

Research Summary: Teaching at the Intersections: Investigating the Experiences of Teaching Assistants

Research Questions & Study Rationale

This study aimed to better understand the ways in which identity and social location (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, age, dis/ability, religious identification, sexuality) shape the teaching experiences of undergraduate and graduate teaching assistants (TAs). While social location has been shown to substantially impact *faculty* experiences on and of university campuses (Ferguson, 2020; Hanasono et al., 2019; Martinez et al., 2017; Waterfield et al., 2018), comparatively little research has explored these issues in relation to the teaching experiences of TAs. At the same time, work that does take this focus (e.g., Drane et al., 2019; Waring & Dipon Bordoloi, 2013; Cortes Santiago et al., 2017) offers interesting insights, pointing to ways in which TAs who identify as members of equity-seeking groups, for instance, might have experiences of teaching that both echo and differ from those of their faculty counterparts. Building on a pilot study that investigated TAs' decision making processes in the classroom (Marquis et al., 2020), this study thus sought to explore the following questions:

- (1) How do identity and social location shape the experiences of undergraduate and graduate TAs?
 - a. How, if at all, do TAs perceive their social locations to intersect with their interactions with students in and outside of the classroom, their teaching-related conversations and networks, and their teaching-related training and professional development?

Methodology

Current and recent teaching assistants (TAs) at one mid-sized Canadian university were invited to participate in semi-structured, individual interviews (either in person or via Skype). Following the interview, participants were invited to complete an optional demographic form.

In total, interviews were conducted with 37 TAs from across the university campus (see the disciplinary breakdown of participants below). Interview recordings were subsequently transcribed, and the data were analysed to look for themes relating to the research questions.

Participant Disciplinary Identification

- Arts & Science: 2
- Engineering: 6
- Health Sciences: 3
- Humanities: 6
- Science: 10
- Social Sciences: 11

(*Note: One participant selected 2 disciplinary affiliations)

Initially, we intended to supplement the interview data with a consideration of Twitter posts speaking to TAs' experiences. Since we had more interview participants than initially expected, though, we elected to focus our attentions on the interview data alone.

Key Findings

Some of the ideas arising from the data that were most prominent and relevant to our research questions are summarized below.

Who Thinks About Social Location?

The data suggested TAs held differing perceptions of the extent to which social location affected their teaching experiences. While some asserted that their social locations had little effect on their experience, others pointed to pronounced influences. Likewise, while some expressed certainty in their sense that social location did/did not influence their teaching, others were less sure, sometimes noting that they *wondered* if social location might explain some of their experiences. In some cases, these differences seemed to be connected to the social locations participants occupied (e.g., several participants identifying as female spoke to experiences of sexualization and harassment connected to gender). Participants also sometimes noted disciplinary differences in attention to social location, suggesting that this was more or less likely to be a topic of discussion in their departmental context than they perceived it to be in others.

Authority and Approachability

Participants offered a range of comments speaking to the sense of authority and respect they were accorded in the classroom. For instance, a number of participants who identified as members of one or more equity-seeking groups shared experiences wherein they were challenged in unproductive ways or otherwise diminished by students and/or colleagues. While many also noted wanting to create a classroom that was not hierarchical or authoritarian, some suggested they sometimes felt a need to assert their authority in order to garner students' respect. Balancing authority and approachability was thus a difficult and at times uncomfortable task for some participants.

Embodiment and Disclosure

Several participants offered comments that spoke to the ways in which their identities and social locations are enacted and 'read' by students in the classroom. In some cases, TAs noted that their identities are apparent from their bodies or the ways in which they carry themselves, and suggested that students make assumptions about them based on these factors. Some also noted consciously making self-presentational choices that intersected with their social locations, in an attempt to shape how students perceive them (e.g., dressing or physically positioning themselves in particular ways). This section of the findings also included participants' reflections on whether or not they elect to 'disclose' elements of their identities in the classroom that might not be immediately evident to others. Again, participants' perceptions in this respect were mixed, with some noting they typically disclose, while others suggested they prefer not to do so, or that they do so infrequently. Participants also indicated that disclosure can have a variety of consequences, including altering their relationships with students in either positive or negative ways.

Social Location and Pedagogical Approach

Some participants suggested their social locations had an important influence on their approach to teaching. For example, some argued that their own experiences of marginalization made them aware of the need to make space for marginalized voices in the classroom, while others noted that part of their teaching experiences involved thinking consciously about how they might be

taken as a role model for similarly-located students, and tailoring their behavior with this in mind. A number of participants also noted that their own experiences as students allowed them to have empathy for the students they taught, and considered how this empathy shaped their approaches to teaching.

Relationships, Connections, and Networks

The data also offered interesting insights into participants' perceptions of the ways their social locations informed their teaching-related relationships and connections. For instance, some TAs who identified as members of equity-seeking groups pointed to a relative absence of others occupying similar social locations in their campus contexts, as well as a sense of connection to students and faculty who did share their social locations. Many TAs also expressed a desire for more teaching-related mentorship, though a few also shared concerns about how mentorship work is undervalued and often falls to marginalized faculty.

Next Steps and More Information

Early insights arising from the study were presented at the following conferences:

- International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning conference (Bergen, Norway; October 2018).
- McMaster Research on Teaching and Learning conference (Hamilton, ON; December 2018).
- Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education conference (Vancouver, BC; May 2019).

Likewise, these findings were shared on the McMaster campus at a MacPherson Institute staff meeting (to which a representative from the School of Graduate Studies was invited), and as part of the Department of Sociology's Speaker Series. A manuscript that describes and explores the 'embodiment and disclosure' and 'authority and approachability' sections of the findings in greater detail has also been submitted for publication. If you would like to read this manuscript, please let us know.

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