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Riding out the storm: The challenges faced and strategies used when balancing teaching commitments and a PhD

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Although universities were traditionally considered to be low stress environments (e.g., Fisher, 1994), research conducted over the last two decades has indicated that occupational stress is increasing amongst academics (e.g., Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua, & Stough, 2001; Kiman & Court, 2010; Mark & Smith, 2012). Occupational and organisational psychologists suggest that occupational stress occurs as a result of a perceived imbalance between demands in the environment and capabilities of the individual to meet those demands (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Neophyte academics appear to be more susceptible to occupational stress compared with more experienced researchers (e.g., Kinman, 2001). As a result, there is an increasing need to explore the mental health of individuals in the early stages of an academic career (e.g., PhD students). Levecque and colleagues (2017) conducted a study looking at the prevalence of mental health issues in PhD students compared with highly educated individuals from the general population, highly educated employees, and higher education students. Findings from this study indicated that mental health issues (e.g., depression, loss of sleep, loss of confidence) were substantially more prevalent in PhD students compared with the comparison groups, with approximately one third of PhD students being at risk of experiencing psychological distress or developing psychiatric disorders. When considering these research findings, it seems imperative to offer support to neophyte academics, in an attempt to reduce the risk of developing negative mental health symptoms.

The remainder of this article will present the reflections of three Sport and Exercise Psychology PhD students. The reflections capture the challenges that these individuals have faced as neophyte academics and outlines the strategies that they have used to manage and meet these demands. All three students are currently balancing the role of teaching alongside

their PhD research. However, the reflections are offered from a number of different time points in the PhD process. Kate Donnan and Helen Staff are both employed as Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTA), whereby they are expected to complete a certain number of hours teaching on an Undergraduate degree course alongside the completion of their PhD. Kate started as a GTA in September 2016 and is conducting a PhD on the effect of heat and exercise induced fatigue on cognitive function and physical performance during team sport. Helen is currently three years into the GTA role and is conducting research on interpersonal coping within the coach-athlete relationship. Helen Heaviside has worked as a GTA for three and a half years, until recently (January 2017) when she took up a Senior Lecturer (SL) maternity cover post at the same institution. Helen's PhD explores media expectations within sport. Whilst each the reflections focus on three Sport and Exercise Psychology PhD students, it is likely that they can be transferrable to other subjects

The following reflections are presented in vignettes, so as to allow our experiences to be effectively represented in a meaningful, understandable, accessible, and engaging way (e.g., Blodgett, Schinke, Smith, Peltier, & Pheasant, 2011; Erickson, Backhouse, & Carless, 2016). Readers of these vignettes are strongly advised to construct their own interpretations of them, and to consider their transferable nature to their own life experiences. Subsequently, it is hoped that these accounts will help normalise the experiences that other neophyte academics face when managing the demands placed upon them. Whilst the reflections presented below come from Sport and Exercise Psychology students, it is likely that they will be transferrable to GTAs specialising in other discipline areas, due to the similarities in roles and responsibilities held by GTAs across a wide range of disciplines.

Reflections

Setting Out in a Storm

Kate. Approximately a year ago I was told I had been successful in applying for the GTA role. I was elated with the news and eager to start as soon as possible. Though as more time went by, the more anxious I felt. Not only was I committing to a completely new position, I was moving 260 miles from my home where my family and friends remained. My previous institution had been relatively local, so this was a big step for me. I think this choice reflected how enthused and passionate I felt about the opportunity. Since starting the post, I have put myself under pressure to continuously display progress and meet deadlines within my independent research, whilst also preparing for and delivering seminars with quality and enthusiasm. This perceived pressure has been escalated through feeling a need to prove myself within my first year of employment. In recognition, I have been encouraged to be open about how I am feeling and seek support where needed. This support has contributed significantly to the successful completion of my first academic year, and has predominantly been provided by my fellow GTA's, supervisory team, and head of subject (HOS).

Helen S. September 2014! It seems so long ago. I was a budding PhD student given an exciting career opportunity to develop myself within the academic world. I do not think the daunting task I was about to embark on had even played out in my head. I was so excited, this was it, the next step to where I wanted to be. However, I still had an MSc to complete in the next few weeks. This unfortunate crossover period was possibly my saving grace, as it limited the time I had to sit and worry about my up-and-coming teaching responsibilities. Before I could take the time to imagine what was expected of me, I was already planning the delivery of multiple sessions to undergraduate students. This possible avoidance approach, is something I have adopted over the past three years. It is not something I necessarily advocate or recommend, but it is possibly one of the reasons my head is still above the rising tides.

Helen H. I remember the day that I got offered the GTA position like it was yesterday. I was ecstatic. I was being offered an opportunity to develop my teaching practice

and research skills - both of which I really enjoy doing - subsequently, getting closer to attaining my chosen career. I have worked as a GTA for three and a half years and then in January, whilst still continuing my PhD, I took on a Senior Lecturer maternity post (SL). I have thoroughly enjoyed the last few years, and love both teaching and research, however, I can honestly say that at times it has been very challenging to balance the demands of the PhD, teaching, and my personal life. That being said, I do not think, without these challenges, I would have developed into the person that I am today.

Riding the Waves

Kate. Within my first week on campus, I was informed that I would shortly be taking my first set of seminars. As a relatively reserved individual, this was a daunting prospect. I had never taught before or engaged in any form of teacher training, so it felt very much as though I was 'being thrown in at the deep end!' However, this was not necessarily a bad way to approach the GTA role. In the past, I have often found myself procrastinating with tasks that made me anxious, which has often meant that I have missed out on opportunities to develop. One example was avoiding an opportunity to discuss and present my research at MSc level. However, throughout the GTA process, I have begun to understand that engaging in those tasks which take me out of my comfort zone will subsequently increase my self-confidence. Instead of contemplating the aspects that could potentially go wrong, I can now focus on the outcomes of what completing each task will bring. This allows me to associate my teaching activity with a sense of achievement, and has contributed to my outlook and enjoyment of leading seminars. Speaking to fellow GTA's who also had to ride these waves encouraged this change in perspective. They reassured me that these initial apprehensions were not unusual, and I was able to see how far they have come a year or two from where I currently stood; this kept me motivated to maintain this momentum in relation to my personal and professional development.

Helen S. As a neophyte academic, I am still coming to terms with the demands of the GTA role. In my first and second years, understanding the academic calendar and the tides this creates throughout the year were frustrating and difficult to manage. For example, modules I was expected to teach on were predominantly positioned during first semester, meaning I had a lighter second semester. Therefore, at times during the first semester of each year, I felt like teaching and marking responsibilities came first and my PhD was left to slowly sink beside me. Whilst it seemed like this, on reflection I was reading academic papers daily and continuing a reflexive diary. However, during those tidal waves of first semester, these tasks felt insignificant at the time. It must be noted, this approach was not something advocated by external support, but my own personal pressures to excel in both job roles. However, my third year became a time for clarity. It was here where I began to understand, with the support of my supervisory team, that those papers I had been reading daily, and reflections I had been writing, were in fact part of the PhD process. It turns out that the PhD had not been sinking at all, but had been riding the waves with me, providing the sanity I needed when busy with teaching and marking responsibilities.

Maintaining the Ship's Course

Kate and Helen S. Time management has been challenging. When we both initially took up the post, we found it difficult to manage the time between the teaching commitments and our PhD research. It, therefore, took time to understand the approaches which were most suitable to maximise our work productivity. One approach which we have both found useful is to block out certain days within a week for either teaching or research commitments (e.g., three days teaching, two days research). This has allowed us to make clear distinctions between the roles and enabled us to focus on specific tasks throughout the day rather than trying to juggle both. Ultimately, by utilising this approach we are able to block out time to work on our independent research, rather than trying to manage the demands of both teaching

and research simultaneously. However, this approach was only feasible through the support of our supervisory teams and management. Keeping our supervisory teams informed when our teaching load becomes heavier (e.g., marking) ensures that they are able to provide us with adequate support. We would therefore encourage other neophyte academics to have regular conversations with their support networks, to support appropriate adaptations such as blocking out time for the PhD, which can really help to systemise the working week.

Helen H. At times I have found it challenging to balance the multiple responsibilities of my role with my PhD. Within the GTA role I was able to block days where I could focus solely on my PhD. However, in my new role, due to higher teaching commitments, this has not been possible. That being said, I feel that teaching alongside my PhD has been beneficial for my work productivity. Specifically, teaching has broken up my PhD commitments allowing me to take a fresh look at it and focus my full attention on it, when I get the opportunity to do so. In addition, it has made me really appreciate the time that I have for my PhD and I see that time as being precious; this has enhanced the enjoyment I experience whilst conducting my doctoral research. I still try to protect time for my PhD where possible, although during some weeks my teaching commitments are much heavier than others, making this impossible. Therefore, I have learnt to be more efficient, using any time that I am not engaged in teaching responsibilities to work on my PhD research. During that time, I make sure that I am giving the research my full attention. I liken it to the pomodoro technique (see Nöteberg, 2009), but rather than working 25 minutes and then having a complete break from work, I work on one task (e.g., teaching related) and then I shift my attentional focus onto a different type of work (e.g., research related). For instance, if I have one hour between teaching, I use that hour to immerse myself in my research. Therefore, I set myself a task and I make sure I meet that task in that time. I have found this approach really useful to reduce procrastination and increase work productivity. Additionally, having a daily “to do” list has

really helped me keep focused during those times and subsequently increased my work productivity.

From Skivvy to Skipper

Kate. As a neophyte academic, it has been invaluable to observe experienced staff deliver seminars on modules on which I teach. This has become part of my seminar preparation. Therefore, to enhance my own practice, I frequently observe a range of seminars and lectures to understand the delivery style others adopt within their teaching. I have often subsequently adopted these styles within my own practice. For example, at the beginning of term, I had difficulty with student engagement during group discussion tasks. Following observation, I implemented other materials such as post-it notes, whiteboards, and flipchart paper for groups who were particularly reserved with one another. Utilising these approaches encouraged group discussion and meant that I could extract answers and perceptions from a wider group of students. Peer observation is not only valuable for the observer, but also the observee. During the latter half of the teaching year, I invited my HOS to observe one of my seminars. The feedback I received following the seminar was extremely beneficial. I was praised for my openness to engage in the process, and hearing the positives that he had taken from my teaching increased my confidence immensely. It confirmed that I was doing well, and removed any doubts I had about my ability. Equally, the constructive criticism gave me specific points to work on – overall helping to improve the quality of my delivery in seminars. Senior staff members regularly offer their time and support with these processes, and knowing first-hand the benefits, I would recommend taking part in peer observations throughout a teaching role.

Helen H. Recently, employers have scrutinised PhD graduates for not having the required skills and knowledge for certain employment roles (e.g., teaching; Wilson, 2012). Therefore early on in my GTA role I engaged in as many opportunities as I could to ensure

that I developed the skills and knowledge that I require for my future career. For example, whilst working as a GTA, I completed a Postgraduate Certificate of Academic Practice. In addition, I was a research assistant on a project which has looked at different pedagogical approaches and how they can influence student engagement as well as develop employability skills. I have also attended numerous internal and external pedagogical conferences and workshops, and have engaged in many peer observations. I have found these opportunities have developed my teaching practice. They have raised my awareness of how different teaching approaches (e.g., use of technology, problem-based learning, immersive learning, gamification) can be used to increase student engagement, but also to ensure that students are better prepared for future employment - both of which I believe are essential requirements of higher education. Although taking these additional opportunities increased the demands I put on myself, I feel that without these experiences I would not have been as prepared for the SL role. When committing to these opportunities, I often find it useful to look at the bigger picture. For instance, whilst I may be busy at one point in time, this experience will support me in future endeavours.

Reflecting on the Voyage

Helen S. When initially starting the role, I had great ambitions to write a weekly reflective piece about my teaching experiences to facilitate my personal and professional development. However, it was not long until other commitments took priority (e.g., PhD research). This does not mean that I ceased reflective practice, but the way in which I conducted it was not conducive given the time constraints I had. Therefore, I have had to adopt new ways to reflect. For example, I often use the time I spend travelling to work as an appropriate space to reflect on my experiences and actions of that day. Additionally, I keep a reflective diary alongside my work diary where I can capture quick thoughts or anecdotes about my experiences. Alongside personal reflections, the peer support network provided at

my institution (e.g., shared offices) creates a safe environment in which I can reflect or share ideas on how to manage various teaching constraints (e.g., student engagement). The reflective journey I have been on over the past few years has shaped my continual development and ensured that I remain in a constant web of learning.

Steady at the Helm

Helen H. One thing I have really struggled with is managing feelings of guilt. I often feel guilty when I am working on teaching preparations, delivery, and marking and not doing my PhD. I also sometimes feel guilty when I am *not* working during out of office hours, such as on a weekend, yet I know others are. But worst of all, I feel guilty when I am working out of office hours and not spending time with my family. I appreciate that I am fortunate to be in the position that I am in today, and to achieve my goals I will occasionally have to work out of office hours, however this can sometimes be difficult. I work in an office with ten other people and a number of these individuals work late nights and weekends. Whilst this might work for them, it does not work for me. I find that if I work 24/7 I am less productive and less innovative because I do not get a chance to take a fresh look at what I am doing, and I am worrying about not spending time with my family. Last year, as part of my personal and professional development, I outlined what I value in life, and whilst I highly value my PhD and teaching, my family and spending time with them comes above and beyond this. In order to be happy in myself and with my work, I need to spend this time with my family, and when I satisfy this need, I find that I am a lot more relaxed and productive when working. So, from my experience, I have found that whilst I occasionally work out of office hours, it is essential for me to plan breaks and time with my family to ensure that I am productive in every aspect of my life.

Being Part of a Fleet

Kate. My support network has been fundamental for my personal and professional development as a GTA. Being open with my supervisory team has enabled them to support me by offering guidance on how I can better manage the pressures of the role. A point that has been reiterated by my team has been to avoid comparing my progress with others, in both my teaching and research activity. Initially, I found it difficult to avoid these comparisons, which at times influenced how pressured I felt. Conversations associated with this have been important in reassuring me of my progress in relation to my self-confidence when teaching and refocusing my priorities to activity that is suitable for my research; instead of considering the stages that those around me are at. Discussing my teaching experiences with my fellow GTAs, HOS, and supervisory team has also helped develop my teaching skills and improved the trust I have in my own judgements of challenging situations. For example, due to having a somewhat relaxed teaching outlook, I found myself contemplating whether there was a need to display a more authoritarian approach to overcome various situations within the classroom (e.g., student engagement). Through openly reflecting upon this with my colleagues, I have come to realise that there is no right or wrong way to approach such situations – and it is a case of working out, over time, what works best for you. This has increased my confidence when managing stressful situations, which in turn has enhanced my focus and productivity within my PhD research.

Helen S. and Helen H. This journey has not by any means been an easy ride. The challenges and demands faced, have at times felt like we were sinking rather than swimming. However, the support offered by our supervisory teams, peers, and management have ensured that we have continued to overcome challenges and learnt new ways of managing those pressures we place upon ourselves. Hearing other people's experiences has helped us normalise our journey throughout this process. Specifically, this support has provided an open and honest space to allow us to share our thoughts and experiences. The combination of

support from a range of sources has made us feel as part of a team, and therefore, we are not left alone to navigate the choppy waters of balancing teaching commitments and a PhD.

Conclusion

In summary, the above accounts offer an insight into the experiences of three neophyte academics riding out the storm of teaching and research commitments. Whilst we are thoroughly enjoying our roles, we have begun to appreciate that it comes with a host of challenges. However, these challenges have presented various personal and professional development opportunities. Based on our experiences we urge neophyte academics to a) establish appropriate working patterns based on the individual's requirements and preferences; b) where possible, engage in both teaching and research development opportunities to prepare for future employment; c) adopt time efficient methods to continue reflective practices (e.g., reflecting whilst travelling); d) establish good relationships with peers, staff, and management to ensure appropriate support is offered; and e) plan breaks into your week to ensure that you have a good work-life balance. The accounts have been presented in a way that allows readers to consider the transferable nature of them to their own life experiences.

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