

# Teaching Critical Thinking: A Framework for Graduate Teaching Assistants

## Abstract

This paper argues Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) are uniquely positioned to model a learner-centred approach to critical thinking, mentoring undergraduates in the intellectual, emotional, and social skills necessary to develop as independent learners. Adapting Jenny Moon's pedagogical model (2005), the paper adopts a whole-person approach, taking the view critical thinking is not limited to intellectual skills of analysis, logic, argument, and presentation. It also encompasses the emotional and social attributes required to learn with and from others. Jenny Moon combines all these approaches in a framework which defines critical thinking as; 1) working with complex ideas, 2) offering evidence, 3) demonstrating understanding of how knowledge is constructed, 4) situating that knowledge in context, 5) representing the thinking process and conclusions with clarity and precision and, 6) demonstrating self-reflexivity.

In my experience, critical thinking is rarely taught as a set of competencies that sit alongside, but separate from, subject knowledge. This paper focuses on developing these skills in classroom-based settings, adapting Moon's approach to create an inter-disciplinary framework, linking lesson planning to learning outcomes. These learning outcomes build on students' unique life experiences, encouraging experimentation, building self-confidence, self-reflexivity, awareness of broader social contexts, and the social implications of knowledge. In academic settings (and wider society) where so much cultural capital is invested in performative self-confidence as well as examined "knowledge", this paper argues that, paradoxically, critical thinking skills are best acquired in settings where undergraduates can learn to *enjoy* the risk of uncertainty, experimentation, and the accompanying vulnerability this requires. This liminal space which GTAs are all too familiar with, ideally positions GTAs to mentor undergraduates through this developmental process.

**Keywords: Graduate Teaching Assistants; Critical Thinking; Pedagogy; Situated Knowledge; Liminality; Quality; Teaching; Standards; Lesson Planning; Uncertainty; Risk; Vulnerability**

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## Introduction

This reflective paper describes my early experience as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) and mature postgraduate student returning to education after a long hiatus. More by luck than judgement I found myself on the Associate Teaching Programme (ATP), the University of Lancaster's development programme for GTAs, at the same time I started teaching. As a new GTA I benefitted from the support of both my ATP Tutor and my academic supervisor, who is also an enthusiastic and thoughtful teacher. In conversation with colleagues, it became apparent the support I received is, sadly, not a universal experience amongst GTAs. The happy circumstances of my introduction to teaching allowed me to reflect on my early pedagogical practice, and specifically my new role supporting students in developing their own critical thinking skills.

In this first half of this paper, I argue GTAs are ideally positioned to mentor students through the process of engaging in their own learning and developing their critical thinking skills. I start by making the case for critical thinking generally, then offer a broad definition of what it entails and thus why GTAs are uniquely positioned to support students in this process. In the second half of the paper, I introduce Jenny Moon's (2005) work and then my own iteration of her framework. This framework has helped me in lesson planning, thinking through the needs of each student in my class, as well as responding to the unexpected opportunities and challenges that arise in classroom discussions. Using this framework in preparation for each class has helped me hold subject knowledge and the development of critical thinking skills as separate but equally important learning outcomes. And by making these critical thinking outcomes explicit, I argue we can help students overcome some of the anxieties associated with expressing an opinion, developing an argument, and responding to alternative perspectives.

## The case for critical thinking

Surely the most important outcome in higher education is to develop critical thinking skills regardless of academic discipline; to consider 'what is said and what is not said; what is included and what is excluded, who is represented and who is omitted from the dominant discourse.' A process which empowers students 'to take social action to improve their own lives and the lives of others' (Pratt and Collins, Teaching Perspectives Inventory, 2000). Stephen Brookfield describes it this way: 'As soon as you understand critical thinking to be linked to action you enter the realm of values, because you have to ask the questions, "Action for what?" and "Whose actions do we want to support?"' (2012: 15).

The Teaching Perspectives Inventory, quoted above, offers five pedagogical attributes of which just one; *transmission*, commits the teacher to developing their own subject and pedagogical skills. The remaining four; *apprenticeship*, *developmental*, *nurturing*, and *social reform*, adopt a holistic approach to teaching, building self-confidence through emotional development and social engagement. In this regard, I consider both teaching and learning to be moral endeavours where, one hopes, right thinking leads to right action.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I paraphrase the Buddhist Eightfold Path here in recognition of how deeply my approach to teaching has been inspired by the work and social activism of bell hooks. Appreciating the philosophical root of hooks' ideas

## What is critical thinking?

When I started teaching, I kept a reflective journal as part of the Associate Teacher Programme (ATP). In my journal, I wrote:

*Critical thinking (like learning to write) is a skill often assumed but less often taught. Reflecting on my own education, I learned to write but was never formally taught grammar (it was out of fashion in the 1970s). I haven't been taught to think critically either. Even though I think I do it, I don't know how I do it and I feel ill-equipped to teach others. As critical thinking is assessed in exams and essays, I want a framework to help plan lessons and develop the independent thinking skills of my students. This seems just as important as subject "knowledge" and providing "objective" critique of students' essays.*

Like Alex Hastie in the first edition of this journal, I noticed 'many students were struggling with some of the more difficult concepts on their modules, with reading academic papers and with developing relationships with their professors and each other' (2021: 39). If we mistakenly assume critical thinking is instinctual, then we compound that mistake by judging students on writing essays and passing exams, without building social skills and confidence in classroom settings where students can experiment without fear of judgement.

My ATP tutor directed me towards Jenny Moon's 2005 paper on the Advance HE website. Moon starts with the question 'How can students engage in critical thinking if they don't know what it is?'

Moon describes how some educational theorists focus on component processes, skills and abilities (Kneale, 2003; Paul and Elder, 2004), for example training in logic (Sweet and Swanson, 2000). This skill-building approach is consistent with a *sequential* or programmatic approach as students develop increasingly complex and sophisticated cognitive structures (Cottrell 1999; Pratt and Collins, 2000). However, Meyers (1986) and Brookfield (1987) caution against a didactic approach, instead advocating for an engaged pedagogy which recognises knowledge is *situated*, and that the development of critical thinking skills is therefore sensitive to students' complex needs and lived experience.

Moon combines both sequential and situated approaches in a framework which defines critical thinking as; 1) working with complex ideas, 2) offering evidence, 3) demonstrating understanding of how knowledge is constructed, 4) situating that knowledge in context, 5) representing the thinking process and conclusions with clarity and precision and, 6) demonstrating self-reflexivity which Moon describes as metacognition.<sup>2</sup>

Critical thinking is, therefore, a dialogical process that involves argument, analysis, and self-reflection. It requires engagement, risk, and vulnerability. As a social process, taking risks

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has helped me to better understand her expansive discourse, refuting tidy separations of the individual and social, material and spiritual, secular and religious.

<sup>2</sup> Moon's complete definition (2005:12) is worth reading in full. Sadly, I don't have space to replicate it in this paper.

and being open to opposing ideas provides a self-reflective opportunity to learn something about oneself, thinking through how knowledge is constructed in dialogue with others. Whilst some students thrive in seminar-settings, others clearly do not. Students have told me they live in fear of being “forced” to participate, even though they acknowledge the “threat” is imagined and not real in most cases.

For teachers, I suggest the problem is three-fold. Firstly, critical thinking requires grappling with complexity. It is therefore difficult to teach. Secondly, we don’t pay sufficient attention to the pedagogical skills required to teach critical thinking skills. Either we wrongly assume critical thinking skills are fully formed by the time students reach university, or that undergraduates develop these skills instinctively through the process of engaging with progressively more complex material. Thirdly, critical thinking cannot meaningfully be taught in a vacuum; it lives within the container of subject knowledge. This, therefore, requires some dis-entangling on the part of the teacher; helping students to understand critical thinking as competencies that sit alongside subject knowledge.

Before I introduce Jenny Moon’s framework for critical thinking, I describe why I think GTAs are uniquely positioned to support undergraduates actively engaging and taking control of their own learning outcomes.

## Post Covid-19: The increasingly important role of GTAs

I started teaching at the same time students returned to the classroom after Covid-19 but one of my colleagues has described “major ramifications” based on her experience teaching either side of the lockdown. As she describes it; “Covid-19 essentially destroyed student confidence when it came to critical thinking. This is a brand-new generation of... [students]. My 2022/2023 class have been overwhelmed with the project of critical analysis and providing evidence” (reproduced with permission, GTA in International Relations, Lancaster).

The effect on mental health from the social isolation and shift to online learning (Akpinar, 2021), along with other global insecurities have clearly affected the post-Covid classroom. A recently published cross-sectional survey of (mostly) British undergraduates reported ‘a large number of students were still experiencing reduced mental health and wellbeing’ because of the Covid-19 lockdown, and ‘it is also possible that returning to in-person teaching and learning could have *further* impacted students’ mental health and wellbeing’ (Liverpool et al., 2023: 3). In this journal, Emma Wilson has argued GTAs can ‘promote a culture of good mental health by incorporating a human element into their roles’ (2022: 38). Conscious of the background anxiety and the lost classroom time, how does one create the necessary conditions of trust for students to successfully engage in the social process of learning *with* others?

The evidence suggests instructor type matters. As ‘student satisfaction is now a major driver of the Teaching Excellence Framework’ (Bell and Brooks, 2019), linked to individual faculty and department performance goals, I believe GTA’s unique position, as neither faculty nor undergraduate, provides us with a relational and pedagogical benefit for the students we teach. Rather than being a poor-substitute for better “qualified” (and better paid) staff, I

argue GTAs offer *complementary* pedagogical skills,<sup>3</sup> enhancing laboratory and classroom based-learning.

A recent survey of law undergraduates described GTAs as “more invested”, “attentive”, and “more accessible” (Ball et al., 2020). The students surveyed by Kendall and Schussler (2012) characterized their GTAs as “relaxed”, “engaging” and “relatable”, in contrast to their “confident”, “knowledgeable”, and “formal” professors. In this journal, Elliott and Marie (2021) have argued GTAs can positively disrupt knowledge hierarchies where students defer to “experts”. Drawing on Haraway’s work (1988) challenging institutionalized, hierarchical, or totalized “objectivity”, Elliott and Marie argue because ‘knowledge is situated [we are] ... answerable for what we learn’ (2021: 74). Critical thinking is dependent on stepping outside knowledge hierarchies, recognizing our *situated-ness* largely drives what we know, what we accept to be true, and what we value to be important. This requires uncertainty is also valued, even though this is counter-intuitive in an environment where we are so often judged on a performative self-confidence and examined ‘knowledge’. How can GTAs contribute to a learning environment where undergraduates *enjoy* the risk of uncertainty and the accompanying vulnerability this requires?

Drawing on work by Cook-Sather and Felten (2017), Elliott and Marie assert GTAs’ unique position can create a learning environment ‘of mutual trust, respect, inclusivity, responsibility... where students can build up their knowledge, creating, resisting, and imagining alternatives... GTAs’ liminality helps them to understand the difficulties of students, while also sharing some of the understandings and positionality of more experienced academics.’ (2021: 76)

As an important sidenote to the main thrust of this paper my own liminal position as a GTA is worth identifying. I am a returner to education after a long hiatus, pursuing (several) careers and raising a family in the intervening decades. I am a white, middle-aged man who *looks* like a career academic amidst the existing hegemonic structures. I am sensitive to how I look, and the degree to which this endows me with a false authority, despite being a begin-again student with a noticeably atrophied ability to remember anything these days. Thankfully, during seminars students happily finish my sentences when my memory fails me, and they appear to enjoy helping me out!

Being white, male and in my 50’s, I am deeply conscious of the barriers to participation I may unconsciously reinforce, and how this affects the teacher-student relationship I seek to develop. GTA colleagues and other early career scholars, particularly younger women, have told me their experience of feeling invisible and unequal partners in the collaborative learning endeavour. In this journal, Zingaretti and Spelozzi focus on the multi-factorial reasons for international students’ experience of exclusion; language, originating culture, skin colour, and socio-economic background, but also argue GTA’s can ‘play a unique role in implementing the ‘small culture’<sup>4</sup>... [with] plenty of opportunities to establish a real connection.’ (2022: 87)

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<sup>3</sup> A point also made by Alex Hastie (2021)

<sup>4</sup> Zingaretti and Spelozzi draw on Holliday’s work (1999) defining a successful classroom as a ‘small culture’ which creates an inclusive, comfortable and safe learning atmosphere for all students.

In the second half of this paper, I suggest a pedagogical approach that can build on GTAs' relational advantage, developing a more collaborative and inclusive framework for classroom learning.

## A learner-directed and partnership approach to building confidence

Whilst it is possible to develop critical thinking skills introspectively, Brookfield (2012) argues students learn best in small groups. They like it when teachers model the process and find it helpful to ground critical thinking in case-studies and scenarios. Brookfield emphasizes we learn most from the unexpected 'aha' moment and the 'disorientating dilemma' (Mezirow 1991, 2000) when we are forced out of our comfort zone. However, fear of the unknown – the disorientating dilemma – makes it hard for students (and teachers) to take risks, often leading to a grim "present but not engaged" atmosphere. How then, can we build group cohesion, trust, and playfulness, as well as individual confidence, to take advantage of the learning opportunities small group learning offers?

The lesson-planning framework that follows, adapted from Moon's 2005 paper, has helped me structure learning outcomes to focus on both subject knowledge *and* social learning activities, building group cohesion and individual self-confidence. By being transparent about my teaching goals: introducing subject knowledge *and* developing critical thinking skills, I hope to develop trust and engagement with the process. Early feedback suggests it offers a partial antidote to the awkward silences and down-turned faces most of us experience as new teachers. It is built on the principle, advocated by both Brookfield and Moon, that the more students can shape their own learning experiences the higher their engagement will be. As opportunities to shape classroom activities are introduced incrementally, students' confidence develops, leading to students shifting their view of teachers as 'expert holders of knowledge to partners in the construction of knowledge' (Moon, 2005: 11). As most GTAs are actively engaged in the critical thinking project of our own research, we are ideally situated to operate from the perspective of and be seen by our students as *partners in the construction of knowledge* in this developmental process.

## A developmental framework for critical thinking

Moon provides a 'tentative set of descriptors for [the] progressively increasing capacity of students for critical thinking and its representation in writing' (2005: 38). The model builds on Baxter Magolda's theoretical framework (1992, 2001) tracing the development of critical thinking through four stages, namely:

- **Absolute knowing** – where students adopt 'right' versus 'wrong' positions.
- **Transitional knowing** – where students adopt more fluid positions about what can be known and what might not be known.
- **Independent knowing** – where students may take a position that everyone has the 'right' to their own opinion.
- **Contextual knowing** – where knowledge is seen as constructed, and where teachers are, at this stage, seen as facilitators and partners in the process.

I have adapted Moon’s descriptors developing a framework which I use to help me internalise the skills I hope to teach, and for planning classroom activities. It is a framework, not a checklist, and cannot be used programmatically. Instead, the framework adopts a constructivist approach (Biggs, 2003) acknowledging that ‘because we all have different knowledge bases, with discrete connections between those knowledge elements, each of us has to scaffold our own learning for ourselves’ (Morss and Murray, 2005: 14). This means that learning outcomes cannot be directly correlated with classroom activities because every student is at a different stage (see above) and that critical thinking does not take place in a vacuum: it is situated within the subject. I discuss this further in the following section.

Introducing this framework to students at the beginning of a course alongside subject goals, may help develop a partnership approach to learning but I stress that it cannot be used programmatically. For the teacher it needs to be internalised, used instinctively and playfully, and can only become this way through regular practice. The current version is shown below:

<p><b>From Absolute to Transitional Knowing</b>  <b>Framing classroom activities around:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Introducing concepts of evidence, evaluation, judgement, and conclusions</li> <li>2) Relating critical thinking to everyday life using case-studies involving everyday tasks in which we seek evidence and make judgements</li> <li>3) Establishing democratic frameworks for discussion; ground-rules for disagreement, modelling disagreeing, and encouraging disagreement</li> <li>4) Discussing different theoretical approaches to the same subject</li> <li>5) Discussing how knowledge is ‘produced’ (publications, media distortion, expert agreement, common usage, etc.)</li> </ol>	<p><b>Learning outcomes:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) Being precise and clear</li> <li>ii) Defining key concepts, verbally and in writing</li> <li>iii) Being able to draw a conclusion from verbal and written evidence</li> <li>iv) Being able to introduce an argument</li> <li>v) Expressing personal opinions</li> <li>vi) Being able to summarise the main points of an argument</li> <li>vii) Describing sources of evidence</li> <li>viii) Understanding referencing as an acknowledgement of other people’s work</li> </ol>
<p><b>From Transitional to Independent Knowing</b>  <b>Framing classroom activities around:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6) How knowledge is constructed (i.e., by following the history of one line of research thinking)</li> <li>7) Disciplinary language and style – the manner in which knowledge is produced, including peer review and sources of distortion</li> <li>8) Over-arching narratives and assumptions in research that have led to distorted judgements/conclusions</li> <li>9) Disagreements between experts</li> <li>10) Case studies where they assess evidence and make a judgement</li> <li>11) Teaching in which issues of real uncertainty are discussed</li> <li>12) Making judgements that have direct significance for themselves or others</li> </ol>	<p><b>Learning outcomes:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ix) Developing self-confidence understanding and using disciplinary norms</li> <li>x) Drawing conclusions effectively</li> <li>xi) Demonstrating critical thinking in writing, using straightforward disciplinary material</li> <li>xii) Evaluating the evidence, argument, and conclusions of one scholar (i.e., “critically examine the argument of....”)</li> <li>xiii) Constructing arguments</li> <li>xiv) Reflecting on strengths and weaknesses in their own writing</li> <li>xv) Seeking evidence creatively, not just using academic references</li> </ol>

xvi) Acknowledging the source of their ideas in written arguments, referencing appropriately

**From Independent to Contextual Knowing**

***Framing classroom activities around:***

- 13) Recognising and challenging assumptions
- 14) Responding to challenges
- 15) A general attitude of questioning
- 16) Focussing on methodology and theoretical models
- 17) Using method to establish context and evidence in building an argument
- 18) Taking responsibility for personal judgements
- 19) Taking responsibility for gaps in knowledge and personal learning objectives

***Learning outcomes:***

- xvii) Evaluating the evidence, argument, and conclusions of multiple scholars (i.e., in a literature review or a “compare and contrast” essay)
- xviii) Developing original positions and situating their position within existing scholarship
- xix) Understanding referencing as a means of judging the quality of a piece of work

In the next section, I provide an example of how I am currently using the framework in my own academic discipline, along with recent student feedback. In my concluding remarks I propose future refinements and circle back to how this model supports GTAs making a unique contribution to the teaching skill-mix.

## The model in practice

The intention is to provide an engaged and supportive learning environment which focusses on emotional and social development as well as an intellectual shift to active learning. Evoking bell hooks (2010); to learn from the heart as well as the head. My own process is to shape classroom activities around opening questions which invite group participation and encourage group cohesion. For example, against classroom activity 4, I might ask “How do we want to work today? Do you want to agree some ground rules for this activity?” Or for classroom activity 19, I might ask “Are there any ideas, concepts or arguments that we have not covered in our discussion today?”. Similarly, I might ask them to work in pairs to summarise learning outcome vi), summarising the main points raised by their peers in the group discussion.

I have found this model helpful as a guide to assessing the needs of the group, if not each individual student. In practice, development through these domains is not straightforward. As new subject knowledge is introduced, we move forwards and backwards, encountering setbacks, and ‘aha’ moments in each class and with each new subject area covered. I acknowledge each student is somewhere in their own process, bridging from absolute to transitional knowing, or from transitional to independent learning, and from independent to contextual knowing. The more students engage with the process, the more likely they are to make incremental progress.

Central to this approach is relating academic knowledge to personal experience, scaffolding more abstract theoretical constructs to judgements formed in everyday life. One of my GTA

colleagues rejects the *tabula rasa*, or blank slate approach, that assumes no innate “intelligence”. She translates this to mean that based on students’ life experience “they already know the answer.” She structures seminar questions to encourage her students to have confidence in their own voice, building trust slowly but also, occasionally forcing individual students out of their comfort zone with a disorientating dilemma. Her approach to learning outcome v) expressing personal opinions, is to “offer a student a question, and if I need to wait three seconds to five minutes, they will, without fail, give me an answer of their own” (reproduced with permission, GTA in International Relations, Lancaster). This approach could undermine trust, but she actively champions the young women in her classes, working against socially constructed feelings of invisibility that were part of her undergraduate experience. The difference in our age and gender allows her to engage her students in a much more direct way. An approach that would potentially have the opposite effect if I deployed a similar strategy.

Our approaches are different not just because of who we are but also who we represent: the middle-aged man and the woman in her late twenties. Nevertheless, we share the same goals: encouraging our students to relate the “abstract” learning goals to “concrete” life experiences, and, as Zingaretti and Spelozzi describe it, creating opportunities for ‘deep learning... when students engage with materials in a personal way’ (2022: 77).

I offer an example from my own field, Indian Philosophy, which may seem “abstract” to outsiders:

*Concepts of Self and Soul are radically different between different Indian philosophical schools, but this has provided the perfect introduction to critical thinking. I have not yet encountered a student who has not already developed a sense of identity, can conceptualize how this knowledge is constructed, and can identify life experiences which shape their perspective. They can relate their own sense of self to different philosophical arguments for and against an ontological Self. This allows students to identify different epistemic frames which determine how knowledge has been constructed. (from my ATP Journal)*

I ask students to write a short piece (200 words) at the beginning of the module on their own beliefs about the Self. I invite them to relate this directly to life experience and/or construct a metaphor based on life experiences. End of module essay questions are framed around concepts of Self or Indian epistemology which gives me a sense of how their thinking and self-confidence as independent learners has developed over the course of the module. Specifically, I look for those instances where a student has moved from quoting others to an engaged position speaking with their own voice, developing their own argument supported by appropriate evidence. One of my students offered this feedback:

*“Seminars had a sense of creative engagement and collective discovery... engagement was encouraged by Nick's suggestions of informal, optional tasks to complete in our own time, with the promise of thoughtful feedback if shared. I found that these tasks really enabled me to escape the rigidity of academic practice and to consider the topics on a personal level. This made them real, bringing the subject to life before applying academic rigour to them. A further aspect... was his open*

*reflection on the learning process itself, something I have found to be conspicuously absent during my time at university. Covering topics such as how to prepare for seminars, the connection between thinking and writing, and how to improve writing quality made a real difference... More than any other course I have taken, Nick's seminars paradoxically gave me the experience of coming to think independently through collective engagement." (2<sup>nd</sup> year philosophy student)*

## Conclusion

In this paper I have outlined a pedagogical checklist, based on Jenny Moon's framework, that can help students understand and develop critical thinking as a set of intellectual, social, and emotional skills that sit alongside subject knowledge. Because these skills require an openness to taking risks and the vulnerability this requires, I have argued that GTAs, who are mostly postgraduates and sit somewhere between student and faculty, are uniquely positioned to mentor students through this process in a supportive environment that models independent learning and a partnership approach.

As I grow more confident in my teaching abilities, I have started to introduce the framework to students, along with Jenny Moon's definition of critical thinking at the beginning of the module, encouraging students to engage with the double vision with which I am holding the module goals: course content *and* the development of their critical thinking skills.

Previously I have only asked for feedback from students at the end of the class, separate to the formal evaluation (which most don't complete). In future classes, I plan to ask them to identify their individual learning goals framed around classroom engagement, independent learning and writing skills alongside the early writing assignment. I will follow this up with a mid-term and with an end-of-term review, asking them to critique their original piece of work. How has their thinking changed? Where are they seeing progress? And where do they need help against their original learning goals?

As I continue to teach, I would like to work with other GTAs who are interested in developing this aspect of their pedagogical skills; to test my prototype framework, reflect on student feedback, and offer a wider range of subject examples. I accept Indian philosophy is its own little niche!

I have argued GTAs are uniquely positioned to teach critical thinking skills, and this may improve student learning outcomes. I believe building pedagogical expertise in critical thinking allows GTAs, and professionals involved in educational development, to advocate for the unique contribution GTAs make to student experience and learning outcomes. My own experience is that institutional support for GTAs varies widely and there is a need to promote awareness of, and participation in, programmes like the ATP. GTAs should insist they have access to professional development programmes. Professional educators should appreciate postgraduates may not have been exposed to theoretical frameworks for critical thinking and should ensure this is a core competency of GTA training.

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