

Cultivating accessible learning communities: the role of GTAs and small group teaching

Introduction

Small group teaching (SGT) can provide a valuable and collaborative space for community construction as well as impetus for creative exploration of course themes.

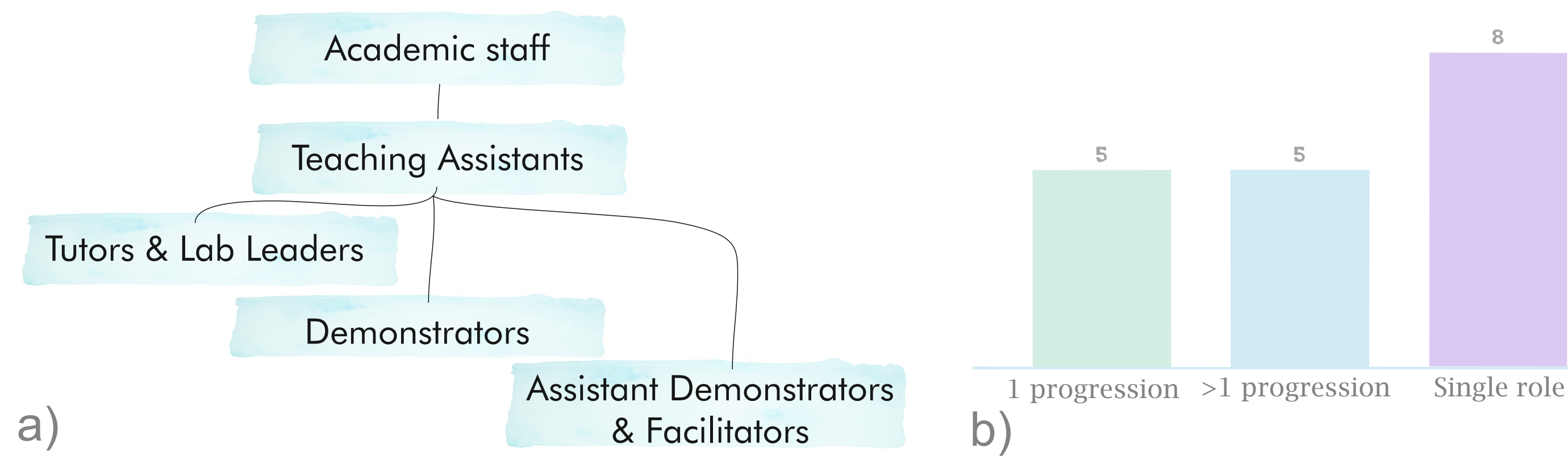


Figure 1. a) Structure of GTA teaching involvement in the School of Geographical and Earth Sciences. Figure adapted from Mathers et al (2021). b) GTA progression through roles (n=18) in GES academic year 2020/21.

As highlighted by Muzaka (2009), the flexible approach of GTAs to delivering course material has great strengths in the small group setting, providing collaborative, adaptive and student-centred environments. The diversity of our GTA cohort (Figure 3) in Geographical and Earth Sciences (GES) compliments this flexibility and is key in constructing and maintaining effective learning spaces.

The GTA support and progression structure in GES (Figure 1) is key to developing the confidence and independence that underpins our model for iterative teaching development (Figure 2) which empowers student and GTA voices within the community of practice.

We reflect on a positively-received year of online tutorial and lab-teaching, foregrounding the value of GTAs in achieving this. Utilising local examples from SGT contexts, we offer a framework to increase opportunities for student and GTA involvement in curriculum co-design, working towards an inclusive learning environment.

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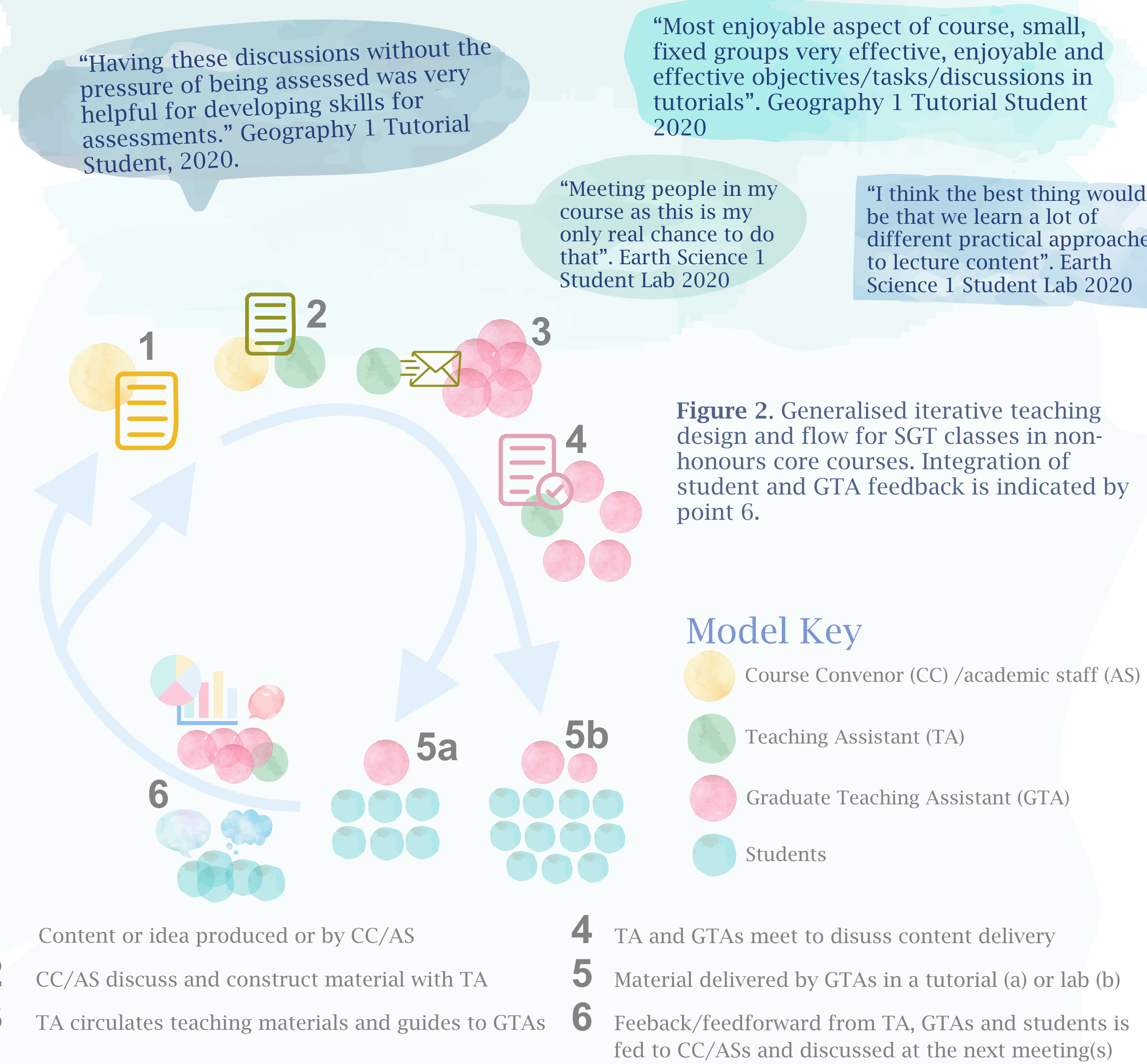
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Student Community & Learning

Collaborative & Creative Learning Spaces

- GTAs can be more open than other staff, as highlighted by Muzaka (2009), to trying new teaching styles and tools in their practice, with a more flexible approach in delivering course material. This in turn allows tailoring and shaping of content to suit the needs of the class group dynamic.
- Tangible valuing of student feedback and opportunities to voice opinions and motivations in a permissive environment leads to value co-creation (Dollinger et al., 2017) and addresses Kreber's (2007) 'ideas that matter' mode of teaching - environments and dialogues are designed to hold meaning for students.
- The co-created etiquette of these spaces develops a critical and reflective approach to learning practices and individual motivations.
- Collaborative creation of safe spaces with peer accountability fosters a 'no stupid questions' permissive atmosphere echoing the notion of "tolerating ambiguity, showing authenticity and empathy" as suggested by Karagiannopoulou and Entwistle (2019, p.1).



Spaces for academic apprenticeship

- SGT spaces support sub-year group communities which provide consistent structure and signposting for student development and course progression.
- Students appreciate these spaces for skills development through active learning practices and collaborative endeavours e.g., role-playing, debates, group presentations.
- There is comfort for students in the provision of specific objectives and positive pressure in terms of clearly delineated expectation echoing the guidance of Mills and Alexander (2013).
- Key concepts and issues from the lecture course can be worked through in a low-pressure environment where difficulties can be expressed with fear of shame or criticism.

GTA Community & Development

- Teaching in an interdisciplinary School (Figure 3) GTAs cannot be subject experts in all topics. GTAs are empowered to disclose their authentic teaching identity in the safe spaces of small group teaching classes. GTAs utilise their 'vulnerability' as a strength working with students using first principles to learn together. As discussed by Karagiannopoulou and Entwistle (2019) tutors who encourage meeting of minds are "tolerating ambiguity, showing authenticity and empathy" traits highly valued by students who "feel more comfortable contributing to discussions when environment is supportive" (GTA for Geography 1 Labs, 2020).
- Teaching teams and teaching meetings are the core scaffolding of GTA working in GES (Figure 2). Diversity in GTA experience is embraced in iterative course redesign: experienced GTAs can inform on previous issues with materials/ student engagement, supplemented by fresh student-centred perspectives of new GTAs who are unfamiliar with content.
- Discussion-based teaching meetings allow integration of a diversity of perspectives to teaching approach and activities and builds GTA confidence in the adaptation of material to suit their preferred delivery in small group teaching.
- SGT in labs involves co-teaching which facilitates informal mentoring of junior GTAs by those with more experience. GTAs can progress through roles (Figure 1) with increasing responsibility and pay grade at a largely self-determined rate (once requisite experience is attained).
- Working as a GTA provides an alternative identity, authority and community for postgraduate students many of whom lack a supportive research group and/or may be new to the School, University or country (Figure 4).

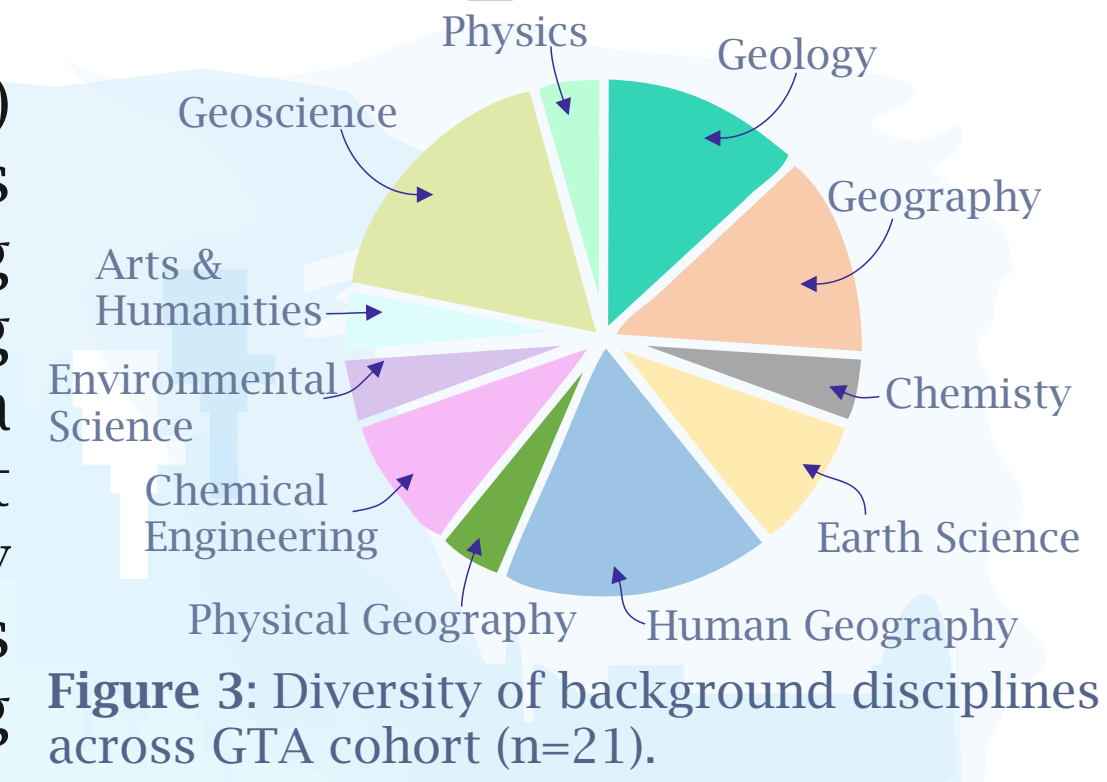


Figure 4. Word cloud generated from surveyed GTAs on three words which best describe their teaching over the last academic year.

Teaching= really helpful in structuring my schedule and organising research. Labs= great for meeting other GTAs. I wish the courses were longer so these virtual ties could be stronger and we could engage the students more in smaller groups. (In regard to teaching in Ges in 2020/21). Anonymous GTA

"It has helped me feel more connected to students and even more so to teaching staff colleagues, as well as part of the school". (In regard to teaching in GES in 2020/21). Anonymous GTA.

"I think it's provided a strong virtual community. It is always nice to see and chat to people and meetings and work with someone more closely in labs etc." (In regard to teaching in GES in 2020/21). Anonymous GTA.

"Groups are excellent, for engagement and answering each other's questions, even sharing resources". (In regard to teaching meetings). GTA for Geography 1 tutorials

Take-home messages

- Small group teaching settings can:
- Be highly valuable, for student and GTA development, when designed as collaborative and explorative spaces.
 - Offer safe spaces for students and GTAs to display vulnerability, question learning practices and explore individual positionality and motivations.
 - Foster student self-efficacy through collaborative design of class etiquette and cohort accountability.
- GTAs can:
- Deliver consistent high-quality learning experiences if provided with continual, appropriate and dialogic support from peers and supervising staff.
 - Enhance School-wide teaching practice through embedding reflexivity in course design and delivery.
 - Develop deeper understanding of teaching pedagogy through flexibility in, and responsibility towards, small group teaching activities.