

**CAVEAT NEOPHYTUS: SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR NEW TEACHERS**

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Ten years ago I was hired to teach part-time at St. Francis College, a small Catholic college in Brooklyn, New York. I was a young graduate student at Columbia at the time and the job was my first. The first semester was a harrowing one; by the time I was through it, I was convinced my teaching career was over. The chairman was of little help; indeed, at the time he seemed to me an aloof and absolute despot. On one occasion, when he appeared quite suddenly to observe, I was frightened into silence. Still he must have seen something worthwhile for he continued to invite me back for several years, and colleagues, looking over his observation reports, tried to console me by pointing out that he never found fault with the content of my lectures. My fears were not allayed, however, and I kept thinking: "If only someone had told me what to expect."

I began that first summer not knowing whether I would ever teach again. But I was determined to write some day about what I had learned and share what I had picked up with some of my fellow graduate students. The result, from a decade ago, is the short essay on pedagogy that follows. I think it says things that a beginning teacher ought to hear.

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Anyone who has glanced at position available notices over the past several years is aware of the ever-present qualifier, "Three years teaching experience required," attached to even most junior appointments. Almost everyone wants experience, though few are willing to provide it. The reason for this is simple: Department chairs know that learning to teach can be almost as difficult as acquiring a Ph.D. Yet graduate programs in the humanities usually do not require courses in educational methods and many students complete their degrees without having had an opportunity to acquire teaching experience.

Fortunately, I was hired to teach part-time despite my lack of previous teaching experience. The experience proved time consuming and, on occasion, nerve-wracking, but I learned a great deal. In the process I was forced to revise some initial assumptions about teaching and students. Discussions with teachers and fellow graduate students left me with the impression that many of these assumptions are common to beginning teachers. Yet it seems that some headaches and mistakes might have been avoided had I only been made aware of what to expect.

Some of the more common assumptions are discussed below. While they are all the result of one individual's reflection upon one particular teaching situation, hopefully they are general enough to have value to others starting their teaching careers.

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### 1. IT'S NOT GOING TO BE A BREEZE.

Any experienced instructor—if he is honest—will tell you that a tremendous amount of time and effort goes into writing up lectures for a new course. For those who have yet to write their first set of lectures, the time factor is compounded accordingly. Three hours of teaching does not translate into three hours of preparation. Nor will the standard undergraduate formula of three hours of study for each classroom hour suffice. At the start, one can expect to spend approximately thirty hours a week in preparing a course. It sounds like a lot of time and it is, but if you are conscientious about what you are doing, it cannot be avoided. First, you are reading the textbooks; usually you will read the material twice, once for content and once for note-taking. Then there is the supplementary reading that is needed to add flesh and bone to the marrow of the text. After this comes the task of writing up the lectures. No easy task in itself, it is made somewhat easier if there is an outline of the material in the text. Once this is all done, there remains a further concern: How are you going to interest your students in what you have to say? A sixty-minute monologue repeated class after class can get to be quite boring; or, if you are not the boring type, your silver-toned voice may induce slumber. Diversify your presentation; students possess more than the sense of hearing. Use maps, slides, films, sound recordings, or whatever other material may be available to you. These will not only increase attention spans by adding a certain amount of qualitative liveliness to your class, but get students to use intellectual faculties that might otherwise remain dormant.

As the term progresses and you begin to get a feel for what you are doing (usually around midterm), your preparation time will diminish by about a third. But any change is more apparent than real, for papers and exams are beginning to trickle in and grading them can be just as time consuming as preparing lectures. This task can be cut to the bone by using examinations that can be graded quickly by key or by speed reading students' papers. Students, however, often expect more. They want to know that you care about what they are doing and your remarks are frequently taken as a measure of that concern. Moreover, aside from being a historian, you are also a teacher. That obliges you to take an interest in aspects of your students' work that technically fall outside the scope of a history course. Consequently, you will find yourself called upon to spend valuable time teaching students spelling, the rudiments of grammar and composition, or, on a more advanced level, how to use a library. Granted, it is not what you bargained for, but as Settembrini in Mann's *The Magic Mountain* has said, "We are all humanists with a pedagogic itch."

### 2. YOU'RE THE TEACHER.

For the new Ph.D. or the graduate student serving as an adjunct or T.A., entering the classroom for the first time can cause a great deal of confusion about who you are. The only difference between the graduate student and the new Ph.D. (in this respect) is that the graduate student's position can be strained by his dual status as teacher-student. Apart from this, other things being equal, the graduate student and new Ph.D. may share a common problem: a role-identity conflict.

It is easy for a new teacher to fall into an "us-them" dichotomy, identifying more with the students than with the faculty or administration. After all, he is probably only a few years older than most of the students and has yet to reach thirty. Along with this is the nearness of his own student days; they may still be on going or, at best, a term or two distant. It would not be too difficult in such circumstances to empathize when the students begin to moan (as all students will) about the overly burdensome requirements or too literal enforcement of the school's cutting policy. That their moans and groans are directed to you should, however, tell you something—that as far as they are concerned, you are the teacher. You are the one in whom the college has invested the authority to set standards and enforce policies and, though the mantle you wear may not be that of Caesar, it should at least be one of Caesar's loyal lieutenants.

By identifying too closely with your students, not only do you contribute to the erosion of your own authority, you penalize them for your uncertainty. Eventually they will enter into your confusion as the pedagogical distance between you and the students begins to shrink. Your ambivalence will only serve to create a set of attitudes that cannot but hurt them: "He is my friend, he won't fail me" or "He only said that because he had to, he does not really mean it" are typical assumptions that can emerge from such a situation. Remember that while you can make teaching a subversive activity, he who sows the wind, to paraphrase Churchill, frequently reaps the whirlwind.

### **3. BE FIRM, FAIR, BUT MOST OF ALL, CONSISTENT.**

This point appears as a corollary to what has just been said about the effect an instructor's uncertainty can have upon students. Ambiguity is the father of confusion and the grandfather of countless headaches. From the start, let your students know what you will require of them, though you must be fair in setting these expectations. Almost all of your students will be taking three or four other courses. Moreover, many of them may be holding down part-time jobs. Your requirements to a certain degree should be tailored to the school-work-personal commitments that your students have developed. Do not "soften" your standards, just be humane and realistic in setting them.

Once you have established requirements, and a syllabus is a good place to outline them, be firm in your insistence that they be respected. Diplomacy notwithstanding, compromises are not always for the better. By giving in to demands that you modify your requirements, you may unwittingly unleash a revolution of rising expectations—expectations of the wrong kind: "He canceled that assignment, let's see if we can't get him to scuttle this one, too." If you feel that the requirements ought to be altered, wait until the next term, if it is at all possible.

### **4. NICE GUYS WANT TO FINISH FIRST.**

A somewhat cynical variation on an old cliché, but cynicism is often the result of idealism tempered by experience. On occasion you may find yourself dealing with students who, in addition to being as bright and personable as their peers, are uncommonly lazy. These are the ones who attempt to be graded according to the criteria of a charm school. Ever so polite and solicitous of your views, these students

are prominent in the give-and-take of classroom discussion, frequently initiate brief talks with you after class, and occasionally call on you for general chit-chat during your office hours. Yet when it comes to fulfilling the requirements of the course, they usually display an infuriating indifference to the required work.

It is not a matter of ability; in potential these students will probably rank in the top ten percent of the class. Rather, it seems that in the past they have found their personality and potential instrumental in excusing their lack of performance and they are simply adhering to a practice that has proven effective. The danger is that you too will buy into their charm and potential and excuse their lack of performance. What is occurring here, of course, is a subtle attempt at manipulation. We all naturally respond to charm and intelligence; that it is directed at us or the result of our stimulation is flattering. Consequently, we have a tendency, at times unfortunate, to make special allowances for those who possess them. To make such an allowance in a grading situation is, however, not only unfair to the majority of students, but is also in the long run a disservice to those "special" students as well. Eventually they will be caught short by such practices, and it is probably for their own good that it happen sooner rather than later. That the practice was not nipped in the bud is unfortunate, but that is no reason to allow it to burst into full bloom; sometimes a grade can be as therapeutic as a slap.

##### **5. *DON'T PRESUME A KNOWLEDGE OF BASICS. HOWEVER, DON'T TEACH THROUGH CONDESCENSION.***

To one degree or another, most professors today rail against the decline in academic standards. They are appalled by how little students nowadays seem to know. One might surmise from this that the prevailing rule of thumb among educators from kindergarten through graduate school is "don't bother, they'll learn it next year." Most of those complaining about this deterioration fail to realize, however, that the complaint is a perennial one and that two generations ago, for example, Jacques Barzun was bewailing the "degree of incompetence now current and tolerated among the intelligent." So it seems that the decline in both instruction and learning has been underway for quite some time. However, entering the classroom for the first time, we are apt to forget this.

Fresh from several years of intensive training, we enter the classroom wanting to flex some finely honed intellectual muscles. That the majority of students are not able to respond is distressing; that some are not even able to feign a response can be disillusioning. Alas, students' repertoires are not what they used to be (if ever they were), but then, neither is life.

The Age of Universal Literacy was slow to come but fast to depart. Nowadays the medium is the message, so if it has not been set to music or put into film it is safe to assume that the subject is not yet part of a living cultural heritage for most students. Still, we are doing what we do because we believe that a knowledge of the past—chiefly acquired through nonauricular, nonvisual forms—can make a vital contribution to the quality of life we create for ourselves. To teach a course that presumes a knowledge of basics, without due regard for the students' prior learning experiences, is little more than academic snobbery, and one might be better off as a

cultural critic. There may be some who will praise your rigor (*mortis*), but it is doubtful that your students will be among them. Most of your students will be eager to learn provided you meet them half-way. Despite their previous experiences, a good many of them approach a new course with a certain sense of innocence and expectation. The tone you set during the first few meetings is crucial, for that is when either encouragement is fanned or experience opens its jaded eye for one last look before drifting off into the big sleep.

Though the cultural heritage is more akin to treasury bills than coin of the realm, it is nevertheless within the reach of everyone. All that we sometimes need to appreciate it is a good tour guide able to let us know what is out there in our own backyard. And perhaps this is the role the teacher should at times see himself in, calling attention to and explaining the unfamiliarity that abounds in the familiar world of our everyday lives. In order to do so, since most of us are not *Platos* capable of eliciting the Pythagorean Theorem from untutored minds, we should perhaps emulate Miss Hardcastle. She stooped to conquer.

#### **6. KNOW WHERE YOUR STUDENTS ARE AT.**

While at the beginning of a course you cannot presume that the majority of students are familiar with its content, you should expect them to acquire a certain degree of familiarity as the course progresses. Examinations frequently reveal, however, that even the most nodding acquaintance has yet to be achieved. One of the major reasons for this is that students very often assume that if they listen to your lectures they need not do any reading.

Although this assumption may have been induced by earlier experiences, it should not be reconfirmed by further experience. You should make clear at the start (if, indeed, it is to be the case) that your lectures will complement the text rather than repeat it. If the text provides the background upon which your lectures will expand, it is essential that you know how well your students have understood the material it presents. Examinations provide this information but only after the fact. As well, not a few of your students will have opened their textbooks for the first time only the evening prior to the examination. Being unfamiliar with the background material to your lectures, they probably did not comprehend adequately what you were saying and, lacking a sure footing, were too intimidated to ask questions.

This unfortunate sequence of events—not reading, not understanding, not questioning, not doing well—can be partially remedied by you. Develop the art of the randomly directed question. Do not just ask if there are any questions—invariably there are not! Instead, ask who, what, when, where, why, or how, and then single out someone to answer. Since students do not like to appear as idiots before their peers, they will force themselves to keep abreast of what is going on for fear of being caught out too many times. And, as a side benefit, you may pick up on points that you did not explain as clearly as you thought you had—and all of this prior to the examination.

## 7. STUDENTS ARE GREAT TEACHERS.

A bad experience may be the silver lining to what starts out as a good day. Adverse experiences force us to question, reflect, and sometimes learn. On occasion, students can be first rate initiators of adverse experiences. Frequently such situations arise out of the realization, "I should not have done that," a realization that may be followed by a "Why?" and "How can I avoid doing that again?"

Such questions beg a certain amount of critical self-awareness and self-scrutiny. In other words, the new teacher should regard his teaching as a learning experience—more like a product in process than an end-product. As such, he should frequently examine his own performance and maintain an openness toward suggestions for its improvement. Student course evaluations, for all their limitations, can be useful here. So too are frank conversations with mature students you can trust to be both honest and fair. Another helpful device is the videotape: have a class or two videotaped and, in addition to reviewing the film yourself, ask a friendly senior colleague for his or her assessment.

Learning to be a good teacher will not be easy; nor will the process be completed at the end of one or two terms. But by looking, listening, and learning, each performance will be better than the last. The important thing to remember as you go along is that if you are conscientious you can begin to trust your instincts. With time your bank of intuitive skills will increase and provide you with a basis for quickly reading classes, students, and situations. While not one hundred per cent accurate, this self-acquired craft knowledge is more often than not on target.

### Looking Backwards

In the decade or so since I wrote a first draft of this essay the landscape of higher education has undergone a sea change, especially for those of us teaching at large urban institutions. In many ways the world my graduate training prepared me for in the late 1970s is now but a shadow, and like many thoughtful and sensitive individuals I strive to distill the best of the old and adapt it to the needs of a new era. I have learned a great deal—about history, about teaching, and about myself—in these ten years. What would I offer up now as sage advice to a neophyte?

Point One: Teaching Has Gotten Harder. The good students are there but they are in the minority; so too, hopefully, the poor ones. The great middle, though, really is not what it once was. There is a great inertia pervading the mass of average students that is increasingly difficult to dispel and requires more and more attention and energy. In some respects this is a consequence of a failing secondary educational system; in others, it is the sad and disillusioning effect of a visual culture that cripples imagination, impoverishes language, and subverts self-discipline. Engaging students who are the contented "victims" of this culture and who possess seven to eleven-minute attention spans is not an easy task.

Point Two: Say "NO!!!" I doubt one could find a college in this country where good teaching was not proffered as one of its highest ideals. Yet very few administrators and deans are willing to commit the resources, fiscal and otherwise, needed to support, develop, and reward good teaching. When it gets down to basics,

what they most prefer, and most often reward, is scholarship, even if it is so esoteric—e.g., virginity licenses in Ming China—that it has little bearing on our teaching.

To have the time to do this work one must learn to say "No" to many things. Increasingly there is less and less time available in the academic world to read, think, and write. Class sizes increase, released time evaporates, committees proliferate, special functions recur with annoying frequency. How much of this can one handle and still remain intellectually active?

Still I would not like to leave this subject without pointing out that scholarship and teaching are not mutually exclusive. They often go hand in hand with scholarly activity—and this should not be conceived only as original research on the frontiers of knowledge—frequently animating good teaching.

Point Three: Academic Politics Are Not Always Pretty. I find it astounding that when I first drafted this essay I wrote nothing about collegial relations. It did not take me long, however, to realize that they are central to one's career and life. Yet they can be very difficult to negotiate successfully, especially in today's highly particularized academic "community." So a portrait of Erasmus—courtesy of Penguin Books—hangs on my wall as a reminder of the futility of polemic and the virtue of charity.

Point Four: Keep the Faith. It is hard at times, but whenever I feel most discouraged I think about the clergy still struggling against sin after all these years. My idealism has, it is true, been tempered, but it has not soured. I no longer believe that I can transform all of my students, open all their minds to ideas, art, civic mindedness, or compassion for their fellow man; it is hard enough to get them to learn a few facts and write a meaningful essay. But still I try, knowing now that the spark will catch only a few but hoping that others will inspire those I cannot.