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# JOURNAL OF Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice

## Engaging With Liminalities and Combating Toxicity: A Compassionate Approach to Developing Professional Identities for PhD Students Who Teach

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### ABSTRACT

The nascent compassionate turn in education demonstrates the importance of contesting market-driven narratives of Higher Education. A key way to position compassion at the centre of Higher Education is through academic development. Compassion is particularly relevant to the training needs of PhD students who teach; they inhabit a liminal position, as both students and teachers. This is one of many stressors and difficulties they are likely to encounter whilst developing their professional identities, and so they are likely to benefit from a focus on both self-compassion and compassion for their own students. This case study describes a new course for doctoral candidates, 'Establishing a Teaching Persona', at a UK university; the training focuses on both compassion and identity to better prepare PhD students for teaching in Higher Education. In doing so, it also offers a consideration of the utility of compassion and identity exploration in academic development for all teaching staff in Higher Education.

**Keywords:** Compassion; identity; doctoral student; teaching PhD students; academic development.

### Introduction

Waddington (2016) argues for the necessity of compassion in Higher Education (HE) to counter toxic environments, particularly in the context of academic practice development. This harmful side of HE is particularly evident in the case of PhD students who teach: in the precarity of their employment status (Zheng, 2018) and related feelings of being overworked and underprepared; in the requirements to present an authoritative teaching identity against a backdrop of their imposter syndrome (Knights & Clarke, 2013) and lack of autonomy around how or what they teach; and in concerns about their own future status and careers (Adsit, 2015). This paper offers a case study of a new course, 'Establishing a Teaching Persona', at City, University of London (City). This training encourages doctoral candidates who teach to develop compassion, for both themselves and their students, throughout their process of becoming a HE educator (Callary et al, 2012). The course aims to achieve this through an explicit focus on compassion, involving collaboration with a counselling professional, and discussions of compassion and emotion (Edwards & Ashkanasy, 2018) in relation to teaching and academic identities. Whilst a compassionate approach to students is likely to promote an atmosphere that is beneficial for learning, it is the practice of self-compassion that will enable PhD students to thrive despite the potential toxicity of their teaching situation. This paper thus aims to explore the need for an academic development approach focused on compassion and identity, the potential of such a course to develop compassion, and to reflect on the experience of teaching its first iteration.

### PhD students and teaching

Afonso (2014) has argued that academia is like a drug gang – involving an “expanding mass of outsiders and a shrinking core of insiders” (p. 1). This would position PhD students as the corner pushers; as their numbers increase (HESA, 2018), eking out a meagre existence on unreliable wages (Acker & Haque, 2015), their chances of moving up into a secure academic position diminish. I am conscious of the reminder by Cuthbert and Molla (2015) that “the over-supply argument draws on largely unexamined assumptions about where PhDs are best employed” (p. 37); nevertheless, many graduate students are keen to seek academic employment. The stress caused by this and other aspects of graduate study has been attested for some time (Rocha-Singh, 1994; Stubb, Pyhältö, & Lonka, 2011; Grady, La Touche, Oslowski-Lopez, Powers, & Simacek, 2014). Current PhD students experience the intellectual challenges of academic study at the highest level (Mowbray & Halse, 2010; Carter, Kensington-Miller, & Courtney, 2016) and writing an extended thesis demonstrating originality (Brodin, 2018) and expertise (Casanave, 2018); in addition, they are advised to develop abilities to make them stand out at application or interview stage in their potential academic careers (Duke & Denicolo, 2017) – such as organising conferences, outreach activities and teaching. Teaching experience is recommended to bring doctoral candidates closer to a lecturership, but it is also important either as an extra source of income, or a studentship requirement. Thus, teaching is frequently a central part of the PhD experience (Burge, Godinho, Knottenbelt, & Loads, 2017), with a UCU (2018) report stating the high numbers of PhD students employed on an hourly basis, especially in research-intensive pre-1992 institutions. Without adequate



support, teaching can become a further strain for doctoral candidates, especially if they feel pressure to excel in order to secure future academic employment in a competitive environment.

### Training PhD students to teach

In recognition of the potential for teaching to add to an already stressful situation, many UK universities offer training for PhD students (Fisher & Taithe, 1998; Chadha, 2013; Truvert, 2014), with some requiring the completion of a particular course or qualification. The institution in this case study is no exception. The first module from City's MA in Academic Practice (MAAP), entitled 'Learning, Teaching and Assessment' (LTA) is a mandatory requirement for PhD students in the term they start teaching, unless they gain exemption through a prior qualification. LTA also enables students to gain Associate Fellowship of the HEA. As the educational development team's experiences indicated that the needs of PhD students were different from those of other teaching staff, a new lecturer role was established, with specific responsibilities for supporting the teaching of PhD students across City. I began in this role in January 2018 and commenced a fact-finding mission. This involved informal interviews with 24 PhD students and academic staff, representing each of City's five schools.

The desire for practical material was repeated by all PhD students. The topics requested included behaviour management; encouraging attendance and engagement, especially if their sessions were seen as optional by students; interpersonal skills; and building resilience to deal with the emotional impact of teaching. They perceived that it was not appropriate to ask about these issues within LTA and so still lacked confidence about teaching after the course. Most of the doctoral candidates felt very anxious about teaching and wanted training well before they started. However, because HEA accreditation requires evidence of teaching practice, LTA participants are now asked to attend only in a term where they already have teaching arranged; this also means that they can put ideas from the course into practice. Imposter syndrome (Bothello & Roulet, 2018) was a concern of many doctoral candidates, which was increased due to the liminality of their status between student and staff, and for most, due to their youth. PhD students felt they lacked the authority to manage a classroom and were unsure about how to position themselves or decide on their new professional identity, linking this to a lack of self-esteem. These concerns about identity also caused anxiety, with doctoral candidates wanting reassurance that they did not need to imitate their supervisor or other colleagues' teaching styles. This was exacerbated by a feeling that they needed to perform well at teaching immediately. Subsequently, they desired a space to share worries and understand that other people have similar concerns.

Beginning teaching unsurprisingly emerged as a clear stressor for PhD students, with uncertainties about basic elements and a lack of confidence to express any doubts or fears to academic staff. Doctoral candidates also experienced conflicts about their developing professional identities: in some situations, firmly positioned by the university as a student, and then in others, expected to perform as a university teacher or lecturer. The aspects of constructing a professional teaching-identity articulated during the informal interviews, which focus on emotion and relationships, relate to compassion. Not only did these students require an additional exploration of issues related to learning and teaching, but they also needed to be able to develop compassion both for themselves and for the students they would be teaching.

### Compassion and PhD students

Compassion is most commonly defined as involving two key components: observing suffering and taking action. There have been significant recent efforts to raise the issue of compassion in education. White (2018) argues that "we may think of compassion as the heart and soul of education and we should treat others with compassion and teach them what compassion is" (p. 75): clearly articulating a nascent compassionate turn in education. In the UK, the marketisation of HE has led to the prevalence of what Gibbs (2018) describes as the "business metaphor" (44.5) for universities. A compassionate approach is, therefore, needed to ameliorate the effects of a system where students of all levels are under a myriad of pressures (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013). These strains range from financial (Richardson, Elliott, Roberts, & Jansen, 2017) to the demands of curricula that still often remain hidden (Killick, 2015; Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018): despite sterling efforts of many HE staff, significantly including the emerging profession of Learning Developers (Hartley, 2011). As both students and teachers/ potential teachers, doctoral candidates are exposed to these student anxieties, but also those of UK teaching staff: to meet metrics imposed by university league tables, the National Student Survey (NSS), and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). These metrics predominantly demand attention to aspects of teaching that are immediately measurable, rather than those that might provide a real insight into learning (Spence, 2018). In turn, they place an emphasis on the quantification of student satisfaction through module evaluations, despite a growing literature that questions the links between these and learning (Uttl, White, & Gonzalez, 2017) as these measurements often do little than confirm students' existing biases towards maleness as a marker of a good educator (MacNell, Driscoll, & Hunt, 2015; Wagner, Rieger, & Voorvelt, 2016).

Embarking on a HE teaching career thus entails engaging with a toxic atmosphere of judgement from the outset. Compassion is, therefore, essential to reset notions of competition amongst teaching PhD students and the potential to view students as consumers. This can be achieved through the ability of compassion to increase a sense of community (Frost, 2000). Of course, many doctoral candidates are already some of the most supportive and committed HE teachers I have come across, often with a fierce concern for their students' wellbeing. This dedication, however, frequently comes at the cost of their own welfare, which is why both aspects of



compassion need to be attended to: for themselves and for their students. Indeed, Waddington (2018) has demonstrated the benefits of self-compassion for academics in terms of psychological health, arguing that it also “helps facilitate the learning process” (211.3). If compassion is viewed as a professional attribute (Maxwell, 2017), it can be adapted specifically for PhD students who teach, building on research into professional compassion in both HE and healthcare settings (Taylor, 2011; Crigger & Godfrey, 2014; Billas, 2017). Whilst not specifically addressing compassion, the Senses Framework for Postgraduates Who Teach (Burge et al., 2017) examines emotions in the context of developing professional teaching identities for PhD students, emphasising the importance of belonging and feeling valued. The teaching course in this case study explores the links between compassion and professional identity negotiation. It thus extends the Senses Framework by offering an insight into the benefits of a more compassion-focused approach for developing the teaching practice of doctoral candidates; this will have wider implications for academic practice in HE as an emphasis on compassion is likely to also benefit others.

### Creating the new course

An initial consideration was how to respond to the PhD students’ need for additional focus on the practical aspects of teaching as well as identity and compassion. One option was an alteration to existing compulsory training, the LTA module. This would be slow to implement as it would involve the university’s internal processes and also a re-accreditation with the HEA. Additionally, I felt that LTA’s focus on learning, teaching and assessment in the context of research and reflection was important, and that a significant adjustment in content would not be beneficial, especially considering the full range of participants (a range of teaching academic and professional staff, both internal and external, as well as internal PhD students). The option to alter LTA to respond to the doctoral candidates’ extra requirements was, therefore, rejected. Similarly, LTA enables PhD students to interact with participants with a range of experience and backgrounds in teaching. I believe that this peer learning is valuable (Boud, 1999), and so it would not be advantageous to remove the requirement for doctoral candidates who teach to take this module. Therefore, I decided to offer additional training. This could have taken the form of an additional module of the MA in Academic Practice (MAAP). Due to the existing structure and credit organisation of the MA, PGCert and PGDip, this would need to be at least 15 credits. I recognised that requiring doctoral candidates to undertake an additional level 7 module with an associated assessment during their PhD studies would be likely to lead to them feeling overburdened, exacerbating rather than ameliorating their anxiety. Instead, the course was established as optional, with no formal assessment, and of a shorter duration than the taught MAAP modules. The course was designed to be taught over 1.5 days: one full day of teaching and activities, and a micro-teaching activity the following morning. As many of the concerns which emerged from the informal discussions with PhD students centred on issues of identity as well as compassion, these were used as lenses through which teaching was examined. The course title also came from one of the students who participated in these conversations: Establishing a Teaching Persona (ETP). The course was advertised to all PhD students from June 2018, in two initial iterations, in September 2018 and January 2019, indicating that it was specifically aimed at people with limited or no teaching experience but that PhD students at any stage were welcome. Numbers were capped at 33 for each iteration, with a waiting list begun when the September version became fully subscribed. Final numbers for September were 21, as some students cancelled just beforehand or did not attend on the day.

The course was structured around different aspects of developing a professional identity, as follows:

#### Day one (full day)

- The teacher as part of HE in the UK (lecture and discussion about contexts and introducing ideas about compassion for students)
- The teacher as planner (lecture-based, about structuring sessions, and building on a compassionate approach to learning)
- The teacher as gatekeeper (lecture and discussion about hidden curricula, academic literacies, cultural competencies and university support services)
- The teacher as a constructed professional identity (Lego activity, introducing concepts of self-compassion and dealing with a potentially toxic environment)
- The teacher as one of many identities (discussion about managing multiple identities)
- The teacher as an authority (discussion about imposter syndrome, credibility, behaviour management, student engagement)
- The teacher as compassionate (section taught by counsellor, about the neuroscience of compassion, self-compassion and including a short mindfulness meditation)
- The teacher as relationship builder (discussions about managing discussions in a compassionate way)
- The teacher as a specialist (world-café style opportunity to explore specific kinds of teaching)
- The teacher as learner (Q&A with PhD students and recent PhD graduate with substantial teaching experience)
- The teacher as presenter (lecture and discussion about presentation skills and exploration of the micro-teach for day two)
- The teacher as reflector (lecture-based, about the importance of reflection and communities of practice)

### Day two (half day)

- The teacher as performer (teaching a short session to peers and an educational developer; receiving and giving peer feedback)

### Compassion and Establishing a Teaching Persona (ETP)

As compassion entails attention to suffering, and the desire to alleviate this, one aim of the course was to provide a space for ETP participants to reveal and discuss their concerns around teaching and the formation of this new professional identity. ETP included an activity which asked participants to reflect on their identities as teachers, and how this aspect of the self might be developed. This task encouraged them to move away from a conception of identity as static and unchanging that White (2018) argues is in opposition to a truly compassionate approach, which entails a “reorganisation of our whole being” (98.6-101.2). The activity utilised a playful approach, involving Lego, as this has been associated with creativity and self-expression in the context of identity formation (Hayes, 2016; Peabody & Noyes, 2017; Tseng, 2017). Participants were first asked to make a model representing the kind of teacher they would like to be. They then combined their models with another person’s, and finally created a composite model with the other people on their tables.<sup>1</sup> During this process they discussed their ideas and decisions and also considered the barriers which might prevent them from becoming this kind of teacher, and how these might be overcome.

The model building enabled participants to think about teaching and their persona in a different way. An act of creation also drew their attention to identity as a continuous process of becoming, allowing them to become more comfortable with liminality. Furthermore, emphasising the possibilities for playfulness and autonomy empowered them to move away from potentially toxic concepts of identity, imposed upon them by HE structures or the perceived expectations of others. The initial focus on their own model provided time for individual reflection, and combining models fostered a collaborative and communal concept of identity. This was intended to encourage them to relate to each other and themselves with compassion – acknowledging the suffering resulting from their fears about teaching and meeting internal or external standards. Discussing the components of a model permitted them to articulate emotions at a remove, meaning that this was less traumatic, and allowed participants to open up to each other. Asking the participants to find solutions to potential barriers meant that problems or feelings were not just shared without a resolution. This aspect was crucial given the upsetting potential of these discussions, and the need to attend to the second aspect of compassion: taking action to negate suffering. Additionally, at the end of the activity, a whole group discussion was used to explore further some of the issues, such as liminality and the pressures of contemporary HE, to enable more experience sharing and bonding, and additional resolution of difficulties raised.

Participants’ potential suffering around teaching was also attended to during some more lecture-based components of the session, which covered practical ideas and information. This was intended to provide reassurance for participants so that, whatever their own experience, they understood some essential background about HE in the UK, and City itself. Additionally, a world-café style activity (which involved other academic and professional colleagues) enabled participants to discuss particular types of teaching in more detail, such as labs or seminars, or have a basic introduction to educational technology. This ensured that the material could be tailored, and provided participants with another opportunity to discuss specific concerns. The lecture-style sections also introduced participants to thinking about the potential suffering of the students they might teach. Issues such as hidden curricula and inclusivity were raised, alongside advice about how these might be addressed to contribute to their own ability to reduce the potential harms of HE.

An activity which used a variety of discussion styles (online, whole class, pairs, small and large groups) was also used to explore particular concerns raised by the PhD students in the initial informal interviews (such as engaging students and managing behaviour), and participants were encouraged to find solutions that benefitted both them and the students. Concerns about the liminality of participants’ status again emerged through questions about how to ensure that they were listened to and taken seriously as an instructor. These were explored through an examination of the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to student behaviour, and a discussion of the benefits of establishing clear boundaries at the outset. The participants were also prompted to reflect on the effect of the different kinds of discussions on themselves as participants. Gilbert (2018) has demonstrated how an attention to micro-ethnography of the eye gaze in group work can provide a more compassionate experience for participants and have a positive impact on social belonging and critical thinking. These issues, and how certain kinds of discussion format might act to silence some students or create social anxiety were specifically signposted. Zembylas (2018) argues that for compassion to be functional, it must focus on a common vulnerability rather than a sentimentality. Accordingly, some of the participants’ assumptions about the students they did or might teach were challenged through these discussions: not to provoke pity, but to enable a critical dimension to the compassion that was stimulated in order to emphasise the need to provide a supportive but demanding environment.

<sup>1</sup> The structure of this activity was inspired by a workshop I participated in during the 2018 conference of the Association for Learning Development in HE (ALDinHE) run by Rachel Stead, University of Surrey.



Compassion was most directly addressed through a section taught by a colleague from City's Counselling and Mental Health Service (CMHS). This element focused on the neuroscience of compassion, and self-compassion. Brescini Ludvik (2018) maintains the importance of mindfulness in compassion, and this was directly addressed in a short meditation section. Although a brief outline of something as complex as mindfulness is unlikely to engender significant change in itself, it was hoped that introducing participants to this idea would encourage them to explore it further outside of the session. Having one of the university counsellors teach this section was intended to make a connection between the participants and this service to offer a route to enable this. Indeed, several participants directly mentioned ETP as a motivation to contact CMHS afterwards.

In the afternoon, a Q&A session was arranged with two current (and one recently graduated) PhD students. They were involved as they had direct, recent experience of the kinds of teaching that PhD students are likely to undertake at City, and it was anticipated that ETP participants may relate more easily to others in a similar position. An online noticeboard, Padlet, was set up as a space for participants to enter questions anonymously, as well as Post-it notes being provided on the day for this purpose. Neither of these options was taken up, however, despite Padlet being used for an earlier activity to ensure familiarity; it is difficult to know whether this was because participants were unsure of the remit of the Q&A or that they felt comfortable asking their questions face to face. Questions initially focused on classroom management, but also began to address wider concerns related to the toxicity of HE, such as contractual disputes. Issues of liminality were also addressed, with the panel suggesting that creating a clear divide between themselves as students/ researchers and teachers, through the timing of tasks, was beneficial. One of the Q&A panel was also a union representative, and was able to provide a perspective on the potential for collective action to resist harmful structures in HE. A question about how responsive one should be to student emails entailed a reiteration of the importance of self-compassion. It was noted that a balance between self-compassion and compassion for others was difficult, but could be achieved through managing student expectations from the outset. Although White (2018) contends that compassionate teaching entails "answer[ing] every student's email as soon as you get it" (111.8), I feel that this places too much of a burden on any kind of HE educator. Self-compassion entails a recognition that regular opportunities to distance ourselves from work are essential.

In the final part of the course, participants each delivered a micro-teach session. For timing reasons, the groups were split into two rooms to present concurrently. Participants had 5-7 minutes for the micro-teach, and then received feedback from their peers and an educational developer. The feedback was given verbally, and also each person summarised their comments on two Post-it notes: a green one noting the positive aspects, and a yellow one giving suggestions for development. Having written feedback meant that participants could more easily reflect on it after the session, in a less stressful environment. In the briefing at the end of the first day, participants explored compassionate feedback to enable the micro-teach to provide the 'learning in a supportive space' (662.5) advocated by Boddington (2018). It was also anticipated that the previous day, involving group activities, would have initiated a sense of community which would also make the process less anxiety-inducing.

## Reflection

As this was a new course, I did not want to exclude any PhD students from it, so attendees came with a range of knowledge about and experience of teaching. This was beneficial, as it enabled exploration of real incidents. Yet I was concerned during some of my observations of small group discussions that the participants with more experience were treated as if their ideas and opinions were more valuable. For future iterations of the course, as more practiced PhD students will have already participated, new cohorts are more likely to all be new to teaching, so it will be productive to examine how this affects the dynamic. As participants came from different backgrounds and disciplines, I was particularly apprehensive about the Lego and mindfulness activities, and whether these would be seen as relevant and valuable learning opportunities. Participants were indeed a little hesitant in making a start with the Lego activity, but soon became fully engaged and each student was able to form a model to represent their professional teaching identity. Indeed, many participants continued to play with the Lego during some of the later lecture-based sections and discussions, with one participant commenting afterwards that she found it beneficial to have as a kinaesthetic tool to aid concentration. When observing this task, it was clear that the creativity involved enabled them to develop a more empowered approach to their own liminality; they became positive about the process of becoming involved in a new professional identity, and their ability to shape this. The dialogues that emerged from the model-combining activities and the whole group discussion at the end demonstrated that this had also been a beneficial way of provoking consideration of self-compassion. Sharing concerns about outside pressures on their identity construction facilitated a sense of community and the ability to rationalise expectations or perceived obligations.

In creating this course, a compassionate approach to the participants was essential, as I was raising some potentially troublesome issues which may have increased rather than reduced negative emotions. Indeed, some participants had a mixed response to the mindfulness activity, with a couple stating that it brought up troublesome feelings. These were ameliorated through the counsellor's debrief to this section. I was also conscious of establishing a safe space for sharing throughout ETP, through the use of ground rules, and signposting to relevant further support. Nevertheless, in the next iteration, the meditation will be altered to avoid triggering negative emotions. Additionally, the element taught by the counsellor could be connected more explicitly to the rest of the discussions; this could be achieved by a team-teaching approach, as the counsellor was only present for her section so was less able to easily establish links. Constructing a professional identity which involves compassion is a complex topic, and throughout the day there were moments where I felt that issues were not being fully explored. For subsequent iterations, I will either reduce the amount of material or expand the course to two full days. There was an issue with participants cancelling their attendance shortly before the course or not turning up; only two thirds of the booked attendees arrived on the first day. Although participants were presented with



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a certificate at the end, it is possible that perceptions of the course's informality meant that they were less likely to treat it seriously. It may be beneficial to look into the possibilities for the course to become credit bearing in the future.

Nevertheless, participants of ETP provided a large amount of spontaneous positive feedback about their experiences, verbally and via email. This included praise for "a really useful and enjoyable course" (email correspondence) and another participant who stated: "congratulations for your amazing course. I truly learned a lot these two days" (email correspondence). Many commented at the end that they would recommend the course to their PhD colleagues. Qualitative feedback from a short questionnaire distributed at the end of the session was also positive, with participants specifically praising:

- the focus on compassion;
- "getting to discuss my anxieties";
- "student mental health/ emotional considerations";
- information about engaging students and establishing authority;
- the Lego activity;
- discussion of practical situations;
- interactivity and "the various kinds of activities";
- "the multiple facilitators";
- the micro-teach;
- and the meditation

Suggested improvements included a longer course, a more discipline-specific focus and inclusion of material on discrimination. A full evaluation and exploration of the course's contribution to the development of participants' compassion and professional identities will be carried out through interview research after the second iteration has been taught.

### Lessons learned

The key points to emerge from this course to support PhD students who teach are as follows:

- A creative activity was particularly beneficial to explore a concept of identity as a continual process of becoming, which is associated with compassion. Building representations of the potential-self drew attention to ideas of identity as a construction, and the potential for autonomy in its creation. An associated reduction in participants' feelings of obligation to conform to fixed roles (evident from my observations of the discussions) appeared to relieve some of the particular pressures of the liminal PhD student/ teacher identity. Yet as all staff who teach in HE will be negotiating a multiplicity of identities, this activity is likely to be productive for others.
- The collaborative approach enabled the inclusion of different kinds of expertise and knowledge. Meeting a range of staff, from educational technology and counselling as well as educational development, and other, more experienced PhD students, also encouraged a sense of belonging within the wider university community, attested to by participants making contact with these areas after the course. The section taught by a counsellor also enabled links to be developed between the theory and practice of compassion, in participants' teaching contexts. This potential for collaboration could be usefully exploited in other academic development contexts; indeed, modules on City's MAAP often utilise students and colleagues from other areas.
- Participants approached discussions of compassion and identity with enthusiasm and thoughtfulness, and made substantial contributions. This indicates that a focus on these issues was seen as valuable by the participants. The course explored areas which are not otherwise explicitly addressed, thus providing a space to challenge assumptions, empower participants and offer a counter to the harmful discourses of HE; again, this is expected to have similar benefits for other HE teaching staff.
- Although the non-mandatory status is likely to have engendered a positive attitude towards the course, the absence of accreditation possibly led to participants being less committed to attendance. Further consideration will be given to striking a balance between compulsion and engagement for future iterations.

### Conclusion

The doctoral candidates who participated in ETP benefitted from the focus on a compassionate approach to developing a professional teaching-identity. Introducing the concept of self-compassion, and identity as a process of continual formation, detracted from anxiety-inducing feelings of having to immediately transition into a perfect teacher. ETP's consideration of the narratives of identity construction, examined through the lens of compassion, reveals the utility of a compassion-focused approach for developing the teaching practices of PhD students. Although identity may be particularly complex for doctoral candidates in a liminal position between student and staff, I anticipate that an approach which explores compassion alongside identity formation would be beneficial for other HE teachers. Placing compassion at the heart of academic development would go some way to answering Sahin's (2018) call that "compassion needs to become a central feature of contemporary HE" (391.6). Of course, further



research is needed to explore the participants' own experiences and perceptions of the course, and the impact that it might have on their teaching in HE. Yet an approach which empowers participants to explore their professional identity development in the context of compassion can enable a deeper understanding of the issues encountered by PhD students who teach. It can also illuminate ways in which accounts from these educators, with their unique insider and outsider perspectives, may be used to oppose the harmful discourses of HE.

### Biographies

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