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ADVICE

Notes for a New Faculty Member

A classroom veteran offers advice that she wishes she'd gotten early in her teaching career



Katherine Streeter for The Chronicle Review

By Jennifer Burek Pierce | AUGUST 29, 2016

When I first started teaching more than 20 years ago, I was a T.A., nervous, excited, and preoccupied by technical details that suddenly seemed important. There were assignments to draft, grading techniques to practice, readings to master, departmental policies to incorporate into my syllabi, and training sessions to attend.

It was easy, in those overwhelming days, to forget why I wanted to be in the classroom to begin with.

I certainly didn't pursue a faculty career because I wanted make and enforce rules. Instead, like most academics, I was drawn to teaching by the compelling talents of my own teachers who brought language and stories to life. In high school, a very elegant English teacher introduced me to Hemingway's spare, sometimes aching prose. One of my first university professors reduced an entire class to helpless laughter with his adroit reading of Mark Twain. I'd witnessed an award-winning faculty member render Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as accessible as if we, too, were hearing those stories along a journey with their tellers.

Yet that first fall — as I sat in training sessions for new teaching assistants — I didn't feel I was learning things that would enable me to become like the faculty who had drawn me to the field. The discrepancy, which I didn't understand how to resolve, left me frustrated and uneasy. These many years later, as another fall semester begins, perhaps some other

new instructors sit in training sessions silently sharing what Ann Patchett once described as "a terrifying hysteria" at "the impossible thought that we would have anything to teach" the students in our classrooms. This is what I would tell them — and my novice self — at the start of a career in the college classroom:

- You will — at times literally — grit your teeth as you are required to assign readings and textbooks you did not choose. You will later select your own course materials, and you will realize that, sometimes, there is no perfect text and that learning can happen even with an imperfect one.
- You will have colleagues who seem to glide through tasks and activities that bedevil you. You will wonder how that is possible. You will envy them. Eventually, you will be glad to know them — whether it's next week when they hand you a lesson plan that reduces your prep time, or a decade from now when they are leading efforts to reform the curriculum and advising. Now and then, they are beacons in the fog. Don't lose sight of them.
- You will remember students' names. You will forget their names. When a student tells you he took another class in your department, you will hope it was taught by your colleague. You will feel a little sheepish when he reveals he took the class with you.
- You will make mistakes. You will be misunderstood. You will not be able to fix every problem or save every student who seems to need saving. None of this is your fault, and it does not foretell your doom.
- You will, entirely inadvertently, set yourself up for a one-liner uttered by one of your clever, playful students. You, too, will laugh. You will learn from them. You will have some students who seem just as capable of running your class as you are, and you will be glad for their provocative comments and insightful questions. Not only will their intelligence and engagement buoy you through a slump, you'll realize their ideas spark your own purpose and dedication. You will realize, as you prepare for class, that the question you're asking yourself is not "How will I know more than X does?" but "What will X say to this idea?" Student X will make your life immeasurably easier.

- You will read the eulogies they write for their parents. You will knit for their children. You will lend them your books. You will feel like Wilbur at the end of *Charlotte's Web*, when the young spiders float away calling "goodbye, goodbye, goodbye," and Wilbur demands that they not abandon him. You will relive that ending year after year.
- You will not always keep up with technology and its every possibility for instruction. You will stop worrying about that. You will learn how to make use of the technologies you do know to best support your teaching. You will experiment. You will hear stories from colleagues whose expertise with tech tools will amaze you, and it may prompt you to try new things. It may also make you realize that someone else is covering that angle, and you don't have to.
- You will be studied. Even before you are conscious of your own habits, students will notice the brand of juice you drink when the morning has been too busy for breakfast, the style of your shoes, and whether you've recovered from an illness or injury.
- You won't share everything you do, and you won't see everything they do, but you will be glad to connect on Facebook one day when they've gone on to their professional lives. If you suffer an incapacitating bout of introversion, you may tweak your privacy settings or your sharing.
- You will keep their sometimes heartbreaking confidences. You will read research papers that reflect their efforts to grapple with health problems of their own or of someone in their family. You will be asked about menopause.
- You will be asked for advice, and you will be capable of providing it. When you are called a fairy godmother and told you have provided some of the most useful advice on graduate education, you will wish you could append those comments to your annual review.

There comes a point in a faculty career where we realize that we have come a long way since our dissertations and first conference presentations, that we did the best we could as beginning scholars, and that we have gained expertise and capability as researchers since then. Our earlier ideas were not wrong — only a beginning, a preliminary to what we have learned and written since then.

Our teaching also improves with time. Our fluency in the classroom is not simply the result of the accumulation of knowledge or the ability to anticipate problems. It is the long transition from emulating our ideals to becoming ourselves.

In the first days, weeks, and semesters of teaching, you need to understand this: You will never be any of the great teachers you saw in front of the classroom during your own education. You will, though, become the teacher you need to be and that your students need you to be.

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