

## Tips and tricks Blog

### 'Zine Making for Zen GTAs'

by Cherisse Francis

According to a range of pedagogic literature and available data including Barr and Wright (2019) 'Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) provide an invaluable contribution to higher education, yet their role is often overlooked and understudied.' Some sources estimate that GTAs contribute up to 70% of the undergraduate seminar teaching at UK universities. Yet, their mental health and individual needs are constantly overlooked. As a GTA myself, this was my lived experience and so I began wondering if my colleagues felt similarly.

Based on formal and informal feedback, GTAs at the University of Warwick report feeling a sense of not belonging compounded by their varied teaching experiences as part of module teams and unmet training needs. This can be emotionally and administratively difficult, and even overwhelming, yet, it is a crucially important stage for development into full-time academics. Before starting this project, I enlisted specific perspectives from colleagues who shared the following thoughts:

- 'As an international student I'm always worried that students won't understand my accent...'
- 'We can only claim for 3 hours preparation but it takes so much longer and my research suffers.'
- 'Teaching is so much pressure and I barely make enough to live off...'

These perspectives influenced and led to the creation of the zine making workshop for Zen GTAs. I first became exposed to the usefulness of zines at a workshop on insider-outsider identity hosted by another department at the University last year. The page that I created at this workshop shown below in **Figure 1** was no great triumph in an artistic sense but after the session I felt a deep sense of satisfaction and reflexiveness and I wanted to afford my fellow Law School GTAs the same opportunity.



Figure 1: The author's first 'zine-making' experience

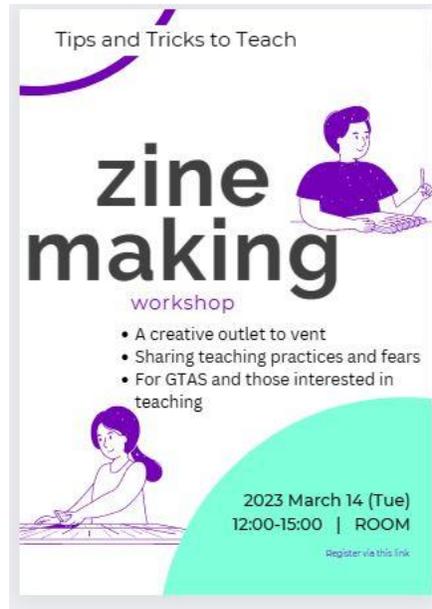
With this idea in mind, I approached the Law School GTA mentor, Dr. Laura Lammasniemi and shared the idea of using zines as a way to engage my peers. Dr. Lammasniemi was supportive of the idea from the beginning and became a co-creator on the project. Together, we began planning the project.

Our objectives were simple:

- To create a space for GTAs to reflect on their reaching practices using creative techniques which if you know anything about legally trained people does not come naturally
- To create a space for GTAs to share with their peers their frustrations, fears and successes
- To allow GTAs a chance to take back some autonomy and help to co-create a 'training tool and help guide of sorts' for incoming GTAs.

One of the most common shortcomings in GTA projects is lack of funding so once we had a plan we approached IATL for funding which we thankfully received. With this plan we approached IATL and were thankfully granted funding.

Our initial plan was to host our zine making workshop in summer 2022 to allow participation from current GTAs and create a 'training tool' for those incoming. However, for various reasons we postponed twice and finally settled on a date of March 14<sup>th</sup> 2023 which we advertised as shown in **Figure 2** below.



*Figure 2: Poster for Zine-making workshop*

On the day, our participants were GTAs, staff members and ECRs from the Law School. Overall, the event was a success but there are a few key takeaways and learnings I wish to share from this experience:

1. Always used trained facilitators- Our facilitators were zine making experts, academics and artists from Coventry university who brought their knowledge and empathy into the room. Prior to the event we had several conversations with these facilitators to create the schedule and ensure that our objectives were met.
2. This expertise was particularly helpful in the context of our second key learning; think carefully about the timing and hosting of your event to ensure full accessibility for your target audience. Our attendance was lower than we expected and in retrospect this could have been avoided. We initially shifted our workshop dates from September and then January to accommodate GTA marking and teaching schedules but on the last occasion in March we did not factor in how the end of teaching also coincided with marking and an influx in student office hours. Thankfully our expert facilitators were able to pivot their plan to maintain a positive and meaningful experience for all involved.
3. This leads to the third key learning; zines by their very nature are unpredictable. With our lower than expected turn out, we were not able to create the collaborative handbook for future GTAs which we had stated as an intended outcome. However, what we were able to gain was a much deeper interactive session. The facilitators guided participants first through the creating individual 'mini-zines' on their teaching experience (Figure 3). Some of our participants were experienced in making zines while others had never even heard of zines so this exercise was a good introduction.



*Figure 3: Individual 'mini-zines' created by participants to illustrate their teaching journey*

Once participants were engaged the facilitators then divided participants into smaller groups which created collaborative zines on similar topics. Looking back, the collaboration between the participants was one of the highlights of the day.

Despite not being able to create the handbook on that occasion, we have made several steps to see this project to finality. One of the main focuses of the project also was partnership and we have now collaborated with Academic Development Centre to convert the 'Tips and Tricks handbook' that was produced by the Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community Team last academic year into a discipline specific resource for GTAs from the Law School in the upcoming academic year. Within this handbook it is our intention to have some empty pages where students can make notes and add their questions in the future. This resource will be completed by the end of summer.

This project also inspired the team to continue providing creative outlets for Law School GTAs and we will consequently be setting up a creative corner in the corner of the PGR Kitchen with colouring materials, adult colouring books as well as activity books to keep GTAs engaged and allow them to vent and reflect.

This project has also been accepted for presentation at the Warwick Education Conference in the hopes that it can become a best practice.

So for me the way forward is to encourage as many of you as possible to use zines. They

- Are collaborative and engaging - we saw transformative learning through our participants challenging their own assumptions about their creative selves;
- Are not resource intensive and can be created using ordinary office supplies; and
- Produce extraordinary results.



*Pictures from the zine making workshop*

## References

Barr, M., Wright, P. Training graduate teaching assistants: What can the discipline offer?. *Eur Polit Sci* 18, 143–156 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-018-0175-6>