Graduate International Teaching Assistants' Social and Cultural Navigation of the U.S. University Classroom

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This discussion serves as a dialogue about Graduate International Teaching Assistants (GITAs) and their cultural navigation of the U.S. classroom. The classroom presents a complex cultural geography that asks them to balance authority, relatedness, and mentorship. Navigating intercultural communication is essential to creating an empathetic learning environment. We will explore the dynamics of teaching in the U.S. classroom. We discuss issues of authority and power distance that come with teaching in a different culture. Finally, we address the different layers of empathy (teacher-student, teacher-mentor). Our paper aims to raise awareness of the ways to enrich the experience/training/development of GITAS as we nurture the next generation of scholar-teachers in the academy.

Key Words: Graduate International Teaching Assistants (GITAS), empathy, authority, power distance, mentorship.

Introduction

Graduate International Teaching Assistants' (GITAs) training is based on cultural conceptions, communication, and mentoring (Boman, 2013; Boyle & Boice, 1998; Cox & Tarry, 2013; Halleck & Moder, 1995; Isaacs, 2008; Yule & Hoffman, 1990). Since GITAs are from non-U.S. cultures, they add knowledge, insight, and new ways of learning and teaching to the university (Wright, Bergom, & Brooks, 2011). We discuss GITAs as a homogenous population when diversity also exists among them. Our decision reflects practicality and our desire to provide a broad context, which subsequent research can pursue and refine.

The issues of employing GITAS in the classroom are related to being understood and accepted, which affects their pedagogy (Bresnahan & Kim, 1993; Prieto & Altmaier, 1994). We focus on the GITA population due to the growing graduate international student population in U.S. universities, which warrants further attention. We will discuss the means to foster an empathetic learning environment for GITAs.

Teaching is an emotional and relational practice (Denzin, 1984; Hargreaves, 2001). The relationship between instructors and students influences students' academic engagement, selfbelief, and academic performance (Klem & Connell, 2004; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Universities encourage undergraduate students to prioritize their own academic progress (Cohen, 2006) and to become immersed in the university environment (Astin, 1999; Guiffrida, 2006; Tinto, 1975). The university must nurture the kind of empathetic relationships it encourages.

International Teaching Assistants' (ITAs) transient status can make it difficult for them to build relationships with their undergraduate students (Kang, Rubin, & Lindmann, 2015; Zheng, 2017; Zhou, 2009). We acknowledge that the contingent position of GITAs is both more recognizable and profound because their transient status is often more visible due to attributes such as their racial difference, audible linguistic accent, or unfamiliarity with features of a U.S. university such as Greek life. Gayle (1990) argues that international teaching assistants could overcome these challenges by adopting interactive and interpersonal pedagogical methods, and by openly discussing their native cultures. GITAs bring unique cultural knowledge to the teacher-student relationship. Communicating cultural expectations to students encourages them to see GITAs as approachable allies when they encounter difficulties with coursework or other stressors (Plakans, 1997). To facilitate these productive relationships, universities should promote intercultural sensitization for undergraduates which can complement workshops for GITAs (Ma, 1993). If this scholarship seems too optimistic, universities should consider the affinities between GITAs and undergraduate students. GITAs are university students themselves and may be able to empathize with undergraduate students. Both populations share a practical goal: to emerge as professionals in the workforce. We focus on the conditions that enable GITAs and undergraduate students to synergize their efforts and commitments in the classroom because they have mutually beneficial goals. Both undergraduates and GITAs offer assets that help accomplish these goals. Undergraduates who are native English speakers have greater facility with the language of U.S. universities; however, GITAs have greater facility with the fieldspecific discourse and can introduce this discourse to undergraduates. This allows GITAs to claim expertise while using the native language of their English-speaking students. This reversal of the usual hierarchy of expertise, one that privileges native English speakers' knowledge, provides opportunities for collaborative teaching and learning (Myles & Cheng, 2003).

Conditions that produce optimal collaboration include the inclusion of culture in learning environments, and availability of—and engagement in—mentorship. Rendón (2009) has proposed one model of culturally sensitive pedagogy that facilitates both the inclusion of culture and engagement in mentorship. Rendón uses the Spanish phrase "*sentipensante*" to describe a pedagogy that recognizes the cultural, intellectual, and spiritual needs and potential of students as important considerations. This pedagogy integrates multiple disciplines and multiple ways of knowing, both Western and non-Western. Rendón stresses that not all faculty will find this pedagogy useful; those who thrive with this pedagogical practice conceive of their role as combining teacher, learner, artist, social agent, and liberator.

Cultural Conceptions of U.S. University Classrooms

Global ways of teaching do not necessarily match with U.S. ways of learning (Isaacs, 2008; Zheng, 2017). Discrepancies center around two issues: the discrepancy between collectivist and individualist ideologies of education, and the balance between teacher authority and student voice. In this section, we analyze these challenges and suggest differences between global ways of teaching and U.S. ways of learning complicate the use of student feedback to assess GITA classroom performance.

Teaching and learning are intellectual and social practices (Vita, 2001). They are also influenced by cultural differences, which affect how instructors and students build relationships (Vita, 2001; Wright et al., 2011; Yook, 1999). Generally, collectivistic cultures exhibit pedagogical practices that place greater authority in instructors. U.S. classrooms tend to be less centralized. Within these broad categories, variations do occur. Triandis (1989) found that Western and Chinese students' culturally informed senses of selves serve as a foundation for culturally-specific learning styles. To adjust to students' diverse needs, GITAs must improve or acquire new pedagogical practices. For example, Wright et al. (2011) analyzed the effects of student-centered classrooms based on Hevruta, a Jewish way of learning. They found that this decentralized model increases students' sense of control of their own learning. Informing GITAs of the greater emphasis on individualism in U.S. culture may help them to adapt to a decentralized classroom. Perhaps working with GITAs to help them adapt to the broader culture of U.S. higher education can help them to become more receptive to this flexibility since they can empathize with undergraduates' efforts to adapt to the university setting.

A collaborative learning environment could be impeded when both GITAs and students face communication concerns and issues of trust (regarding sense of authority between GITAs and students, and among students). Encouraging collaborative learning requires balancing GITAs' authority and students' autonomy. Here, the differences between collectivism and individualism as cultural values is especially impactful. Auyeung and Sands (1996) examined the effects of individualism and collectivism on cross-cultural learning styles with students from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Australia. Australian students practiced a concrete and active learning style while their counterparts from Hong Kong and Taiwan engaged in a more reflective and abstract learning style. Auyeung and Sands (1996) concluded that student engagement can be encouraged when educational experiences are aligned with students' cultural expectations. An example of the negative ramifications of misalignment between student and GITA cultural expectations is the definition and response to plagiarism. Collectivistic cultures tend to emphasize the reception and recitation of established knowledge (Zhao, 2009). Established knowledge is seen as a shared resource and drawing upon that resource expresses deference to authority. Identifying plagiarism is one example of a pedagogical responsibility that can vex any graduate student, but it is especially challenging for GITAs from collectivistic cultures. A society that embraces individualism may identify plagiarism where a collectivist society sees an admirable display of deference. We recommend that faculty engaged in training GITAs use practical modelling to ameliorate this challenge. Perhaps reframing the process of properly referencing and citing others' work as a form of deference, rather than focusing on plagiarism as a failure of original thinking, would help GITAs adapt to the understanding of plagiarism in U.S. academic institutions. While this difference is subtle, it accomplishes the important task of articulating the issue of plagiarism in a way that resonates with GITAs in empathetic and culturally sensitive manner.

One common goal of individualist and collectivist cultures is establishing learning environments that promote empathy to support intercultural collaborations. Hargreaves (2001) claims that expressing and acknowledging differences

through open communication fosters compassion. This entails that GITAs may need to risk vulnerability to establish rapport with students. One productive means of expressing vulnerability is the use of humor in the classroom (Myles & Cheng, 2003). While humor can be culturally specific, it is this quality that makes humor a potentially fruitful way to encourage dialogue and engender compassion between GITAS and their students. A joke can spark a discussion of the unique qualities of GITAs' and students' respective cultures. It is possible that neither GITAs nor students have interacted with individuals from another culture in an intercultural classroom environment prior to their studies in the U.S. The unfamiliarity of this experience has the potential to stimulate teaching and learning for both parties.

Communication as an Act of Empathy

Communication between GITAs and students starts with compassion. The concept of compassionate communication includes both cultural factors and linguistic features. Researchers found that undergraduate students express frustration because GITAs' accents can inhibit their learning (Isaacs, 2008; Tyler, 1992). Rubin's (1992) study affirms that non-language factors also affect undergraduates' perceptions of GITAs. Often, students may perceive that a GITA with a non-White appearance has an accent, even when no accent is present (Rubin, 1992). The perception of an accent based on physical appearance demonstrates the power of stereotypes and pre-existing student bias to influence the perception of GITA pedagogy. Consider that Vita (2001) points out that student feedback assumes both teachers and students agree on what makes an effective pedagogy. Language comprehension is an important factor in GITAs' development, but culturally specific assets that GITAs bring to the classroom must also be acknowledged.

Some researchers agree that language comprehension affects the quality of GITAs' teaching and students' learning. Objective measures, such as rating scales (e.g., AndersonHseieh, Johnson, & Koehler, 1992) and standardized tests (e.g., TOEFL), have traditionally been methods of assessing language proficiency (Halleck & Moder, 1995; Isaacs, 2008; Tyler, 1992). According to Tyler, Jefferies and Davies (1988), limited language proficiency can make teachers' instruction seem disorganized. It can be especially challenging when teachers' grammatical errors omit discourse markers, e.g. the connective tissues of a lesson (Tyler, 1992). These researchers have correlated GITAs' language proficiency with their pedagogical skills and students' willingness to participate in the classroom.

Recently, researchers have moved away from a predominant focus on GITAs' language concerns (Gorsuch, 2006; Miller, Brickman, & Oliver, 2014). When training resembles the instructional experiences of the faculty, GITAs are more willing to experiment with diverse methods to engage students (Boyle & Boice, 1998). This perspective views teacher education as an experiential and communicative process as opposed to a formulaic set of rules, including a focus on grammar (De Jong & Van Driel, 2004; Halim & Meerah, 2002; Nilsson, 2008). Inquirybased teaching is one example of experiential teaching that combines instructors' pedagogical content knowledge and their classroom experiences (De Jong & Van Driel, 2004; Halim & Meerah, 2002). Features of inquiry-based teaching include: 1) Dialogue; 2) Problem based experiential learning; and 3) Sharing of authority between students and teachers. As an example of how inquiry based learning occurs in a humanities course, the instructor may ask students to write reflective papers in response to a reading assignment. Those papers would then prepare students to lead in-class discussion on the reading; the instructor would act as a collaborator in the resulting dialogue, guiding and responding to students' questions and interests, but not dictating those interests (Kirschner, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). This emergent perspective foregrounds the importance of teacher and student collaboration to maximize both reflective teaching and active learning.

Survey research also highlights GITAs' concerns of pedagogical identity. Cultural differences can complicate GITAs' pedagogical development because teaching approaches are often culturally-based and thus may not be seamlessly implementable in another culture (McDonough, 2006; Park, 2004). This can create a discrepancy between GITAs' senses of pedagogical identity and teaching expectations in a new culture. GITAs' self-efficacy is an important factor in their ability to develop pedagogical identities that facilitate their comfort in the culture of U.S. higher education institutions. We suggest that offering GITAs the opportunity to teach courses that align with their area of expertise builds GITAs' sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982). GITAs' subject matter expertise will be apparent to their students, and initial matter expertise engenders their students' confidence (Little, 1990). One way to show this trust in the classroom is to promote a fluid structure of authority. Like Zheng (2017), we posit that the more familiar GITAs are with

the subjects they are asked to teach, the less self-conscious they are about their cultural differences, such as linguistic fluency. GITAs and teachers engage in dialogue and negotiate meaning and learning strategies. Consider the following scenario where a teacher normally prepares a lecture on each homework assignment. In a more fluid classroom, the teacher would instead ask students how they would like to review the assignment, whether through "think pair and share," small group work, or other means. This reduces authority concerns when GITAs and their students view their relationship laterally rather than hierarchically.

Mentorship to Support Empathic Teaching and Learning

Unlike native GTAs, GITAs can look to mentors as models of both professionally and culturally acceptable behavior. Effective mentoring can enable GITAs to develop the following skills: knowing their subject matter, teaching and assessing students, incorporating student feedback to engender a classroom conducive to student success, and honing their own pedagogy through reflection (Meadows, Olsen, Dimitrov, & Dawson, 2015). Intellectual skills and interpersonal relationships can be developed simultaneously.

The literature illustrates many potentially effective approaches to GITA mentorship (Boyle & Boice, 1998; McDonough, 2006; Park, 2004). One approach is through action research, which concentrates on specific situations related to GITAs' concerns. Action research is feedback-intensive and pragmatic; teacher self-reflection and teacher-student collaboration are emphasized (McDonough, 2006).

A second approach is faculty mentoring. Boyle and Boice (1998) suggest the use of mentorship programs that focus on the mentoring of GTAs by experienced faculty validates GTAs' insights and classroom experiences. We believe this is applicable to GITAs; the cultural insights that native faculty can offer to GITAs may increase the value of mentoring. The research on effective approaches to GITA mentorship is intended to support GITAs' pedagogical development, in addition to their integration into the university community. A caveat is that GITAs and their faculty mentors' expectations need to be aligned with program goals to prevent disillusionment about individual contributions, goals, and outcomes. Mentorship can be advantageous for GITAs for setting goals, refining pedagogical craft, and adapting to the discourse of the academy. We recommend that faculty engaged in training GITAs use practical modelling, such as grading papers collaboratively on a common assignment with GITAs, then discussing the rationale that supported assigned grades. This will facilitate the development of a consistent standard of evaluation.

Problematic communication with mentors can undermine GITAs' motivations because GITAs need to self-sustain their motivation insofar as they commit to the goals previously discussed. In the absence of empathetic communication, GITAs may turn to a familiar hierarchical role for their sense of identity security. Here, empathy is a multi-layered geography that is fostered by GITAs in their classroom for their own pedagogical improvement and student learning progress. We argue that empathy is a dynamic and generative force that inspires new forms of collaboration for teaching and learning with creativity and energy so that GITAs can be more effective in the classroom environment.

Conclusion

GITAs seek to sustain productive relationships with students and faculty mentors, both of whom can be sources of encouragement. Both undergraduate students and faculty mentors provide feedback for fleshing out practical pedagogical challenges they face. Empathetic communication and cultural receptivity were shown to create conditions in which GITAs' relationships can flourish. We adopted an understanding of communication that entails more than technical concerns (e.g., grammar). We affirmed that cultural receptivity and communication are mutually reinforcing for the building of trust between GITAs, their mentors, and their students. We recognized that GITAs must integrate their multiple responsibilities and professional obligations to their stakeholders to form a professional pedagogical identity.

Developing self-efficacious GITAs has benefits for universities. GITAs add diverse perspectives to the university. The challenges they face in the classroom invigorate pedagogical methods, particularly among experienced faculty. Our

study pertains to GITAs who are learning to be teacher-scholars, so effective training serves as a valuable investment for the long-term trajectory of undergraduates' learning, faculty professional development, department productivity, and institutional vigor. Nevertheless, limitations exist. Our discussion on creating empathetic environments for GITAs to thrive assumes that all constituencies understand empathy in the same way. Emotions are culturally situational.

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