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The Fluidity of Graduate Teaching Assistants: Role-Playing and Experiential Learning in Teaching and Research

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Abstract

Professional identity in academia is negotiated at the intersection of personal agency, institutional structures, and pedagogical practice. Although identity negotiation remains dynamic even for experienced academics, it is particularly complex for Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), who occupy liminal positions as student researchers and seminar tutors. Prior research has examined GTA workload and role conflict, but a methodological gap remains in understanding how GTAs develop pedagogical judgment through experiential learning across

their multiple roles. This paper explores how GTAs role-play academic identities as instructors, researchers and emerging scholars through role-fluid experiential learning engaging as part of informal professional apprenticeship. Drawing on reflective autoethnography from three international GTAs with over one year of teaching experience in a UK business school, the study applies the four stages of Kolb's experiential learning theory (2014) to examine how teaching development unfolds as cyclical experience through concrete experience, reflection, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. Our reflections show prior experiences inform constructivist, student-centred pedagogy. Using analytic vignettes, we arrived at three main themes: student engagement, performative flexibility, and cultural adaptation, each demonstrating how experiential learning shapes pedagogical agency. Through this process, early performative teaching evolved into intentional pedagogical design and identity development. The study extends GTA identity scholarship by showing how GTA identity is shaped through fluid, experience-based learning and informal developmental work, rather than only through formal training, workload, or role-conflict accounts.

Keywords: Kolb's Theory, Pedagogy, Reflectivity, Graduate Teaching Assistants.

Introduction

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) occupy a liminal position within higher education, situated between studentship and academic labour. This ambiguity often renders their professional learning both intensive and under-theorised. While existing scholarship has explored GTA workload, role conflict, and pastoral needs (Bridgeman & Barbas-Marcroft, 2024; Oluyide, Mazimbe & Adeyemo, 2025), far less attention has been paid to how GTAs learn to teach and develop pedagogical identities through everyday teaching practice. Research on GTAs has predominantly focused on structured mentoring programs, practicum experience and theoretical training (Campbell, 2024; Lu, 2024). Schmidtlein (2025) explores the role of teaching circles as structured peer-support environments not only to foster mentorship but also encourage reflective teaching practices and create inclusive spaces for ongoing development. However, Schmidtlein (2025) points out the need for transfer theory (Perkins & Salomon, 2018) and constructivist teaching (Bransford et al., 2005) for GTAs development; given that GTAs are constantly transferring learning and sense making across student, researcher, and teacher roles. As GTAs actively build knowledge, we need to uncover GTA liminality and identity negotiation which could provide further understanding of how GTAs navigate their dual roles as students and instructors, particularly in handling authority, and pedagogy skills.

This paper aims to understand how GTAs develop pedagogical skills and construct their professional identities through the fluid role-shifting involved in being students, researchers and teachers simultaneously in a UK business school setting. Drawing on Kolb's experiential learning theory (2014), this paper conceptualises our teaching development as a process of concrete experience, reflection, abstract conceptualisation, and

active experimentation. We used a reflective autoethnographic methodology to trace our moments of successful and failed teaching and sense making. Rather than processing teaching competence as a static skill set, this paper frames GTA pedagogy as an evolving practice shaped through three themes; student engagement in UK seminar settings, the adaptation of our teaching persona and strategies (performative flexibility), and the influence of misalignments between UK academic norms, students' prior educational and sociocultural experiences on both student behaviour and our pedagogical decisions (cultural adaptation). This paper proceeds by outlining the theoretical framework, methodology, literature and vignette analysis, followed by discussion and conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

Learning theories have been developed across behavioural (Watson, 1913), cognitive (Bruner, 1960) and experiential (Dewey, 1986; Kolb, 2014) perspectives. Recent articles have explored the use of Kolb's theory in supervision (Gordon, 2022) and entrepreneurial education (Taneja, Kiran & Bose, 2022), and a teacher's education model (Mechouat, 2024) as a psychological process that advances traditional learning beyond the use of textbooks. As shown in Figure 1, Kolb (1984) posits four stages of learning: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation; and its application to GTA pedagogical practice and identity formation. Existing studies show this cyclical approach has been adopted in medical training and entrepreneurial education. As exemplified in Wijnen- Meijer et al. (2022), medical training is grounded in clinical exposure where practitioners engage in real patient interactions (concrete experience), reflect on diagnostic decisions and outcomes (reflective observation), integrate biomedical

knowledge to refine judgement (abstract conceptualisation), and apply revised approaches in subsequent cases (active experimentation). Competence emerges through repeated cycles of action, reflection, and adjustment within high stakes, relational environments.

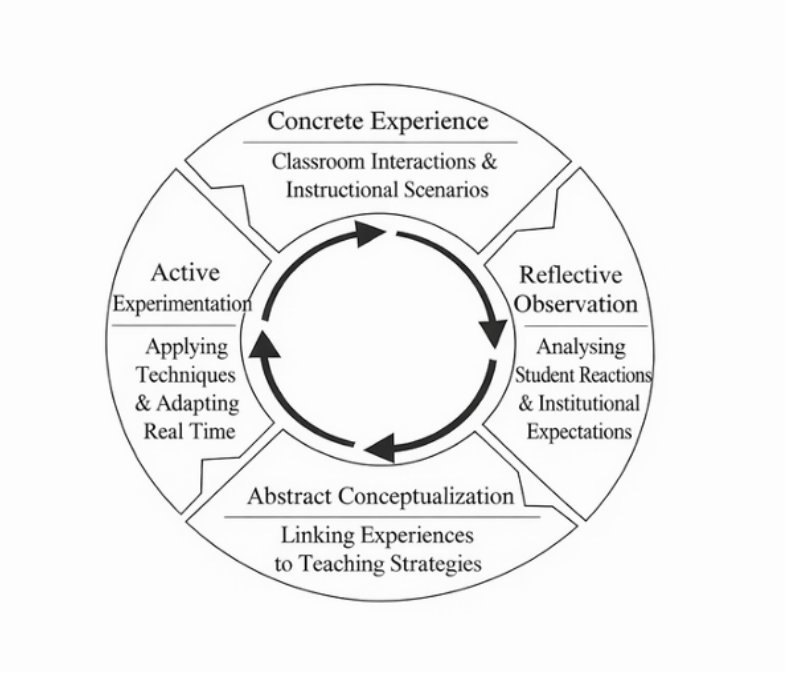


Figure 1: Connecting Kolb's Learning Cycle to GTA Pedagogical Practice & Identity Formation (Source: Authors' computation)

Entrepreneurial education follows a similar logic. Taneja, Kiran, and Bose (2022) states that entrepreneurs test ideas in uncertain markets (concrete experience), evaluate feedback from users and stakeholders (reflective observation), develop strategic insights or business models

(abstract conceptualisation), and iterate through new prototypes or pivots (active experimentation).

GTA pedagogical development operates through the same experiential structure. Teaching occurs in live classroom settings characterised by ambiguity, diverse student needs, and institutional constraints. Though in a disintegrated fashion, Gordon (2022), Sun (2023) and Rosetti (2023) indicates that GTAs engage in classroom interactions (concrete experience), interpret student responses and tensions around authority or inclusion (reflective observation), translate these insights into pedagogical strategies such as scaffolding or culturally responsive teaching (abstract conceptualisation), and implement these strategies in subsequent sessions (active experimentation). Unlike in medical training and entrepreneurial education, the layered interconnectivity of these stages is underdeveloped in GTA pedagogical practice. Using Kolb's four-phased theory in pedagogy skills, and identity formation, this paper explores GTA experiential learning as a model of performative and developmental teaching. The interconnectivity of these stages is fundamental to develop GTA pedagogy given its cyclical approach to facilitate behaviour, cognition, experience, and perception of a learning process. The next section is a literature review of scholarly works on broader engagement with GTA pedagogical development and identity formation.

Literature review

Starting a PhD programme is often associated with progression into academic teaching roles; others emphasise research and Graduate Assistantship as non-conformity with a universally teaching "traditional" expectation (Lee, 2019; Lu, 2024; Park, 2025, Schmidtlein,

2025). However, GTAs have potential to impact learning and retention of many undergraduates, yet Freeman, Bleiler-Baxter, and Gardner (2026) anchored their psychological needs of competence, autonomy, relatedness from a self-determination perspective. Through follow-up surveys, Freeman, Bleiler-Baxter and Gardner (2026) reveals teaching program development strengthened GTAs relatedness with faculty and peers with diminishing returns on their teaching autonomy. From another perspective, Campbell (2024) examines GTA identity renegotiation in third space within institutional frameworks. Campbell (2024: 4) describes third spaces as a "site of cultures, communities and identities to come together and jointly reach innovate insights." For GTAs, initial exposure to teaching often begins with attendance at teaching-skills workshops or basic preparatory classes; however, their value depends on how pedagogical skills are meaningfully linked to personal experiences. Nonetheless, their ability to create multiple teaching reference points enables learners to encode, store, and retrieve knowledge more effectively (Froehlich & Rogers, 2022). In the absence of extensive university teaching experience, one of the most effective ways for GTAs to impart knowledge is through performative and liminal positioning between teacher and student roles (Gomila-Grau, Quesada-Serra & Bertrán-Tarrés, 2025). This makes it imperative to theorise how GTA role fluidity and liminality shape both pedagogical practice and professional identity formation.

Existing scholarship assesses GTA role negotiation and identity formation. For example, Bridgeman and Barbas-Marcroft (2024) explore how GTAs balance teaching, learning, and research, offering insights into how inter-role and intra-role facilitation shapes future academic trajectories. Similarly, Sun (2023) evaluated how international GTAs negotiate identity through flexible agency and resilient liminality. While these studies adopt role and identity-focused autoethnographic approaches, as Graduate Teaching Assistants, our

experiences are drawn to deepen how pedagogical practices are developed within the liminal space of simultaneously being student, teacher, and researcher. As discussed above, effective learning requires the creation of multiple reference points. This process is closely tied to how GTAs draw on their prior experiences as student researchers. Imparting knowledge therefore requires structured teaching activities, such as adaptive questioning and prompts. These are integrated into a real-time pedagogical design approach to support learners with diverse abilities, educational backgrounds, and learning trajectories (Ghaith and Awada, 2022). This pedagogical orientation recognises that learning is uneven and relational rather than linear, particularly within diverse learners. Through our personal narratives, we extend this literature by reflectively exploring how our pedagogical skills are shaped by experiential learning. Drawing on our existing autoethnographic research, the following section explains the methodological framework used in this study.

Methodology

This study draws on reflective autoethnographic accounts of three international GTAs with over one year of teaching experience in a UK business school. Autoethnography is epistemologically appropriate for this study because it enables situated knowledge production, making visible the embodied, relational, and often unspoken dimensions of GTAs liminal academic work (Campbell, 2024; Lu, 2024). As shown in Figure 2, using a self-constructed questionnaire (Appendix), we critically reviewed our teaching experiences and developed a metacognitive understanding of how we learn to teach most effectively. Then, this culminates to a framework of episodic and reflective data through peer-to-peer discussion and shared reflective notes.

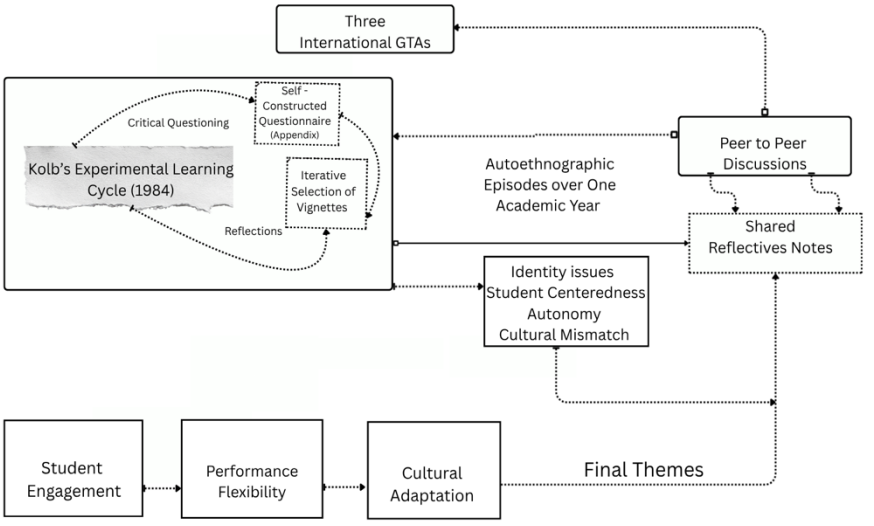


Figure 2: Reflective Autoethnographic Framework (Source: Authors' computation)

Thereafter, we used vignettes in an iterative pattern to unpick our experiences over the academic year; each author independently coded their reflections, and these were co-constructed using an inductive, thematic analysis approach. The vignettes are constructed in the first person and analytically organised around the four stages of Kolb's experiential learning cycle to interrogate lived experience. The following section explains our findings and analytic vignettes from our teaching experiences; highlighting how Kolb's experiential learning cycle applied to the three themes we uncovered.

Findings

Lamy's Vignette on Student Engagement

Following Kolb's theory, my concrete experience started with who and how I relate with others. My first seminar focused on identity formation, using embedded lecture slides and personal photographs from relatable moments, including informal social settings. This approach also sought to affirm a gendered dimension of my positioning by signalling that international GTAs are as knowledgeable as home-based GTAs. While this initially appeared to be an effective way to start a class, it did not generate sustained student engagement. While in Kolb's second stage of reflection, this may indicate a tension between how I was institutionally profiled and how I sought to enact my academic identity. In what became a figment of abstract conceptualisation, I recognised the need to integrate my pedagogical persona (Goffman, 2023) more deliberately into each seminar. In doing so, I situated my teaching identity to reinforce authority and visible leadership support. While I sustained this stage, I actively experimented with different teaching styles, sometimes as front stage performance for role playing and identity formation.

I recount another experience of adopting self-regulated strategies (Kitsantas et al., 2025) commonly associated with doctoral supervision, such as goal setting, monitoring progress, and identifying gaps in my doctoral research (Mechouat, 2024). Reflecting on my PhD journey, student researchers are signposted to relatable academic resources and peer learning networks to mitigate educational and cultural learning disparities. In teaching, I mirrored a similar pedagogical approach using guided questioning, think-aloud techniques, and iterative feedback loops to support the same learning outcomes at different levels of readiness (Santillan, 2023; Hasani, Mohseni & Mowlaie, 2024) in the classroom.

Linking to abstract conceptualisation, differentiation scaffolding thus emerges as a central pedagogical mechanism within my experiential cycle (Santillan, 2023; Hasani, Mohseni & Mowlaie, 2024), enabling support for diverse learners while simultaneously developing my professional judgement and instructional confidence. Grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development (Chaiklin, 2003), I used scaffolding as a temporary instructional support to enable learners to perform tasks beyond their current level of competence, with responsibility gradually transferred as mastery develops. In another teaching technique, differentiation extends this logic by accounting for variation in learners' prior knowledge, confidence, linguistic repertoires, and educational trajectories, and by adjusting content, process, and modes of demonstration accordingly (Puntambekar, 2022). To actively experiment with my differentiation scaffolding techniques in the next seminar, I encouraged students to provide anonymous feedback on their learning outcomes. These insights were used to recalibrate activities, pacing, and examples in subsequent seminars, reinforcing teaching as an experiential learning process.

Ann's Vignette on Performance Flexibility in Teaching

My learning as a GTA has been most visible this semester while teaching seminars on a business simulation module. Without formal training, I first based my teaching on what I had seen from experienced lecturers and my own past practice. I moved around the room, gave light feedback, and encouraged students to explore ideas independently. However, after a few sessions, I started to feel a tension between looking confident and helping students learn. Many groups kept changing the same variables, such as marketing, while ignoring others like operations or research. Several students asked if they were "doing it right," which reflected my own doubts about whether I was teaching effectively. I felt present but not fully engaged in teaching, as

if performing the role rather than doing it. In response, I created a simple checklist that required each group to work through every department. This idea came from one of my master's professors who used checklists when our groups got stuck. That small change began a learning process where discomfort and experimentation helped me grow as a tutor.

Reflecting on this experience showed me how much self-doubt influenced my teaching. I began to wonder if my "hands-off" style was truly student centred or if it was a way to avoid authority. The students' uncertainty about "doing it right" mirrored my own doubts about teaching correctly. This is a common experience for new teachers who struggle with legitimacy (Stewart & Jansky, 2022). Reflection helped me turn anxiety into something useful. Taking time after each seminar to write and think allowed me to see discomfort as a signal for change rather than failure. After using the checklist, I moved more purposefully, asked focused questions, and felt more confident directing students' attention. Reflection turned uncertainty into practical action and helped me claim authority in the classroom.

Over time, I realised I had mistaken "student-centred" learning for leaving students alone. True independence, I learned, still requires structure and guidance (Campbell, 2024). I also noticed how lecture materials and norms positioned me as a background helper rather than an active designer (Mathers et al., 2021). Viewing resources as flexible tools helped me respond to students' real needs. My research on decision-making and feedback also influenced this shift. I began to see seminars as live experiments where I could observe, adjust, and learn from what worked (Bale & Anderson, 2024; Sun, 2024). Now, I prepare adaptable tools like checklists and discussion prompts and ask students what helped or confused them. Each successful change builds my

confidence and sense of purpose. I now see teaching as an ongoing process of reflection, structure, and adaptation (Godfrey, 2024).

Elma's Cultural Adaptations for Active Learning

Like many GTAs conducting postgraduate seminars, I commenced the role devoid of formal pedagogical training and was anticipated to implement active learning norms. A typical characterization in the UK context through noticeable verbal engagement, discussion-oriented interaction, and unprompted student contributions. (Quinlan et al., 2024; Park, 2025). Consequently, my early seminar designs reflected dominant active learning assumptions, privileging open-ended discussion and visual mind-mapping. In this instance, my seminar cohort predominantly comprised of South Asian students. Shared cultural reference points with students and concern about how UK institutional expectations of "active" engagement translated into this classroom further influenced the teaching environment.

The initial session was characterised by collective hesitation, prolonged pauses, and shared silence. Drawing on the cultural familiarity with restrained classroom participation, I resisted interpreting this response as disengagement or pedagogical failure. Instead, I analysed how students' behaviours were shaped by cultural norms, power relations, and situational unfamiliarity. Careful observation and limited verbal participation were understood not as indicators of weak learning, but as culturally situated strategies for navigating academic hierarchy and uncertainty. In the absence of formal pedagogical guidance, culture functioned as an informal learning framework through which students and tutors jointly negotiated the meaning of active learning (Chang, 2024).

Subsequent reflection shifted my focus from classroom interaction to interpretation. As instructors, the perceived mismatch between my intention to promote active learning and students' modes of engagement unsettled my confidence. These internalised expectations of respectful attentiveness conflicted with the UK institutional norms privileging vocal participation. Surprisingly, I observed that the students mind maps show substantial conceptual engagement with the learning resources.

Foregrounding abstract conceptualization, classroom silence does function as a strategic response to authority, risk, and evaluation rather than disengagement, especially within culturally hierarchical learning contexts (Chiang, Brooks & Chen, 2023). These experiences illuminate broader dimensions of GTA work, where teaching is shaped by liminal positioning, emotional labour, and ongoing negotiations of authority rather than formal status alone (Javed & O'Brien, 2024). Consistent with Sun (2024), my experience highlights how international GTAs often establish pedagogical legitimacy through reflective sense-making and cultural translation rather than through performative conformity to dominant teaching norms.

Through active experimentation, I shifted my discomfort towards analysing the assumptions shaping the UK learning environment. Drawing on my dual positioning as a GTA and international student, I recognised that expectations of participation were informed by shared cultural learning histories. Engagement was expressed not only through verbal contribution, but also through attentive listening, observation, and careful task execution. This understanding aligns with culturally responsive teaching scholarship (Abdalla & Moussa, 2024) which emphasises that participation styles are culturally mediated and that pedagogy is more effective when adapted to these contexts rather than applied uniformly (Chuang, Shih & Cheng, 2020). My revised

practice represents a culturally mediated approach using active experimentation of Kolb's theory in subsequent seminars.

Discussion

Across the three narratives, we collectively articulate experiences of anxiety and self-doubt in our roles as GTAs particularly in relation to facilitating learning without formal pedagogical authority. Although these tensions manifest differently, they are connected by shared patterns of reflexivity, experimentation, and pedagogical skills. In the business simulation context, one narrative captures the experience of being "present yet pedagogically inactive," while another interprets collective silence and hesitation as a misalignment between dominant active learning expectations and a culturally diverse classroom. On identity formation, author's creativity shows how relationality and authority are modelled through personal images and storytelling.

Aligning with Kolb's experiential learning cycle , our concrete experiences are narrated as unrefined first person experiences in the classroom, reflective observations are made through guided prompts, cultural norms feedback loops (Campbell & Hansen, 2025); abstract conceptualisations are integrated through theoretical framing and exemplars (Hasani, Mohseni & Mowlaie, 2024); and active experimentations are enabled through culturally responsive teaching, iterative tasks and graduated autonomy (Wijnen-Meijer et al., 2022). These practices were particularly salient in GTA-led teaching contexts, where formal pedagogical training is often limited and teaching competence develops through practice, reflection, and experimentation (Rossetti, 2023).

Initially, our teaching style was performative, triggered by past experiences, shadowing of experienced instructors and mentorship. Nonetheless, Lamy and Elma's vignettes, differentiation–scaffolding and cultural translation contribute not only to student learning but also to GTA professional identity formation. It shifts teaching from performative delivery towards intentional pedagogical design, activating the experimentation stage of Kolb's learning cycle in a student-centred manner. Over time, this process fosters confidence, pedagogical authority, and professional agency (Devi & Thendral, 2023).

Our peer-to-peer review reveals that our liminality is a constructive resource for developmental labour while effective teaching requires a shift from performative delivery towards intentional pedagogical design. The fluidity of roles is reflected in our performance towards pedagogical agency, echoing scholarship that conceptualises GTA development as recurring cycles of observation, adaptation, and role negotiation (Devi & Thendral, 2023; Mechouat, 2024). Through this reflective exercise, we identified our personal insecurities such as self-doubt, anxieties, and novice teaching skills towards developmental labour phased to become a professional in higher education.

Conclusion

In business school settings, teaching is largely practice-based learning requiring student engagement which remains a relevant context for Kolb's learning theory. Contrary to most faculties, the business school prioritises visible engagement as a proxy for learning, creating a learning environment where GTAs must perform authority, clarity, and engagement in real time. Technically, this sets the UK business schools

learning environment apart from other faculties. Against this background, this study extends Kolb's experiential learning theory by demonstrating that GTA pedagogical skills develop through modelling of prior-experiences, tension, and feedback embedded in everyday teaching practice rather than through formal training alone. Our findings on student engagement, performance flexibility and cultural adaptation connects GTA pedagogy development and identity formation. In addition, we identified role-playing drawn from tacit doctoral supervisory skills to align teaching with evolving performative skills and intentional pedagogical design. Our strategies included intermittent pauses, partial responses, rotating spokesperson roles, and modelling contributions before gradually withdrawing instructional support. Collectively, our reflections reposition GTA teaching as a form of professional apprenticeship characterised by emotional labour, role negotiation, and active experimentation. By theorising everyday pedagogical practice as developmental labour, this study provides a novel exploration of how GTAs learn to teach within their liminal academic roles as a student, researcher and academic tutors. Future research might explore the pedagogical advancement of GTAs across various disciplines and institutional settings, analysing the influence of teaching environments on identity formation and the role of experiential learning frameworks in professional development in higher education.

Competing Interests
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Ethical clearance / Data Availability.
This article is a reflective piece which centres on authors' professional experiences, observations, interpretations and relevant literature, which is appropriately cited. As the article does not involve human participants, personal data or primary empirical research, formal ethical approval is not required.

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Authors' contributions
The main idea was conceived by the first author while all the authors contributed to the analytical methods and overall paper development. The vignettes in the study are all authors' contributions. Hence, vignette names are pseudonyms and identifying details have been altered to protect authors' confidentiality while preserving analytic meaning.

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Appendix.

Stage 1: Concrete Experience
Were you exposed to any learning experience throughout the training?

Critical questioning
What counted as a learning experience in the absence of a structured training?
How were early teaching encounters shaped by uncertainty, mimicry, or role playing?
How did institutional ambiguity produce informal learning spaces?

Stage 2: Reflective Observation
Did you develop confidence and competence through training?

Reflexive use
How did you interpret student reactions, feedback, and silence?
What forms of self-doubt or legitimacy questioning emerged?
How did reflection mediate emotional labour and authority?

Stage 3: Abstract Conceptualisation
What learning experiences affected attitudes, perceptions, and sense of competence?

Pedagogical framing or Ideation
How did you move from imitation to pedagogical reasoning?
When did teaching shift from performance to intentional practice?
How did theory, marking criteria, or disciplinary norms reframe practice?

Stage 4: Active Experimentation

To what extent were learning experiences effective in developing your teaching skills?

Re-practicing new ideas

What teaching strategies were consciously revised?

How did you test new approaches under institutional constraints?

How did experimentation reshape authority and professional self-perception?