



1

Becoming a Teacher

Welcome to being a graduate student teaching assistant! Your mission is to enhance the education of undergraduate students. This is a challenging and exciting task that is often tinged with anxiety for first-time teachers.

While most graduate students are both eager to teach and nervous about teaching, universities have been slow to provide adequate training programs for first-time teachers. Stepping into the breach, we have written this book so you do not feel that you are starting from scratch. You will learn from your own experiences in the classroom, but we hope that the information in this book will spare you from repeating mistakes that others have already made.

Your department may or may not view your teaching responsibilities as a priority compared to your research and course work. But you should take this job seriously: you have been entrusted with the education of undergraduate students, which is a critical contribution to your department and to your field as a whole.

This chapter will supply some general advice about what to do once you find yourself in a classroom.

“The only advice I got before I started teaching was to erase the board using vertical strokes: erasing the board from side to side makes your butt wiggle.”

Your Teaching Persona

Teaching is a kind of performance, and the person you are in the front of a classroom is in some ways different from the person you are outside of it. Developing your *teaching persona*—the person you become once you step into the classroom—takes time and experience.

Finding Your Teaching Persona

Over time, you will discover whether you, as an instructor, are loud or quiet, funny or serious, a sitter or a stander, a board user or a handout maven. In the meantime, experiment with different approaches until you figure out what feels comfortable and what elicits the best reaction from your students. Don't hesitate to try something that may not “feel like you,” because your teaching persona may turn out to be an unexpected side of you. But do not be afraid to reject suggestions on teaching that you feel your innate personality will prevent you from pulling off (e.g., singing mnemonic devices). You will look uncomfortable and be less effective.

Teaching with Authority

For beginning teachers, there is often a progression from *acting like* you are in charge of the classroom to *feeling like* you are in charge of the classroom. This is normal. Unless you give them reason not to, students will generally accept your authority no matter how you feel about your qualifications as a teacher.

You will start to *feel like* you are in charge of your classroom as you gain experience. Until then, you may find that you rely more on “the rules” (guidelines, due dates, syllabi) and on established teacher-student roles to create a feeling of authority. For example, many teaching assistants start by imitating favorite teachers of their own. As you get more experience and confidence, you will be able to act more natural in your

“As a college student, I was taught by a teaching assistant who looked like she was thirteen years old. Although she looked so young, her confidence, competence, and terrific preparation for class earned everybody’s respect by the end of the first meeting.”

role as an instructor. You then will be better able to be more like yourself while you are teaching.

The Joys of Teaching

While teaching is an additional burden for already busy graduate students, there are several significant pleasures to being a teacher.

Giving Back

Teaching allows you to help other students learn and grow. It also reminds you that you already have a great deal to contribute to the teaching in your field, even if you still have a long way to go in your own education. You spend a lot of your time as a student focused on what you don’t know; teaching helps you remember how much you do know.

Improving Your Own Studies

Teaching helps you to be a better student. You will become more receptive to the efforts of your own professors after you have been on the other side of the desk. Teaching also requires you to learn material more thoroughly than you ever learned it as a student.

Preparing for Your Career

Teaching as a graduate student offers excellent training to those who will go on to become professional teachers. It helps you become comfortable in the classroom and discover your own teaching style.

Expanding Your World

The life of a graduate student can be startlingly narrow. Many graduate students find that most of their time is spent doing very focused research and interacting with a relatively small number of colleagues. Teaching allows you to meet people at the university who are not your classmates or your professors. In addition, it can be a pleasure to feel that you are gainfully employed, even while you are pursuing your own course of studies.

Enjoying the Job

Teaching can be fun in and of itself. It allows you to be creative and enthusiastic. The chance to explore material in your field and your students' curiosity can also fuel your enthusiasm about your own research and your field in general.

The Agonies of Teaching

At some point in your teaching career, you will fall flat on your face. It will probably happen more than once. It may be painful, but you will survive. And you should find it reassuring to know that *every* instructor has had this experience.

Bad Days

You can come to class feeling completely prepared to teach brilliantly and leave wishing you had never gotten out of bed. Take some time to try to figure out what went wrong. Keep notes; you might teach the same course again several years later, and you usually know what you could have done better as soon as you leave the classroom. Learn from this experience, but do not torture yourself about it. Focus on making the next class better.

See pages 200–2 in Chapter 9, Meta-Teaching, for more information on what to do after a bad day.

Bad Courses

This happens. Some classes never gel; the professor organizes the course poorly; the course tries to cover too much or too difficult material; and/or you are not doing your best teaching for personal reasons. It is unfortunate when this happens, and all that you can do is try to figure out what went wrong and how you can improve things the next time.

Bad Class Dynamics

Any teaching assistant with more than one section at a time can attest that some sections work well and some do not. Your first reaction may be to blame yourself when a section does not go

well, but also remember that the students play a key role in an effective classroom too. It may help to try adjusting your teaching style to a particular group of students, but there will always be groups of students who never come together.

Bad Teaching

Your car broke down. A relationship ended. You were up until 3:00 AM grading. You have had five cups of coffee, and you still *cannot* wake up. You will have bad days. It is your responsibility to do your best not to allow outside factors to bring down your teaching. When you teach badly, figure out how you can take care of yourself so that you are in better shape when it is time to teach again. Obsessing about what went wrong will not get you on the road to feeling (and teaching) better.

Maintaining Perspective

If you take teaching seriously, it can become almost life consuming. Class preparation and grading can take up as much time as you allow. And you can wrap up too much of your self-image in your performance as an instructor. A good teaching day can put you on an affirming high, and a bad teaching day can ruin your week. Cherish the highs (they can be a rare treat in graduate school), and focus on reacting productively to the lows.

What Your Students Are Thinking after Class

While you may spend the rest of the week worrying about whether or not your discussion was as lively as last week or whether the diagram you drew on the board was confusing, your students are not worrying about your class as much as you are. Most students are more focused on grasping the content of the material than on observing how you teach it. Additionally, undergraduates also have many other things on their minds besides your course (e.g., the exam they have that afternoon, their attraction to another student in your class). Some students will think about the class after they leave, but if the class did not go well, they may be as likely to

attribute responsibility to themselves or to their classmates as they are to you. Try to remember this when you find yourself overly worried about how the class is working.

“One night at the supermarket, I wheeled my cart into the check-out line right behind one of my students. She looked completely shocked. She clearly believed that I did not exist outside the classroom.”

What You Should Be Thinking after Class

An important part of teaching is learning from experience. When a class goes well, think about what went right so that you can repeat it. When a class goes badly, think about what went wrong but do not kick yourself about it; just fix it. See it as a learning experience, not as a statement about your ultimate abilities as a teacher. Most mistakes can be fixed in the next class. Remember that a bad class session does not make a bad course.

Care about your students and their learning. Also, be kind to yourself: remember that you are still learning too.

Further Reading

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