

Leaving Your Comfort Zone: Lessons from a First Year TA.

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Abstract

Teaching offers personal and professional challenges. With these challenges come vulnerable moments and times that one must step outside one's comfort zone. This may be the only way to grow and to live an authentic life. Personal teaching experiences are offered and five tips are shared to help new instructors enjoy and survive the classroom. The tips are intended to help prepare the next generation of social work professors.

Key words: *teaching, experience, social work, humor*

Introduction

My first semester teaching was an adventure. At times the challenges moved me way out of my comfort zone. However, taking risks and stepping outside one's comfort zone may be the only way to grow and to live an authentic life. The late Dr. Stan Dale (transactional analyst, radio announcer, founder of the Human Awareness Institute) is often quoted as describing comfort zones as "plush lined coffins. When you stay in your plush lined coffins, you die" (August, 2014, para. 2). To share knowledge and experience with the next generation of social workers, to become a university professor and a researcher is the fulfillment of a life-long dream. So you, too, made the choice to become vulnerable, take risks, and move out of your comfort zone. Here are 5 tips for surviving and enjoying your first semester teaching based on my experiences. I hope you find them helpful. You may identify with my adventures, you may not. We are a diverse group of dedicated individuals pursuing education to solve serious social problems stemming from poverty, inequality, social injustices and more. If you do not identify with my experiences, you may find them humorous. You are invited to do so. The problems we seek to address are serious but we need not always be so. The survival tips are presented in reverse order for a Hollywood dramatic effect.

#5. Embrace Technology

If like me, you have been off campus for more than a decade and a half, new teaching technologies carry a big learning curve. In much of my clinical practice and agency work, we lagged behind the latest technological advances. Thank goodness for a basic familiarity and experience with laptops and smart phones. Beginning the semester, there were presentation programs to learn, either Microsoft Power Point or Prezi. For classroom management, Blackboard, the electronic course management system, and Safe Assign, the plagiarism checker, all needed to be mastered. Excel spreadsheets from the Registrar and smart classrooms that come in PC and Mac versions had to be understood and utilized. Adobe Connect web conferencing and Wiki interactive assignments are teaching tools that were mercifully saved for next semester's learning. But help has been available. My experience has been that faculty, staff and fellow teaching assistants (TAs) are happy to answer questions and help you get going.

Non-traditional sources of help were available, too. Halfway through the semester my 14-year-old granddaughter came over to tutor me on several of the fancier Power Point features. She knew a surprising number of tricks and showed me how to add sound effects to slides and how arrange lines of text to appear one at a time on a slide. Midterm feedback received from my students indicated that my granddaughter-enhanced Power Points were more engaging than my earlier efforts and were preferred by my students 2:1. You may wish to use any sound effects sparingly. Not only can get this cheesy quickly, the added sounds are much louder emanating from the classroom speakers than from the mini speakers on your laptop at home. I used an explosion sound as a topic transition marker *once*. Once was enough as I scared myself silly when that slide appeared with a BOOM! The students were amused.

#4. Go With the Flow. Stuff Happens

On the first day of class, my plan included lecturing with an enthusiastically prepared Power Point presentation which included a hyperlink to a riveting and relevant YouTube video. Practicing my embrace of technology, the students were going to be assigned to several small groups for their upcoming projects via the random assignment tool available in Blackboard. The first obstacle to present itself that day was the surprise of discovering my assignment to a Mac version of a smart classroom. As a PC user, closing already open program windows via those little red, yellow, and green lights was about all the Apple skills I had. It was challenging enough to log the previous professor off the system and myself on. Lowering the screen and starting the projector had not been covered in training and I was out of Apple skills. One of my students grinned and pointed out the wall switch behind me labelled “screen.” That was one problem solved with only a little embarrassment. A few moments later, a helpful student recruited by me from the office next door pointed out why the projector would not turn on. Hanging from the ceiling was a web of bare wires where the projector ought to be. My observation skills had decreased as my anxiety had increased. Since there was no projector to actually turn on, that helpful young man took the time to show me how to start the projector had there been one and then he politely left the class. No audio/visual PowerPoint presentation was available for that first day and no riveting/relevant YouTube video to impress and engage them would be shown either. Furthermore, random assignments to groups had to be accomplished the old fashioned way, with names drawn from a hat. Students pitched in by making group membership lists and by drawing their names from one of their very own hats. We made do. They were dismissed a little early that first day, with extra time to go buy books. They didn’t seem to mind.

In addition to the inevitable technology failures, other stuff happens. On another occasion we found that the speakers for the sound system had been unhooked and no one could figure how to plug them back in. The wiring behind the MAC computer looked like tangled yarn. That class period was rearranged for a think/pair/share discussion and an in-class writing activity instead of whatever had been planned using technology.

On two different occasions, our classroom was locked. The first time was disconcerting as usually there was another class in there ahead of us. When I arrived, my students were mulling about in the hall waiting for the early class to dismiss so we could go in. When it was past time for them to come out, we tried the door and discovered it was locked and no one had even been in there. It took a few minutes to find someone in the building who could locate a custodian with

master keys. We started class a few minutes late that day. This was a warm-up for the next occasion of being locked out of our room. The second time was final exam day and as it was near the holiday break, there were fewer custodians around. Luck was with us though; we found a custodian. She let us in and the exam did start on time. It is good to arrive early for class and better still to know who has the master keys.

#3. Learn Your Personal Lessons

Life is a series of lessons. Lessons are repeated until learned. This is rule four from *If Life is a Game, These are the Rules*, a book written by Cherie Carter-Scott in 1998. Her list of 10 rules for being human has been a helpful tool for many years. In my experience, lessons are indeed repeated until learned. What happens after one lesson is learned? Dr. Carter-Scott answers in rule five: Learning does not end. We move on to new lessons. These are the lessons repeated during my first semester. Your lessons will likely be different, but you may identify.

Don't take yourself too seriously. This is always good advice. It is similar to the famous epigram of Elbert Hubbard, turn of the century American writer, philosopher and publisher, who said "Don't take life too seriously. You'll never get out alive" (Hubbard, 1917, p.109). Taking myself too seriously blocked my creativity, produced anxiety, and generally got in my way.

Just before patting myself on the back for a job well done posting the Exam 1 study guide to Blackboard *an entire 10 days prior to the exam*, I noticed the syllabus read that students would have access to the study guide 14 days before any exam. In order to be fair with students and give them the study time that they were assured of in the syllabus, Exam 1 had to be moved. This involved moving a project due-date, flipping a lecture and a movie as well, so that new material wasn't presented prior to the exam. As the new exam date approached, there was a class period when all my students expressed confusion about their due dates for everything. Only three class periods had changed to accommodate the rescheduling of Exam 1, and minimal project due dates were involved. Those changes had already been reviewed in class and also updated on the master syllabus which was posted on Blackboard. The classroom became tense and the students were grumbling. Feeling anxious, I began thinking, "This is all my fault. I'm a bad instructor." That was followed by feeling shame and an old negative voice in my head started telling me, "You don't belong here." I froze and felt panicky. After a deep breath or two, Tuckman's 4 Stages of Group Development came to mind (Tuckman 1965): Form, Storm, Norm, and Perform. Aha, perhaps this was the storming phase! It wasn't about *me*. This was a natural group development process. Meanwhile, the room had grown silent during those long, thick seconds. My next decision was to break the silence by overstating the obvious, "Wow, this is tense." We all laughed. Relaxed again, we reviewed the syllabus together until everyone clearly understood their due dates. The class showed a spirit of cooperation and helpfulness that day. That level of tension was never repeated.

Face your fears. At my university, there is a two-day orientation for all new TAs to complete prior to the first teaching assignment. In this training, my fear of judgment was faced through a microteaching exercise which included videotaping and peer feedback. All 9 members of my small group were from different disciplines. We each had to choose a particular style of teaching to model (lecture, discussion, or active interactional learning), prepare a 15 minute

mini-lesson on whatever educational topic we chose, present this while being videotaped, watch the videotape at home and then receive a written critique from all peers and the group leader. This was way out of my comfort zone. However, it was not optional. The feedback was fair and helpful. My peers were kinder to me than I was to myself. The videotaping experience did make the first day of class less stressful by comparison. It would logically follow that surviving team critiques would have made my faculty observation/feedback later in the semester less stressful. But no, that was not entirely true.

The faculty observation was also fair and helpful. Yet, the shaming voice was back in my head that day. Stronger and a little meaner than the first time. The most challenging lesson for me this semester was struggling with the return of that belittling inner voice saying, “You aren’t good enough.” Working in my comfort zone of clinical practice for 15 years, that voice had been quiet but I recognized it from childhood and early adulthood. Through a combination of hard work, life experiences, and therapy of my own, I had thought it was gone.

Thankfully, I found Brené Brown’s lectures on TED TALKS and her books after that. Dr. Brown became a refreshing new resource. A social worker and a researcher on shame and vulnerability, Dr. Brown’s 2010 book *The Gifts of Imperfection* has been #1 on the New York Times Bestseller List. That book, along with *I Thought It Was Just Me, But It Isn’t: Making The Journey From “What Will People Think?” to “I Am Enough”* (Brown, 2007) are on my bedside table. Reading those books has provided me strength, comfort and practical tips on confronting shame. In her work she proposes that empathy has healing power for shame and the two most powerful words to hear when you are struggling is, “me, too!” (Brown, 2012, 19:22).

#2. Get to Know Your Students

Listening to students, learning their names, their educational interests, and something about their personal lives is important. It has been a challenge for me to remember names. That’s something I have never been very good at. Faces, details about people, and, oddly enough, phone numbers, are easily held in my head but not names. Learning student names is a sign of respect and caring; it demonstrates listening skills and sets an important tone reflecting dignity and worth of persons and the importance of human relationships.

To help with remembering names and tracking other details, there are inexpensive and free downloadable attendance applications. I found mine in the Google Play store and installed it on my android phone. After entering class data such as student names, section numbers, email addresses etc., the class took selfies which were then uploaded to the application. All the data were also downloaded onto my laptop. When answering students’ emails or grading their papers, their faces were visible via their photos. The program also held the demographic information from the 3x5 index cards filled out in class on the first day: hometowns, majors, practice interests, etc. This helped with learning who they were as individuals and made the grading process more personal.

#1. Show Up

Be the real you. I’m a Humanist and an Existentialist. Two of my heroes are Rogers and Yalom. Carl Rogers claimed that in order for a person to “grow,” he/she needs an environment

that provides genuineness (openness and self-disclosure), acceptance (being seen with unconditional positive regard), and empathy (being listened to and understood) (Rogers, 1980, p. 115-116). Irvin Yalom (1980) underscored the importance of authenticity and instilling hope in the therapeutic process. Although they both wrote about essential characteristics of effective therapists and therapy encounters, these are essentials for a classroom instructor to model as well. While my awareness and competence regarding pedagogical complexities will be developed in future semesters, this is what I bring to the table now. My experiences regarding authenticity involved my overall approach, such as sharing the occasional (riveting and relevant) stories from the field. Once or twice over the semester social workers that I personally worked with visited my class and shared their work experiences as well. Students responded well to this. Sometimes it was tempting to show all that I know and act like an expert, using diagnostic language to impress them. On a daily basis, I reminded myself why I want to be an academic. It is not to build a career. There are people I still want to help and a solution I want to be a part of. That grounds me.

At the end of the first term, the official feedback I received from students was good enough, on par or slightly above the university mean on all measures. The emails from a handful of students saying that I made a difference were deeply appreciated. Since there may be future semesters without such warm fuzzies, those were placed in a folder for occasions when I will need them. Additionally, hearing a kinder voice in my own head saying, “You made it. Good job,” was both personally meaningful and welcomed. The faculty feedback that was most helpful was the honest observation that I seemed to be finding my lecturing style. My faculty observer shared that it took some time for her to develop her style as well. Her authenticity, vulnerability and empathy were deeply appreciated. Best of all, I have been asked to teach again for another semester!

So my adventures this first semester were worth it. My desire to be of service to the next generation of social workers, to become a university professor and researcher increased through the challenges I survived by coming out of my comfort zone. Some of the tips gleaned from my experiences may have relevance to you: embrace technology, go with the flow, learn your personal lessons, get to know your students, and show up. To become an academic is to increase your ability to learn while doing.

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