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Creating an equal, diverse, and inclusive learning environment in a Graduate Teaching Assistant-led classroom

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss a few teaching strategies and learning support methods Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) can adopt to create an equal, diverse, and inclusive learning environment in the small group teaching context. Equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) are important values required by the Equality Act that UK universities look to adopt in various ways, but GTAs, whose role is very specific, are rarely part of the debate on how to implement them. I will argue that the classroom is of particular importance when it comes to the implementation of EDI in the context of HE, and that it is essential to develop inclusive

teaching practices for all students. My paper will fill the gaps in EDI training identified in the literature by proposing the following teaching strategies and learning support methods (and discussing the likely challenges they may cause as well as ideas for solutions): setting ground rules at the beginning of term, close cooperation with the Student Wellbeing teams, strategies on how to learn students' names in advance to make them feel welcome regardless of their cultural background, effective use of teaching platforms to encourage equal, diverse, and inclusive participation, as well as developing accessible learning materials and teaching structure. I will draw on my experience of teaching as a GTA at UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies (UCL SSEES).

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Introduction

In this paper, I will discuss a few teaching strategies and learning support methods Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) can adopt to create an equal, diverse, and inclusive learning environment in the context of small group teaching. Equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) are important values required by the Equality Act (Legislation.gov.uk, 2010) that UK universities look to adopt in various ways. Even more importantly, EDI practices can make HE more accessible, enhancing student learning and their university experience. GTAs, however, are rarely part of the debate on EDI strategies and/or ways to implement them. This is primarily because GTAs tend to be PhD students in the first instance, and they are therefore rarely full-time permanent members of staff.

The current situation is a serious oversight, as GTAs are important partners in undergraduate teaching, contributing to a significant proportion of student experience and learning. GTAs have plenty of potential to implement EDI practices for at least two reasons. Firstly, while larger lectures are given predominantly by module leaders, GTAs tend to teach smaller groups of students in tutorials, seminars, workshops, or lab sessions. This means that their role is much closer to partners with the students than that of module leaders. In addition, as Collins (2021) points out, GTAs have particular potential to foster inclusivity in the classroom by deploying 'decentred' teaching practices. Secondly, GTAs are typically PhD students or early career researchers, whose stage of academic education and career is much closer to that of students. GTAs therefore stand a better chance of developing closer relationships with students and thus understanding their experiences, needs, and challenges they are facing.

Research on EDI in the context of HE tends to focus on policies and their implementation. Many authors argue, however, that more needs to be done to create fully inclusive universities (Scott, 2020; Ahmet, 2021; Gavino, 2021). Schwabenland and Kofinas (2023: 333) observe significant levels of fear and anxiety associated with EDI issues among academic and professional services staff in the UK, concluding that "the hidden curriculum of equality, diversity and inclusion is not evolving, despite explicit, and high-level demands that it does". Similarly, Holand and Silva (2022: 2) note that "there unfortunately remain within our educational processes and systems several inherent biases and barriers that militate against equality, diversity, and inclusion". According to Holand and Silva (2022: 4), "EDI is more than just targets, numbers, or representation. It is about acknowledging the intersectionality of individuals and the role that they play within the higher educational sector". A few scholars stress the need for more EDI training among university staff. For instance, Nakamura (2022) highlights the importance of developing awareness of one's own biases.

An important area where EDI can be implemented, although it is rarely acknowledged in practice, is the classroom. Wijeratne et al. (2022: 62) observe:

> "While the concept of diversity in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is not new, until recently, it was not included in strategic or organizational change efforts. Often the response of HEIs to diversity concerns has been to increase the number of students from diverse backgrounds (e.g., international students, mature students, students with disabilities, minority groups) in their intake, an approach known as structural diversity. However, while structural diversity at HEIs has increased in the last 20 years, **institutions have not transformed into truly multicultural diverse**

organisations [emphasis mine] … It is a challenge to build inclusive access to existing structures without addressing **issues around inequality and exclusion on which one's learning environment is built**".

A few other scholars stress the significance of creating educational structures that would facilitate the learning of *all* students (Halinen & Järvinen, 2008; Moriña, 2017). Collins et al. (2019: 1481) found that "the university's attempts to be inclusive were largely driven by the provision of support and reasonable adjustments for individual students" and "this creates organisational and individual challenges that **highlight the need to move towards becoming inclusive to all** [emphasis mine]". Ainscow and Miles (2008) and Acedo (2008) argue that teachers play a particularly important role in facilitating the learning of all students, as they can implement participatory policies and good practices "from the ground up". To address the issues of EDI in the classroom, the concept of inclusive teaching and learning was developed, defined as recognising "all students' entitlement to a learning experience that respects diversity, enables participation, removes barriers and anticipates and considers a variety of learning needs and preferences" (Wijeratne *et al.*, 2022: 63). In other words, inclusive education means "taking account of and valuing students' differences within mainstream curriculum, pedagogy and assessment" (Hockings, 2010: 3). One of the three recommendations for educators interested in implementing inclusive education is to "build an inclusive learning environment", as "fostering a community of learners will create a comfortable, supportive environment where students can take more control of their learning, and learning will be understood as an ongoing dialogue between student and academic (transforming teaching by facilitating engagement)" (Wijeratne *et al.*, 2022: 70). However, GTAs tend to report that they do not feel properly trained in inclusive teaching practices (Embry, 2006; Hassenfeldt *et al.*, 2019;

McAnally, 2023). Studies confirm the lack of sufficient GTA training in either EDI principles or inclusive teaching practices (Sarju & Jones, 2022).

My paper will address this lack of training and contribute to the argument that it is the classroom that is of particular importance when it comes to the implementation of EDI in the context of HE. I will also argue that it is essential to develop inclusive teaching practices regardless of whether individual students have or have not declared a disability or condition. Drawing on my experience of working as a GTA at UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies (UCL SSEES) between 2019 and 2024, I will propose a few teaching strategies and learning support methods GTAs can adopt in order to create a classroom in which students feel respected, empowered, and welcome. I will also assess the effectiveness of these strategies and methods based on my observations as well as the results of student feedback surveys. I will focus particularly on students with disabilities, international students whose first language is not English, as well as students who miss classes. While there may be multiple reasons for students' absences, it is important to acknowledge that they could result from disabilities (e.g., chronic illnesses), religious observances, as well as sickness, which is particularly salient in the context of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

Background context

UCL SSEES students are a very diverse community, coming from various parts of the world, speaking a wide variety of languages, and being used to various teaching and learning cultures. In 2022/2023, almost 50% of UCL students came from countries outside the UK (UCL, 2022).

As first-year undergraduate students, they are often new to academic practices and conventions, especially in the UK context.

In 2019/20, over 17% of home students alone declared a disability of some kind in UK higher education (Hubble & Bolton, 2021). According to the statistical data provided to me by the UCL Student Support and Wellbeing team, 10,840 students (out of a total of 51,058 students) indicated they have a disability or condition when enrolling at UCL, 49% of whom have a Summary of Reasonable Adjustments (SoRA). This figure is likely to be higher, as it is possible that students with a disability or condition may not have declared it for one reason or another. In addition, students commencing their undergraduate programmes since 2020 have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, as their high school education is likely to have been disrupted by the pandemic restrictions. The pandemic has been found to have a negative impact on students' mental health, raising stress and anxiety but also triggering new or existing conditions (Rich *et al.*, 2023). In 2022, as many as 64% of UCL students reported that Covid-19 was having a negative impact on their mental health (Students' Union UCL, 2022). Stevanović, Božić and Radović (2021) also show the negative impact of distance learning on students' motivation.

All these factors make creating an equal, diverse, and inclusive learning environment particularly significant in the selected context.

Specifications of the project

For this project, I collected a few strategies and methods which have been shown to be effective in increasing equality, diversity, and inclusivity in the university classroom. Based on the literature and EDI training I attended at UCL Arena, a professional development

programme for all UCL staff who teach and support students' learning, I compiled the following list of practices: setting expectations at the beginning of term and reinforcing them politely if need be, close cooperation with the Student Wellbeing teams to flag up concerns to maximise student chances of getting the support they need, memorising students' names in advance to make them feel welcome regardless of their cultural background, effective use of teaching platforms to encourage equal, diverse, and inclusive participation, and developing accessible learning materials and structure of teaching sessions. In the Autumn Term of the 2023/2024 academic year, I systematically implemented all of the above strategies to my teaching of three tutorial groups on the selected module.

To see how these strategies influenced how students felt in my tutorials, I conducted mid-term and end-of-term feedback surveys using Google Forms in Week 5 and Week 10, respectively, which were devoted to tutorials specifically (separate module evaluations were conducted by the module leader). In the mid-term surveys, there were three short semi-open questions, exploring whether students had noticed the EDI practices.

1. What do you like about the tutorials?
2. Is there anything you would like to be done differently?
3. Is there anything else you would like to say to me?

To increase comparability, in the end-of-term surveys, there were 12 questions: 8 questions with answers on a scale of 1–5, two of which are related to EDI (see Figure 1), and 4 open questions, which were the same as the mid-term survey, plus: 'Which tutorial do you remember the most, and why?'. The surveys were conducted during the tutorial to increase the response rate. Out of 45 students registered, 23 responded to the mid-term survey and 8 to the end-of-term survey,

which can be attributed to poor attendance in the last tutorial before Christmas[1]. Because of the low response rate to the end-of-term survey, I included the responses to the module evaluation and to a similar survey conducted on another large compulsory second-year module I taught at UCL SSEES, where I consistently implemented the same strategies and methods.

Question 6: The pace of teaching was...

	1	2	3	4	5	
Too slow	○	○	○	○	○	Too fast

Question 8: In the tutorials, I felt included and respected.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

Figure 1. EDI-related questions in the end-of-term survey.

Discussion of practices and their implementation

Setting ground rules
At the beginning of term, I clearly established my expectations of students, such as listening when another student is speaking, reminding students that even if they are shy, their opinions are valid

[1] For ethical reasons, identifying details have been changed and comments have been generalised to reflect typical responses.

and the class deserves to hear it, and most importantly, respect towards everyone. The idea behind it was not only to explain the values my teaching practice is driven by, but also to ask students to comply with them. When necessary, I reinforced ground rules politely and respectfully as the term developed. Drawing on Boring and Philippe (2021), who show that informational rather than normative interventions can significantly reduce discrimination, I explained ways in which disrespect can be shown inadvertently, and asked students to be mindful of them.

This strategy is very easy to implement. It can also take very little time. I found that it is particularly effective when it is also implemented by the module leader and the students get the same message from the whole teaching team. This in turn shows how cooperation with the whole teaching team is beneficial in the case of GTAs. In the future, I will grant the students more agency and invite them to help establish the expectations in the hope to make them feel more included in the session arrangements (Cardon & Womack, 2022: 84).

Cooperation with Student Wellbeing teams
Teaching the same module in 2019/2020, I became concerned about a student who repeatedly asked about the activity instructions I had just given and did not engage in any group activity. After a chat with the student and a fellow GTA, I flagged up the issue to the departmental Education and Student Support Office. I spoke to the student's personal tutor, who advised them to see the Student Wellbeing team. As a result, the student received a SoRA in the first term of his programme. Thanks to this experience, I became familiar with the university procedure for flagging up concerns as well as the services and support offered to students by the Student Wellbeing teams. In 2023/2024, I worked closely with the module leader, discussing cases of repeated absences and other concerns I had, e.g., about a student

sharing their experience of immigration. The students were then contacted by the module leader to see if they needed further support.

The challenge of this practice is its feasibility. GTAs often teach multiple groups and the tutorials (ten per term) are typically scheduled for 50 minutes, which is very little time to get to know all of the students and notice all the potential concerns. However, awareness about potentially worrying behaviours, such as consecutive absences without notice or a student sharing concerning information with the tutor, increases the chances of reacting in at least some problematic cases. Even if the teacher does not witness any worrying signs, being mindful of them can help them develop a pedagogy of care (Motta and Bennett, 2018; Maistry, 2022). With the mindset of care, the teacher is focused on supporting the students in other ways, as well.

Another challenge is that teamwork is essential for this strategy to work. Universities and departments differ in terms of structure and type of support offered and it can take a while for GTAs to learn how to go about it. A way around it is close cooperation with module leaders, who can provide guidance and suggest effective ways of helping based on their experience and connections within the department and university.

Learning students' names
Informed by my own experience as a non-native speaker with a 'difficult' name and my own research on language and discrimination, I realised what a difference it makes when the teacher addresses you by your name. Deakin-Smith, Bryan and Pilcher (2022) show that students prefer to have their name mispronounced than avoided altogether, while Weekly (2023) demonstrates that certain forms of addressing students can be classified as discrimination and microaggressions. In addition, Cardetti et al. (2022) demonstrate that intercultural

competence training can enhance the inclusivity of GTA-led classrooms. I therefore learned students' names and researched the pronunciation of those I found difficult in advance. It is particularly helpful if the university system stores students' names with pictures. In the first tutorial, I introduced myself and asked students to introduce themselves (by name and preferred pronouns). I also asked to be corrected if I mispronounced their names. I then revised the names before each session, as part of my teaching preparation. If I forgot a specific name in class, I apologised and practiced the name for the following session.

This method is challenging because it depends on the teacher's cultural and linguistic background, which is always in some ways limited. Inevitably, some names, especially those that the teacher has encountered, are easier to remember than others, especially if they teach multiple groups. This practice is thus not only very time-consuming, but also requires plenty of effort to get it right. I have found, though, that even if the teacher makes a mistake, students appreciate the effort.

Effective use of teaching platforms
To encourage equal, diverse, and inclusive participation, I paid a lot of attention to effective use of teaching platforms. I uploaded my slides and other teaching materials to Moodle, the teaching platform used at UCL, at least 24 hours in advance to give students a chance to familiarise themselves with the tutorial content or to come back to it later if they needed to. I also emailed students before the sessions, reminding them how they needed to prepare. This strategy is very useful for students with learning disabilities and visual or attention deficit impairments (Thompson, 2021) as well as students whose first language is not English (MacKay, 2020: 7).

Although this approach requires thinking ahead, it is relatively straightforward to implement. It is also worth remembering that minor changes to the uploaded materials can always be made, even after the tutorial has taken place.

Accessible learning materials and teaching structure
Finally, I developed accessible learning materials. I used PowerPoint layout templates (Elias *et al.*, 2018), which are much more accessible than PDFs (Nganji, 2018), ensuring that there were few words on my slides, the font size was big (at least 24) and there was a colour contrast between letters and the background (which is recommended to be pale) (American Anthropological Association, 2023). In addition, I used slides to provide students with activity instructions, which I also provided orally in class.

I structured my sessions in an inclusive way. I began the tutorials with discussing Intended Learning Outcomes (which were also visible on the slides) to help students navigate the new material. Since students with learning adjustments may need support "understanding instructions and the requirements of tasks", which can be done by using "multi-sensory teaching styles", "scaffolding" and "repetition and reinforcement" (Training and Development Agency for Schools, 2009), I started tutorials with a quick revision of the lecture and the previous tutorial(s) and finished them with key takeaways[1]. In this way, I hoped to not only build new content on students' previous knowledge, but also to synthesise the topics covered, as the term progressed.

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[1] Cardon and Womack mention scaffolding as one of the techniques they recommend for facilitating inclusive seminars, however, they only suggest using the scaffolding method for assigned reading (2022, p. 85).

I also used a variety of active learning techniques for different learning styles, including small group discussions, quizzes, peer feedback, role-playing, scenarios, storytelling, and preparing material in small groups. While active learning techniques have been widely discussed in the literature (see, e.g., Anderson & De Silva, 2007; Settles, 2012; Lutsenko & Lutsenko, 2022), it is important to observe their significance for EDI. Cardon and Womack (2022: 81-82) argue that a good inclusive teaching practice is giving students diversified options for participation, which is especially significant for students with mental health disabilities. I also believe it is a good practice to encourage student engagement in international classrooms. This strategy seems to have worked very well in my context, as many students commented on how engaging, interactive, and diverse my tutorials were.
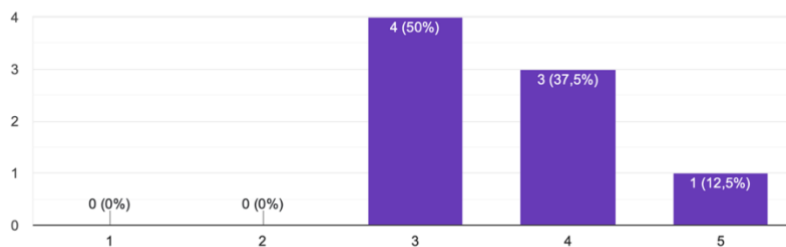
Strategies related to accessible teaching materials and teaching structure are time-consuming, but there are ways to make them easier. A useful tip might be to save a template of an accessible presentation, e.g., in a PowerPoint format, and use it from week to week. The 'scaffolding' technique requires devoting the preparation time to both the 'content' of the class and the pedagogical approach used to teach it. However, it is important to acknowledge that the pedagogical approach is very important for student learning. Hence, I set aside an equal amount of time for the two in my teaching preparation (usually an hour for each). I also found that working closely with other GTAs on the same modules was very helpful, and that sharing ideas with them sped up the process significantly.

Evaluation and lessons learnt

The survey results show that students did feel included and respected. Students' answers to the two closed questions in the end-of term surveys are presented in Figure 2.

Question 6: The pace of teaching was...
8 odpowiedzi

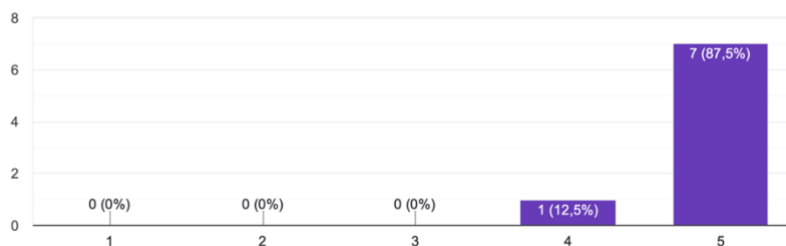Question 8: In the tutorials, I felt included and respected.
8 odpowiedzi

Figure 2. Students' answers to EDI-related questions in the end-of term survey.

7/8 students 'Strongly agreed' with the final closed question, which is the most directly related to EDI: 'In the tutorials, I felt included and respected'. This shows that the practices implemented were effective.

Although the response rate to the survey was low, the results show that the practices were very effective. These findings could be complemented by including questions about specific practices.

Responses to open questions show that the students noticed especially the strategy of accessible learning materials and teaching structure, the 'scaffolding' technique in particular. Answering the first question 'What do you like about the tutorials?' in the mid-term survey, seven students talked about the 'scaffolding' technique as well as 'revision and reinforcement', which they reported made the content easier. A student said:

> 'Revisioning key concepts from the lectures … Well organised content and slides (I always know what we are talking about at the moment)'.

The other surveys confirm these results. The 'scaffolding' technique used in the tutorials as well as diverse teaching methods, including active learning techniques, were also mentioned by the students in the module evaluation form. One student explicitly mentioned the availability of the slides:

> 'I appreciate … the ability to access the slides if the tutorial is missed'.

In the mid-term surveys, three students talked about feeling safe, welcome, and included, which is also the case for the other surveys. One of my students said:

> 'Feels like a safe space to give your ideas'.

Another student mentioned the 'personal' approach in the tutorials, while yet another said:

> 'We are encouraged to express our opinions'.

A student also appreciated a closer contact with the tutor resulting from the smaller group size than the lecture:

> 'it's a smaller group, you have a more direct contact with the teacher and the students'.

A lesson to be learnt from the survey is about the pace of teaching, which is also related to EDI, albeit more indirectly. While half of the respondents were happy with the pace of teaching, the other half felt that it was fast, which shows that adjustments are recommended in future. One of the ways to address it is to monitor students' feelings about the pace of teaching multiple times during the term. This is, however, related to broader issues of the length of tutorials and overall module design.

Conclusion

This paper addressed the insufficient EDI training among GTAs identified in the literature by proposing five practices GTAs can implement in their classroom to create an equal, diverse, and inclusive learning environment. Results from student feedback surveys show that the practices were effective, as students felt included and respected. Students commented the most explicitly on accessible learning materials and teaching strategies. I have argued that this strategy is time-consuming, but I have provided tips on how to make them easier to implement. Although the students did not comment on

the other four strategies, they all responded that they felt included and respected, which can be linked to all the strategies implemented. Further study is needed to evaluate their effectiveness more directly.

This study has shown how significant the role of GTAs is in implementing EDI principles in HE. It has also shown that the classroom is a particularly important area where EDI practices can be implemented, as the classroom comprises a significant portion of student university experience. I have argued that it is essential to design the teaching in an inclusive way regardless of whether individual students have or have not declared a disability or condition, as this can help students feel included, respected, and empowered. It is helpful for GTAs to work together to support each other in developing inclusive pedagogy. GTAs need to be supported by module leaders and departments by not only providing sufficient EDI training, but also by establishing close cooperation. This can not only lead to integrated and coherent EDI strategies, e.g., inclusive module designs, but also help to address EDI issues timely and efficiently.

Acknowledgements

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