Marian wanted/wants to go into teaching.*

We met in a coffee shop. It was a crisp morning and, as I waited outside, I wondered if every person that passed was Marian...how would I recognise her?

Then a young, fresh-faced girl arrived and before I could even ask if it was her, she'd said 'Gina, is it?'... 'Yes', I answered, feeling as though I had just turned up for an interview!

Marian looked so young that I could hardly believe she was a postgraduate student. I wondered if I looked really old to her...

We went inside...

We ordered coffee and tea and sat in a quiet corner of the shop, trying not to disturb anyone else. I went through the ritual of explaining that I would be recording – Marian knew the score so we didn't delay on that...we just got chatting...

...and the conversation just flowed freely...

Marian was easy to talk to and I was very comfortable listening to her. She began by explaining that she wasn't on a scholarship in her institution, so she wasn't obliged to do any teaching hours; *she was doing them out of choice*.

But she was paid...

Wow, I thought, she isn't a teaching postgraduate in the typical sense (but by that stage, I had realised that there wasn't a typical GTA). But then she spoke of other postgrads in her institution who were on scholarships and were doing 12 hours of teaching.

...12 hours of teaching...????

...that didn't seem to be part-time teaching territory any longer...not when full-time members of Faculty in the sector were doing between 16 and 18 hours...

We moved to talking about professional development...and just like so many other postgrads who teach, Marian hadn't received any form of pedagogic training or induction; and she would have liked it; she described how alone she had felt trying to figure things out for herself. That made me stop and wonder why teaching postgrads were left to navigate all of the Institute's systems by themselves...other new members of Faculty weren't usually left on their own...so why were these postgraduates left to fend for themselves?

So where or to whom did Marian go for advice or guidance...?

My supervisor for sure, he's very em, yeah, like he's been a lecturer for so many years and he's quite...like he's quite helpful for things like that and happy to help kind of thing...

Though he was really helpful, Marian was conscious that she didn't want to annoy him by running to him for advice every time she had a question; it seemed strange to me that Marian would think that asking for assistance would be construed as being annoying.

- What kind of supportive environment were we creating for GTAs where they would end up thinking that they were bothering others?
  - Was there anyone else to turn to?

There was someone else for Marian...the person who had delivered the module in the previous year. He too had been a postgraduate student and had since become a lecturer (become a lecturer...did that simply mean that he had secured a full-time job?). According to Marian, he was really helpful for practical things, things that she would never have even thought of...

But had Marian experienced challenges as a teaching postgraduate student...?

No, was the answer...and this was partly due to the classes that she had been allocated - quite simply they were all nice and for that she deemed herself lucky. There'd only been one incident of note...she had arrived in the classroom early to set up and was sitting at the back of the room and...as she said...

...one guy came in and started playing really loud rap music and was like '*ah lads, listen to this...*' and talking really loudly in the classroom and I was like '*okay guys, we're going to get started...*' and he had a heart attack...cos he hadn't realised that I was...

I looked at Marian as she was talking and I couldn't help but feel that I might have made the same mistake as that guy; I would never have known that she was a postgraduate student. I wondered if it was more difficult or easier for the students to relate to Marian as a postgraduate student than it was to their other lecturers (this echoed Kendall and Schussler's (2012) study exploring undergraduate students' perceptions of GTAs). Marian was quick to respond by saying that the students weren't in any way intimidated by her, nor were they disrespectful...there was 'a camaraderie' in the class, a mutual respect, maybe partly due to the fact that Marian understood what it was like for her students,

having been taught by postgraduate students when she herself was an undergraduate – she knew what it was like to be a GTA and she described how she viewed postgrads who were teaching...

...I remember them seeming way more...earnest and like...like I can remember one girl in particular like would give us surveys after, like every fifth lesson to find out, like yeah '*how am I getting on?* '*am I doing okay or...?* I guess I'm also conscious of that as well, you know, I'm just trying to...like, ease into it, and not kind of come off like totally frantic...or whatever [laughs]...

I couldn't imagine Marian being frantic; she seemed very relaxed to me...yet confident – confident in her discipline knowledge and confident as a teacher.

I'd almost finished my coffee at that stage; coffee was useless for these kinds of situations – you just drank it too quickly. Marian had chosen more wisely and was topping up her tea each time there was a slight break in our chat, gently stirring towards another topic of conversation. Our flow was momentarily broken by neighbours who joined the adjacent table for their mid-morning sugar coated catch-up. Cup clatter accompanied by a full-scale search for an errant milk jug, and all the while I was conscious that I was recording the conversation with Marian. Would their conversation be picked up too – was that ethical? The stage felt cramped and nobody was sticking to their lines...

Would Marian continue to talk now that she had another audience...?

She did...once again, she wasn't fazed and went straight on to discuss her assessment strategy with the students. She spoke comfortably about a multiple-

choice exam that was coming up, but slowed down when she described the more 'subjective assessment' that she would also be conducting. I immediately got the sense that Marian saw this as being challenging. Had we stumbled on something that fazed her?

...no...

Marian was way ahead of me and had already planned for the assessment, by inviting in the person who had given it the previous year; he would provide advice on the grading aspect. There was a comfort in her voice as she described this – a comfort in knowing that she would have support, especially given that, as she said,

I've completely no experience doing anything like that before...

The value that Marian had for that peer support was similar to what others had found (Myers, 1998; Austin, 2002) and, as Wise (2011, p. 136) indicates, the communication which occurs in these supportive relationships with peers and faculty members has 'been found to be a powerful force in shaping the teaching practices of new GTAs'. Marian was that new GTA...

We moved on to discussing power and I asked Marian if she felt that she had the power to change something in the module, or even make suggestions for change to a module, if she thought something was no longer relevant. She was very clear in her response...she had already changed a lot. She referred to her inherited module notes as being 'a little bit outdated' and she was adamant that her

students would get information that was up-to-date. I was impressed by her vision but wondered if she had needed approval before making any changes to the module. Marian laughed, loud enough for our neighbours to break away from their chat and look our direction...

No, Marian didn't have to check with anyone, for as she said,

...there's no one who's overseeing the content in these modules or anything and it's very much just...it's yer module...kind of 'go off and do it'...

It was though Marian owned the module; she was almost echoing Bill, who, if you recall, had also been left to his own devices with the module, and a similar scenario would be described by other postgrads, including Knowles. That was a level of autonomy that I didn't think existed for teaching postgraduates. It certainly hadn't existed for me when I initially embarked on my teaching journey. But where did Marian get the time to consider and implement changes to a module? Was she like the other postgrads I had talked with in that she was pushed for time?

She was...and, as she continued to talk, it was the first time that I sensed pressure in her voice...

She was reflecting back on the start of the year and how much time she had spent sorting her notes. There was a disorder in her description of that initial panic...

there was such a short timeframe...in like, we literally had a week to get the first week's...like...we've been working week to week with the

notes...like trying to just kind of staying...It was a bit of a...it was a bit of a mess to be honest...

It transpired that Marian, just like other postgraduates, had been called in to teach at the last minute, almost like filling a gap (and Knowles would come out with similar lines later when he would say... 'there's a vacancy and they just haven't filled it...we have a gap here, we don't have a full time member of staff to fill it'.)

A teaching postgrad = a last-minute backup plan...

And even her supervisor had commented on this...Marian went on to describe her reaction...

She was very much em, her opinion was that it was...we were doing them a favour, rather than they were doing us a favour...say the department wanted to fill the hours and that it was kinda being thrust on us and that we weren't...em...[...]...it wasn't gonna...it was gonna affect our research poorly in that we were going to lose all these hours etc...

Her supervisor was clearly concerned that the teaching would negatively impact upon Marian's research and it did. Marian didn't get any research done in those first few weeks, but from that point onwards she had developed a structure and the scales between research and teaching was now more evenly balanced...

And despite the fact that there was no connection between what Marian was teaching and her research (just like Sara had described), she did comment that she had become a lot more organised since she had started teaching, fine-tuning

her time management skills. I got what she was saying...I remember that when I was teaching and studying, having a structured timetable make it almost easier to work than having no timetable at all...was this another of the benefits of being a GTA, in that you were forced to become more organised? I wondered...

As both our cups now lay idle, our conversation turned towards contracts and payment and Marian mentioned that she was still unsure as to how much she would be paid for the hours. Did she even have a contract...?

She had no idea...(which to me suggested that she didn't)...

I was intrigued...and I couldn't help comparing. Would a part-time lecturer who had been taken on by the organisation still be there two months later wondering what the story was regarding payment? Who knows, but I doubted it. But here was Marian and things still didn't seem to be sorted. I probed her on this...and her words hit hard in response. For her, there was...

...a bit more of a cavalier attitude towards postgrads inside there; it is very much 'well they're doing it for the experience kind of thing', like, than there might be if I was coming in through an interview process...

Yes, she was being treated differently...

Her words brought me right back to what her supervisor had said about the department needing Marian, more than Marian needing the department. I was feeling that Marian was being exploited, but was she feeling this too...?

She did...and worse, she felt as though she was caught between the Head of Department, who wanted someone to teach the hours, and her supervisor who was concerned that the teaching would detract from her research...as Marian said,

...we can't keep anyone happy...

Caught in the middle again...

The fact that Marian had to fend for herself suggested that there was nobody representing the GTAs in her institution; they had no voice. At that stage, I was feeling both sorry for Marian and frustrated on her behalf; she had so many people to please – her department head, HR, her supervisors, and her students. All of that without even considering her studies...

Up until now she had come across as very confident...but I was beginning to think that maybe her position as a teaching postgrad wasn't enabling her to be that confident. When it came to contract and institutional processes and systems, she wasn't asserting herself...did that stem from the fact that she might've still viewed herself as a student?

She voiced what I had been thinking...

Yeah...also like the age difference...like I kinda went straight from undergrad to...I had a year out and then I went straight back in to...so I do still...I still am more in student mode than I think...

She also commented that because she looked young, this had its disadvantages when she was trying to identify herself as staff or as a postgrad...

Did she have to identify as one or the other...?

Oh it's a bit of a nightmare like, especially because...I think I look quite young...I look like a student when I'm walking around so like I think a lot of the staff members don't really know...like, they think I'm a student as well, especially when I'm meeting them in classrooms...they think, like you know, 'you're the lecturer?'...em, I...I still call myself...a postgrad student...I have a staff number and I have a staff HR account and things like that but I still am not really thinking of myself as being...I still...I'm kind of in student mode I suppose...

But then in the classroom, Marian found that she had to be 'more of an authoritative figure', which meant that she had to change her mindset slightly and think of herself as a staff member...

A lot of juggling of identities, I thought...

And though she seemed well able to assert herself in the classroom, I wondered again why she didn't feel as able to do this with other members of the organisation. She put this down to there being 'a bit of power difference' – she thought she could be more 'outright and upfront about things' if she had been a bit older...

...was power linked to age...?

It was almost as though Marian knew her place and she even commented that she was aware of a hierarchy when it came to programme board meetings. She would be invited to these meetings and to the department ones and she would go...but she would be doing 'more listening than talking'.

I had listened.

Marian had talked....

I glanced to the side, expecting to see round two of doughnuts and drinks but our neighbours had gone; I don't remember them going...I hadn't heard them leave...

...but I wondered how much they had taken from our conversation, if anything. Had they listened or just talked...?

I offered Marian another tea but she politely declined...she had work to do...a structured timetable to follow...

We walked down the rickety wooden stairs and back out into the noisy world, where it seemed that everyone was talking and nobody was listening...

### **Postscript**

We touched base again three months after our initial conversation – this time by email. I wanted to know what Marian had thought of her story and whether she had anything else she wanted to add to her experience. She was succinct in her reply and simply commented that she thought the story had really represented her experience very well. She seemed happy with how I had represented our conversation. But what really struck me in her email was that she expressed her gratitude to me for letting her 'take part in the process'. She was grateful that someone had listened to her and someone had valued her voice...clear in her line:

...thanks for letting me take part in the process!

I felt like answering 'I didn't "let you take part" in the process, You ARE the process...

On the one hand I was pleased, pleased that it meant so much to her...but as I reflected on it, my initial pleasure morphed into disillusion...disillusion that here was a postgraduate student who felt that she had to thank someone for merely *listening...*

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Late 2019...early 2020...another email from Marian popped into my Inbox, in response to yet another version of her story...

It read as follows:

*Hi Gina*

*Thanks for getting back in touch! I had a read through my story, and just wanted to let you know I think you captured my experience perfectly. I love your writing style too!*

And that was it – concise and to the point...

Though I was delighted that she had gotten back in touch with me...I was disappointed that she hadn't filled me in on what had been happening in her life as a postgraduate...was she still a postgrad, was she teaching or had everything changed? Out of respect for her, I didn't want to intrude by writing back again and prying...after all, she had 'let me' be part of her story for a while...

## ACT VII:

### **The poststructuralist researcher, postgrads who teach and the nature of power – an entwining triad**

‘Power does not corrupt. Fear corrupts... perhaps the fear of a loss of power.’

John Steinbeck, *US author (1902-1968)*

Back in 1957, Robert Dahl, the US political theorist and professor at Yale University, published a paper entitled ‘The Concept of Power’. In it, he made the following remark, which, for me, perfectly conjures up an image of power that resonates with my poststructuralist stance, (which itself will become more apparent as you read through this part of the story). Dahl commented...

‘Unfortunately, in the English language power is an awkward word, for unlike “influence” and “control” it has no convenient verb form, nor can the subject and object of the relation be supplied with noun forms (Dahl, 1957, p. 202).

The word *power* is therefore somewhat of a poor fit linguistically. As Dahl identified, it has no associated verb form nor agent noun; it functions solely as a noun. In that sense, it relies on accompanying verbs such as ‘to have’, ‘to exert’, and ‘to wield’, to show some indication of the possession of power. But ironically, if you adopt a Foucauldian perspective (1980a, 1982, 1991), which threads through this section, then power is everywhere and is not owned or

possessed by anyone, so maybe we don't need a verb after all...maybe the word itself is more verb like...something dynamic, moving, a force of itself...

I see *power* in this way...it is everywhere...seeping through every sinew of society...

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**celisne**

so you're suggesting that the whole teaching postgraduate student experience is infused with power...power around and power within...why?

**me**

well, i think that is because it was like that for me starting off teaching...power was pervasive...

**celisne**

how so?

**me**

well, i had no contract, no holiday pay, no security of tenure, a bit like those in this study – Knowles, Stephen, Leanne, Lauren...

**celisne**

and when did that change...?

**me**

maybe it was when i got all of those things...maybe that moved me towards a more agentic consideration of power...realising that I could use this power to teach in a way that I wanted to...

**celisne**

but that suggests your power only came when precarity was lifted...?

**me**

that might well be the case...

**celisne**

you mentioned Foucault earlier and that you've been guided by his views...do you want to drill deeper into that...?

**me**

well, it's not just Foucault, there are others too that I draw from, but I'll give you a sense of their thinking as we go on....

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## Poststructuralism and a multiplicity of meanings...vive la *différance*

I have already shown that the idea of a multiplicity of meanings is fundamental within poststructuralism...

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**celisne**

so just how are interpreting poststructuralist theory and how does it relate to postgrads who teach?

**me**

well, as I said earlier, poststructuralism is essentially a theory of language and knowledge, mainly associated with 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosophers, including Foucault...

**celisne**

so do I presume in that case that it is of French origin...?

**me**

yeah, it developed as a critical response to structuralism, which itself focused on the logic of structural relations, including language. So, rather than concentrating on this logic, poststructuralism set out to deconstruct these structures...

**celisne**

*(smiling)*

so that's the difference...or should I say *différence*...or even *différance*...?!

**me**

oh I see what you did there! ...yeah, the concept of '*différance*', as advocated by Derrida (1982), proposed that language operates within a constant state of fluidity and that meanings change. He suggested that the meaning of signs came not just from their *difference* from other words, but also because signs are continuously undergoing a process of *deferral*.

**celisne**

that resonates with me...a constant state of fluidity...but what's *deferral*?

**me**

well, *deferral* is based on the notion that meaning is more fluid than fixed and that it depends on the particular context in which it arises, which suggests that texts are constantly open to multiple interpretations, placing the responsibility on the reader to derive their own interpretations from a text.

**celisne**

so a multiplicity of meanings is constructed...created...

**me**

and then interpreted in multiple ways...

**celisne**

sorry, I threw you off tangent there...you had started talking about Foucault...

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### **Finding Foucault...identifying and naming the locations of power**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) has been hugely influential in shaping interpretations of the concept of power. He focused much of his studies on disciplinary power and the subtle ways in which power is expressed in all relationships, viewing power as immanent in all social relations and contending that all such relations were in fact ‘relationships of power’ (Foucault, 1988, p. 11). Ball (2013) even comments on how Foucault saw the concept as ‘power relations’, rather than just ‘power’ (Ball, 2013, p. 6), thereby emphasising the ubiquitous nature of power. Foucault saw power as reaching into the fabric of all individuals and inserting ‘itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives’ (Foucault, 1980a, p. 39), thereby influencing everything that we do. Unsurprisingly, he suggested that power is everywhere and ‘comes from everywhere’ (Foucault, 1998a, p. 63) and is not wielded by certain individuals, nor is it something that is owned (Foucault, 1998a). Rather, it is pervasive in all social structures and is co-produced within all social relations (Heizmann and Olsson, 2015).

In Foucault's view, there was no truth without power (Foucault, 1980b). From this perspective, power was therefore 'diffuse and capillary, omnipresent' (Allen, 2002, pp. 133-134). Similarly, power is fundamentally relational (Foucault, 1972) and rhizome-like (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), in that, being everywhere, it can be both hidden and visible. Adopting this view, power can be considered as 'a basic force in social relationships' (Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson, 2003, p. 265), which reflects the view that power operates within a network of relations (Foucault, 1977), further endorsing the perspective that power is not owned by any one entity.

### **Embedded in a web of power**

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**celisne**

So far all of the stories presented have alluded to different manifestations of power (power of supervisors, undergraduates, research, institutions) and how they have impacted upon the teaching postgraduate experience...but how does the concept of power shape them?

**me**

well, I see the experience of postgraduates who teach as being surrounded and interwoven by threads of power. Not only do these power relations, or lines of force, frame their experience and shape their existence (Winslade, 2009), but they also impact upon their identity...

**celisne**

...but you already said that to exist is to *name* something – so why don't You name those expressions of power that you see entangling the GTA experience...

**me**

fine...let me *name* them...well, there are the State bodies exerting power over the GTAs, directly and indirectly, as we saw in the opening act. Then, there is power in the individual institutions,

exerted by those in managerial positions, who are the ones making decisions around the postgraduates' working conditions...

**celisne**

...but what about power closer to them...?

**me**

yeah, in the shape of the undergraduate student body and the other teaching postgrads for sure...and let's not forget the power within the postgrads themselves...an enabling, agentic power...

**celisne**

...and Gina, what about your power as the researcher in the study, isn't that there too, close to them...?

**me**

yeah, for sure...and I'm very aware of it...and am trying to lateralise it as much as I can, even, for example, in things like inviting them to choose their own pseudonyms...there was power in that...

**celisne**

...well, maybe you could talk to me a bit more about all that so I can paint a picture of power in my head...

-----

### **Irish higher education...where is the power?**

Probably the most powerful body within the Irish higher education sector currently is the *Higher Education Authority* (HEA), the body with responsibility for governance and regulation. It is 'the statutory agency responsible for the allocation of exchequer funding to the universities, institutes of technology and other higher education institutions (HEIs)'<sup>35</sup>. Not only does it allocate funding, but it also provides guidance on policy practice and acts as 'a conduit through which HE state policy has been both formulated and directed' (Walsh and Loxely,

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<sup>35</sup> From the HEA website; source: <http://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/> [accessed 10 January 2019]

2015, p. 1129). Added to this, the HEA is tasked with focusing on outputs and performance, making it an extremely powerful player in the HE sector.

*Is it all about performativity?*

Writing from a UK context, Collini (2018, p. 47) cautions that ‘everything that tends towards greater ‘performance management’ increases the power of managers’. This focus on performativity was reflected in Ireland in the 2016 strategy document *Investing in National Ambition: a strategy for funding Higher Education* (DES, 2016), which called for a major injection of funding in higher education, whilst simultaneously outlining the importance of achieving ‘better outcomes for our investment’ (ibid., p. 1), along with accountability and transparency.

As such, it is no surprise that part of the HEA’s role has become one of auditing, financial monitoring and seeking value for money across the system and it appears that postgraduates who teach play a significant role in this because of their cost effectiveness.

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**celisne**

so, with the focus on funding, it seems as though attention has begun to centre on where and how HEIs can attract monies...

**me**

that’s the way I see it...and one of the main areas is that of postgraduate studies, for which there is little state funding support and the costs are primarily borne by the individual student and, with more and more postgraduate research students in the system, it is no surprise that they are being viewed as an extra staffing resource, a way to address the decline in full-time faculty members, a way to ‘fix’ a staffing crisis...

**celisne**

it's a bit like what you said earlier...the same as in the US and the UK, the appearance of teaching postgraduate researchers on the Irish HE landscape seems to have aligned with neoliberalist thinking...nicely coinciding with a move towards a market-led HE sector...

but you said earlier that power was everywhere...

**me**

that's just the way I see it...but if you consider that Foucault was also interested in examining the relationship between knowledge and power and the way he saw Western knowledge as being constructed around binary oppositions, which themselves are created through discourses, then that opens up more considerations for how power envelopes the teaching postgraduate experience...

**celisne**

oh you've mentioned this before...I'm not really sure what your interpretation of this is...could you give me an example of a binary opposition...

**me**

well, masculine/feminine, theory/practice, science/art...that kind of thing...

**celisne**

I get it...so in this story it could be student/teacher, or teaching/researching...or maybe it's you, academic/manager...! Anyway, what's the problem with binaries?

**me**

power, that's what. In creating binaries, one pole of opposites will always be privileged over another...it's like a tug-of-war between constructs and only seeks to polarise knowledge...

**celisne**

isn't that something that Cixous *et al.* (1976) explored...?

**me**

yes, and she saw these binary oppositions as being 'heavily imbricated in the patriarchal value system' (Moi, 1985, p. 104)...

**celisne**

and what do you think is true...?

**me**

don't even go there celisne...if you try to fix a meaning to a version of truth, then you are in danger of creating regimes of truth, which may go on to be systemised and influence practice and beliefs...you would just be enacting power by doing that...and before you know where you are you will be saying things like 'research is more

important than teaching' and that will become your truth...but not mine...

**celisne**

fine, no need to argue on this...can we go back to the concept of power and where it might fit with postgraduates who teach...?

**me**

...as I said, power is pervasive and can construct social institutions through the imposition of order and discipline...

**celisne**

and you're suggesting that teaching postgraduate students are being disciplined...?

**me**

well power is both explicitly and implicitly expressed through language and practice (Barthes, 1967; Cixous *et al.*, 1976; Kristeva, 1980) and power maintains hierarchies through the production of discourses (Foucault, 1978) and practices, which operate in us all (Inglis, 1997) and this disciplines our ways of thinking and acting (Anderson and Grinberg, 1998).

**celisne**

...well that still doesn't really explain how it fits with postgrads who teach...

**me**

think about it Celisne...we've already said that one of the critiques of the existing literature on GTAs, is that it talks *about* GTAs and not *with* them...that's a demonstration of power through discourse and may influence the way in which GTAs act and think.

**celisne**

...but what about power being an enabler?

**me**

yeah, in later works, Foucault saw it more as a productive force (Foucault, 1980a), one which enabled individual subjects to shape themselves. He claimed that it was 'the intertwining of the productive and repressive aspects of power that is the key to understanding the relationship between power, subjectivity, and agency' (Allen, 2002, pp. 134-135).

**celisne**

so, he saw individuals as shaped by the powerful social relations which surround them...and that would include postgraduates who teach...?

**me**

well, consider the view of Allen (2002), the US-based philosopher and academic, who has been heavily influenced by Foucault, and

who suggests that ‘...individuals are subjected, and this is in a dual sense; they are subjected to the complex, multiple, shifting relations of power in their social field and at the same time are enabled to take up the position of a subject in and through those relations.’ (Allen, 2002, p. 135).

**celisne**

looks like postgrads who teach are constantly navigating through lines of power so...  
but there is something I don't get...

**me**

what...?

**celisne**

well, if Foucault's belief is that power is the driving force behind all human relations, does this somewhat negate the view that there is potential for agency? I mean do individuals have control over their ways of being if power is everywhere and we are dominated by powerful discourses?

**me**

yeah, it's a good point alright...you could say I suppose that his is somewhat of a constraining module of agency (McPhee, 2004), which was reflected in his earlier works where he presented 'individuals as passive bodies, constituted by power and immobilized in a society of discipline' (Deveaux, 1994, p. 228).

**celisne**

but the postgraduates who teach in this study...do you think they are passive? Or are they agentic...?

**me**

well I suppose it depends on what you are understanding by being agentic in this case. For me, in this conceptualisation, agency can be the story we tell ourselves – it is the narrative. And just as narrative has a temporal dimension, so too agency is often seen as a temporal process, or as described by Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 963), an ‘...embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)’, thereby reflecting a narrative ontology.

**celisne**

so, by being involved, here and now, the postgrads who teach are being agentic...

**me**

yeah...this conceptualisation of agency is one which takes into account the dynamic potential of human agency and thereby suggests that social actors are capable of 'formulating projects for the future and realizing them...', in the present' (ibid., p. 964). And that is what they are doing here...for me they are not passive subjects within the IoT sector...here in this study, eleven teaching postgrads practised their own freedom by engaging in conversations, which itself is an expression of empowerment (hooks, 2010)...

**celisne**

but what's your interpretation of empowerment...?

**me**

well, there are lots of conceptions of empowerment (Rappaport, 1984; Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995), but one I can identify with is that proposed by Rowlands (1995), who states that 'empowerment must be about bringing people who are outside the decision-making process into it' (Rowlands, 1995, p. 102), a view which is echoed by Perkins and Zimmerman (1995, p. 570), who even suggest that empowerment might even include 'shared leadership'. But it's a slippery concept, I know that...

**celisne**

is that the first step...the idea of listening to others and recognising everyone's voice? That has echoes of hooks (2010, p. 2) when she comments '...each student finding his or her unique voice, this recognition is usually empowering for students'...but I'm not sure that that is the case with all the postgrads in this study...I mean think of Marian's words when she thanked you for 'letting' her take part in the process...

Gina, is empowerment even possible...?

We have already seen that postgraduates who teach tend to be largely outside of the decision-making processes in higher education; they are talked *about* and not *with*, almost a way of *disempowering* them, rather than empowering them.

**me**

yeah...and even if they are at the decision-making table, are they likely to speak...? Access alone to decision-making circles isn't enough (Rowlands, 1995)...once there, people must perceive themselves entitled to occupy that space, embracing the idea of 'power from within' (Rowlands, 1995, p. 102), reaffirming the notion that there is agentic power within us all.

**celisne**

...and I suppose, if you consider the Foucauldian perspective that power may only be exercised if subjects are free, then, some of the postgrads in this study showed that they were free to develop their

own pedagogical practice...I mean look at Knowles and Stephen, they negotiated their own terms and hours; and others, like Tom and Robin spoke about introducing changes into the curriculum and their assessment practices. And, they could decide themselves whether or not to engage with any institutional politics...look at Emma, she had deliberately chosen not to engage with any institutional politics.

Is that not all empowerment...?

**me**

if that is your interpretation of it, maybe...but I need to reflect on how I interpret power and empowerment...

-----

As the concept of empowerment inevitably involves identity (Drury, Evripidou and Van Zomeren, 2014) and language, power and identity have all been explored by French theorists who have embraced poststructuralism, such as Cixous *et al.* (1976), Kristeva (1980) and Derrida (1982), it is timely to return at this moment to my own story and to unveil as to how I found the development of my own identity to be a powerful experience...

**In the *name* of power...*pouvoir* or *puissance*?**

My initial position in higher education was as a lecturer of French...

[**Aside:** *I had originally named myself a 'French lecturer' but I now realise that this could be interpreted in a different way...I am not French...I lectured French...*]

...and in French, there are two words for power: *pouvoir* and *puissance*...

and they too have different interpretations...

...so how am I interpreting power...or pouvoir...?

I interpret *pouvoir* as the power of dominating or being dominated by; in that sense, it represents the force behind, not only getting someone to do something that they would otherwise not have done (Dahl, 1957; Lukes, 1974), but also, the potential to influence others (Turner, 1991) and shaping their thoughts and wants. This is an interpretation of power that is essentially underpinned by a dominance model of control (Berger, 2005) and is synonymous with authority, coercion and hierarchical structures. This very much reflects the notion of power as ‘domination, forced compliance and submission’ (Haslam, 2001, p. 221), a paradigm of power that I suggest has been evident in most Western institutions for centuries, and is reflected in many HEIs. In this respect, power is used to impose order and discipline and to exert control, either through *pressure* or *legitimisation*. As posited by Emerson (1962) pressure (or a dependence-based relationship) is the idea of power being expressed through influence, in that A’s power over B is proportional to the extent to which B depends on A. In this instance, B will conform with A’s demands as they feel forced or pressurised into so doing (Bourgeois and Nizet, 1993).

*But...you might be wondering, how might this apply to postgraduates who teach?*

In many cases, GTAs are dependent on the organisation for their funding through stipends, which may leave them in a financially dependent role vis-à-vis the organisation...

...but there is another way of influencing and exerting power over others and that is through legitimation, which suggests that a person exerts power over another by influencing behaviour and making their demands appear legitimate (Freiberg, 2010). If applied to the postgrads who teach, it would suggest that they might accept their precarious position in the organisation, as it is presented to them, in such a way that it appears to be legitimate. If we legitimise the title that is becoming more commonly used to describe them - *Graduate Teaching Assistants*, and their status as assistants and not staff, then there is the strong possibility that they will accept it as being the norm (Leanne's story really brings this to the fore).

-----

**celisne**

well wait a minute...aren't you legitimising the title 'GTA' here by using it...

**me**

no, that's why I'm using different names interchangeably...like I said earlier...differing interpretations...

-----

*But let me pause...and think about another interpretation of power...*

*Puissance* is the other word for power in French, and it is this word which I am interpreting as portraying much more of an emancipatory interpretation than that of *pouvoir*, one with which Foucault aligned in his later works, when he acknowledged both the productive and the repressive nature of power (Zink and Burrows, 2006). This interpretation suggests a more enabling, agentic approach to power and advocates that, as individuals, we have the capability to transform our social condition, to shape our own world, to create our own identities. It

represents a generative interpretation of power, and more closely aligns with the idea of ‘power to’ and empowerment (Kelly, 1992), than the idea of ‘power over’ (pouvoir).

Returning to the opening syntactic analysis of the word *power*, I find it interesting that with the replacement of one preposition in English, ‘power *over*’ and ‘power *to*’, as summarised by Lukes (1974), the entire interpretation of the concept changes...and we are presented with another meaning of power, a more enabling one...and one which now jars with that the early view of power as presented by Foucault.

Minor change, major impact...

But let me return once again to how this view of power impacted upon my experience as an early career academic...

### **Navigating between (em)powering identities...**

I was pursuing a postgraduate qualification in French when I secured a part-time position teaching French in another higher education institution...an Institute of Technology. Without even thinking about it, I had suddenly assumed two roles, student and teacher, similar to the postgrads who teach, and, as I mentioned already, I am still negotiating these identities as I conduct this study as a student once again! (and maybe this is why I chose this research topic...)

But, at that particular time, not many people knew that I was...a teacher in one institution, and a student in another...(and many other subjectivities too...)

the GTAs, maybe I too was negotiating many intersecting roles in silence, just as Skorobohacz (2013) had identified in her study.

Added to this, I never felt that I had to openly share these two (of my many) subjectivities to my students or my colleagues. And because I was in two different locations, I was never obliged to juggle identities.

I had the power within to choose whatever identity fitted at the particular time. This notion that identity is not fixed (Caldwell, 2007), but rather fluid (Sachs, 2001), chimes with that expressed by Lester (2008, p. 283), who suggests that identity is a fluid process which is not a fixed state of being, but rather that ‘multiple and competing identities exist simultaneously with individuals *choosing* [italics added] to perform each identity based on the contexts in which they find themselves’. And inherent in this view is a sense of agency, that we *choose* our identity depending on our context...this is what I saw myself doing.

-----

**celisne**

But did any of the postgrads in this study experience the same thing...?

**me**

I think so, we've heard it in Emma's and Leanne's stories already and agentic power and identity feature in Knowles's and Stephen's stories too...we'll hear from them in a bit...

**celisne**

can we just chat more about identity first...?

**me**

sure...

-----

‘I don’t care what they call me’, he said confidently, ‘so long as they don’t call me what they used to call me in school.’

*Lord of the Flies* (1954) by William Golding, (British novelist, playwright and poet, 1911-1993)

**IDENTITY...(A STATE OF FLUX)**

**‘I’m no longer a student – I’ve crossed over to the other side...’**

Emma, postgraduate student who teaches...

Or could they be Gina’s words...?

‘Through others we become ourselves.’

Lev S. Vygotsky, *Soviet psychologist (1896-1934)*

As far back as 1967, Dubin and Beisse (1967, p. 521) made the following astute comment in relation to GTA role ambiguity when they remarked: ‘[t]he teaching assistant is both an officer of instruction and a student serving as apprentice teacher. These are incompatible positions.’

And over fifty years later it seems that postgraduates who teach are still occupying multiple *incompatible positions*...

*But how do they see themselves and how do others see them...?*

**‘Just who am I?’ ...where do GTAs fit...out in the cold...?**

Let us consider for a moment the words of Leanne...

*‘...when I said previously that GTAs are exploited, unrecognised, undervalued, unsupported, ignored and more - I never knew how right I was until I made the shift to the other side of the table and was treated as an insider. Only now, being warm, do I know how out in the cold I really l was.’*

-----

**celisne**

wow, I hadn’t realised until just now that Leanne uses that binary opposition of warm and cold to symbolise the gap between tenured members of Faculty and precarious postgrads who teach...

**me**

I know, and that thread of identity weaves throughout her story...

**celisne**

and through yours...

**me**

I'll consider that in a while...

-----

Though numerous studies have been conducted into the area of identity and professional development within the context of teaching (Abell, 2000; Danielewicz, 2001; Eick and Reed, 2002; Archer, 2008; Colbeck, 2008), which could be applied to the context of postgrads who teach, the fact that there are far less focusing exclusively on teaching postgrads is noteworthy in itself. Jazvac-Martek's (2009) study does have as its theme the issue of identity amongst doctoral students, but not specifically those engaged in teaching duties.

*Was the dearth of literature on GTA identity further evidence of another veil of silence around them...?*

However, this has changed in recent years in the UK, with the publication of two significant studies (Compton and Tran, 2017; Winstone and Moore, 2017), which have as their theme the issue of GTA identity. But before analysing the findings from these particular studies, let's first look at the overall concept of identity formation and see how it relates to postgraduate students who teach.

How do they *become* postgraduate researchers who teach...?

## I-identity...turning the mirror back on oneself

---

**celisne**

with all this talk of identity...it's like we're going around in circles,  
and getting nowhere...it's a bit like we are stuck in the désêtre...

**me**

don't you mean 'desert'?

**celisne**

no, I mean 'désêtre', in a Lacanian way...

**me**

I don't follow...

**celisne**

well, from a poststructuralist prism, Lacan (1901-1981) would have  
suggested that the subject can only find her or his identity when  
they abandon all other identifications...a bit like being in a state of  
'unbeing', or 'désêtre' if you prefer...

**me**

a bit like deconstructing your identity in order to start again and  
reconstruct it; after all, identity is a construct...

**celisne**

Lacan was interested in psychoanalysis and particularly in what he  
referred to as the 'stade du miroir' or the mirror stage of child  
development...whereby a child, on seeing its own reflection has  
now turned itself into an object that they can view from outside of  
themselves...

**me**

but isn't that the way it is throughout our lives, not just as  
children...?

**celisne**

yes, well Lacan (2001) went on to say that this mirror stage was  
with us throughout and became a permanent structure of  
subjectivity...

**me**

and is this reflected through language...?

**celisne**

of course...in Lacan's view the 'I' merely 'designates the subject  
of the enunciation, but it does not signify it' (Lacan, 2001, p. 228)

**me**

and so we're back to the idea of multiple subjectivities again...but I suppose this also aligns with my methodological approach, in that I see narrative as having a role in identity construction, as posited by Bruner (1990), who suggested that story-telling is needed when it comes to issues of identity...

**celisne**

...or identities...because, through stories, 'we constantly construct and reconstruct ourselves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter' (Bruner, 2002, p. 64), which itself suggests that subjectivities are continuously negotiated...

And Lacan puts forth the view that all identities are constructs and contextual and are constantly shifting or being destabilized, which allows for the possibilities of many different identities...

When you think about it we 'we exist in intersubjective situations, never in isolation' (Markham, 1999, p. 66), which means we are always occupying different subjectivities, which is powerful...

**me**

So how am I/You/We interpreting identity here...?

-----

What is identity...?

...Identity is what?

Who is identity...?

...Identity is who?

Where is identity...? ...Identity is where?

Identity remains a contested concept and one which itself has a multiplicity of meanings. The terms *identity* and *self* are changing phenomena that defy hard and fast definitions (Ashmore and Jussim, 1997). Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt (2000, p. 750) go further and suggest that identity is 'a poorly defined concept'...

but why are we trying to *define* it...?

One such interpretation is that posited by Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge and Scabini (2006, p. 309) who describe it as the 'subjective concept of oneself as a

person' and state that is constructed through an interplay of affective, cognitive and social interaction which occurs within a particular context. Inherent in this description is the view that identity is a social construct, a view echoed by Danielewicz (2001, p. 10) who presents an image of identity as being...

'who we are and who we think other people are'.

But identity is also concerned with the role we elect to play and how this is communicated, along with the role that 'others assume we have taken' (Volkman and Zgagacz, 2004, p. 594), thereby illustrating the importance of our behaviour in creating our identity.

But there is an uneasiness and tension that can accompany identity formation (Danielewicz, 2001), as it is often seen as a period of potential crisis and disorientation (Thomas and Border, 2017), with increasing concern over role conflict (Feezel and Myers, 1997; Muzaka, 2009). This degree of instability and uncertainty surrounding identity change is aptly captured by Bauman (2000, p. 71) when he posits that in times of uncertainty 'identities are more like the spots of crust hardening time and again on top of volcanic lava which melt and dissolve again before they have time to cool and set'.

...is that what the postgraduate students were experiencing...they were taking on multiple roles...and were they experiencing multiple tensions...?

It seemed that that was indeed the case for many of those I spoke with...

Danielewicz (2001) goes further with this idea and argues that students should, in fact, be encouraged to develop a professional identity *before* they even enter into

teaching in the first place...but in the case of postgrads who teach, that would suggest some form of initial training prior to entering the classroom. Although a laudable view, it is important to highlight that the students in her study were all enrolled on teacher training courses. As such, they were not like the postgraduates in this study, many of whom were not considering a future in academia or may have never engaged with any literature on pedagogy or education in general.

But there is another way of viewing GTA identity...

...a more *positive* one...

...one where the GTA is in a more *powerful position* to shape their own identity...

### **Negotiating Identity: we've a powerful hand**

If we accept the notion that our identity can be created by us, then we could argue that it is a very powerful concept; we have the power to name ourselves and to shape the ways others see us. This was posited by Winstone and Moore (2017), who, in their UK study, identified GTAs as having multiple identities, as they navigate between being student, teacher and researcher (and no doubt there are more subjectivities at play), echoes of Harland and Plangger's (2004) study, in which they were referred to as 'postgraduate chameleons'. But, instead of referring to any inherent tensions in this, they saw GTAs as *readily engaging* in 'identity work' (Winstone and Moore, 2017, p. 494) as they negotiated a professional identity in the transition from student to teacher. They contested that this period of liminality of status (from being either a student or a teacher) allows

GTA's to operate with identity malleability and, as such, they had the capability to adjust according to the situation in which they found themselves.

In other words, they shape themselves rather than being shaped...

So for them, *being* a GTA, was a time of opportunity, where instead of occupying an 'ambiguous niche', these teaching postgraduate students occupy a 'unique niche', where they are free to engage in identity work.

Unique...individual...special...exclusive...

In this respect, the authors were viewing the GTA role, like that expressed by McKiggan-Fee *et al.* (2013, p. 171), as one that is 'rich with opportunity and potential', rather than one where the student feels a sense of confusion not knowing which role they are occupying at any given time.

This perspective is echoed by Zembylas (2003, p. 223), when he acknowledges the power of identity formation by suggesting that it 'creates spaces for individuals to develop a sense of agency in their lives and to construct strategies of power and resistance', suggesting that our identity can allow us to find our own voices. This would further support the idea that the postgraduates who teach actually have the *power to* forge their own identities; they may find themselves in a transitional space in terms of their identity, a rich space in which they can grow and develop in terms of their identity, unlike other members of staff whose identities may be more rigidly fixed, by virtue of the fact that they are tenured.

Another significant study into the identity of GTAs was conducted in the UK in 2017 by Compton and Tran (2017), who explored how Postgraduate Researchers (the term they use for GTAs) perceive themselves.

But this time, they moved away from the dichotomous dilemma of...

*student vs teacher...*

in favour of a triality of identity, suggesting that GTAs are simultaneously

*researchers, students and teachers...*

And what makes their study interesting for me, is that they invited GTAs to *identify themselves*. Using these three identities they found that those postgraduate students who were less involved in teaching duties tended not to view themselves as 'teachers' but more so as 'students' and 'researchers', whereas those more heavily engaged in teaching saw 'teacher' as being a significant part of their identity...supporting the view that what we do shapes our identity...

So are teaching postgraduate students in a potentially powerful position where they can be the authors of their own identity...? If this were the case, then it becomes a '*power to*' scenario where they have the freedom to carve out their own image of self.

This issue of identity featured in some of their stories...we saw it in both Leanne's and Emma's story...when I had asked Emma about how she saw herself:

**Yeah, that...that...it's kind of awkward situation...I felt very awkward, em, because you're trying to show that you can be one of them, and**

then you're talking to students like you can...you were one of them...so you're kind of playing two different roles...you know...

And just listen to what Leanne had to say in one of my email correspondences with her...

I get it now. I'm a nobody. I'll just take what I can get from the authority and try to protect my students from the bureaucracy of it all.

But Leanne also displayed agency in her role when she said:

I will finish my [names qualification] here. I've come too far not too - not because they deserve to have me graduate here but because I deserve to graduate and because I want to share the voices of my participants and give their voices some power too.

### **Identifying agency**

In the case of teacher identity, Zembylas (2003, p. 214) suggested that the construction of identity is 'dependent upon power and agency' and that power, which is a natural part of the teaching process (McCroskey and Richmond, 1983), is what ultimately forms one's identity. But within a poststructuralist paradigm, language also has a role to play in identity construction, for, rather than meaning being reflected through language, it is created in language. And if we consider the fluidity of meaning within language, then this suggests that language is the space where identities or subjectivities are constructed. A poststructuralist perspective would posit that our identities are created and governed by language and discourses, in that, as individuals, we conform to certain discourses present within our own social contexts. Therefore, identity becomes a function of these discourses and because there can be many competing discourses at any given time,

this can mean that identities or ‘subjectivities’ are not fixed, but rather in a state of constant construction and development. Davies and Gannon (2005, p. 319) contend that, as we are ‘constituted through multiple and contradictory discourses’, so it depends on how these discourses are positioned whether or not agency is possible, a view echoed by Davies (2008).

-----

**celisne**

so from a poststructuralist perspective, agency is not really about ‘an individual standing outside or against social structures and processes’ (Davies and Gannon, 2005, p. 319)...is that it?

**me**

yeah, agency can be about the ‘recognition of the power of discourse’ (ibid., p. 313)...

-----

When I now apply this to my own situation as an early career academic, the students in my classroom had no reason to *identify* me as a student; they saw me as a staff member just like any other.

*They contributed to the shaping of my occupational identity.*

Similarly, my colleagues in the institution where I was teaching didn’t even know I was studying elsewhere.

I was simply referred to as ‘staff’.

-----

**celisne**

‘staff’ ...sounds like a stable signifier to me...or to Derrida...

**me**

yes, but it's not the signified, as the signified can vary...between people, contexts, time periods...it can mean many things to many people...

-----

Reflecting on this now, that's exactly how *I identified myself*. I was 'staff' first and foremost and then a 'student', when I *chose* to be. In that sense, I felt that I could name my own world and, as Street (2011, p. 581) claims, 'the very act of naming and defining is already an act of power'.

I remember feeling a certain sense of power from within and I liked the title of 'staff member' – I thought it conveyed a certain status upon me; the *name* and *title* made me feel important.

...however, I also remember having a strong sense of being a new entrant in academia or as it is often termed 'an early career academic'. So, in many ways, my identity was constantly contested and continuously shifting (Zembylas, 2003). (It still is...)...Echoing this idea of the changing nature of identity, Gale (2011, p. 215) refers to 'the *process* of assuming an academic identity', which, on reflection, is what *I* was experiencing at the time. Similar to how Ball (2013) describes his own situation, I too 'was searching for a sense of identity and security' (Ball, 2013, p. 2), navigating between being a student, a staff member and an early career academic.

And, although this may be seen as a time of opportunity, in that it represents the initial opportunity for the early career academic 'to exercise significant agency in

relation to teaching' (Kahn, 2009, p. 197), I never remember feeling that same sense of agency within my teaching practice...

...I was beginning to wonder if teaching postgraduates felt it either.

### **Left to my own (de)vices...**

I continued to teach French in the IoT for over 20 years, despite having had no initial training in what it meant to teach...

-----

#### **celisne**

but is that not still the case today...is there training and support for everyone who starts out teaching...? Is there any difference between existing staff, new staff, postgrads who teach...?

#### **me**

that's a good point; in that sense, there is no difference between any of us in the HE sector...in my institution there is pedagogical support for new staff but I don't know if that is the case everywhere...sometimes you are just left to your own devices...

-----

As an early career academic, I had been thrown in at the deep end but I had learnt to swim (or maybe just stay afloat!). If, as Foucault (1977) claims, power and knowledge are inextricably linked then having no pedagogical knowledge, made me feel somewhat powerless.

Because of this, I began modelling my teaching practice on what I had been accustomed to as a student; my practice became 'a consequence of experiencing learning' (Brookfield, 1993, p. 21).

But is this surprising...?

...probably not, given that most of us will do the same unless we are encouraged to stop, reflect on our practice and see ourselves in a reflexive way.

I *became* a 'lecturer' and I 'lectured'; I covered content, in a very transmissive style - a teacher-centred view of learning in which teaching is seen as purely the transmission of knowledge (Ramsden, 1992; Freire, 1996).

- Why?
- Simply because I didn't know another way...

Looking back now, I didn't have anyone to ask – if I had a technical query I felt comfortable talking to discipline colleagues, but when it came to teaching and learning, there was nobody to ask; there was no support (it seems to be the same for many of the postgrads in this study...). hooks (2010, p. 119) comments on this when she states that 'teachers need to learn effective ways to teach' but, in my experience, it was almost as though the teaching practice played second fiddle to the discipline itself. There was (and still is!) an expectation, held by many in higher education, that if you were qualified in your discipline, then you were suitable to teach.

And I simply didn't know another way of teaching.

But then that changed...

### **Power of pedagogy...**

I enrolled on a *MA in Teaching and Learning* and I suddenly found myself interrogating my philosophical view of education, that which had underpinned my

practice for so many years. For the first time, I was questioning my own beliefs and values of education. My first task on the programme was to compose ‘a teaching philosophy’...

-----

**celisne**

a what...?

**me**

I know...I was on shaky ground...

**celisne**

well, I suppose as a poststructuralist, you better get used to instability...!

-----

For the first time in my position, I started to really think about pedagogy and who I was as an educator and what I saw as the purpose of education; *I* questioned *my* identity. I found myself sinking in a pedagogical quagmire...and I didn’t arrive at an answer...

-----

**celisne**

but wait...that was the problem...you were looking for an answer...

**me**

I know...I now realise that finding an answer shouldn’t have been my objective...the fact that I was constructing my identity was a start...

-----

So it seemed like a natural progression that this led to me conducting some work with my institute’s *Teaching and Learning Centre*, where I began supporting staff

with pedagogical training and continued to reflect on my own practice. Until that point, I had weaved throughout many disparate discipline areas, all of which had been underpinned by a love of teaching and learning. Working in the area of pedagogy directly finally allowed me to fully embrace a passion for learning in a way that was very meaningful to me. It afforded me the chance to reflect upon my own teaching practice, considering not just what was *out-there*, but what was *within* and fully embracing the reflective nature, summed up in Ergas's (2016, p. 59) idea that 'the mind has a mind of its own'. I gradually moved from a teacher-centred approach to a more learner-centred one and this, in itself, felt empowering.

I think that this was the narrative turn in my story...

...where *I* began to understand what teaching *meant* to me...or rather, what my interpretation of teaching was...

Still in my lecturing role, I began designing problem-based learning modules (Bell, 2010; Levy and Petrusis, 2012) and collaborative and enquiry-based learning. I even started calling myself a 'facilitator' as opposed to a 'lecturer', as this was my understanding of my role (another example of the *power* of titles and names, and how that shaped how I saw myself and how I wanted others to see me).

Somewhat like the influential US scholar and activist, bell hooks, I too was 'at my best teaching in the smaller workshop setting' (hooks, 2010, p. 63). I viewed myself as a co-creator of knowledge where we were together a learning

community (hooks, 2010). After over 20 years, I had finally found the opportunity to exercise a sense of agency in my teaching (Kahn, 2009).

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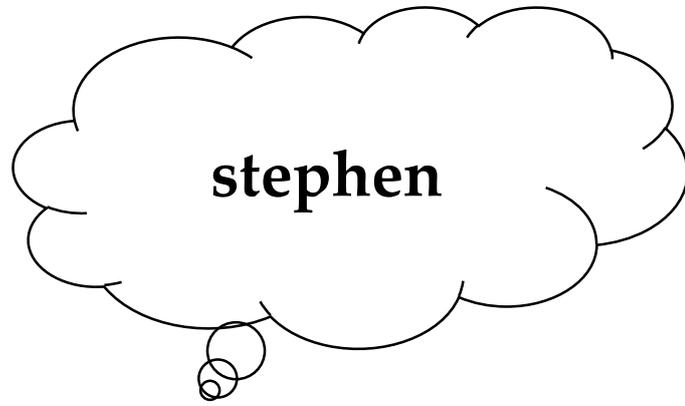
**celisne**

agency, empowerment...I'd love to hear if that was reflected in any of the stories...

**me**

oh, I think it is there alright...let's break away for a moment and listen to Stephen...for me, there is agentic power within Stephen...see what you think...

-----



## stephen

*so you take the pain and you move on...*

*Everyone is...is given the opportunity to teach...*

*What if you don't want to?*

*...I always have the option...*

*I'm aware that I have the option in saying no to lecturing*

*I wish I had that - I'm just the girl who can't say 'no'...*

*Always have been...*

*I do have the flexibility...*

*But...?*

*...they went out of their way*

*So?*

*I think it's important to establish a willingness to make a contribution*

*...sounds like a win-win...*

*Except I'm not winning...*

*...Or am i? where there are winners, there are losers...*

*I get an enormous buzz...*

*... helped a large group of students at least a tiny little bit to establish themselves in the world...*

*...really, really happy with that as a legacy...*

*but it took me a long time to get that...*

*...where was I now...?*

## En parlant avec Stephen...

### Learning in a labyrinth

I sat there, awkwardly convinced that there was more to his story. It was as though there was more to this labyrinth than I imagined...

*Prologue: Stephen wanted to be a full-time academic; or more specifically he wanted to lecture full-time. He had carefully considered all aspects of academic life and knew the parts he liked and didn't. He had a very distinct view of research - it was 'a hurdle to overcome' and a means to an end - the end being the full-time lecturing position. Stephen wanted to teach. Everything that had gone before in his life had been just leading him here...and he had arrived...*

Our conversation took place in a little room in the Institute's library. It had been Stephen's choice of venue. Nestled in-between seamless shelves of books, it seemed the perfect location to be discussing the joys of teaching. I wondered if books, Foucault et ses amis were neatly shelved, waiting to be borrowed...

And, for a brief moment, surrounded by all the books, I was transported to the scene in 'The Name of the Rose' (a film based on the novel of the same name by Umberto Eco), where the main characters, William and Adso, two Franciscan

monks, discover a hidden library, laid out in an intriguing labyrinth...I wondered if Stephen's story would have as many twists and turns...it did...

Right from the outset, Stephen called it as it was; there was a lovely air of honesty around everything he said; it felt refreshing. He had a deep understanding of how the system worked and I instantly got the sense that he was clever at working it to his advantage. He opened by commenting on the hierarchy of lecturing that existed within his institution...

...we have a format here where we are given...there's a hierarchy if you like of lecturing within the college. So we are normally at the bottom of the hierarchy and therefore you're allocated lecturing courses and other teaching activities at typically very short notice...

...confirming that teaching postgraduates were indeed 'at the bottom of the hierarchy' (back to the bottom rung of that precarious academic ladder again)...

The way he spoke, I got the impression that Stephen was very aware of his place in the organisation and, even by his use of the term 'allocated lecturing courses', he had made clear that he had limited, if any, input. But it was his next piece about how he was called upon to teach at the last minute that stuck with me.

...you may get a call from the Head of [School/Faculty] as little as 2 to 3 days before a course is due to begin to say that you have 24 hours of teaching time to do. So that can be very challenging...somewhat frustrating.

...'somewhat frustrating' – I could think of far more colourful language to describe it.

And so the acting theme seemed to surface when Stephen referred to how he prepared for classes...

...I rehearsed. I read through everything. I was very happy...

But, in this case, Stephen was reassured because he had been given notes by the previous lecturer, which was not always the case...he described other situations in which he had been given the module descriptor and expected...

...to produce notes, exercises, exam structure, continuous assessments, etc...

He went on to describe his learning journey with his students, both personally and professionally:

When I started as a lecturer I was very much chalk and talk. It was very much a case of I would stand up, and deliver the material with as much emphasis and character as I could put into it. But I wasn't engaging with the students properly. I wasn't giving them the opportunity to engage with the problem and come up with the solution themselves. So that was a big learning step for me...

And then Stephen came out with the line that was by now synonymous with postgraduates who teach – he'd commented that he'd been 'thrown in at the deep end'...but, it didn't faze him...and I got the impression listening to his calm and rational voice, that it would have taken a lot to faze Stephen (similar to Sara)...

Stephen seemed very accepting of his situation and I wondered if this was because he was slightly older than some of the other teaching postgraduates I had spoken with. Did time have a way of putting things in perspective or was

there something else? I looked down at the counter on my recorder, partly worried about the time left in the batteries...what would I do if it stopped?

...this conversation could never be re-enacted...

Stephen sounded more positive and had moved on to talking about how supportive his institution had been, in that they had provided pedagogic training for him, by way of a module, which he had found really useful. But there was more to this – as he spoke about it, it was almost as though he was grateful for the training he had received from the organisation; the kind of gratitude you express when someone does you a favour...like, for me, someone offering to proofread your entire research study!

I couldn't quite work it out...*'Why would you need to feel gratitude to be trained for a position which you were asked to do?'*

He went on to comment...

...this college has been very good in supporting me in terms of pedagogy training, etc...and we have a structured [degree] programme here, which allows us to obtain a certain number of credits from modules that are run by either this college or other colleges. So I was able to participate in a pedagogy module early on delivered by an expert here in (name of IoT). That was really useful.

This module had highlighted for him the difference between training and education:

...training for my perspective is about delivering content, making sure that the person you are delivering to understands... and can implement

whatever procedures or skills you're training them in. Whereas the pedagogy module opened my eyes to the fact that education is about giving the students the tools to think for themselves to solve problems, to adapt and develop their own skills and their own analysis, so I was...I am eternally grateful to the college for providing me with that.

'...eternally grateful...'

...strong words, I thought...

But what was coming across to me was that the module had provided Stephen the reflective space to think about learning...and listening to him, I couldn't help thinking that this must have given Stephen a deeper sense of what it meant to be an adult educator. And he returned to the learning journey he had been on, which was reflected in his words...

...back in the first semester of 2016/17 and I was a fledgling [postgraduate] student and a fledgling lecturer. Now I have a body of notes and a body of work behind me. Em, and a modest level of expertise in lecturing, in terms of...I can. I can stand in front of any class and not make an eejit of myself. [...] I have the notes, I've done the research...I have a course structure. I can build the exam fairly quickly...and I know what I'm going to do for the CA.

And although, it seemed that Stephen seemed au fait with all the processes involved in lecturing, from curriculum design to assessment, I was still struck by the way that he referred to having 'a body of notes' and 'a course structure'. Was that enough for an educator, I wondered?

I must've still been contemplating this, as Stephen continued to praise his institution for its ongoing support of teaching postgraduates...(maybe I just hadn't expected this from anyone – maybe I had just hoped for it but didn't think

that it existed). Stephen spoke of how his institution was particularly good at connecting with postgraduate students and seeing how they were getting on in terms of their research and their lecturing. He described how the institution gathered feedback from the students which, if positive,

...gives you a certain level of traction so you, you actually start to move up the hierarchy a little bit. And once you gain a reputation as... at least... a reliable lecturer, then they tend to think of you a little bit sooner. So you get more notice...

I lingered on the mention of 'hierarchy' (he had started our chat with that word) – clearly there was a power structure here and I wondered if all the teaching postgrads in that institution were aware of the rules of the game. Was it about building your reputation, getting known and then being somewhat 'rewarded' with more notice and more time to prepare?

In recent years, the system of recruitment of teaching postgraduates had become more formalised in Stephen's institution. Whereas, in the past, it was a case of being just, as he said:

...brave enough to stand up in front of the class,

now there were interviews to be part of a lecturing panel (was this because there were now more and more postgraduate researchers in the system?). Whatever the reason, it didn't seem to bother Stephen – he was pleased that it was an opportunity for him to raise his profile a bit.

...I glanced at the recorder again...I couldn't even work out by looking at it if it was still recording...

But maybe that didn't matter...capturing exact words – that wasn't even my aim...

We had gone on to talk about money...Stephen was being paid for his hours lecturing, but just as Leanne before him, he had no contractual rights...no pension, none of what he described as 'ancillary benefits'... (tenured members of staff would have all of these...)

But that didn't seem to concern him for the moment; it was all about the pleasure derived from engaging with the students. And it wasn't about the money, as Stephen saw it somewhat as an apprenticeship (Garland, 1983; Lambert and Tice, 1993); he said it was like:

...doing my time the same way that the solicitor or barrister would be...and part of gaining credibility...proving myself as a viable potential employee.

'Gaining credibility'..., I thought...another burden to carry, as he was forging his career path...

Listening to Stephen, I couldn't help feeling that this all seemed grossly unfair; here he was lecturing and getting paid per hour and yet, he had none of the benefits of being a full-time member of staff. Was this idea that he had to 'do his time' sold to him by the institution? And for how long did he have to 'do his time' before he was deemed 'suitable' to become a lecturer with rights? There

were no guarantees either that he would secure a full-time position after all of this. We were back to the issue of precarity once more...

I wasn't sure if Stephen's precarious position bothered him as much as it did me; he said that one of the big advantages for him was the level of flexibility that it accorded him...he could turn down hours 'without any censure or disapproval from them'...( 'them' being management)...

Stephen seemed very comfortable with this...

But the word 'precarity' was pounding in my head...and I wondered if Stephen was hoping for something more secure in the long term...

His vision unfolded as he said:

...I would never emphasize security of tenure as being important because I think if you continue to develop and evolve as a lecturer that security becomes almost a by-product of it. So, [...] I wouldn't see myself as exploited. In fact, to a certain extent, I'd see myself as taking advantage of the flexibility that I'm offered...

The words he just said were ringing loudly in my ears...

**'...I'd see myself as taking advantage...'**

To me, it was as though Stephen was just biding his time and doing what he had to do – but on his terms. And he was happy with this...as he said, the position...

...gives me a level of flexibility that I wouldn't have if I was a half-time lecturer...

[**Aside:** *I cast my mind back to that feeling of insecurity that I had had when I started teaching – terrified not to accept the hours I was allocated, for fear of losing them.*] But

maybe I just wasn't quite as philosophical in my perspective as Stephen was; he believed that if you 'demonstrate competence' in terms of your teaching, then things tend to work out in your favour,

...there's a proven path...[...] and there's a drive on to recruit more...[...] lecturers.

For Stephen, the position was working out well; despite being taken on at a comparably lower pay rate than full-time staff, he commented:

there's a hard cash reason behind this, but there is a drive on...the college has set as a goal to increase the number of [...] faculty. So that works in my favour.

Was it almost a case of the institution needing him as much as he needed them?

And was Stephen prepared to play the political power game? He was aware of the politics in the college and referred to the multitude of 'personal fiefdoms' that existed. He remarked...

I'm aware of the politics. I tend to stay out of it. You can play a very strategic game here and, to a certain extent, there are benefits in doing so, as I say my long term aim is to become a full time lecturer. I'd like to do that here. So I'm very careful to be seen here as much as possible...that I'm present with the right people...that I'm participating and giving my time etc...and that I am a reliable and enthusiastic participant in all aspects of college life and there's a level of strategy in that...

It sounded like political chess to me...

And, as our conversation drew to an end, I couldn't help wondering how Stephen was so philosophical about everything; he was prepared to accept his lot and wait for the ultimate reward as he saw it – that of a full-time lecturing

position. As he himself had said, 'we are all people just getting on with the job'... and he seemed perfectly content being a teaching postgraduate student. He was comfortable with that identity. As he said himself 'so you take the pain and you move on'.

*Was being a teaching postgrad considered somewhat of a painful experience?*

Even if that was what he said, he certainly didn't convey it – he seemed to really enjoy it and I was now enjoying listening to his enthusiasm...

Just then, I heard some rummaging outside, accompanied by a gentle but firm knock on the door. A stern, middle-aged face appeared and before any introductions could be exchanged, he launched straight into his rehearsed line...'sorry, can you keep the noise down, there are people trying to study'. On cue, both Stephen and I stumbled over our apologies, but the on cue intruder wasn't waiting for the audience's reaction and had exited the stage as quickly as he had entered.

Our flow had been broken...and it felt as if we had to just wrap up...

But just as there is always one more bend in a labyrinth, Stephen's story took its own narrative turn...one that I wasn't prepared for...but should have known was coming...

It emerged that Stephen had developed a life-threatening condition a few years' prior, a condition that made him realise that it was time to get off the 'treadmill'. Maybe that is what had made him so philosophical about everything,

so 'in the moment'. He had navigated the labyrinth and had decided that he had needed to do what he wanted to do in life...

...and that was teaching...

We exited the room and looked around the library...there was nobody to be seen – nobody to disturb...just time and space for reflection on what it meant to be a teaching postgrad...

### **Postscript**

It was only when I sent him on the second version of his story that Stephen got back in contact...in his email, he commented:

Many thanks for sending me that, it made me smile and I really like the way you write. As a footnote, I should probably tell you that I have recently dropped out of the [postgraduate] program here in [name of institution].

As my research progressed, I discovered that my tolerance for some of the more archaic and bureaucratic elements of research and academia was lessening. This culminated in my interviewing for a full-time position here and deciding 20 minutes into the interview that I didn't actually want the job anymore.

Ultimately my biggest discovery was that I have little or no interest in research, and absolutely no desire to participate in the production of journal articles which are largely contrived and which revere style and sesquipedalian prose over relevance and applicability.

However, it is not all gloom and doom. My participation in the research community has led to the establishment of a network of contacts and friends which in turn has led to opportunities to move into the development of training and mentorship programs... I continue as an hourly paid assistant lecturer for the time being. My future as a lecturer at 3rd level is uncertain, it always was...but there are other opportunities to teach and make a contribution.

It was his last line that stayed with me...that idea of the uncertainty of his position and the acceptance that this had always been the case. But it was the note of positivity in the last few words that made me stop and think and I couldn't help but think to myself...

Stephen, you've already taught me so much and have made such a contribution to this study...

-----

**celisne**

well, it sure seems to me that being a postgraduate who teaches worked quite well for Stephen...he was making his own choices...

**me**

yeah, his account was not something I had expected at the outset...

**celisne**

that will teach you to look at things from all angles...there isn't one story here about postgraduates who teach...there are many...just as there are identities...

sorry, I interrupted you to hear about Stephen...weren't you in the middle of talking about power...

**me**

yeah, but maybe that's why Stephen's story fits so well here...so let me get back to the power of discourse...

-----

We have already seen that discourses and names are considerably powerful, in that they can affect our experiences and how we live our lives.

But let's deconstruct discourses a bit further...

### **Dissecting discourses**

Discourse is a key concept of a poststructuralist perspective; a concept that I interpret quite broadly. On the one hand, it refers to the 'broad, socially constructed systems of language' (Hardin, 2003, p. 537), but equally, it is not solely concerned with language, but rather it is a 'historically, socially and institutionally specific structure of statements, categories and beliefs, habits and practices' (Ryan, 2001, p. 32). Drawing from this, I align with the view that discourse not only shapes people, but the discourse to which individuals have

access determines the stories that they articulate (Hardin, 2003). In that sense, discourses become embedded in discursive practices, shaping practice, and these practices then produce further discourses (Anderson and Grinberg, 1998).

Discourses are also concerned with what can be said and thought, who can speak, when and with what authority (Ball, 1990), which, for me, represents both the power of words and the power of silence (Gal, 1991; Rowland, 1991; Fidyk, 2013) and being silenced, as voiced in one of my conversations:

**Me:** ... *would you feel as a...as a postgrad who's teaching, that you have a voice in the organisation?*

**Lauren:** No, I wouldn't...I don't know. Do many people here feel they have voices? You know, I don't know.

Consequently, discourses have a profound effect on how people think and act (Mills, 1997) as 'they constitute both subjectivity and power relations' (Ball, 1990, p. 2) and have the power to regulate conduct and pressure human beings into disciplining themselves.

But how do discourses align with a poststructuralist stance?

In invoking a poststructuralist lens, the researcher hears the stories as told to them, interprets them through their own perspective, puts these lives into texts (Hatch, 2002), by possibly co-authoring them, and then it is up to the reader to interpret the text as they wish. As a poststructuralist, Foucault (1977) examined discourses and texts to see how they are inextricably linked to power relations. His idea of power is that it rules by consent, with those on whom power is exercised allowing this to occur. He viewed power as expressed through particular discourses,

permitting some things to be said whilst other things remained silenced. He saw language as being ‘a construction based on power relations within the specific discourse’ (Berbary, 2011, p. 186), which can, and does, shape our realities. This reinforces the view that language is both political and social in nature (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005) and has the power to be an agentic force.

Discourses, therefore, produce power and reinforce it, but just like other poststructuralists, Foucault rejected the conceptualisation of discourses being binary and instead favoured the existence of a multiplicity of discursive elements, that produce power, reinforce it and even undermine it.

### **Break the silent discourse**

...blank pages...                      ...

absent words...

...gaps in meaning...

-----

**celisne**

so just because the words aren't visible, doesn't mean the thoughts aren't there...

**me**

yeah, there's meaning in the silences too...think about hooks (1989)...she herself was influenced by Freire (1996), and she also acknowledged the power of dialogue, words and silence...

**celisne**

oh you mean when she wrote about the plight of Black women in the US who were struggling to speak in their own voice, and the

way she highlighted issues of marginalisation, self-identification and submission...

**me**

exactly...by analysing the power of language and silence, she examined the way in which the oppressor can silence the oppressed through words and their associated meanings...

**celisne**

but how does that connect with teaching postgrads...how does she fit into this story?

**me**

well, let me give my interpretation...though she's not a poststructuralist, hooks (1989) has her roots in literature and language and explored how language was used as an expression of power and dominance over minority communities within the US, particular over black vernacular speech...

**celisne**

so you mean that kind of thinking could be applied to this study...

**me**

yeah...I mean, she was also writing from the context of her classroom and she recognised that '[m]any students often feel that they have no voice, that they have nothing to say that is worthy of being heard' (hooks, 2010, p. 45)...

**celisne**

so we need to talk with postgrads who teach...

**me**

yes, because if you think about it, hooks outlines that those 'who talk *at* us [italics added], who by refusing to converse, promote and maintain a hierarchy of domination wherein withholding gives one power over another person' (hooks, 2010, p. 45). The way I see it is that hooks (1994) is interpreting the oppressor's language as a political expression of domination and, as such, other voices tend to be 'silenced, censored, or marginalised' (hooks, 1994, p. 173)...

**celisne**

so, maybe human existence cannot be silent – maybe to exist is 'to name the world' (Freire, 1996, p. 69). So, maybe hooks is advocating that one way to overcome this type of submission is to make speech heard, to 'emerge from silence into speech' (hooks, 1989, p. 6).

**me**

yeah, quite Freirean...it shows the importance of dialogue and how dialogue cannot exist 'between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them' (Freire, 1996, p. 69).

**celisne**

and isn't that we are trying to counteract here...

**me**

yes...and that is why we need to talk *with*...and there is power in a 'conversation' (a word hooks uses for the title of one of the chapters of her 2010 publication, and one which I have also adopted in this study)...we need to hear from postgrads...to listen to them...maybe to get an idea what it has been like to be a GTA/teaching postgrad in the past...to hear that side of the story...

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And just as discourses shape *our* stories, they are also shaping *this* story. Let me momentarily explore the current discourse which is reflected in some of the policy documentation relating to postgraduates and their education...

Within one document, the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (HEA, 2011), the Department of Education and Skills suggested that postgraduate 'researchers should, where possible, be afforded opportunities to participate in teaching such as laboratory supervision and tutorials' (HEA, 2011, p. 19). The discourse around postgraduates teaching seems to be a very favourable one; there seems to be an acceptance that postgraduates should teach where possible and be encouraged to do so...

...but, at the same time, there is still no formal recognition of their practice.

Remember the 2009 IUQB publication, *Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Higher Education*, which set out to publish national guidelines of good practice relating to PhD programmes, inter alia Teaching and Learning and Professional Development.

Well, let's look at the *words* in that publication...?

Within this 68-page booklet, the word ‘teaching’ appears 6 times, compared with ‘research’, which features a total of 204 times...

Is this another indication of the imbalance between teaching and research?

...a further example of how teaching plays a lesser role in the personal and professional development of postgraduate research students, despite the fact that, as I have shown, some postgrads have up to 6 hours teaching a week.

There is, however, an acknowledgement in the document that ‘[c]ontributing to teaching has long been a standard part of the ‘PhD experience’’ (IUQB, 2009, p. 29), as it allows students to acquire significant skills and is described as ‘a major link between research and undergraduate learning’ (ibid., p. 29-30). It goes on to outline that all student applicants on doctoral programmes should be ‘made fully aware of all such [teaching] duties’, their associated supports and conditions, *and of the value of the experience to be gained*, before they commit to a specific programme’ (ibid., p. 30, original emphasis). But, remarkably, despite lauding the value of this experience, the document does not go into any detail to expound what this *value* is...and, with only 6 references to ‘teaching’ throughout, I would question the value (if any) the document is itself placing on *teaching* as an activity.

And within the IoT sector is the value of teaching experience for postgrads  
being embedded...?

...and, if so, by whom...and when and how?

The paragraph in the document which refers to these responsibilities ends abruptly with a sentence that appears, to me, to be an afterthought...

...it concludes: 'Training relevant to allocated duties is also important' (ibid., p. 30).

What struck me here is that, not only is this idea not developed in any detail, but also it just refers to 'allocated duties', another suggestion that the teaching postgrads have *no say* in what tasks they will be expected to perform by way of their teaching commitment.

But national policy documentation and guidelines are not the only way in which power is expressed in relation to postgraduates who teach; there are also expressions of power at a more local level...

### **A local injection of power**

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**celisne**

if individual HEIs have a certain level of autonomy, then those in managerial positions are making decisions and drafting policies (or not as the case may be) which must impact significantly on the postgraduates who teach...

**me**

well, yes, especially given that there are currently no national policies, it is left up to each HEI to decide the nature and number of teaching hours that the GTAs will carry out (IUQB, 2009). Decisions are being made *for* them by those in power...

**celisne**

and did you ask the participants in this study if they were aware of any policies that pertained to them within their own institutions?

**me**

yes, and they weren't...which doesn't mean that policies don't exist...

**celisne**

well, in a way, that would be even more telling...imagine policies existing in relation to them and they not having any input into them...that to me has echoes of what Mercille and Murphy (2015) would have said - evidence of a deepening neoliberalisation,

characterised by ‘a reduction of democratic input into policy-making’ (Mercille and Murphy, 2015, p. 9)...which itself is an expression of power.

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Flora (2007), writing within a US context, believes that the role of US GTAs is often puzzling to administrators and *policy makers* (italics added), which to me is almost a suggestion that they aren’t involved in any policy-making themselves...rather it is the policy makers making decisions *for* them.

And though that may be the situation in many HEIs, it is important to note that, in most cases, other teaching staff have representation through trade unions. Within the IoT sector, postgraduates who teach are vulnerable because they don’t have union representation. In the university sector things are slightly different as postgraduates who teach there can join the Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT)<sup>36</sup>...

### **Serving undergraduate education**

Undergraduate teaching is another site of power, with research suggesting that undergrads relate positively to postgraduates who teach. Some would say that it is because the postgrads are closer in age and are therefore seen as more accessible to the undergrads (Moore, 1991; Fairbrother, 2012; Nasser-Abu Alhija and Fresko, 2018).

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<sup>36</sup> The Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) is Ireland’s only dedicated trade union and professional association for third level academic and research staff.

[**Aside:** *I hadn't considered the potential of power in this relationship before; the power to influence undergraduates...the power to make a difference...but how?*]

Sharpe (2000) claims that GTAs should have a better sense of what it is like to be an undergraduate learner and, in some cases, they are better positioned to explain concepts in a way which would be more familiar to an undergraduate learner.

That had been echoed in Tom's words:

...we're fresh through the system...we're now coming the other side of it, so we're the freshest at seeing both sides of it...

...with a similar view chimed by Knowles:

...if you're fresh learning something yourself, then when you're teaching it, you're much more em, engaged when you're teaching it...

GTAs can be more approachable (Kendall and Schussler, 2012; Weidert *et al.*, 2012) and more motivated (Sharpe, 2000) and these may be examples of the powerful position that teaching postgraduates occupy.

But, undergraduate students can also be quite critical of GTAs and can call into question their credibility (Golish, 1999), despite Harland and Plangger's (2004, p. 80) contention that undergraduates were 'an audience who held no power over them' [as in GTAs/teaching postgrads]. In the US, undergraduates have commented that they perceived 'professors as being more structured, confident, in control, organized, experienced, knowledgeable...and respected than GTAs' (Kendall and Schussler, 2012, p. 196), as the latter were seen as lacking the training, knowledge and experience (Rowley, 1993; Park, 2002; Harland and Plangger, 2004).

If power is constantly negotiated between teachers [or GTAs] and students (Turman and Schrodt, 2006), this can present quite a pessimistic view of how we are at the mercy of dominant discourses and, if we adopt this perspective, it almost negates the power of human agency, which I would contend is inherent in the postgrads who teach, if we consider the term power more so as *puisseance*...

Therefore, if we look at the concept of power through a poststructuralist lens (or multifarious lenses), then we must acknowledge that there is not one single way to challenge the status quo in terms of power, but rather multiple ways (Fletcher, 1999). In that sense, the goal should be ‘to open up the discourse to alternatives and to entertain new possibilities...as new voices and new perspectives are added to the discourse’ (Fletcher, 1999, p. 2). In turn, ‘[t]his allows new stories to be told and new meanings to be created’ (Fletcher, 1999, p. 4). And through their stories here, new meanings will be created...

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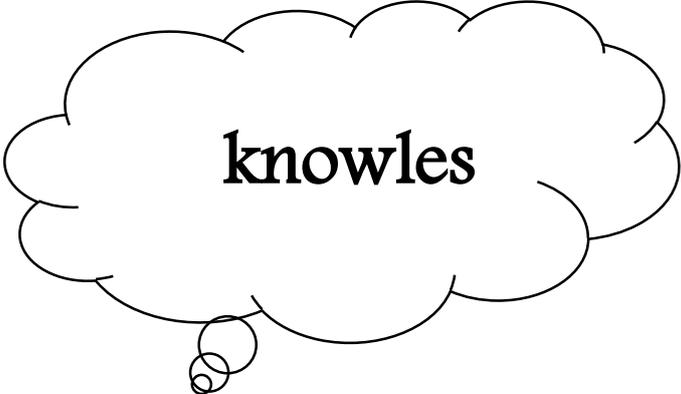
**celisne**

so you’ve talked a lot about the idea of power and particularly the power of pedagogy; but is this something that emerges in the postgraduates’ stories...?

**me**

yeah, listen to Knowles’s story and you will hear a lot about the power of pedagogy...

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## knowles

*I found that my teaching helped my research... I was like oh my God, now I realize what I'm supposed to be doing here...*

*Mind the gap...*

*...we have a gap here,  
we don't have a full-time member of staff to fill it.*

*Maybe you're being used?*

*Sometimes you can't see the wood, my friend the forest...*

*Did they help you?*

*one of the first challenges would've been...*

*I think you're dropped in at the deep end...*

*And where are you positioned?*

*...low in the pecking order...*

*I still feel that need to validate myself...*

*So why do it...?*

*I'm doing what I want to do and*

*this is some of the crap, I have to deal with...*

*what's the philosophy behind it all?*

*I love teaching...I genuinely love teaching...*

## Knowles and Gina...

### Recognising validation...

That day we had chatted in an empty canteen. I would've bought him a coffee, but there was nowhere open. It was Summer and clearly the college was both student and caffeine-free. Summers were strange in a lot of HEIs...for me, it was the only time of year I could make out the hurried scuff marks on the floor and hear myself think, as my thoughts reverberated against the bare, neglected walls; walls which had been abruptly stripped of their posters, job ads, lost and found notices and last-minute pleas for grinds. Student life wiped out for another academic year, like a duster wiping a board clean in preparation for new thoughts to slowly develop and emerge...

*Prologue: Knowles loved teaching...(or rather he loves teaching – I doubt that has changed). He also loved talking really quickly; his sentences tripped over each other like a reluctant school boy's untied laces. He had chosen the name 'Knowles' in honour of the educator, Malcolm Knowles. I was impressed. Clearly, he had given this serious consideration. Maybe that is what impressed me the most. Knowles had started as a teaching postgraduate in a business-related area a few years ago, but had recently secured a full-time position as an assistant lecturer. He was still completing his postgraduate programme. I wondered if he remembered what it was like to be a teaching postgraduate student...*

Knowles started his story by explaining how he had entered academia in the first place – he'd done his time in industry, where he felt as though he had been surrounded by power, authority and hierarchy all that time. I got the sense that he was done with that, or at least that's what he hoped. He didn't enjoy his last job but stuck at it for two years before leaving. It was clear that it had left his mark on him. He got out before it got to him. And he wanted to teach. As he quickly pointed out:

...anybody who's in academia knows that it's not well paid. Em, so, you're not doing it...you're not doing it for the money...you know you're definitely not doing it for the money...

Knowles was a new entrant on the assistant lecturing scale in the IoT sector and his position didn't come with offerings of bonuses or dividends, or so-called perks...it came with 18-20 hours of teaching a week, along with all the other demands...

But Knowles wasn't doing it for the money – he was doing it because quite simply, he loved teaching and learning (oops, am I dichotomising again?).

Words and terms like 'fascinating', 'learning, that's brilliant' and 'I love that...' flowed effortlessly from Knowles...

...there's nothing better than when you get a student come back and say, you said this and this is what happened...that's worth thousands...

Knowles wanted to make a difference...

He also enjoyed teaching undergrads more – was it because they were still receptive to new ideas – to being challenged? I think he saw himself in them. He identified with their curiosity, their willingness to learn, their enthusiasm.

He wanted to nurture that and watch it grow and, for that reason, he was prepared to adopt different teaching strategies and to inspire them...

He then came out with the succinct statement that seemed to sum up everything – ‘you learn something new every day’. Six short words that encapsulated his learning journey and mirrored one that I was on. And as those words slowly trickled through the barren corridors like droplets of thirst-quenching water, I couldn’t help thinking how inspirational a line it was...one to nurture the germinating seeds of academia. In the few quiet sentences after he had uttered his line, I had already conjured up the dream of having those six little words placed aloft in every educational institution in the land. If this was an example of adult learning, then Malcolm Knowles would’ve been immensely proud.

In teaching, Knowles had found his niche. Every new event seemed to represent for him a learning occasion – it didn’t matter what the event was; as long as it was new. He summed up his experience of learning so poetically, as he said...

...I was learning something new, I did something that I had never done before, and I was suddenly learning and I love learning.

For Knowles, it wasn’t just the learning of content but the learning about self that was important, as he said himself...

I’m going to sound like an old man now, young people kinda think they have all the answers, right? And you kinda go, you haven’t, the more you realise it, the more you look at these things, the more you realise how little you actually have. So, the...it has made me humble, and, and I love learning...

It struck me that I had never been that self-aware when I started out in academia; it had all been about learning the content for me. I began to wonder if this was because I had gone straight into academia, whereas Knowles had

spent many years in industry and had had the time to reflect on his own self development.

He cast his mind back to those early days teaching as a postgraduate and was quick to point out the challenges that were involved... ‘...I think you’re dropped in at the deep end.’ I’d heard that line before! Wasn’t it Stephen who had said it too...?

As Knowles described it...

There’s nobody that kind of says to you, here is...you know, an induction, and here is what we expect you to do...and you’re given a curriculum, you know, the script, the module, the module descriptor, but you know, that’s open to interpretation, and, you know...every single year since then, I have revised my course notes...so you don’t know, really you’re in at the deep end.

He saw teaching postgrads as primarily left to their own devices, expected to navigate the system by themselves (a bit like Marian was doing). Having been in the system for over 20 years myself, I could relate to that as I knew how tough it could be. And then, there was the work...especially in the first year...Knowles had done the maths...as he described...

...your first year...for every hour you’re in the classroom, you’re talking about 3 to 4 hours’ preparation in advance of that one hour.

In the silence of the canteen, I could almost hear my mental calculator doing the sums...but Knowles had gotten there before me...

So if you’re doing 6 hours a week...that’s...you know, that’s 18 hours. So half your...during the semester, half your research time is spent preparing...

Funny, I thought...he has just referred to it as 'research time', almost an indication that all of his time was dedicated to research and that teaching was eating into that. That's not to say he didn't enjoy it...he did, simply because it was another learning experience and, for Knowles, every learning experience was positive. For him, if you were learning something new whilst teaching, then it made you more engaged in your teaching. He was quick to point out that he thought that engagement dissipated over time, so if teaching something for 10 years, you were less likely to be engaged as you weren't learning something new. [I wonder did he see me as non-engaged after 25 years?!].

But Knowles returned to the position of teaching postgraduate students and commented that they were the ones doing what he described as the 'hard content', simply because the institution had 'a vacancy and they just haven't filled it'.

And this idea took centre stage again in something else that Knowles mentioned:

...we have a gap here, we don't have a full-time member of staff to fill it.

This time, it was his use of the word 'we' that intrigued me...who was the 'we'? Was it a 'we' which represented all the teaching postgrads, or was it 'Knowles and the institution', in which case was he suggesting that he was representing the organisation? But Knowles was quick to explain that the flexibility that went with being a GTA suited him, stating that not only could he 'turn down work' if he chose to do so, but he had the power to choose the dates and the modules that suited him. And that flexibility mattered to him...

He expressed no interest in having a title or a rank in the organisation; I got the impression that he was purely interested in doing a good job as a teacher and

rank or position didn't interest him, as he said himself...

I have no desire on rank or level...I really...really don't care at all, all I care about is that I get to do my teaching...[...].and I get my flexibility..., so someone else coming in on a higher rank taking something, it didn't bother me...

But he was still aware of the power in the institution...our conversation around this unfolded:

*Gina: In terms of, I suppose, when you came in and I know you have to cast your mind back to when you came in, but was there a sense of power in the organization and did you know where it was? Or was it something that you were concerned with at all? Or something that didn't bother you?*

**Knowles:** Power...as in the place is going somewhere?

*Gina: Em, power...just a sense of authority? Or did you just come in and not really mind?*

**Knowles:** I came in not really minding...I've kind of been involved in politics too long...as I'm here longer and longer I do now see the politics. But I don't play them. I don't get involved in them, but I do see the power here.

Knowles didn't elaborate at that time, but I sensed we'd be coming back to issues of power before long.

For me, most of Knowles's account centred around him alone as a teaching postgrad and so I probed a bit deeper to see if he had had any structured support.

I had hardly finished asking him, when he jumped in to put me straight...

...no...do you see, there's no structure...there's no structure in place...it's kinda like an emergency stopper really for something...

Between **gap-filling** and **emergency stoppers**, I was getting a picture of GTAs just being some kind of back-up service – the old reliables who you could call upon on an ad hoc basis, when there was nobody else to teach...

So had Knowles received any support from the institution? Had there been any mentoring? The answer again was a resounding ‘no’. Nothing was offered by way of guidance, so Knowles had had to actively seek it out himself, from existing staff. He went on to describe how, during a previous year’s exam boards, he had panicked when he realised that, with multiple meetings taking place in multiple venues, he wasn’t able to attend them all. So, he asked some lecturers what to do and reassuringly, they explained to him that, if it was an award year being considered, then he should be in attendance. Unsurprisingly, this was a guideline and one which was ‘not written anywhere’, but it satisfied Knowles’s concerns, who deemed it good enough advice to pass on to the newer GTAs coming after him.

But it wasn’t just the other staff who were of benefit in providing advice; the other postgraduate students were also there for him and he spoke of one who had been of particular help. There was a bond there, reflected in Knowles’s words,

...we’ve become like brothers, you know, we gave each other an awful lot of support...he’d tell me how to field the problem and so forth, so we’d support each other.

As Knowles was speaking, I was reflecting on my own experience and vividly remembered the support that I received from another lecturer who started teaching the same day as me. I think we had bonded over our sense of confusion with the new role!

But this was all very informal...was there a need to establish something more formal by way of support for the postgraduates who teach? According to

Knowles, there was, but he picked up on the idea of peer mentoring as opposed to faculty mentoring, when he commented...

...it would be useful to have someone who has been in 2 or 3 years talking back to someone who is starting off.

This led us on to talking about the influence of supervisors on teaching postgrads/GTAs. I wondered how supportive supervisors were of the fact that postgraduate researchers had to teach as well as conduct their research; support from supervisors had emerged in Lauren's and Sara's stories too.

In a direct manner that I was warming to, Knowles made his situation very clear; his supervisor seemed very against the fact that he was engaged in teaching. But it was the way he said it that brought us back around to the idea of support again...

...she would never have supported my teaching, in so much as she would never have been in favour of it at all, you know... her whole way of supervising, she's only interested in papers...

I think it was the way he had said...

**'she would never have  
supported my teaching...'**

that struck me the most...the idea of an academic not supporting teaching jarred with me (again!). Could they not see the benefits of students teaching for their own learning (Uno, 1999), or was it all about getting the research done and more publications produced? Research was being valued and recognised

through papers, but what about the value of teaching; was that being recognised?

But the next question perplexed me more, and it was because I had no idea why I asked it. For some unknown reason, I felt I needed to ask him if he felt his supervisors (as Knowles had experience of a few supervisors during his time) favoured research over teaching.

*Gina: Did they (your supervisors) prioritise research?*

**Knowles:** Yes, absolutely. Yeah, yeah, 100%. And it's predominantly, I think, driven by this need for publication.

Deep down, I think I was hoping that, in some way, I had misheard him until now and that normal supporting service would be resumed momentarily. Surely, he would go on to describe how his current supervisor saw the value in both activities...but no, it wasn't to be.

...if you can publish and they (your supervisors) can get...their name on it... trying to get something else out of the process, as in publications...

For that reason, Knowles had turned down some teaching hours, on the basis that he said that his supervisor would not have approved...

...my supervisor, would have, you know, gone to town on me...I said no because I know *my supervisor would have just absolutely gone to town on me...*

Despite Knowles not mentioning the word *power*, I could feel the power that his supervisor wielded over him in what he had just said. And maybe the supervisor was just doing her job, ensuring that he wasn't neglecting his own studies...

To me, it just felt strange that there was this role conflict and differing messages...in Marian's story she had also commented that her supervisor was worried about her doing the hours, but her Head of Department was encouraging her to do them...

In terms of finances, Knowles was on a stipend but, as he said, 'it's very little money'. Very little money added to the fact that being paid an hourly rate for his teaching meant that Knowles lost out during holiday periods, meant that, unlike tenured staff, he had no continuity of income. January was a bleak month at the best of times, but it became instantly darker when Knowles commented...

...you come back at the very end of January, you have to work, a month in arrears, so you, actually got paid for the first time in March...which was really, really difficult...you couldn't depend on your money...

I kept thinking to myself – that wouldn't happen with a tenured member of staff...why is it acceptable with a postgraduate student who is teaching?

But then I was reminded of my own situation as an early career academic; the initial elation when I realised that I would have long holidays, quickly followed by the sheer sense of panic that I would be without any income for weeks on end. But, for Knowles, it wasn't just a case of not having a guaranteed income, there was also a level of uncertainty around the teaching hours...each word was singed with doubt...

...and you were never, never sure, that you were going to get those hours. And you were always the last to know because they would fill...they would fill everything else first and then they would come and say okay...

Back to that idea of being the last one to know and leaving you dangling precariously, I thought...back to the bottom rung of the ladder...

Knowles later mentioned that teaching postgrads were indeed 'low in the pecking order'. This led us to chat more about identity and how Knowles saw himself in the organisation.

Did he still see himself as a student or, given that he was now a full-time member of staff, did he see himself differently?

Pytlak and Houser (2014) suggest that GTAs' initial credibility would not be seen as equal to that of full-time professors...but did Knowles feel the same way? Did he still see his position as low in the pecking order? How did he name himself...? He explained...

...I do now see myself as a...  
as a lecturer, but em,  
I do research part-time...

He saw himself, first and foremost, as a lecturer. But, as Knowles pointed out, this hadn't been an overnight change...it had taken a while. I was intrigued to know who or what had prompted this change - Knowles explained...

...do you know when it changed, actually, when I started going to department meetings and people talked to me as a colleague rather than as a [postgraduate] student, because you used to be always introduced, if you went anywhere as..., [his name] is doing his [postgraduate] here, whereas now, it's, [name] is our [discipline] lecturer, you know...so that changed...

So, Knowles now *saw himself differently* because others *saw him differently*.

But despite now *seeing himself* as a lecturer, Knowles had the idea of a pecking order still on his mind and was aware of his position...

...it doesn't bother me, but I'm more aware of my position in terms of being a junior... I am. It doesn't...I don't care...but I'm more aware of it, I'm not...senior, because I would've been, in my previous jobs I would've been, and I'm not...

He kept saying it didn't bother him. In fact, he commented that he had made a deliberate attempt to block out any reference to hierarchy in his current position...

...I've put up a barrier. I don't want to see...I'm sure it's going on, of course it's going on...in every organisation, I don't want to see it, I don't want to participate in it.

Though he was saying he was blocking out any sense of hierarchy, and given all he had described in terms of challenges facing those in precarious positions, I wasn't convinced that he had stopped thinking of ranks and hierarchy.

But Knowles didn't strike me as someone who would dwell on past challenges; he already had a bigger wish for the future:

...this is my wish, I hope that I still have this passion in 20 years' time and I hope that I'm not bothered by rank, or any of that kind of stuff in 20 years' time...Life, when you get that little bit older...[...]...you feel, [the] urgency goes out of life and you're more just about the experience of being here...and okay, I kinda don't need to prove myself any more...

It was a sobering thought and, as he said...

you're more just about the experience of being here...

---

### **Postscript**

Six months later, an email popped into my Inbox – I didn't recognise the name and, for a moment, it was almost making that ominous journey to the 'trash can'...but something made me open it. It was from Knowles. I didn't realise it until that stage, but I had forgotten we were using pseudonyms and to me he was still 'Knowles'; for me, he would always be Knowles.

He had emailed me to let me know what *he* thought of the first draft of his story, which I had sent to him. He commented that he had really enjoyed reading it

and that it had captured the essence of what we had shared. I had invited him during our conversation to add to the story if he wanted, to keep the story going so to speak, but at that stage he didn't feel the need to add anything.

I'd like to think that he has re-read his story many times since and is continuously adding to it...after all, every re-reading of a story is a retelling (Bruner, 1987) and that's how his story lives on...

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Late 2019...and I circulated the latest draft above to Knowles to see what he thought and to see again if he wanted to add to it...he did...

He enjoyed reading the latest version and then commented...

I still love teaching and I still strive to find new learning and ways of imparting that learning. I have had a number of opportunities to teach outside [name of institution] as a week-long lecturer. This gives me a totally different perspective, especially as one of the weeks was at an international school in [names country]. My research struggles along and I am still working towards the elusive PhD. On the positive side, my research is beginning to strongly align with my teaching and I am able to cross them into each other.

I was struck by how the research vs teaching debate no longer seemed to be an issue...

But it was his words...

**'I still love teaching and I still strive to find new learning and ways of imparting that learning'**

that resonated the most with me...the eternal search for new learning and ways to impart that learning...

Knowles had made me rethink the false dichotomy that exists between teaching and learning, and his story had taught me more than anything that teaching was learning...

‘What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it. That doesn't happen much, though.’

J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)

**SOUTENIR, PAS SOUTENANCE: SUPPORT...**



## charlotte

*There was another research student...every week we would have actually had a meeting together...*

*So what's the hand you've been dealt?*

*...a Jack of all trades*

*And what's your trump card?*

*...that's the strength of us as postgraduate researchers because we're up to date in the literature...*

*I sense a 'but'...*

*...you think you're doing great,*

*equally you might not,*

*you might have a bad day,*

*...it would've been nice to get that feedback ...*

*We learn from each other, don't we?*

*...we were constantly meeting up and chatting*

*we would have bounced ideas off each other*

*it's great to have others...*

*But nothing that was formal.*

*No, it wasn't and that's maybe probably an issue...*

*and a quote weaved into my mind...*

*"You have been my friend," replied Charlotte. "That in itself is a tremendous thing."*

*—E.B. White, Charlotte's Web*

*...the power of peer support...*

## Chatting with Charlotte...

### **Feedback anyone...?**

Charlotte commented...

...I didn't like that we didn't get the feedback. I think that was a big thing...if you put it in black and white we're just let go and teach. Well, we could be doing anything in that teaching, you don't know...or they don't know what we've covered and what we haven't covered...that was a big negative because, yeah, we should...you should get...we should've got feedback on what we done, for sure and been monitored a little bit more...

Charlotte was just 'let go and teach'...but if I think back to my first year teaching, so was I. So, was it any different now...?

Charlotte wanted someone to validate what she was doing...I can't remember if I had been the same when I started teaching...but this was something that had popped up in many of the other stories, including Emma's and Bill's...

She was also very reflective in her practice...I can't remember either if I had been as reflective...she would analyse every teaching session and jot down what worked and what didn't. As she said,

...we're all great at the start in our teaching, but when the research takes over, teaching gets pushed back a bit.

But yet, here was Charlotte doing what every textbook would suggest is effective teaching practice - reflecting on her practice (Bolton, 2006)...I was impressed...here she was, committed to being the best she could be and yet there was nobody there to confirm this to her.

I finished by asking her if there was anything else that she would like to see introduced to support postgraduates in their teaching and it was no surprise that she came right back to the idea of peer support again...that's where we had started and now we had gone full circle...

So let's turn back...

...or forward...

***Prologue:** Charlotte had just started teaching as a postgraduate student. She had come straight from being an undergraduate and was now teaching 2 hours a week. Her teaching hours were unpaid, but she was obliged to do them because her scholarship depended on it. She was contracted to teach 2 hours a week...*

*[Aside: Charlotte came across as very enthusiastic. Looking at her, I had flashbacks to when I started teaching in my 20s. I wondered if I had come across as keen then as she was now. I was somewhat envious...envious of that early excitement and relentless enthusiasm... and it reminded me that that kind of enthusiasm had been shown to increase the likelihood of student retention (O'Neal et al. 2007), suggesting that the contribution of teaching postgrads was invaluable to assisting undergraduate education...]*

We met on a summer's day in June...the words 'summer' and 'June' always evoke a warmth, the glow of hotly anticipated holidays...but today wasn't one of those days. It was damp, almost cold, one of those 'not-what-you expect' summer days...

We arranged to meet in a small classroom on Charlotte's campus, on the first floor of a building that had been named after either someone famous or someone who had made a 'more than generous' donation to the institution - either way, I can't remember...

Getting into lecturing had always been on the cards for Charlotte; she herself had been taught by postgraduate students and, for her, that was almost standard practice in her discipline. But just like some of the others, she had no input into what she was teaching – it was her supervisor who ‘designated’ what she would teach. And there was a pattern; it appeared that there was one particular module in her institution that was regularly given to postgraduates to teach.

But back to that word that she had uttered...

...‘designated’...

...the use of this word reaffirmed to me that, as a teaching postgrad, Charlotte had simply been assigned hours to teach, without consultation. It too reminded me of my own situation starting out teaching, where, I too had just been allocated teaching hours and class groups. I remember that pervading feeling of powerlessness – voicing a silent voice.

Would anyone have listened to me? Was there anyone to listen to Charlotte?

She went on to explain that she had been allocated first years to teach, which, in her view, was easier than having other years...not only because the module content was easier but also, because Charlotte wouldn’t have known the first year students, something that had also surfaced in my conversations with the other postgrads, just like Marian...

This led the conversation around to the support that she received for her teaching – where had she gotten her support?

Answer: her peers...(a position also voiced by Austin (2002) who suggested that graduate students found some of the best support through their peers). She described the weekly meetings she had with another postgraduate student, as

together they reviewed what had worked in their teaching and what hadn't...a shared teaching experience, I thought. (And how many new staff members would get the occasion to do that?).

But there was more...Charlotte not only wanted to perfect her practice, she wanted to stretch further, to be creative, 'to think outside the box'. I gazed around the small classroom where we were and thought to myself 'how could you possibly think outside the box in this box?'. Sometimes you had to be really creative in your teaching...

But back to support...

Charlotte had received some initial guidance from her supervisor but even she had stepped back somewhat knowing that Charlotte and the other postgraduate student were working together. I couldn't help wondering to myself if she had stepped back for this reason or because she simply couldn't or didn't want to offer any support herself...who knows?

But Charlotte was getting other support. Her institution had offered her a pedagogy module at the beginning of the year, which Charlotte described as 'extremely beneficial'. Not only had it helped her with 'how to teach' but she also described how, during this module, she had explored teaching philosophies, something that she admitted she would never have thought of prior to completing the module.

I looked down at the recorder, conscious of the ticking time left on my batteries...Charlotte caught me looking and, for a moment, I felt like one of those students who actively feigns interest but is secretly seeking out distractions. 'That's not me, I promise!' I regrouped quickly, worried that Charlotte would think that I wasn't interested in her story and, almost too enthusiastically to be

natural, I brought up the topic of teaching and research...was there any link for Charlotte between her teaching and her studies?

There wasn't really...apart from the time that had been invested in both; hadn't she already mentioned that when research takes over, teaching gets 'pushed back'. Charlotte admitted that she had had no idea at the outset how much time went into teaching; but she had taken a lot from her teaching practice...it had helped with her presentation skills, skills that would be beneficial when it came to the recruitment stage of her research and skills that would be beneficial should she decide to go into teaching full-time...

But research that was the priority and of that she was very definite...she had rationalised it in that her teaching wasn't going to get graded - her research was. As she said herself about teaching, 'there's nothing allocated for it'...and she wanted it to count in some way...

Did it all come back to grading and external validation, I wondered quietly...?

So, for Charlotte, her teaching was, as she said,

...a strong point going forward...if you want to go into teaching or the academia road...

Was teaching only seen as some kind of stepping stone, on the yellow brick road of academia? I'm not sure if she sensed my disappointment that teaching might not be valued as much as research, but very quickly she added that teaching had been 'a brilliant opportunity' and she counted herself lucky that she had been in an institution that had provided that experience.

As Charlotte spoke about getting experience, I wondered if she had acquired any experience inputting into teaching and learning strategies. She had. The module she was teaching hadn't changed for a number of years and she had taken the decision to update it based on the knowledge she had of the discipline. As a

postgraduate student, she saw herself perfectly positioned to input into modules, as she was up-to-date in the literature, something she believed was

...the strength of us as postgraduate researchers...

Her comment reminded me of Fairbrother's (2012, p. 357) remark that, because they are actively engaged in research, GTAs have the ability to 'exploit the research-teaching nexus to the maximum' and are therefore better positioned to offer examples from their research. In that sense, they can create an authentic learning environment for the undergraduate students, one where the disciplinary knowledge is current. But did other Faculty members think the same, I wondered...

Were postgraduate students *valued* for their *knowledge*?

Charlotte's confidence seemed to ooze as she described how she added more content to the module on the basis that it was more applicable than what had been there, replacing things she felt were irrelevant or even a 'bit outdated'.

At that moment, it was like the classroom we were in morphed back into a teaching space once more...as I realised how much I was learning by listening to Charlotte. I saw her very much as the 'teacher' and couldn't help reflecting back at my own situation when I started teaching. I would never have been self-assured enough to start adapting things. I wish I had been.

Charlotte was also involved in the assessment of her students and I wondered if she had received any direction on how to assess, given that she hadn't done it before. It was no surprise that the direction she had been given had come from her peers...herself and another postgraduate student had decided to first and second mark between them, to compare practices. They had given each other feedback, almost validating each other's decisions.

Sadly, for Charlotte, that was the only feedback she had received. She described what would have been her ideal situation - the lecturer would come into class and observe, and then give you feedback on your practice. The idea of a mentoring and support programme sprung to mind; why weren't they in place for teaching postgrads, given that they were in place for academic staff in some institutions? Hadn't this already been highlighted by Austin (2002) who found that graduate students weren't receiving regular mentoring or feedback, and, because of that, they had to make sense of their experiences alone. Nobody to guide, to advise, to give them feedback on their teaching. Okay, so Charlotte wasn't alone, but she was relying on another postgraduate student for support...was that enough?

So, given that Faculty members didn't seem to be involved in postgraduate mentoring, would it be possible for existing teaching postgrads to mentor incoming students, I wondered? For example, what kind of advice would Charlotte give to an incoming GTA?

For a start, she would advise the student that they would probably spend their first year 'finding' themselves...('first year', I thought - I had already spent a quarter of a century trying to find myself and I'm not sure I was any closer...). She also suggested that talking to other postgrads would help...

...that's a big thing and you can learn a lot from them, their mistakes...

We were back to feedback again and learning from others.

And just as the clock ticked by, it all came back to time once again...

Charlotte advised spending a lot of time preparing for class, 'taking your 3 or 4 hours to prep', and even coming into a classroom and practising talking through your presentation. It was all about being prepared and knowing your content...but was teaching coming back to just knowing 'content' again?

Maybe not...Charlotte went on to describe how initially she had been concerned about 'getting my content covered' but, as time went on, she decided that it would be better to focus on less content and to teach it more deeply. I felt reassured that her deep thinking about teaching was leading to deeper learning for us all.

Our conversation was slowing giving us more time to think, and, as it did, Charlotte began to reflect on her own development as a teacher. She had seen that change in herself - initially she had been 'a bit rigid with the content', thinking that she needed to get everything covered; but, as time went on, she began to realise that if the students started talking and 'a good conversation' developed, then that was more important than just talking through facts.

But wait...wasn't that exactly what had happened here in my conversation with Charlotte; we didn't focus on getting things covered - instead we had 'a good conversation' and look at the learning that had taken place...

And that was it...that would've been my feedback to Charlotte - she had a really good sense of how to assist other teaching postgrads; she was developing as a teacher. I paused one last time and thought - I would have really benefitted from having had someone like Charlotte to guide me when I started teaching...it's just a shame that Charlotte hadn't been there for me...

### **Postscript**

Weeks went by...

I contacted Charlotte again to send her my version of her story and she got back to me by email soon afterwards. She commented...

...I only just got around to reading the story. Very interesting to read and I love the dialogic poem...

That was the kind of feedback I welcomed, I thought! I had asked her if there was anything that she had wanted to add to her story at that stage, but she didn't.

But that is just for the moment...who knows...in the future I may hear from Charlotte again, or I may even hear from her students...!

## ACT VIII:

### Where has all this talk gotten us...?

‘THEY have the manners to be silent, and you, trusted as you are, the baseness to speak!’

Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898)

-----  
**celisne**  
so we’ve heard all the stories...all 11 of them...

**me**  
more so 12...don’t forget mine in there too...

**celisne**  
oh yeah, I almost forgot...  
...so a lot of themes have emerged in the stories, but how do they all come together now...?

**me**  
well I think it is back to the conceptual framework that I described in the beginning...I think that there is the overarching theme of power and within that are three conceptual strands – pedagogy, identity and agency...and together they all shape the GTA experience...

**celisne**  
and all the other issues that are raised, such as the challenges, the support, the naming, the silencing...

**me**  
...I see power running through all of those themes too, sometimes in a negative way and sometimes positive...

**celisne**

...well, when it comes to the GTA experience, there's a lot to analyse for sure...

...and don't forget we still have to consider your story...I mean I know the spotlight has been on the teaching postgrads, illuminating their experience, but there's a lot of this story that focuses on you...so what have you learnt from the experience...how do you see yourself?

**me**

as a practitioner, is that what you mean...?

**celisne**

why are you restricting to one subjectivity...?! What about you as a researcher...who are you now...?

**me**

well, it's not as if I have suddenly arrived at a destination...I'm not the finished product...

**celisne**

oh, I know, but where are you landing now...today...?

**me**

I think 'I've got the key to my castle in the air, but whether I can unlock the door remains to be seen.' [*Little Women* (1868) by Louisa May Alcott (US novelist and poet, 1832-1888)]

**celisne**

I don't really understand - what do you mean by that...?

**me**

For me, it feels as though I have come a long way but that I have a lot more to learn...both in terms of being a researcher and a practitioner...

But I'll come back to that in the next act...remember, this is not just my story, it is the story of postgrads who teach, so let us first look at what we have learnt about their experience...

...and remember, these are just my interpretations of the experience of postgraduates who teach in the IoT sector...others will see things differently...and they should...

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**What was/were the *meaning(s)* of it all?**

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**me**

so, what do you make of the stories...?

**celisne**

well, aren't they all so different – I mean out of eleven participants, there is only some commonality (with power permeating throughout the whole experience)...

...they all have such different experiences, don't they?

I mean, I don't know why I would have expected something else...the world of a teaching postgrad is vast in terms of experience, don't you think?

**me**

I'm not so sure to be honest...one of my initial observations when I listened to these postgrads who teach, was that their world was much narrower than I might have originally assumed...I suppose they didn't seem at all concerned with their position on a national level; their focus was purely on an institutional level...

**celisne**

Are you surprised...? Why would they care about GTAs on a national scale...sure, they're too busy within their own institutions to be concerned about what is happening on a national level. Were you not the same as an early career academic...? did you even know at that stage who the national power brokers were?

**me**

Fair point...yeah, I do remember how I saw everything through the lens of my own institution...that was my world...maybe it's just because I simply accepted that the institution wielded direct power over my position...I suppose for me, in those early years, I was never involved in any discussions about national-level policies or decisions...

**celisne**

...but it's the same for teaching postgrads now...they are not invited to national discussions about their position...sure, there are no national discussions...you heard that...or were you not listening?!

...it's weird isn't it...that expression that is often used...

'to have a voice at the table',

but in this case, for the postgrads who teach,

*...there is no table...!*

So, I suppose the intersecting themes that have emerged in this research are primarily focused on the participants' own institutions, is that right?

**me**

Yeah, that seems to be the case...so maybe we can look closer at that...

Let's start by analysing the relationships that they have within their own institutions – you know, their supervisors, the undergrads, their peers and, of course, them themselves, everything that falls within their world...everything that forms their web...

**celisne**

...the world wide web of the postgrads who teach!

**me**

...exactly...

**celisne**

So, do you think that power runs through the entire experience...?

**me**

Well, that's what I'm suggesting...but let's discuss it further...as all the themes come through their stories in different ways...let's talk about them...maybe from the outside in...

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### **The outer web...the power of the institution**

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**celisne**

...okay, let's start with the outer layer of that powerful web and by that, I mean the individual institutions themselves...there seems to be a strong level of power exerted over the postgrads who teach, by the particular institutions ...

...through policy (or even absence thereof, which is another form of silence I suppose)...

...through practice...

and through existing discourses...(including hidden ones)...

The participants made implicit and explicit references to this power exerted over them within the institutions themselves.

...it was almost as though power seemed to be something that they saw others as having, including their supervisors...I mean look at

the way Knowles, Marian and Lauren described situations in which they had to negotiate the power dynamic with their supervisors, as they tried to balance both their research and teaching commitments...

**me**

You just said 'having' in relation to power...that was like our discussion earlier about power not necessarily being something possessed, but something that is more pervasive...

**celisne**

...yeah, and they also spoke about the challenges that characterised their experience, the responsibility, the workload, all decided for them by those in positions of power within the institution.

**me**

Yes, the individual institutions wielded a lot of power over the participants in this study...and it certainly seemed to me that some of them were silenced within the system.

Listening to them I got the impression that it was difficult for them to voice any concerns they had...

Maybe the situation would be different if there were more assurances for them around their contracts and their conditions – but, to me, those I spoke with appeared voiceless...

**celisne**

...maybe that is something that you would like to discuss in greater detail?

**me**

Sure...the more we talk about silence the better...

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### **Silence at the table!**

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**me**

...for me...being 'voiceless' describes a state of not being able to speak...but the participants in this study were not voiceless...they spoke to you and recounted their feelings and experiences...they wanted to talk and tell their own stories...

...so, in that sense, it was more a case of them being silenced or their voices hidden, rather than being voiceless. In fact, I have identified three ways in which I saw these teaching postgrads being silenced. Let me clarify...

...firstly, by not having any formalised representation in their institutions;

...secondly, that even when they did speak, their voices were largely not valued.

And thirdly, the GTAs were left in a silent state by not being able to engage in any dialogue about their teaching or get any feedback on their teaching practice. Would you agree with me on this?

**celisne**

I hear what you're saying, but maybe you could explain it further...

**me**

...well, if power is reflected in discourse and practices (Foucault, 1991), then the fact that the postgrads in this study were excluded from policy formation or any decision-making, within the institutions, is reflective of their lack of power...

...and, in most of their institutions there was no evidence of any policy around their teaching duties...

...interestingly, in our conversations together, they didn't raise the issue of policy at all...it wasn't even on their radar, which led me to conclude that nobody in any of these IoTs had raised or discussed such policies with them...whether policies existed or not, the postgrads in this study had no awareness of them...

**celisne**

...well, hold on...Robin spoke of being a listener at the staff meetings...maybe she was aware that micro-policies were being formed, but that she just wasn't part of them...

...and I suppose because they weren't at the table when their conditions were being decided, it became the case that they almost expected not to be consulted and were allowing others to make decisions for them. I think what Leanne said about this sums it up perfectly: '*...we're completely dependent on other people for legitimacy*'.

**me**

And maybe that includes me, as someone researching them...?

**celisne**

...well, you talked with them...so in that sense, they were consulted...but I suppose if you think of the way they are often described, as, for example, 'the forgotten tribe' (McCready and Vecsey, 2013), which suggests that they have just been overlooked, would you now challenge that view, having heard from them...?

**me**

...yes, I would make the claim that teaching postgrads in Ireland are not 'forgotten' in the sense that it is an accidental oversight, but

instead, in many cases, they are being ignored or even intentionally disregarded...

...in that way, we could describe them as the *ignored* tribe...or even the *disregarded* tribe...

**celisne**

But why do you think institutions would do that – what would be their justification...?

**me**

...maybe, it's the case that if institutions start to explore their experience, then they would have to acknowledge them and formalise their situation. Bringing them to the fore would be an expression of legitimisation and, as such, their status as employees and their working conditions would have to be considered and negotiated, similar to what occurred in the US. As it currently stands, there is no obligation on the institutions to provide anything for them.

So maybe the entire sector here is deliberately choosing to turn a blind eye towards them and merely using them for its own benefit. And they have no formal representation when it comes to students' unions...

...that was clear in Leanne's story...

Remember, as she said, because research students aren't part of a class group, they have no voice at student union level...

**celisne**

...nor at teachers' union level... they're not staff either...

**me**

...no, but it is not just a case of being either students or staff, is it? ...they have multiple subjectivities...

**celisne**

...you're right, and even at institutional governance level, in some cases, they are not specifically represented...caught again straddling different roles, unrecognised by either group and left feeling marginalised...

...back to being neither 'fish nor fowl' (Park, 2002, p. 51)...and questions again over their identity...

...and being treated differently to existing faculty members...

**me**

...yeah, look at Bill, Charlotte and Tom...none of them were given any choice in terms of their teaching duties...nor Leanne, and I know not all faculty members get a say in what they teach, but in the teaching postgrads' case, it was almost as though they just accepted their fate...they didn't feel as if they could negotiate. Remarkably, they weren't consulted about the levels of modules

they were comfortable teaching...and remember, some of them were concerned that they might know the later year undergrads...so it is important for them which level they are teaching...  
...and both Lauren and Emma were concerned about that...they felt it might have compromised their role as teaching postgrads...

**celisne**

...is the prevailing discourse that decisions are taken for the postgrads and not with them...?

**me**

yes, I think so, and it reflects what the literature says, in that we are talking about them and not with them (Jackson and Simpson, 1983; Prieto and Altmaier, 1994)...

...and to make matters worse, look at Lauren's story...she wasn't consulted in terms of room location which impacted upon the teaching strategies which she wanted to employ...so, not only was the organisation telling her what to teach, but they were also influencing how she taught.

This is a good example of how the power of the institution has impacted on her pedagogical practice...

**celisne**

and was this reflected elsewhere...?

**me**

...yes, it also threaded through Bill's story when he told of how he had simply been assigned the content to teach, without any consultation, which was itself a manifestation of the power held over the teaching postgrads by those in authority. And the same sense of being controlled by others was expressed by Charlotte and Tom, with Charlotte being 'designated' her hours by her supervisor, whilst Tom referred to a 'limited' choice which he had been given in respect of the modules he was asked to teach. Robin even talked to this when she commented...

*...you wouldn't really get a choice, it's kind of whatever comes up...*

When you listen to Robin, it sounds as though it all happened by chance, a sort of pot luck.

But clearly someone was making decisions around this  
and the postgrads weren't being included.

...more examples of the influences of power over pedagogical practice...

**celisne**

...keeping with this theme of power, would you say therefore that the postgrads who teach are side-lined when it comes to decision-

making...in that they are not in a position to question anything – essentially, that they are working in a system where the ‘structures and values are not questioned or hierarchies challenged’ (Inglis, p. 4)...?

**me**

...yeah, they aren’t in a position to question anything – so I think that, in that sense, they have become more marginalised, as they are not part of the discourse...

...and we have already seen that discursive practices have a profound effect on people’s thoughts and actions (Mills, 1997), with language having the power not just to reflect reality but to shape reality, so their reality is being defined by the institutions...and this has left them side-lined...

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### **Left on the subs bench...**

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**me**

...this is a good example of power being constituted through accepted discourse and practices (Foucault, 1980a) and then the way we think about a subject influences the way we act towards them...

...so, if postgrads who teach are talked about rather than with, then the act of making decisions for them and not with them becomes legitimised and their exclusion from policy-making becomes perpetuated.

**celisne**

...I agree...and it seems that it then becomes easier for those in positions of power to exclude and marginalise them and this marginalisation becomes legitimised.

**me**

exactly...but listening to them has shown me that there are other practices in place within the system that engender marginality and perpetuate the inequality they experience; look at the fact that only two of those in this study sat on programme boards. The other postgrads in this study had no representation at programme board level and, as such, weren’t, for the most part, in a position to make changes to curricula...

...they couldn’t really implement changes to programmes, so they seemed to have very limited, if any, input into the teaching, learning and assessment strategies of the programmes on which they were

teaching...not consulted yet again – just another expression of power over them...

And, that seemed to bother some of them...I mean look at Bill, he would've really welcomed having input, especially into the teaching and learning strategies.

But he didn't have a say...that would bother me...

Just think about it for a second...you're a postgraduate who has just secured teaching hours; quite possibly, you were recently an undergrad, you've come through the programme, you may have insightful feedback to offer so as to improve the overall learning experience for the next cohort of students...you have all this learner experience...

you have a voice...

but then – you suddenly have no say...

...Silenced...

So you have no autonomy and no sense of ownership around what you are teaching (Park and Ramos, 2002)...it's not really a collaborative approach to programme development is it?

...in my view, this seems to be a deliberate decision by those in charge not to formalise the teaching postgraduate position...

**celisne**

...yeah, I suppose when you put it like that, it does seem to contradict all the literature around treating students as partners in their own learning...

**me**

...for sure...I mean look what's been written in that area...

...take Healey, Flint and Harrington (2016, p. 1) for example; they advocate that learning in partnership is 'a pedagogically sound alternative to consumerist models of HE', and yet we are not treating these learners as partners – those in power are choosing not to listen to them.

If you go back to the mid-2000s, there were calls for the creation of spaces where students and teachers could 'talk about their feelings and concerns' (Lynch and Baker, 2005, p. 131), an inclusive space where differences in curricula, pedagogy and assessment practices would be respected. I don't think that exists for these postgrads who teach...

**celisne**

No, it seems that the institutions are not consulting them...nor are they listening to their feelings or concerns. Do you think that there might be a way to address this going forward?

**me**

Well, I don't want to be making recommendations per se but I do think that one way to address this would be to ensure that teaching postgraduates have full representation on all programme boards for the modules on which they instruct.

I think that in itself would be an expression of power...

It would break down this particular wall of silence and ensure that teaching postgraduate students were at the table, as partners, involved in the decisions that, up to now, were being made for them...but, then again, who knows, it is enough to have them at the table...will they feel the power to speak?

**celisne**

I don't know; that might work; you mentioned earlier that there were other types of silence which you saw emerging in this study – do you want to talk about them?

**me**

Yeah, well, I've mentioned that GTAs are really not invited to voice their views but I think that it was clear listening to them that, even when their voices were heard, they weren't valued...

...take Lauren – she mentioned that she had voiced her opinion about curriculum changes, but she was quick to point out that it was only done in an informal way. She seemed to accept that, because there was no formal mechanism into which she could input, that meant that her voice was largely ignored. I think that led to her feeling undervalued, which could have negatively impacted her self-efficacy...

...and Marian and Bill – they expressed how they had encountered silence in terms of feedback on their teaching. This was also strikingly evident in Charlotte's story; she kept expressing her desire to receive feedback with regards her teaching, as though it would validate what she was doing and this also came through in Tom's story...

I remember when I listened to their stories, I thought that is was because neither Charlotte nor Tom had taught before, but Knowles, who had taught previously, had the same feeling. Given that feedback has been shown to be such an integral part of the learning process (Juwah, Macfarlane-Dick, Matthew, Nicol, Ross and Smith, 2004; Hattie and Timperley, 2007), it is ironic that no feedback seemed to be provided for any of the students in this study. Feedback is powerful as it helps learners to develop both personally and professionally, so, in a way, withholding feedback from the postgrads could be seen as a way to stop them advancing in their role...

...and it also illustrates a lack of desire on behalf of the institutions to communicate and engage with them in terms of their pedagogical practice...

**celisne**

And is this something that you think could be easily addressed?

**me**

Absolutely...it could be through the introduction of a mentoring system or something like that...we've already seen that mentoring programmes for teaching postgrads exist in other institutions and they are great for helping GTAs to strengthen their teaching ability (Austin, 2002; Cho *et al.*, 2011). But I think, in those institutions where formal mentoring systems do not exist, we should still be encouraging a more open communications network between Faculty and postgrads who teach.

**celisne**

It comes back to listening again doesn't it?

**me**

It does...and that really brings me on to what I saw as a third type of silence that emerged in this study and that centres on what is not said by these individuals  
...in other words...that which they didn't feel empowered to say...  
It's coming back to this idea of what is not said as opposed to what is said...

**celisne**

Meaning...and deferred meaning and all that...do you think this came across in their words...?

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### **Don't say a word...someone might be listening**

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**me**

Well, for me, this really came across in Leanne's story through the way she described her sense of feeling exploited and undervalued; do you know what struck me here...?

**celisne**

What?

**me**

Leanne was telling me all about this...but she wasn't telling those in positions of power in her own institution...

**celisne**

Yeah, but given her relatively powerless position, that isn't very surprising, is it...?

**me**

No, I suppose not, but I think in Leanne's case, it was a silence that was more akin to an 'unwillingness to talk', which may have been evidence of that fact that sometimes by talking and relating a negative experience you might be compromising your situation...didn't someone talk about 'burning bridges'...?

Oh yeah, and Marian was the same...she sat on programme boards but she was very conscious of what she could and couldn't say at these meetings. Her comment about an upcoming staff meeting spoke volumes to me...what was it she said...

...I think I will be definitely more listening than talking...

It's almost like an acknowledgement that what she wanted to say wouldn't be valued, or couldn't be said and therefore, she was taking the decision to remain silent, almost accepting that her contributions didn't count, almost complying with the power structure in the institutions.

Or maybe she felt so vulnerable in her position that she was almost scared to say anything...

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[*Aside: this brought me right back to how vulnerable I had felt early in my academic career and how I was often scared to say anything, too scared that I would lose my job...precarity weighed heavy upon me...thankfully, it doesn't any longer...*]

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**celisne**

I got the impression from some of the teaching postgrads that they did indeed feel vulnerable...almost fragile in their situation...what do you think?

**me**

Well think about the relationships that some of them had with their supervisors...these were very powerful relationships...

in some cases, they were doing teaching hours for their supervisor – so, it’s no wonder then that, like Knowles, they might have been reticent to talk about their teaching experiences with their supervisors, especially if that experience was somewhat negative. I suspect that it was out of fear of what the supervisor would say but also the consequences that it might have had for their studies.

...talk about an implicit power relationship there;  
I mean take Jordan and Howe’s (2018) findings - they discovered that many of the GTAs in their study ‘felt pressurised to take on more teaching, while others reported supervisors’ disapproval of teaching activities’ (Jordan and Howe, 2018, p. 515). Feeling ‘pressurised’ – is that the way we want our postgrads to feel...  
And that was certainly the case for Knowles, but also if you think back to Marian and Robin’s stories, they both made the point that their supervisors weren’t really happy that they were teaching, as they were worried it would compromise their research...but a lot of them seemed unable to say ‘no’ to extra teaching hours...

**celisne**

I don’t think that they were empowered enough to say ‘no’...

**me**

I agree and I think that all of this has implications for the future direction of postgrads who teach in the IoT sector...maybe we all need to stop and think more and talk with them around their own personal and professional development...to ensure that they feel empowered enough to share their experiences...

**celisne**

I think that would be great, but don’t forget, you are already doing that in this study...you talked with them and listened, so, in that sense you are chipping away at that wall of silence. They felt empowered enough to share their experiences, which itself is very reminiscent of hooks’ (2010, p. 21) view when she commented:

‘...each student finding his or her unique voice, this recognition is usually empowering for students.’

I think the power lies in being able to voice that voice...

And creating the conditions for their voices to be heard...

...but haven’t you already brought their experience to the fore elsewhere...?

**me**

Yeah, very early on, in April 2018, I presented one of their stories at a narrative inquiry conference, here in Ireland, in Sligo...it was Emma’s story...and the submission paper was entitled:

***‘We say we are teaching them to teach, but talk is cheap and Graduate Teaching Assistants are cheaper’: is it all just neo-liberalism and is anyone really listening?’***

**celisne**

And I bet that got people thinking about the role didn't it...?

**me**

Yes, what was interesting there was that some people at the conference started reflecting on their own prior experience as teaching postgrads and they began considering what was happening now in their own institutions with regard to postgrads who teach...

**celisne**

well that was a powerful way of disseminating knowledge wasn't it?

...and didn't you bring their voices elsewhere...

**me**

Yeah, I presented their stories at a GTA Developers' Forum in Bristol last year...that was great, because for a start, I was the only one there talking about the situation with teaching postgrads in Ireland...and I was learning more about the situation in the UK...but more than that, it was a chance for the postgrads to speak...

**celisne**

How did that work again...remind me...

**me**

I took the stories from the postgraduates in this study and shared them with another group of postgraduates who were teaching in my own institution and then I filmed them talking about the stories they had read and whether or not those stories and experiences resonated with them...the overall presentation was entitled...

**‘Everything you wanted to know about GTAs, but were too afraid to listen...’**

...and the accompanying video piece was called:

**‘their stories, your voices, our experience’...**

**celisne**

Sounds very co-constructed...

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## Don't feed the precarious animals...

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**celisne**

But can we come back to that idea of staying silent because of a sense of vulnerability...do you think that has something to do with the whole precarious nature of postgrads who teach...?

**me**

For sure...I mean, I think the entire teaching postgraduate student experience within the IoT sector is one that has been shaped by a neoliberalist ideology. We have already seen that teaching postgrads are often taken on because they are flexible and cheap to employ (Gillon and Hoad, 2001; Park, 2002) and because they don't have 'employee status' the institutions have no obligations towards them. So, they are left in precarious situations, unsure as to whether or not they might secure more permanent positions when they finish their studies. Filling gaps...taking the place of a tenured member of staff...all indications of a pervasive precarity in the sector...

...look at Knowles...

...his reference to his own situation as filling the gap of a tenured member of staff had echoes of Gill's (2013) comment that precarity was indeed dominating academia. And others in the study also described the precarious positions in which they found themselves, both in terms of security, but also in terms of additional rights and privileges that were denied them....

Remember, there didn't seem to be any pension or holiday entitlements for these individuals, affirming that they occupied a lower position in the hierarchical structure in the organisation. And because GTAs are not formally recognised within Irish higher education, there is no uniformity around the issue of payment. Most of the postgrads in this study were not paid for their teaching duties<sup>37</sup> (as it usually forms part of their research contractual agreement).

And they have no rights as employees, as they are not deemed to be employees, despite doing the same work as full-time faculty members in many cases...is all of this exploitation???

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<sup>37</sup> In the US and the UK, the majority of GTAs working within the university sector would be paid an hourly rate for their teaching duties.

To be honest, they are left having to accept their situation, knowing that if they don't agree to conduct their teaching-related duties, then they risk not being able to continue with their studies.

What can they do...?

What would you do...?

Do we need to formalise their situation in some way so as to 'see' them....?

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*[Aside: reflecting back now, I recall that one of the reasons why my parents had encouraged my siblings and I to pursue careers in education was because they believed that they were 'steady, secure' jobs. My father had been self-employed and my parents never seemed comfortable with the precarity of owning their own business. It now seems ironic that what were once heralded as the secure jobs in education have become precarious.]*

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**celisne**

Yeah, it's a difficult one for sure...

**me**

I mean, look at Leanne for example – talk about being left occupying a precarious rung on the ladder – look how vulnerable she felt in the position. And what's worse was that she was struggling with the idea that by taking on the position of GTA, she was in effect denying someone like her a full-time teaching position.

It's like she was shooting herself in the foot...and she knew it...

I know this already emerged in Raaper's (2018) study when she suggested that, by undertaking teaching work, these students may actually be supporting a system that is promoting precarity, rather than offering full-time contracts...and that is exactly what Leanne was experiencing in her situation...

Imagine the irony in that – she was contributing to her own precarity...the existence of GTAs, like her, meant that other staff members found themselves in equally precarious situations,

confirming that wider discussion around precarity in the sector (Johnson and McCarthy, 2000; Courtois and O’Keefe, 2015).

**celisne**

I know...and it wasn’t just in Leanne’s story that the issue of precarity was unveiled, was it?

**me**

No, precarity and a prevailing sense of uncertainty seemed to weave throughout all the stories, especially when it came to the treatment of some GTAs by their supervisors...

Lauren commented on how supervisors would often ask postgrads to just step in to cover a class at late notice...

...another ‘filling a gap’, eh?

...and she alluded to the fact that it was hard to say no...and this came up a lot in their stories...

Take Bill, he also mentioned that sometimes he had been asked by a supervisor to cover a class at very short notice, again contributing to the precarity of the position.

I think it’s a case of the GTAs not wanting to burn bridges in the institutions.

**celisne**

That sounds awful...but hold on, they weren’t all like that...what about the others?

**me**

No, you’re right...there was a very different message coming through Stephen and Knowles’ stories...they both suggested that they were the ones in the powerful position...they could say ‘no’ to extra teaching hours and had the flexibility to do so...

Sure I mean, Stephen even suggested that he saw himself as ‘taking advantage of the flexibility’ that he was offered...

**celisne**

Yeah, but hold on – you do know what makes them different from some of the other participants in the study, don’t you?

**me**

Well I know one thing...they were paid for their hours...they were on an hourly rate and, as such, might have not felt obliged to do the hours they were asked to do. Maybe it was the issue of payment changed the way in which they viewed their situation and, of itself, was empowering. But, I’m not sure the issue of payment for teaching was of particular concern to the participants in this study, despite what I might have assumed originally. It seemed to

me that they were more concerned about the nature of their job and of the support that they required, than the money...

**celisne**

So maybe it wasn't the money issue that made Stephen and Knowles' stories different...maybe it's because they were older than the other postgrads who were teaching and they felt less vulnerable in their situation...

**me**

Well, some of the others were mature students too, so I'm not sure about that...maybe it just shows the unique experience that everyone has as a GTA/postgraduate who teaches...

**celisne**

...but I suppose we shouldn't forget about the other challenges that emerged from the participants in this study – there were pedagogical challenges for them for sure...

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**Rise to the challenges...is there anyone to share this burden of responsibility?**

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**me**

For sure – I mean the issue of challenges and concerns resonated throughout all of their stories and this was a particularly dominant theme, which reflects what is evident in the literature (Musaka, 2009; Jordan and Howe, 2018)...

What I found interesting is that when I started the conversations with the participants in this study, I began by asking them to talk about the overall experience of being a teaching postgrad, including the challenges and joys. But, listening back, I was struck by how the challenges and concerns permeated through a lot more than the joys...

**celisne**

yes, they all seemed preoccupied by the responsibilities of the position, including the workload and all the associated time constraints. The challenges all related to the institution's specific demands on them, which echoes Muzaka's (2009) claim that there are multiple tensions associated with their varying roles.

**me**

But it wasn't as if there was one stand out challenge...

Just being a postgrad who teaches is a challenging experience...

I know one of the things they spoke of was the increased workload, especially at the beginning of the term, which supports Park and Ramos's (2002) contention that GTAs are being overburdened by their Faculties.

Look at poor Bill for example...he commented that the workload had caught him by surprise for the first three months of the academic year. I mean 'three months'...that's a long time to be overburdened, especially when you are studying as well...

...and Lauren confirmed this by referring to the first semester as 'hectic', she was trying to juggle the workload between teaching and studying. And we can't forget Robin - the preparation for her teaching took up more time in September than she would have liked...

...there's no doubting how busy everyone felt at the beginning of the year...

...and this aligns with what the literature has shown in terms of the time and energy commitments that go into being a GTA (Lowman and Mathie, 1993; Jordan and Howe, 2018).

**celisne**

Was this similar to your experience too?

**me**

Yeah...I experienced a really busy start to the academic year, trying to balance my studying and my teaching. But I was able to talk about it because, as you know, I was studying in one institution and teaching in the other. That made me feel a bit more powerful. I'm not sure the individuals in this study felt as though they could air their concerns with anyone...

**celisne**

No, I'm not sure they could (maybe just amongst themselves)...

**me**

...but it isn't just the workload that is challenging – what also emerged in these stories is the concern which the teaching postgrads had around their level of responsibility towards the students...

...now that's a heavy burden, in my view...and this aligns with Boehrer and Sarkisian's (1985, p. 14) study, in which the GTAs blamed themselves for 'their students' poor performance or apathy in class'.

But I think more importantly, it also highlights the emotional labour of caring that is part of teaching (Isenbarger and Zembylas,

2006), in that teachers, and I would include postgrads who teach in that, experience emotional labour when they engage in caring relationships and, as a result, have to neutralise or inhibit their own emotions. These caring relationships can also become a source of emotional strain, anxiety, anger, and disappointment (ibid., p. 123) – and we saw this in some of the stories...

For example – take Emma – she just didn't want to let her students down and she viewed their success as heavily dependent on her success as a teacher. She was worried that she was to blame so, in that sense, she was taking on the emotional strain of teaching...

**celisne**

So, as well as being responsible for research and teaching, as a postgrad who teaches, she saw herself as being responsible for the students' success...that's a lot to take on...

**me**

And look at Sara, she was the same – she was assuming responsibility for her students not understanding something. I don't know, but I think it points towards an inherent lack of confidence and self-esteem in their teaching ability. It's no fault of their own but it is a reflection of the concern around teaching ability, as expressed through Fuller's (1969) teacher development model.

And again, in terms of sharing responsibility, there was no indication from those in this study that they shared this feeling of insecurity and responsibility with any members of Faculty or with their supervisors. It's a hard one to share I suppose...I mean, I wouldn't be telling that to my supervisor – they might automatically think that I wasn't up for the position...

And Bill was the same – he constantly questioned his own ability and was concerned that his capacity to teach would have a negative effect on the final year students' grades...

...and Tom, he too expressed a sense of responsibility in his story, but his was different, in that it was directed towards maintaining the standard of the programme on which he was teaching. He didn't want to feel that his teaching was impacting negatively on the programme's reputation. There was a sense of loyalty to the institution there, in that he wanted to do the programme justice.

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*[Aside: I reflected back to my own experience when I started teaching and could easily identify with all of their situations. I too had felt the same burden in relation*

*to my students, a pressure that nobody else seemed to acknowledge was there, simply because nobody had asked me...had I learnt anything in those intervening 25 years...had I not been asking or listening...clearly not...]*

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**celisne**

All of this points to one thing for me...these teaching postgraduate students are under pressure...and often ill-prepared...

**me**

Well, I think all of the examples here just serve to uphold what the literature is saying about postgrads feeling ill-prepared for the scope of their responsibility (Boyer, 1991; Weidert *et al.*, 2012).

And worryingly, I think, it also points to the way in which some of the teaching postgrads can do nothing but accept the pressures that they are put under, another example of power being exerted over them. And this would support the view expressed by Raaper (2018), who, like me, was writing from a Foucauldian perspective in her study of GTAs. She stated that when individuals begin to accept the pressures placed upon them as ‘being normal or view these in relation to their own personal responsibility’, (Raaper, 2018, p. 425), it makes any oppositional response unlikely. In that sense, they are accepting the power around them.

*And power is all around...*

**celisne**

And, in your view, what needs to happen...or rather, what would You like to see happening?

**me**

Well, I think you are asking everyone here, aren't you? For me, I think that all of this speaks to the need for more formalised conversations to take place with Faculty, prior to them starting to teach, so that the postgrads can voice their concerns...right from the outset...

...but as I said earlier, I think studies like this one will help achieve that...they may not be formalised conversations yet, but at least there is a conversation taking place...

**celisne**

So, what you're saying is that we need to listen more to postgrads who teach; but is there anything else that emerged from the stories

on the issue of training...are institutions getting it all wrong in terms of what is being provided for these students?

-----

**Fail to train...and train to fail...**

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**me**

Well, they're probably getting it wrong in that some of them are not considering training at all...

Put it this way...out of 11 participants in this study, 5 of them mentioned that they hadn't been provided with any pedagogical training, either in advance or during their time as GTAs..., which pretty much supports what the literature is saying – GTAs are usually inadequately prepared for their teaching duties (Rushin *et al.*, 1997; Prieto, 1999; Golde and Dore, 2001; Dudley, 2009). And though some of them said that they didn't know if they needed it, it still may have been a good idea to offer them the choice of doing it...

But this issue of GTAs not being prepared to teach isn't something new; research from the 1960s to the mid-2000s found that the thinking at the time was that the quality of undergraduate education was compromised by GTAs teaching (Dubin and Beisse, 1967; McKiggan-Fee *et al.*, 2013), simply because GTAs didn't have pedagogical training...

So this would suggest that GTAs might benefit from being provided with formal pedagogical training, in order to ensure quality teaching practice (Sharpe, 2000; Golde and Dore, 2001; Hardré, 2005; Young and Bippus, 2008; Weidert *et al.*, 2012; Chadha, 2013) and to feel prepared, rather than being in a 'pedagogical no mans'land' (Ryan, 2014, p. 99).

**celisne**

But that wasn't really road-tested amongst all the participants in this study, was it?

**me**

No, but it did emerge that they felt training would help them. And that is similar to what the literature is saying...I think the demand for guidance and training is coming from the GTAs themselves (Bond-Robinson and Rodrigues, 2006). And we already know that GTAs who have training and some teaching experience prior to starting their teaching, are more effective than those who haven't

(Prieto and Altmaier, 1994; Prieto and Meyers, 1999). I suppose at least 6 of them got training of some kind, but even they knew of other postgrads in their own institutions who hadn't received any...it appears that any pedagogical support is really only offered on an ad hoc basis, depending on the individual institution – a bit like what other studies had found (Sharpe, 2000).

**celisne**

Seems to me as though teaching training isn't valued...

**me**

Well, even when the training was offered, there was nothing to suggest that these programmes were evaluated or whether or not these individuals were asked for their feedback...

...and those in this study weren't asked if they would like to input into future rollouts of the training programme...their views were simply not sought...but yet they were happy to talk to me about it...so they do have a view on it...

**celisne**

That's true...what did you make of what they told you about their training?

**me**

Well, what surprised me was that some of them seemed almost grateful for the support they received – I mean Stephen even used those words – 'grateful for the training'. He didn't see it as something to which he was entitled, given that he was the one asked to teach. It was almost as though he was indebted to his institution for providing him with a professional development opportunity...a sentiment also expressed by Charlotte. For them, training was seen as somewhat of a privilege which, in itself, is another example of the power held by the institution and not by the GTAs themselves.

Maybe it's an example of those in power bestowing privileges on others as a way of asserting their own power...

**celisne**

That might be the case, but I suppose not everyone viewed it in the same way...

**me**

No, Leanne's perspective was very different; she didn't view professional development as a privilege, but as a right...and she was a strong advocate in her institution for access to more formalised pedagogical support for all postgrads who teach. What she said was that only a select few in her institution were allowed to do the training and that tenured members of Faculty were given priority. Wow...think of those words... 'allowed to do the training...'

That really just shows how those in positions of power were presenting professional development as a privilege, something over which they had control. They alone could decide who would access this training and it was almost been offered as a reward rather than a right. That shouldn't be the case at all...would you agree?

**celisne**

absolutely...I think that there is a necessity to provide adequate training and development for all teaching postgrads to ensure that they feel supported with their teaching...

**me**

Well that was definitely not the case with at least three of the participants in this study. At least three of them, Emma, Lauren and Bill spoke of their sense of anxiety at the mere thought of being in front of a class group...I'm not sure how confident they felt...

**celisne**

So what would you propose to address that...?

**me**

Well, I don't want to be making suggestions...that's for everyone to consider...but since you are asking...

...involve everyone....!

Any development programmes for teaching postgrads should involve them, both in the design and the delivery of the programme. I think this would recognise the importance of treating students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education (Healey *et al.*, 2016) and would support Sharpe's (2000) view that the GTAs are lifelong learners...it's not just a job they are doing...through teaching, they are learning too...

**celisne**

So you're suggesting that, as these students are not currently involved in their own training, going forward they would be partners in the process...is that right?

**me**

Yes...I think this would also be a very overt statement of valuing their input and contribution in the process and would see them developing a closer and more egalitarian relationship with other members of Faculty (Furlonger, Johnson and Parker, 2014). And remember, how Charlotte wanted that relationship, which she summed up by saying...

...that was a big negative because, yeah, we should...you should get...we should've got feedback on what we done, for sure and been monitored a little bit more...

If you think about it, an emphasis on student voice, participation and empowerment would be the antithesis of a neoliberal ideology (Wenstone, 2012), which as we have seen already, has been the fertile breeding ground of the GTA concept...

**celisne**

Well I'd agree with you there; just on another issue, you saw the way in which the GTAs talked about research vs teaching and I just wanted to get your views on what emerged from the study in relation to this...and how this may also be seen as a manifestation of power...

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**Research has the edge...**

-----

**me**

Well, for sure, whether you agree or not, the two activities are dichotomised and two distinct and very powerful discourses have emerged around them.

Look, we saw in Leanne's story, that the opportunity to teach was presented to postgrads as something attractive, a golden opportunity to gain teaching experience...but then you look at how it is viewed by others in the same institution as a secondary activity, which can interfere with the postgraduates' research, reflective of the idea that research is often prioritised over teaching (Fox, 1992; Serow, 2000).

**celisne**

Do you think that the teaching postgraduates in this study prioritised one over the other?

**me**

Oh, I think that they are very aware of the powerful position that research occupied in the sector. They knew that research was being prioritised over teaching, echoing what the literature had shown (Colbeck, 1998; Durning and Jenkins, 2005; Healey, Jordan, Pell and Short, 2010; D'Andrea, 2019). It was like they experienced a sense of conflict, as they were constantly required to prioritise between their research and their teaching commitments.

Put it this way...all but one of them prioritised research, with only Lauren commenting that research was actually getting in the way of teaching.

That was unusual...nobody else mentioned that...

**celisne**

I know...and didn't she admit to you in a follow-up conversation that, for her, the image of teaching was being tarnished with all the negative considerations that accompanied it...it was like teaching, as an activity, was losing out to research...

**me**

yes, that's right...which is interesting, because most of the time GTAs comment that teaching is interfering with their research (Sharpe, 2000), and Bill made that clear when he referred to teaching as just something he had to do...an assigned duty if you like...which also echoed what Sara said about it....

...so, despite the belief that both activities should work to complement each other (Neumann, 1992; Hattie and Marsh, 1996; Fisher and Taithe, 1998; Brew, 2003; Holbrook and Devonshire, 2005), and maybe not be dichotomised, this clearly wasn't a view shared by all the postgrads in this study. I think they tended to view them as separate activities, each of which brought its own set of responsibilities.

**celisne**

And why do you think that is...?

**me**

Oh, I think there are two reasons for that: firstly, it was evident in some of these stories that their teaching was not aligned with their research...so it created conflict for them...like Sara, for example, who didn't feel as though she was benefitting from her teaching practice...

...but, there's another reason and maybe a more significant one...those I talked with were being sent a clear and powerful message by their supervisors that it was their research that counted the most and this obviously created some tension for them. I mean it was their research that was being incentivised by department grants and external body funding...is it any surprise that teaching was the poor cousin...?

To me, it is another example of the power that weaves through the two activities...

Look at Knowles, for example, he had wanted to take on more teaching hours, but wasn't comfortable doing so as he knew that this would not meet with his supervisor's approval. And Marian, she had initially received a negative response from her supervisor when she announced that she would be doing some teaching hours. Lauren was the same – she mentioned that she felt that all of the supervisors were somewhat negative towards the fact that their students were engaged in teaching. There was clearly a power

dynamic here between the supervisors and the postgrads and it was being expressed through the research vs teaching debate...

**celisne**

Just on that relationship issue between postgrad and supervisor – what did you make of that?

**me**

well to me, in most of their accounts, it didn't seem to come across as a relationship of care – it was more one of power of the supervisors over the postgrads...

...it was almost as though the supervisor was purely concerned with the idea that the postgrad would succeed in terms of their research, by publishing and advancing their careers...it didn't strike me that they saw the value of teaching and what it could offer the postgrads by way of personal and professional development...

**celisne**

I suppose all of this portrays the difficult situation in which postgrads find themselves, as we have already seen, outlined by Morrow (1964), when he said that teaching assistants were having to choose between prioritising their studies and their teaching...I'm not sure anything has changed in over 50 years...

**me**

...yeah, that seems to be the case...for example, in Lauren's institution, some members of Faculty were trying to offload their teaching hours in favour of doing research, which in itself, sends out the message that teaching is seen as an inferior activity. And they were only doing this 'cos they were coming under pressure to focus on research (Park, 2002).

Sara confirmed this too - she had been asked to do her supervisor's teaching hours so that he could be released to conduct other duties, including research. And other supervisors were putting the students under huge pressure to complete their research at all costs.

...and I suppose, if you are not offering pedagogical support to GTAs, then that's another sign of teaching being undermined. I would see that as almost a way of saying that it wasn't necessary to learn about pedagogy in order to know how to teach.

**celisne**

Well that seems to be the case in this study...

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*[Aside: reflecting on our conversation it demonstrated to me that teaching did indeed occupy a lower status than research...but that led me to asking myself even more questions: if teaching was being perceived by some postgrads as being something unattractive, what message was that sending out about the teaching profession?*

*Was it being side-lined, hostage to the more financially lucrative research activities?*

*And what would happen if some of these postgrads went on to occupy full-time teaching roles? Would they value teaching as much as research, or not?*

*And what effect might all this have on the quality of teaching in our institutions...?*

*I was left with more questions than answers...and it felt as though, along with the postgrads, I was caught in a teaching/research vicious circle...]*



## **The inner web...supporting structures holding it all together**

*The underpinning undergraduate power...*

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**me**

...yes, I think power as a concept weaves through that relationship also...

...let's start by looking at the relationship that these students had with the undergrads...it was obviously a very powerful one. They mentioned that the feedback from the undergraduates was positive, which really seemed to support them in terms of their teaching practice. It might be that the undergraduates relate more positively to them because they are closer in age, or by virtue of the fact that GTAs have recently had the experience of being undergraduate student themselves (Moore, 1991; Muzaka, 2009; Weidert *et al.*, 2012; Nasser-Abu Alhija and Fresko, 2018).

**celisne**

That's interesting, talk to me about that idea of being close in age...did you sense that it was significant here in this study...?

**me**

em, they did feel closer, but it wasn't necessarily because of their closeness in age (Fairbrother, 2012)...no...it was because they had recently been undergraduates themselves and had a good grasp of the material they were now teaching.

It was borne out in Sara's story - she said that having that undergraduate experience close to her was helpful...and Marian also described her positive relationship with the undergraduates, relating it back to when she herself was an undergrad. She had been taught by a postgrad, who she had described as having been very earnest and concerned for her students, so I think she had modelled herself on that and was clearly showing concern for her own students now.

...and this was especially the case with Marian, Robin, and Charlotte...

...they saw themselves as knowledgeable...maybe that was down to the fact that they had all been taught by postgrads themselves, so they had a better understanding of what it meant to be a GTA, which is reflected in the literature (Sharpe, 2000)...

But, here's a thing...they all seemed conscious of how their teaching experience might have been very different if they had been assigned fourth year students, as there would have been a

concern that they may have known them, being so close in years. I wonder was this an indication that they were more comfortable with earlier years because they didn't know them or was it also that they were more confident with the content they were teaching at those earlier levels of study...?

**celisne**

Did it emerge in anyone else's story...?

**me**

...yeah, in Stephen's story...he reflected on having been taught by a GTA himself. Do you know what I found interesting there...he expressed his gratitude in having been taught by someone who had been actively engaged in what they were teaching and passionate about it...

...this echoed what came up in the literature about how GTA enthusiasm can often have a positive effect on undergraduates and can increase student retention (O'Neal *et al.*, 2007).

**celisne**

And we can't forget Tom...

**me**

...no, absolutely...he also saw himself as being, in his words, 'more approachable' than the more senior members of faculty, not because of the closeness in age, but because he had recently been an undergraduate himself. I mean...that's a great example of what we have already seen in the literature about GTAs being more approachable (Park, 2002; Muzaka, 2009; Fairbrother, 2012). And there is a sense of agency here too, in that the relational dimension of their role is being valued and celebrated – the postgrads had forged out their own relationship with the undergraduate students and together they had created a space, their own teaching space which they valued...

**celisne**

So there's power and agency in that postgrad/undergrad relationship, is there?

**me**

...for sure...and I think that was evident in these stories...and let's not forget that the undergrads do have power over teaching postgrads, just as I mentioned before; it can be the case that the undergrads are quite critical of GTAs and have the power to call into question their credibility (Golish, 1999). The fact that some of the participants in this study were concerned about establishing credibility reflects what we've already seen in the literature (Worthen, 1992; Simonds, Jones, and Bedore, 1994; Hendrix, 1995) and I think that immediately places the undergraduate students in a position of power.

**celisne**

But that could add to the pressure for the postgrads who teach also, couldn't it?

**me**

...of course, and this was reflected in Emma's story – do you remember she revealed her level of concern vis-à-vis the undergraduates; she said that she thought that the undergraduates had more power than the staff and she felt answerable to them. So, rather than feeling confident that she had recently covered the material, as an undergraduate herself, she began questioning as to whether or not she was knowledgeable enough to teach undergraduates...now, that's pressure...

**celisne**

Yeah, it was as if she doubted her own ability...especially when it came to issues around establishing her authority with the undergrads...would that be your reading of it too...?

**me**

...yeah, I mean she outlined an occasion when tension had arisen between her and her students in terms of authority and she was concerned that she would compromise their education, which, I suppose, is reminiscent of the concerns originally expressed by Chase (1970), over the quality of instruction as provided by GTAs.

...and we've already witnessed that, in some cases, undergraduates perceive professors as 'being more structured, confident, in control, organized, experienced, knowledgeable...and respected than GTAs' (Kendall and Schussler, 2012, p. 196), but, I didn't get the sense, listening to the participants in this study, that they felt less respected by the undergraduates, did you...?

**celisne**

No...but I did get the sense that some of them felt that they were maybe letting the undergrads down...

**me**

...yeah, I got the same impression from some of them, including Emma and Lauren....

...they were worried about not doing the role justice, by virtue of the fact that they felt less qualified than the tenured Faculty members....and Lauren conveyed this same concern when she said that she was worried in case the undergraduates felt as though they were 'losing out' by having a postgrad teaching them, as opposed to a more experienced member of staff.

...I think all of this is an indication of the powerful relationship that exists between GTAs and the undergraduates they are teaching and the way in which this relationship can impact upon the overall

experience of the teaching postgrad, and, in this study, this has been the case...

...but I suppose it's not just the relationship between the teaching postgrads and the undergrads which is powerful, there are other powerful relationships too...

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*Power of peers...and mentoring*

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**celisne**

...just on that, what about the relationship between the postgrads who teach and their peers...is that a powerful one too and does it play a role in how they see themselves...?

**me**

...well, for me, this was one of the most significant themes to emerge across all the stories...

the power of peer support...

But let me just step back for a second and explain why I think this is the case...

...it's because there is no mentoring...

I know that much has been written on the issue of mentoring for GTAs (Waldeck, Orrego, Plax and Kearney, 1997; Boyle and Boice, 1998; Gaia, Corts, Tatum and Allen, 2003), but, interestingly for me, none of the GTAs in this study referred to having any form of mentoring scheme in place in their own institutions.

...just imagine that...

...no form of mentoring...no-one to advise really...it's a bit like the ignored tribe again isn't it...?

I mean, we have already seen that teaching postgrads value the role of mentoring even more than institute-wide seminars or instructional training programmes (Jones, 1993) and it is a way of engaging those new to teaching (Boyle and Boice, 1998). It's also a way of connecting existing teachers to those new to teaching...to share practice, to collaborate, to form a community of practice...to help each other...

Mentoring is powerful in that sense...

Now the common view of mentoring is that it would involve everyone, which didn't seem to be the case here...the situation seems very different than in the US, where mentoring of GTAs by Faculty members is much more common (Flora, 2007), but it doesn't appear to be here in Ireland...or at least not in the IoT sector.

There was no evidence for the participants of any 'guidance' on how to be a teacher, (Goodlad, 1997). But, in stark contrast and despite the fact that it is not something which has been extensively explored in the literature, the idea of peer mentoring amongst GTAs was something to which many of the participants in the study made reference.

In fact, they all seemed to rely almost exclusively on their peer support network – being predominantly the other teaching postgrads in their institutions.

**celisne**

So, do you think that one of the only reasons why peer support is so significant is because there is no form of mentoring available...?

**me**

...quite possibly...I mean, what emerged in these stories is that the GTAs, rather than being mentored by members of faculty, were getting their mentoring almost exclusively from their peers and it was this 'power of peers' which shone through. I don't know...but I really don't see why both types of support, peer and Faculty, couldn't exist together...

**celisne**

But in this study, none of the peer support was formalised was it?

**me**

...no, there was no mention of any formalised peer support by any of the participants in this study, but they constantly referred to the informal peer support that existed between them...

...look at Knowles's story when he referred to the invaluable support that one of the other students had been to him since he started in the position and, equally, Charlotte described how she had set up meetings with another GTA as a way of getting support for her teaching.

But it was something that came up in all of their stories...Marian also told of how she relied heavily on another teaching assistant in her institution, clearly illustrating the power of peer support...

...and Leanne also mentioned the supportive culture that existed between her and the other postgrads...

...and let's not forget Sara, who also referred to contacting postgrads from previous years to get their view on some of her teaching practices, almost like a generation of GTAs passing on their knowledge to the next generation...almost a legacy...

**celisne**

To me, all of these examples just mirror Austin's (2002) finding when she acknowledged the value of the relationship between the postgrads themselves...

**me**

...yes, and that was a view echoed some years later by Wise (2011), when she commented that the mentor relationship between GTAs is mutually beneficial, as they can support each other, not just in terms of their teaching, but also with other aspects of their studies...

...so, it exists...and to be honest, I am not so sure about formalising it...is there the danger then that it just becomes something that 'has to be done'...does support need to be formalised or would that change the nature of it...I'm not so sure...maybe I need to reflect on that further...

**celisne**

Why do you think that they call on other teaching postgrads for advice and support rather than other members of Faculty...?

**me**

...yeah, that is something that is worth interrogating alright...I'm not sure, but, one possible reason might be that GTAs are reluctant to air any pedagogical concerns in front of their supervisors, for fear that it might reflect badly on their relationship with them.

...I suppose teaching postgrads are very conscious of the power that supervisors hold over them and, as such, any admission that they are experiencing difficulty with teaching might leave them feeling somewhat inadequate.

**celisne**

And any other reason...?

**me**

...well, I suppose there may be a simpler explanation for why, in this study, they might turn to other students...it might be because there is nobody else to listen to them in their institutions...

**celisne**

And so we return to the idea that nobody is listening...

**me**

...there's no getting away from it...

But look, whatever the reason why they turned to each other for support, what did emerge in these stories was that their peers were their first port of call when they experienced any difficulty in their teaching...

**celisne**

I know that, in his Irish-based study, Ryan (2014) referred to the need to establish communities of practice (just like Wenger (1998) advocated) amongst GTAs, which, as he outlined, would allow for additional support for the GTAs in terms of their pedagogical development. Do you think that is what is needed...?

**me**

...well, I know that this view was expressed years ago (Hiebert, Gallimore and Stigler, 2002), but to be honest, listening to the GTAs in this study, I'm not sure that there is need to establish a community of practice amongst teaching postgrads...

**celisne**

Why not...?

**me**

...because it already exists...

They see themselves as being a community of postgrads who teach...they support each other and discuss their situations amongst each other – isn't that what Emma, Tom and others all mentioned. They are identifying themselves as a group. And from what the postgrads in this study were saying...it is one of the most powerful supports currently available...maybe it just needs to be recognised so that they GTAs can politicise and speak out for their rights...

**celisne**

...yeah, maybe...

...and we've seen how powerful peers are in terms of support, but I suppose the other themes that emerged throughout all the stories were the pedagogical power and that of identity and how the GTAs saw themselves...

**me**

yes, for sure, so let's discuss them further...

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*Pedagogical power*

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**celisne**

...do you think that the classroom itself is a site of power for the postgrads who teach...?

**me**

...quite possibly...I think that we have seen that the institutions themselves are sites of power and that the undergraduates themselves wield power, but there may be a different power at play within the classroom...one where the GTA is in a more powerful position...

**celisne**

...how so...?

**me**

well, many of the participants in this study were free to adopt whatever teaching and learning strategies they wished in the classroom...Robin, Marian, Tom...to name but a few...and this was something powerful for them...

...in that sense their pedagogical practice was a source of agency...and this came through very powerfully in Knowles's story, where he saw the opportunity of teaching as a learning process for him...so he felt very empowered as a teaching postgrad...

**celisne**

...I hadn't thought of it like that before, but that would suggest that there is empowerment within the classroom...which I suppose was also evident in the pedagogical relationship that they had with their own students. And do you think that this played a role in how they then saw themselves...?

**me**

...absolutely, I think that this has shaped their own identity...remember identity construction is marked by relations of power, both positive and negative ones...  
...but let's discuss that one further...

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## **The heart of the web...being a GTA/teaching postgrad**

*Framing our own identity...naming ourselves*

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**celisne**

Identity is something that really came through in the stories didn't it...?

**me**

...very much so; listening to the participants in this study, it was as though they were travelling through a transitional occupational space, both in terms of their role and their identities...they were constantly traversing the liminal positions of staff and student...

...at times, it resonated with the Lacanian idea of 'désêtre' again...the view that they were in a state of 'unbeing' or 'non-identification' – not being labelled one thing or another but rather juggling multiple identities – being a researcher and teacher and more...but maybe that is a powerful thing in itself – knowing that these identities are all constructs and being in a position to choose your identity depending on your context...

...that could be potentially quite emancipatory...

**celisne**

...yes, but it could also be quite challenging; if you think about it, those in this study seemed very unsure at times as to how to name themselves...

And that might have added a sense of confusion and uncertainty to their role...

**me**

yeah, that could be the case too...and I know Emma's story reflects that. I remember the tension that I felt when she commented, '*We don't know what we are really...*'

...she said 'what' we are...not even 'who' we are...I wonder now did she not even see herself as a person at that stage; did she just see herself as a product of the system...an object...again, a bit like the Lacanian mirror image...she was looking at herself but seeing an object...

**celisne**

...echoes of the GTAs being commodified in the sector (Harland and Plangger, 2004)...

**me**

...yeah...

**celisne**

And do you think that this could be reflective of Danielewicz's (2001) claim that identity formation can often be accompanied by a sense of tension...?

**me**

...well I think identity formation can be a very powerful tool, in that it allows for individuals to create their own sense of agency in

their lives (Zembylas, 2003), but yes, like I said, it can also be accompanied by tension and confusion...

Look at Tom's story...he mentioned it when he commented at one stage '*whatever we're classified as...*'; I think this not only conveyed a sense of confusion, but also gave the suggestion that he was leaving it to others to name him, rather than naming himself...

To me, it seemed as though Tom was almost acknowledging that someone else had the power to name him.

**celisne**

But what about Winstone and Moore's (2017) claim that GTAs were actually engaging in identity work as they transitioned from student to teacher...?

**me**

...well remember, they are not all necessarily transitioning from being student to teacher...I don't see it as being as linear as that – remember, they can be occupying both subjectivities at the same time...

But yes, Winstone and Moore (2017) did suggest that being a GTA was in fact an opportune period in which to forge your own identity...

**celisne**

...and is that something that you saw reflected in this study?

**me**

no...my interpretation of what the participants were saying was that this was a time of confusion or maybe, through a teaching and learning lens, it was a prolonged moment of disorientation, as they struggled to carve out their own sense of identity.

I mean, the fact that Emma raised the issue of what they were named is significant...and, remember, names or unstable signifiers, are always a threat to hegemonic power...

...‘those who have the power to name the world are in a position to influence reality’ (Kramarae, 1981, as cited in Moi, 1985, p. 158)...

...and the ambiguity around their names was compounded by the fact that none of the institutions in question had formalised the GTAs' situation and, as such, they didn't have a title to identify themselves with, other than that of...

‘...postgraduate students who teach...’

**celisne**

So, do you think that because of that, they started defining themselves in relation to others, those others being staff members...?

**me**

...yep, it's almost back to binary oppositions again...you are a 'postgraduate researcher who teaches' or a 'GTA' because you are not 'staff'...the meaning of the title only exists through a process of deferral...you are something because you are not something else...think of it like this...

...‘meaning is never truly present, but is only constructed through the potentially endless process of referring to other, absent signifiers’ (Moi, 1985, p. 106).

...for me, it is almost as if these postgrads were also engaging in an ‘othering’ process themselves, acknowledging that they were a separate group. I mean listen carefully to what Leanne said when she made comments such as: ‘I’ve crossed over to the other side’ and ‘across the hallway’ (a reference to the tenured members of staff who were located in an office on the other side of the corridor).

I mean, the GTAs in this study knew who they were by who they were not...

**celisne**

...that just echoes that Lacanian idea of identifications being abandoned, in order for the subject to find his or her identity again...

**me**

yes, it's like deferred identity that we already talked about...

...and Leanne, in her postscript, very aptly described this, when she commented on her shift from being a GTA to a paid Faculty member, and said: ‘Only now, being warm, do I know how out in the cold I really I was’. What do you think this indicates?

**celisne**

Oh for me, this is an indication that she could only appreciate how marginalised she had been as a teaching postgraduate student, when she started experiencing life as a paid staff member...

**me**

...well, it was almost as though her title determined everything...it shaped her identity, but that is the naming issue again isn't it...?

**celisne**

Yes, and this whole act of naming was a finding that came quite unexpectedly...

**me**

...for sure...I mean I was so struck by the significance that the GTAs in this study attached to choosing their own pseudonyms...I suppose it supports the view that names are powerful representations (Charmaz, 2006).

For me, it brought me right back to considering not only the power that is in a name, but also the empowering experience that it is to choose your own name.

**celisne**

And titles and labels are arguably only a way of trying to fix meaning...(Moi, 1985)...but tell me, what do you think this might mean for GTAs going forward?

**me**

...oh, I think that it is imperative that we give more consideration not just to the titles used to describe these postgraduate students but also we should consider if titles are what is needed....and, if so, who should be involved in coming up with these titles. Shouldn't it be the GTAs themselves...?

I mean, because postgrads who teach in the IoT sector are such a recent phenomenon, maybe they do have the power to negotiate their own identity, just as Winstone and Moore (2017) would have contended.

...but shouldn't they be naming themselves on a national level so that they can establish rights around their positions, with regards payment, recognition and conditions of service...

**celisne**

Well that would suggest a sense of agentic power...but think of the challenges of trying to do that, especially given the fluid nature of the postgraduate cohort...I mean, some of them are in the position a year and then gone...do they have the power to establish themselves as a group? What do you think...?

**me**

...I'm not sure really...you're right...it's a transient cohort...almost a precarious cohort in that way...is there anything stable about being a postgraduate researcher who teaches? You might be teaching one year and finished your studies the next...I hadn't thought about that until now...

**celisne**

But come on, do you think there are benefits in being a teaching postgraduate student...?

**me**

...for sure, I think that what emerged from the participants in this study was that there are a number of benefits in being a teaching postgrad. Many of them felt that they were gaining something from the experience and I would contend that this placed them in a more powerful situation in their organisation.

I think that they are in a position to draw on their own agency and to resist any of the negative power struggles that they face, which itself represents a Foucauldian perspective.

They can use this experience to develop their personal and professional skills, both in terms of their current studies and their future career.

**celisne**

I agree...and this is something that I hadn't considered at the start of this study either...I suppose, I didn't think that these teaching postgrads were in a powerful position, but some of them feel they are, in that they are developing skills in their role...such as research skills, time management skills, communication skills and personal development skills...

**me**

...I thought the same...and despite the fact that only a few of the GTAs in this study were teaching areas directly related to their own studies, there were examples of where their teaching had impacted positively on their own research.

Look at Emma's situation, she was supervising undergraduate students and that allowed her to fine-tune her own research skills, (Feldon, Peugh, Timmerman, Maher, Hurst, Strickland, Gilmore and Stiegelmeier, 2011; Sandi-Urena, Cooper and Gatlin, 2011), along with her organisational and management skills, which, in turn, helped her with her own postgraduate studies...now that's a powerful experience.

And, in preparation for her teaching, Emma was constantly consulting the literature and this was also adding to her discipline knowledge. This would support Fisher and Taithe's (1998) argument, as previously outlined, that the two activities, research and teaching, can benefit each other.

**celisne**

So, the experience has been beneficial for Emma in terms of research but what about the others and their skills...?

**me**

...for the others as well...I mean both Marian and Knowles referred to how their teaching duties were helping them to develop their time management skills...and the teaching had added a structure to their time, which was assisting them in terms of conducting their own research. They were planning their days around their research and their teaching and this seemed to be working well for them. Marian had even commented that the teaching preparation had encouraged her to go into college and to be more structured and organised.

**celisne**

And you mentioned communication skills too...do you think that emerged in their stories?

**me**

...absolutely, the teaching had helped both Robin and Charlotte to enhance their presentation skills, which in turn, had boosted their self-confidence. This was also echoed by Emma and Bill, with Bill remarking that he had been taken out of his comfort zone, but had learnt a lot during his teaching practice. This aligns with the experience outlined by Fairbrother (2012) who remarked that she had developed her own communication skills during her time as a GTA. This in itself is a powerful development...

**celisne**

And, in terms of personal development, did you see this as a time of development for the GTAs...?

**me**

...for sure, look at the case of Emma, Stephen, Knowles, Lauren, Marian and Robin, they all saw teaching as affording them the chance to gain invaluable experience.

...It was an opportunity to carve out a future in academia.

**celisne**

Almost as though we were back to the original reason as to why the concept first emerged...

**me**

...yes, and even Sara, who didn't express any interest in going into teaching, still acknowledged the good experience that teaching was.

...and when you think about it, some of them had even gone on to postgraduate study knowing that it incorporated teaching and they were using this experience almost like an apprenticeship.

In that sense, they were free to choose their own actions.

**celisne**

Do you think this is an example of how some of the participants in this study have expressed power over their situation and how they are agentic...?

**me**

...for sure, and this was also evident in Knowles' and Stephen's stories as they referred to the flexibility that being a teaching postgrad offered them. And there was something else that I found interesting in their stories...

...they both expressed the desire not to be shaped by the context around them; they were aware of the politics that surrounded them but chose not to engage with it. It was as though they wanted to navigate their own pathway through the experience and did not want to play the political game.

**celisne**

I agree...I think these are all indications of how some of the postgrads in this study were using the experience of teaching to

their benefit, and that they had developed ways to deal with the self-related concerns...something that Cho *et al.* (2011) had outlined in their study and similar to the ones that Fuller (1969) had examined in relation to teachers' concerns in general.

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**Postscript:** if we take all of these examples on board, then arguably postgrads who teach are in a powerful position where they can...

...develop on a personal level...

...influence change...

...develop their own pedagogical knowledge...

...be agentic in shaping their own position...

and...

...name and identify themselves...

## ACT IX:

### The Final Act...but not the last

‘A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead.’

Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair* (1951)

### The end of one beginning...

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**celisne**

...so don't tell me, you are now going to offer a list of recommendations...?

**me**

not at all...who am I to recommend...I can only interpret through my own lens...I may proffer some suggestions as to how I would like to see the threads of this story continuing, but they are not recommendations...

**celisne**

but without recommendations, it's not a 'real' doctoral thesis...

**me**

it depends on what you mean 'real'...have you not learnt anything about what this story is about...?

**celisne**

fine...so you are going to make some suggestions...

**me**

some loose ones, from my perspective...but You will have your own thoughts... so I am inviting You initially (and maybe You are

a GTA/teaching postgrad yourself), to consider what you have taken from this study and how your knowledge of postgraduate students who teach might have altered having read this story.

**celisne**

and I suppose there will be more questions to consider...!

**me**

there are always more questions...but stop and consider as you read... and remember, I'm trying to avoid making any grand claims about the overall GTA experience...they are all unique experiences each with their own challenges...but what I am starting here is a long-overdue conversation...

**celisne**

...well you've started one...and have you noticed that in this act there is even more conversation between us...why...?

**me**

two reasons...it's to reflect that in this study, the conversation with GTAs/postgrads who teach has well and truly started and should continue...

...and it is also reflective of the autoethnographic nature of this study, that i am dialoguing with myself and talking about my growth as a researcher throughout this journey...

**celisne**

i get it, so before we get to that, how do you want this dialogic story to continue...?

**me**

well, for the moment, i'd like to think that You may dip in and out of the stories again...read them in a non-linear way, as a reflection of the non-linear process from which they emerged (O'Neill, 2015). Treat them as an anthology of experiences to read at your leisure, reflect upon them and interpret as you choose and consider what it might be like to be a postgraduate student who teaches...

**celisne**

will do...but i might re-read and get a different interpretation...

**me**

that's the point! ultimately, it is up to You to interpret *how* you wish, for as West (1996, p. 13) states, 'texts are open to further interpretation and the story is never complete.'

**celisne**

i know that now, but could you just tell me what you see as the overall contribution of this study to the broader teaching postgraduate story...

**me**

okay, listen carefully...

there is just one recommendation I would make and it is to You, the reader.

Stop for a minute...

look around you...

Do you 'see' the GTAs/postgraduates who teach/teaching assistants who are around you, the ones you interact with every day. Now that they're visible...look at them...and ask Yourself this...

...who are they?

...how did they get here...?

...what do they actually do in your organisation...?

...have you ever wondered what the experience is like for them...?

**celisne**

yeah, that's it, isn't it...that's a contribution this study is making...we've gone right back to the beginning again – I remember in the opening act, you said it was about making the *invisible visible* and that's what we have done here...

**me**

yeah, but because this study is all about dialogue, narrative and words, I prefer to think that, perhaps, we have made the *unheard heard*...

**celisne**

that's it exactly...

**me**

...but this study makes a contribution in another way...

**celisne**

what is it?

**me**

it's the methodological contribution it makes – creating smaller, focused stories about individual experiences (Mueller, 2019), thereby adding to the bigger story...and talking *with* postgraduates who teach...embodying the view that knowledge is co-constructed...and leaving everyone's story open to interpretation...

**celisne**

so, before you tell me about what you have learnt about yourself throughout this research journey...can I give you some takeaways about what I have learnt about the GTAs...

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## Smiling in the face of adversity

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**celisne**

...so, what I observed is that there was no one common challenge; they encounter many obstacles, tensions around roles, responsibilities, workload and authority, but it all depended on their own individual context...

and then, in some cases, the experience was a positive opportunity for them...

**me**

yeah, the challenges faced were as unique as them for sure...

**celisne**

so do You think that there's any point offering standardised training programmes, especially when they have so many distinct challenges...

**me**

it's a good point...and maybe it needs more consideration...but remember, it's not as if training is the panacea – it won't all be fine with a bit of training...there are underlying issues with the whole concept...

**celisne**

...i can see that now...but, are there positives to this story...?

**me**

for sure, listen to the sense of excitement that came from some of the GTAs here, think of **Knowles** or **Tom** or **Emma** or **Lauren**, could you not hear the joy in their stories about teaching...nobody disliked it, even though **Sara** didn't really care for it – it wasn't dislike...

...so despite finding themselves in pressurised situations (Raaper, 2018), they seemed, for the most part, to enjoy the act of teaching and found the experience rewarding.

**celisne**

i suppose that's true...

**me**

and think of their personal and professional development and all that they got in terms of confidence...the support they got from other teaching postgrads...the bonds they created, there was joy there too...

**celisne**

...fair point, but that is all about those around them... what about them and their identity, or identities...what have we learnt there?

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**'I am who I am'**

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**me**

...the GTA experience is a time when postgrads seem to be quite unsure about their identity and part of this confusion stems from the titles used (or not!) to describe them...remember Emma's words...

**Nobody knows...[...] whether we're deemed staff or student...**

Or Lauren's words...

**... I've always felt like a lecturer...So I've always felt completely different...**

...and, in some cases, they were confused as to how to identify themselves to the undergraduate students...

**celisne**

...and, don't forget, that for some of those in this study, labelling themselves as students had consequences for their credibility – the worry that the undergraduates would not necessarily take them seriously if they were merely perceived as students.

**me**

yeah, so it's an indication of the power of names, titles and language...

**celisne**

but how do you name someone when they are occupying many roles simultaneously...shifting subjectivities, multiple perspectives...

**me**

i don't know, but maybe what should happen is that postgraduate students who are involved in teaching choose their own names...which would be timely given the change in the sector. And if you subscribe to Foucault's (1980a) view that our identities are constructed through language and discourse, then their name(s) is/are important...

**celisne**

so wouldn't it be great if they could name themselves and shape their own position and identity in higher education...wouldn't that be an example of their agentic power...?

**me**

well, it would make a difference and doesn't that encapsulate the view posited by Giddens (1984) that agency is about more than simply resisting, it is about making a difference...and the difference would be that the postgrads would be deciding for themselves...might be something worth exploring for sure...

...and remember, Compton and Tran (2017) suggested that the way in which postgraduate researchers self-label may also affect how they behave and interact and this was reflected in my conversations with the postgrads...

**celisne**

...there you go, another example of the power of words and interpreted meanings...you just said 'conversations'...and that was the word you used in place of 'interview', all because of the power...

And then you used titles interchangeably too...and the whole piece around the participants choosing their own name...

**me**

yeah, it was important; it was my attempt to lateralise power between me, as a researcher, and the postgrads...the weirdest thing about that though, is that I now only think of the participants by their pseudonyms...

**celisne**

what...? you mean you can't remember their *real* names...

**me**

Celisne, how would it feel if you took out the word '*real*'...?!?

**celisne**

I get it...! They are just names...words...what did I even mean by '*real*'?!?

Anyway, you won't like me for this but I do remember that, in earlier versions of this study, you were embodying exactly what you were critical of others of doing – you were talking *about* GTAs...

**me**

thanks for reminding me Camilla...sorry, Celisne!

No, you're right about that...and that was and maybe still is, a struggle...maybe it is back to language and structures again, but initially, I was continuously referring to postgraduates who teach as 'them'. I saw them somewhat as a homogenous group, but I think that by doing this study and by presenting each story

individually, it has helped me to see individuals and individual experiences, albeit some experiences are common...each of these has a unique powerful story...

**celisne**

...and speaking of power, maybe we can just talk about that for a minute...

**me**

sure...power is never far away from anything is it?!

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### **Positions of power**

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**celisne**

...where are we in terms of power...I suppose the study has revealed that the postgraduate teaching, or GTA, experience is one that is engulfed in manifestations of power, expressed through both discourse and practice, as Foucault (1978) would have suggested...

**me**

yes, and we saw they are being silenced and even in situations where they are able to express their views, it appears as though they aren't always valued. And individual HEIs are using their power to shape the GTA experience, deciding upon the nature of their work - the hours, payment, contracts....

**celisne**

yeah, i see that...and then there's the power dynamic between the postgrads and their supervisors and with the undergrads too...we need to identify and recognise all those sites of power...but listening to them, there is also power within...

**me**

yeah, but think about this celisne, do we listen to them and empower them to be agentic...? Just reflect on that for a while...

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## The curtain is about to come down...await the curtain call

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**celisne**

...well, we've a lot to consider there, and I suspect we will poke at those questions for a long time to come...

**me**

...that's what we/You/i should be doing, constantly questioning, thinking and learning...and that's how we will create new knowledge...

**celisne**

...oh yeah, that was another thing that I learned from this study, the idea of multivocality – that You/I/we all have many different voices and perspectives, that change depending on the context...our identities are dynamic and fluid and there is/are meaning(s) in everything...

**me**

...that's an interpretation that i can align with Celisne!

**celisne**

...hey, have you realised, we've reached the end...

**me**

sadly not Celisne, there is no end remember...it's more a case that the narration of this study is drawing to a close and we've reached the final act...that's all...

**celisne**

so where will the story go from here...?

It's like we have unravelled a tapestry of threads, things to consider, but how do we get everything back together again...?

**me**

we don't...we've just started the conversation and now it must continue and other threads will be unravelled in further studies...

**celisne**

well that's fair enough, and I think that I have a better understanding of what it is like for postgraduates who teach in the Institute of Technology sector...

...but, given the autoethnographic aspect to this study, can we now talk about you and what you have learnt by taking part in this study...what have you learnt as a researcher...?

what I am asking is, if narrative is about 'the practice of constructing meaningful selves, identities, and realities' (Chase,

2011, p. 422), then, through this study, you must have learnt about your identity and reality...

**me**

for sure...but i think we've established that it isn't just me the researcher; just like You, I have many subjectivities...!

**celisne**

fair point...well made! But i suppose i'd like to get an idea about the journey you've made...

**me**

...journey I've *made*...I'd say, the journey I am still making...it's more of a lifelong learning journey...

**celisne**

...true...so tell me, what have you learnt so far...?

**me**

well, I suppose I can only give you an idea about where I am landing today...ask me again next week and I will probably be at another point in this story...

**celisne**

I get that, so just give me an idea as to where you are today...what have you learnt as a researcher, a practitioner...?

**me**

...well i mean, it's been like a labyr-i-nth of learning, where 'I' have been in the middle of everything...and I've gone down several impasses, but maybe that's where the learning was the most valuable...

...anyway, where do you want me to start...?

**celisne**

well, I suppose there is no beginning per se, aren't the start and end points of narrative research quite ambiguous (Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2013), so anywhere is fine...

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### **A labyr-i-nth of learning**

[**Aside:** *what had I learnt, I thought to myself quietly...about my practice as an educator...and more...my relationship with teaching postgrads in my own institution...me as a researcher...there was so much...*]

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**me**

okay, well, let me start on methodology so...the autoethnographic threads and the storying...there's much I learned about methodology... and you were right Celisne...narrative research is messy...it would've been so much easier to do a more traditional thesis...I suppose I had no idea starting out that my methodology would also take centre stage...

**celisne**

...what do you mean...?

**me**

well, for me, the methodology brought everything together; it has been my ontological philosophy, it embodies my epistemological stance – my view that knowledge is co-constructed and that it is through storying, telling and retelling that we make sense of our lives...  
...these stories are 'all meaningful stories of personal experience that people produce' (Squire, 2013, p. 48)...it is the backbone of this piece...it's the stage that has supported this entire production...

**celisne**

that sounds pretty powerful...I can't imagine you coming out with something like that 4 years ago...

**me**

I wouldn't have had, no...and maybe that just shows my own learning...and that's powerful in itself.  
But I think that power is also reflected in my methodological approach – don't forget though stories, individuals can take control and feel empowered (Holloway and Freshwater, 2007)...and through experiencing and telling this research story, I feel empowered...  
Narrative is powerful...

**celisne**

so there is 'power' and 'storying' and 'power in storying'...aren't you just playing with language again...

**me**

I'm always playing with language! But it's a good point Celisne... and I'm glad you brought that up – as doing this study has made me reconsider my view of language. I like the descriptor that Clough (2002, p. 16) uses to explore the use of language in narrative – he said... 'Language does not describe – for example – characters to the point where they are 'pinned down' but rather language glances off objects just as it 'glances off' experience.'

**celisne**

nice...but how are you interpreting this...?

**me**

...well, I see language as reflecting an experience, just like Clough (2002), this idea of 'glancing off' – as in hitting an angle and then bouncing off in another direction...language is like that in that it can project meaning(s) in many ways...

**celisne**

...quite rhizomatic isn't it...like skimming a stone in water and having ripples of meaning emerging...and is that how you see it too?

**me**

...yeah, although, not a stone – too rigid a concept...

But that's my interpretation alright and that's what I have learnt in this journey also...that language and interpretations are dynamic, fluid...

I saw that when I started talking with the postgrads – I can still hear Leanne's words...

It's always interesting to hear a reflection back from another person...the other version of the same conversation. Obviously I experienced our conversation my way and while I'm glad to see you picked up the essential points of my story, I found it interesting to see the emphasis that I didn't realise I was placing - but you did pick up on.

**celisne**

and what does that say about interpretation...?

**me**

...well that all these experiences are there to be interpreted; I interpreted them one way but now You can read them and interpret them in a different way...knowledge, ideas, they are all socially constructed...

**celisne**

...which brings us back around to social constructionism again and the idea that we are shaped by our social context (Berger and Luckman, 1966) and that the self is not something stable or fixed...but is constantly changing. I think Jackson (2001, p. 386) sums it up really well when she says that '(f)eminist poststructural theories of subjectivity posit a notion of the self as a site of disunity and conflict that is always in process and constructed within power relations' and she was talking about the context of teacher identity...

**me**

...yep, multiple subjectivities, that speaks to my poststructuralist orientation alright...

So if I think about it and reflect on where I was at the start of this research journey, then, I know that I didn't consider that idea of multiple subjectivities and perspectives; I used to just see postgraduate students who teach as occupying some liminal space between 'student' and 'teacher'...

**celisne**

you've moved a long way from that binary opposition, haven't you? Wasn't the initial title of this study something around 'illuminating liminality'...?

**me**

yes, and maybe I was making that assumption starting out - that GTAs were all transitioning, from student to teacher...another lesson learnt – don't make assumptions!

**celisne**

...or at least challenge your assumptions (Belsey, 2002)...  
...and what about creating the conditions so that teaching postgrads/GTAs can speak out, not just in your own institution...have you considered that...?

**me**

well, as I already mentioned, I did present at a narrative inquiry conference in Sligo in 2018 and then I brought their voices to Bristol to a GTA Developers' Forum, so I think both of those things are a move towards change aren't they...?

**celisne**

for sure...

**me**

...and there's more...in October 2019 I supported a group of postgrads who teach in my own institution...let me explain...  
I suggested to them that they apply for funding to the National Forum, under their *Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning Enhancement Funding in HE 2019*<sup>38</sup> initiative...they applied and they were successful – but what is important here is that this was completely their project – designed by them, managed by them and for them...

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<sup>38</sup> This was a once-off non-competitive call with a total value of €5.57m targeted to enhance teaching and learning in Irish higher education. Details of the fund are available at: <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/funding/strategic-alignment-of-teaching-and-learning-enhancement-funding-in-higher-education-2019/#1559827913582-7be520d6-266c> [accessed 9 July 2019]

**celisne**

wow, that's great...so what are they doing for the project?

**me**

...they want to publish a collection of their experiences – I say 'collection' in the broadest sense...they are currently considering an anthology of poems, or writings or even photos, animation...it could be any medium...whatever they choose...

**celisne**

and will this be shared?

**me**

yeah, across the sector...which is fantastic as more people will listen to them and their experiences will be shared with other postgraduates and everyone in the sector...

**celisne**

that's dissemination alright...

**me**

and they have asked me to write the 'Foreword' for it...

**celisne**

...the 'Foreword' or the 'Forward'?! no, seriously that is progress...

**me**

I know, the pleasure – the privilege is mine...

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### **Alternative 'landings'**

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**celisne**

...so where do we go from here...?

**me**

well, we're back to that bouncing off experiences again...you could explore many things that have emerged from this study...

**celisne**

*(smiling)*

...so I hear...but maybe you could suggest some paths of inquiry for the future...who knows, maybe you yourself will be doing more research into this area...

**me**

maybe...so let me present my view as to how things might develop...

I suppose I see a need for a more detailed exploration of the conditions of postgraduates who teach throughout the sector...to ensure that their experience is properly valued...so that they are being treated fairly for the service that they are providing...

I think the sector needs to talk with them...

**celisne**

...would that be so that they can compare experiences...?

**me**

well, compare and share maybe...yeah, so that those of us working in the sector can learn from them...I mean there are so many different scenarios out there, in terms of how many hours people are teaching and even who they are teaching....

wouldn't it be good to share all this...?

**celisne**

...yeah...well especially given the timing and the way in which you described the changing HE landscape, with the IoTs now becoming TUs...

...and how else would you like to see the story developing...?

**me**

well, I would advocate for the creation of a representative body for teaching postgraduate students from across the sector...

**celisne**

...so you would like to see them recognised in some way...?

**me**

yeah, I would like to see the concept re-imagined, where it becomes something that is collaboratively agreed between all the various stakeholders...

maybe a situation where postgraduates who teach could unionise or could consult with those in management over their conditions, or the creation of a peer/Faculty mentoring programme, or maybe even some collaborative work between the Union of Students of Ireland (USI) and the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI), as that is the union that represents teaching staff in the IoT sector...

**celisne**

...so these postgraduate students would be partners in the teaching process...

**me**

...yeah, and not just silent partners...but working together...and maybe that would remove some of the tensions around their

teaching and research commitments, the likes of which Bill described...

**celisne**

...and is there any other research that you would like to conduct or see conducted in respect of these individuals...?

**me**

...yes, I think it would be really interesting to shine a light on the undergraduate students' perceptions of teaching postgrads, within the IoT sector, like Kendall and Schussler (2012) and Park (2002) have done, but no similar studies have been conducted in Ireland, so that might be interesting...

And I'd also really like to explore the teaching and learning strategies adopted by GTAs and see if these differ across academic disciplines...and don't forget, this is a study of postgraduates who teach in the IoT sector only, so maybe it would be interesting to examine the GTA experience in the university sector also...

**celisne**

*(laughing)*

...sounds like another 3 doctorates at least!

**me**

...true! But in some ways what I would really like to do, above anything else, is to return to this story...to go back out to the eleven participants in a few years and see where they are at and to engage in further conversations with them about their perspectives on being a teaching postgrad...

**celisne**

...yeah, a follow-up would be good, especially as it might shine a different light on the way in which they would identify themselves, having lived through the experience of being a teaching postgraduate student...

**me**

...but all that is in the future; for now, I just hope that this study goes some of the way towards creating the conditions for these teaching postgraduate students' voices to be heard and acknowledged...

I hope I have done that...talked *with* them and listened *to* them...

**celisne**

...I think you have done that, and the conversation has started and must continue...

...but, I suppose, these are all just your interpretations...meanings that you have attributed to the experiences. And others will have different interpretations reading this...

**me**

...absolutely... You may have a different experience of this and see things through a different lens...

**celisne**

...oh I do...

-----  
*And with the self-satisfied smirk of a successful sleuth, celisne leaves the stage...*

*Time passes...*

### **R-evoking celisne**

-----  
**me**

*(shouting)*

celisne... celisne, are you there...? ... celisne... où es-tu?

*(silence)*

...typical, You've been with me on this journey right from those early stages, guiding my scraping fountain pen across the pages of my famous blue notebook – journaling with me. And here, in this piece, You're practically in every scene...

...You've been with me since even before you had a name!  
...and now, just when I'm about to make some claims to knowledge, you're gone, nowhere to be heard...

...but what claims am I making...?

Let me explain...

#### *Methodological claims*

...supporting the view that experience is something that is discursively constructed and interpreted (Chase, 2011), one of the claims that I am making is a methodological one; the conversations that I had with the postgrads, the way in which I was fully immersed in these conversations and the subsequent representations of these encounters, have all enabled me to deeply explore and present the problematics faced by postgrads who teach in the IoT sector. Through the layered nature of these representations, I have also highlighted the multiplicity of issues that they face...and unlike a

lot of the literature I am not doing this by talking *about* teaching postgrads but rather, talking *with* them...

In addition, by embracing a narrative approach, I have presented not only the story of the postgrads who teach, but also the story of this research itself. So, this is both a research story and a story about research...

But that is not the only claim that I am making in terms of methodological contributions; I am also making a claim for the adoption of performative writing for this study, as a different way of knowing. In effect, I have abandoned conventional thesis writing in favour of a playful, more evocative form of writing, one that embraces ambiguity, fluid interpretations, interruptions and blank spaces. And this form of writing has allowed me to create a space into which the reader is invited to be and to create their own meaning, by exploring gaps in knowledge...showing that knowledge itself is not fixed, but fluid and constantly evolving...

#### *Pedagogical claims*

But this study has created other ways of knowing and, in particular, has impacted significantly on my pedagogy and practice and on my pedagogical relationship with postgrads who teach...

Well, here too, I have witnessed a change – whereas, in the past, on the pedagogical module, I focused on '*teaching to*' these students, now, I centre on '*learning with*' them, re-imagining the classroom as a discursive learning space, in which we share experiences, rather than reading off fact-laden PowerPoint slides.

And I think I now realise that I didn't listen enough before to the students...I listened to those who spoke, but not enough to those who had something to say but weren't talking...I didn't seek out voices...I wasn't actively listening and interpreting what others had to say...

but now, I suppose I have become more cognisant of the importance of involving all learners in their own learning, by *listening* to them. I see this as a move towards empowerment or 'puissance'. This then introduces the possibility of agency, as being a move towards change...and that has been empowering for me.

And this conversation with postgrads who teach/GTAs, whoever, has just started and there's a lot more to talk about/to think about/to question...our story is far from over...  
...Ironic really, that I am talking about continuing a conversation and you're not even here...

But do you know celisne – I suppose, at this stage, you are more like a silent power than a powerful voice and maybe...since you are everywhere, I shouldn't be asking où es-tu...but what I should be saying is...tu es partout...

### EPIGRAPH OR EPITAPH

And as we leave the stage, we can only imagine what the future for postgraduates who teach in the IoT sector might be...

...will it be a case of *The Mousetrap*, where, like the actors, the students will change, but the story will stay the same?

...or will their situation change, bringing with it new stories of their experiences?

Who knows...?

... whatever happens in the next part of our story, one thing that has emerged in this study is the importance of listening *to* postgrads who teach, of hearing what they have to say, of sharing experiences and of learning *about* them *from* them...of making the unheard, heard...

*The curtain falls...*



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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET



#### **Research Project Title**

Illuminating liminality: an exploration of the experiences of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) within the Institute of Technology sector in Ireland.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The study is concerned with exploring the experiences of graduate teaching assistants within the Institute of Technology sector in Ireland.

#### **Why have you been invited to participate?**

You have been invited to participate as you are currently a registered postgraduate student who is also carrying out teaching-related duties within an Institute of Technology.

#### **What will the study involve?**

The study will involve 2-3 separate interviews/conversations. It is envisaged that these conversations will be approximately 1-1.5 hours each in duration. You will be asked to talk openly about your experiences as graduate teaching assistants. The interviews/conversations will be audio-recorded. They will take place at a venue agreed by both you and the researcher.

#### **Do you have to take part?**

You do not have to participate in this study. Participation is entirely voluntary. You will receive this *Information Sheet* and a *Consent Form* prior to the study commencing. You should read all the information carefully and may ask me, the researcher, any questions which you have relating to the study. Having read all the information, if you are happy to partake in the study, you should sign and date two copies of the *Consent Form*. This is so that you can keep one copy of the form and I will store the other copy securely.

You have the option of withdrawing before the study commences (even after having

signed the *Consent Form*) and you may withdraw at any time during the study. Should you wish to withdraw at any stage, any data which you have shared to that point will be destroyed.

**Note:** Electronic Information sheets and consent forms will be encrypted and stored on a PC or secure server at Maynooth University whilst hard copy Information sheets and consent forms will be held securely in locked cabinets, locked rooms or rooms with limited access on campus.

**Will the data be confidential?**

A commitment to confidentiality will be upheld as it is a necessary part of the research process. This right to confidentiality is an important, but not absolute, principle that the University strives to uphold in all its research activities.

**Will the data you provide be anonymous?**

Anonymity will be ensured at all times throughout the study. No clues as to your identity will appear in the thesis as names will be changed. Any extracts from what you have said in the interviews will be entirely anonymous, should they appear as quotes in the thesis.

**Note:** It must be recognized that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.

**What will happen to the information which you give?**

The information you provide will be transcribed and you will have an opportunity to review the transcription to see if it is an accurate reflection of what you said during the interview/conversation. You will be allowed change any aspect or redact any information with which you are not happy. In addition, you may ask questions about the study at any time following the interview/conversation sessions and may request at any time to have your transcript withdrawn as data from the study.

The information which you provide will be kept confidential for the duration of the study and will only be available to me, the researcher and the research supervisor. It will be securely stored. Electronic data collected will be encrypted and stored on a PC or secure server at Maynooth University whilst hard copy data collected will be held securely in locked cabinets, locked rooms or rooms with limited access on campus. Audio recordings collected on a mobile device will be encrypted where possible and the device password protected with a strong password. Data will be removed from the mobile device as soon as is practicable. Data will then be removed to a desktop PC or server in a secure location at Maynooth University. On completion of the study, the data will be retained for ten years and then securely destroyed.

**What will happen to the results?**

The results from the study will be presented as part of a doctoral thesis. They will be seen by the supervisor, second assessor and the external examiner(s) for the programme. The thesis may be publically available in the future and parts of it may be published in research journals. In addition, the findings from this study may be presented at academic and other relevant seminars.

**What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?**

No negative consequences are envisaged for you taking part in the study. However, it is possible that taking about your own particular experience may cause some individuals distress.

**What if you are not comfortable after the interview?**

When the interviews/conversations are completed, you will be asked how you are feeling. If at that stage, or any subsequent time, you feel distressed in any way, you should contact me, the researcher, Gina Noonan, using the contact details below. You may also contact \_\_\_\_\_ [name redacted], nurse at \_\_\_\_\_ [institution redacted], at \_\_\_\_\_ [phone number redacted] or at \_\_\_\_\_ [email redacted].

**Who has reviewed this study?**

Approval for this study must be granted by Maynooth University Ethics Committee before a study like this can take place.

If you need further information, you may contact me, Gina Noonan, at [gina.noonan.2017@mumail.ie](mailto:gina.noonan.2017@mumail.ie)

**Researcher Details:**

Gina Noonan,  
Doctoral Student,

Department of Adult and Community Education,  
Maynooth University,  
Maynooth, Co. Kildare.

**Supervisor Details:**

Dr. Camilla Fitzsimons,  
Department of Adult and  
Community Education,  
Maynooth University,  
Maynooth,  
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Email:

[Camilla.fitzsimons@mu.ie](mailto:Camilla.fitzsimons@mu.ie)

## APPENDIX B

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENT RESEARCH



In agreeing to participate in this study I understand the following:

The research is being conducted by Gina Noonan, doctoral student with the Department of Adult and Community Education. The research is being supervised by Dr. Camilla Fitzsimons, Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University. The method proposed for the research has been approved in principle by the Maynooth University Ethics Committee, which means that the Committee does not have concerns about the procedure itself as detailed by the student. It is, however, the above-named student's responsibility to adhere to ethical guidelines in their dealings with participants and the collection and handling of data.

Names and contact details of researcher (and academic supervisor):

Gina Noonan: [gina.noonan.2017@mumail.ie](mailto:gina.noonan.2017@mumail.ie)

Dr. Camilla Fitzsimons: [Camilla.fitzsimons@mu.ie](mailto:Camilla.fitzsimons@mu.ie)

- I have been informed in writing as to the general purpose and nature of the study.  Yes  No
- I am participating voluntarily.  Yes  No
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.  Yes  No
- I understand that if I have any concerns about participation I may withdraw at any stage, without repercussions.  Yes  No
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participation in the study.  Yes  No
- I have been informed that the study will involve participation in interview/conversation sessions and that these interviews/conversations will be audio recorded.  Yes  No

- I understand that all data from the study will be treated confidentially and that no participant's data will be identified by name at any stage of the data analysis or in the final thesis.  Yes  No
- I understand that at the conclusion of my participation, any questions or concerns I have will be fully addressed.  Yes  No
- I have been informed that data from all participants will be compiled, analysed and submitted as part of a doctoral thesis to the *Department of Adult and Community Education* and that direct quotes may feature as part of the thesis.  Yes  No
- I understand that the data will be encrypted and stored on a PC or secure server at Maynooth University and that it will be deleted after ten years.  Yes  No
- I understand that there are no known expected discomforts or risks associated with participation.  Yes  No
- I understand that if during my participation in this study I feel the information and guidelines that I have been given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if I am unhappy about the process, I can contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at [research.ethics@mu.ie](mailto:research.ethics@mu.ie) or +353 (0)1 708 6019. I understand that my concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.  Yes  No
- I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time, and may withdraw my data at the conclusion of my participation if I still have concerns.  Yes  No

By signing below, I agree that I have read and understood the *Participant Information Sheet* and am participating in the study voluntarily.

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_ Participant

\_\_\_\_\_ Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_ Date