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**My First Year of Teaching**

**A new Ph.D. adjusts to a faculty job and to a foreign classroom**



*Image: Brian Taylor*

By Rachel Herrmann

I didn’t know what to expect of my first year in the classroom. And as an American teaching U.S. history in England, I didn’t know what to expect of British students. Last fall I walked into a room ready to talk about 19-century diet reform by citing Sylvester Graham’s invention of the graham cracker only to learn that most of the students had never eaten one. Even with many such small differences, I think that my initial year as a faculty member would have surprised me no matter the location.

At the same time, my first few months on the job have sometimes provided a lesson in rediscovering what I already knew. For example, I’ve had to remind myself that although the substance of a lesson plan may look the same from course to course, each class unfolds differently depending on the composition of students present. Last semester my "Revolutionary America" course had two seminar groups, one in the late afternoon, and another with fewer students at 9 a.m. on a Friday. Some weeks the afternoon group was better, and some weeks, the Friday group was more engaged. Techniques that worked for one group didn’t always work for the other, and I had to always be on my toes in the event that discussion fell flat.

Other aspects of teaching have posed thornier and less-familiar challenges. I still need to work on my skills as a discussion leader. Although I had guest-lectured and taught small "how to be a historian" sessions in graduate school, I hadn’t done much seminar teaching. Turns out, I was naïve about how quickly I would be able to build classroom rapport. I suppose I started my first year thinking that although it would be tricky in some hypothetical way, I would manage to replicate the enthusiastic and intense discussions that I myself had engaged in as an undergraduate. I didn’t look ahead much further than that first class, at the start.

It would have been useful, instead, if I had thought about how long it took me to work up the courage to bake a soufflé.

One does not simply transition from eating soufflés in restaurants to pulling them triumphantly from the oven; I had to figure out how to beat egg whites into stiff peaks, how to melt chocolate in a double-boiler without it seizing, how to fold those ingredients together, and how to patiently keep the oven door closed until a combination of my timer and my intuition let me know that dessert was done. I still, on occasion, screw them up, especially now that I’m in Britain dealing with an unfamiliar convection oven and Celsius temperatures.

In a similar manner, good discussion in a classroom does not just happen. I soon realized that I couldn’t just walk in, arrange everyone’s chairs into a circle, and expect students to want to talk with enthusiasm about their reading for the duration of the session.

During the early weeks of the semester, to foster good discussion, I provided verbal prompts in lecture for students to think about before we met for seminar. Then in seminar, I would go around the room and literally ask each student to offer a 30-second comment on the reading, before breaking everyone into groups to get ideas flowing and, finally, coming back together for discussion. Once the semester got under way, we were able to talk effectively as a large group, but I had to lay a solid foundation for that to occur. I’ve come to realize that until I get more comfortable with class discussion, it’s OK to structure my seminars with several mini-activities.

By far the most significant surprise has been the realization that teaching is not like writing a dissertation. That statement may sound idiotic to anyone who’s been teaching for a long time, but although I felt somewhat prepared to teach, I hadn’t considered the extent to which I *wouldn’t* draw upon my research for my teaching.

I don’t neglect exciting quotes or ideas from my research; I use them in class frequently. But students want to hear material presented in a way that is simply different from scholarly writing. Students want statistics that give them a firmer sense of what was happening in the past, or a basic map, or a chronology of events. A representative quote, even if amusing, doesn’t always suffice. They’re also not always comfortable with historians’ tendencies to equivocate. When I offer them both sides of an argument I try to be explicit about the fact that I’m doing so, and I try to point out the ways in which they could use both aspects of my argument if they were writing an essay.

As I move through my first year, I’ve tried to remind myself of the continuing necessity of checking in with students to see how they think the class is going. I try to spend a minute at the start of each lecture and seminar on housekeeping issues, such as concerns about note-taking and recommendations for additional readings. During the weeks before major assignments are due, those shopkeeping moments seem to stretch longer than a minute or two as we discuss essay structure and citation questions.

In the same vein, I now distribute anonymous midsemester evaluations for my students to fill out so that I can get a sense of what they think of my teaching, and how I can improve. I also, however, make sure to ask them what they think about the state of their learning, and what they could be doing to make the most out of the course. I’ve found that waiting until the end of the semester to get their comments, when it’s too late to change anything, can frustrate me as well as the students.

I am also embracing some of the most unfamiliar aspects of British higher education. While I’ll admit that I am not entirely sold on their practice of holding exams in January rather than December, I am really coming to like the concept of "second marking."

At my institution, second marking (marking is what people in the states would call "grading") occurs once all assignments for the semester have been turned in. At that point, three groups of students have their work marked by an additional grader: those students with "firsts" (essentially A’s); those students who are failing; and those students with borderline averages for all of their work (meaning someone whose overall grade falls in between, for example, a B and a C, not someone with a solid B or a solid C). Usually, a third of the students in each course undergo second marking. Afterward, the first and second markers meet to discuss any significant discrepancies and make changes accordingly, and a sample of work is then sent to an external marker from outside of the university. The whole process means that some students’ marks change after they’ve taken their final exams.

I have found that practice extremely useful for several reasons. First, seeing how other faculty members evaluated students’ assignments gave me new grading language to steal, which is always nice when you find yourself repeating the same phrases. Second, it was helpful to get a sense of students’ capabilities at the various levels I had not yet taught. It also offered unique insight into my colleagues’ pedagogies in terms of the types of sources they assigned and the things they expected their students to discuss. Finally, I found it striking and reassuring that even the more senior professors in the department sometimes second-guessed the grades they gave.

I’m also enthusiastic about the fact that my department makes an effort to schedule faculty members to observe each other and to be observed nearly every semester. I’ve found the feedback useful, and as an observer I picked up a few new tricks. One colleague, for example, provides a slide of things he isn’t going to cover so that students don’t expect certain material (though of course he can always delve into those topics later). Sitting in the back of a colleague’s classroom to assess how students were reacting to the lecture made me think more carefully about how to speak to students in the back and the front of the room, on the left side of the classroom as well as the right, and to encourage my already-present propensity to roam around the room as I talk as a way of making sure that students are taking notes on their computers rather than checking email or Facebook.

I have plenty yet to figure out, both about teaching in general and about teaching here in Britain. For example: Assignments here tend to be determined at the department level, based on a student’s year in the degree. That means I don’t get to decide how many essays my students will write for my course. But I do have free rein over the questions I ask them to write about. The lack of flexibility on assignment structure, though, means that I’m still pondering how to get British students to participate in online projects such as writing blog posts and using Twitter, since so few of those assignments would get counted in the assessments that make up their final grade.

I can only tell myself that I will continue to ask questions. Further querying of my students revealed that here in England people eat toasted marshmallows without the added delight of melted chocolate and a graham-cracker sandwich. Although I’ll admit that I find the lack of s’mores a bit dismaying, I’m enthusiastically adopting new desserts such as sticky toffee pudding. And during the end of the semester when I succumbed to the urge to eat a dinner entirely of cheese, I reveled in the sheer variety of European options.

All of which is to say that although differences between England and America remain, teaching would be a quest to devour new information about strategies and techniques no matter the location. A life without graham crackers is a hungry life—and hunger is a very powerful motivator.

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