Commentary:
The Precarious Position of Teaching as a Graduate Student

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ABSTRACT

Although elementary and secondary education teachers often undertake years of schooling and practice before taking charge of the classroom, graduate students can be called upon as instructors shortly after their first arrival to campus. With little time to review or develop course elements, graduate students are thrown headfirst into dealing with the dramatic daily role reversal of being both a student and a professor. This article, in contrast to formal pedagogy papers, provides a narrative by a graduate student intended for fellow graduate students about to assume the title of instructor. It is an informal collection of teaching advice learned the hard way, including why introductory geography is a great introduction to teaching, some specific tips for first time instructors, and the advisor’s perspective on the experience.

Key Words: pedagogy, graduate student, teaching, geographic education

INTRODUCTION

While often one has a suitable amount of time to develop a course and all of its associated components, there are still many instances, particularly for us graduate students, when we are rather swiftly thrown into the role of professor. In cases like these, there is no time to consult the literature on proper pedagogy, create multiple drafts of syllabi, or attend seminars about teaching tools. Instead, you have to hit the ground running and learn, in a trial by fire, how to move from behind the classroom desks to in front of them. Recently, I took note of some important lessons learned, not from the wealth of literature on geographic education, but from my own teaching blunders and hiccups. Hopefully this reflection, though sometimes embarrassing to confront, will be useful to other graduate students embarking on a similar path, faced with putting together their own course and carrying the
sole responsibility for its execution. This is simply a collection of notes on teaching for the first time as a graduate student from both a fellow graduate student who has done this not long ago and from a professor who got her start in instruction the same way. Perhaps there are graduate students who thrive in this role, who have no qualms or concerns about stepping into the professor spotlight and easily take the helm. For them I hold a great deal of respect. However there are many of us who, as students still, feel more kinship with fellow students (undergrads though they may be) than to professors who we have yet to become. For those of you who find the transition daunting, the following highlights some of the insights gained by a fellow weak-in-the-knees first time graduate student instructor.

**INTRODUCTORY GEOGRAPHY & INTRODUCTION TO TEACHING: A GOOD FIT**

Although some graduate students may not feel competent enough in any subject to make the initial transition from student to professor, I found that teaching the topic of introductory geography was a great fit for my first course. Many subjects are relatable to everyday experience. Due to the broad nature of geography, it is perhaps one of the more relatable disciplines out there; we have a plethora of human and physical geography experiences in our day-to-day lives. In other words, there are countless opportunities to turn away from the textbook and use your own life experiences as examples of course concepts and topics. It can feel rather awkward to try to teach someone else’s course, which is what clinging to a textbook from cover to cover really is. Instead, turn to the familiar, to your own life, when you can and encourage your students to do the same. It is more beneficial for you and your students alike if you focus on teaching fewer things more thoroughly and personally in your course rather than attempting to cram it all in. Cramming in more material in your course is just like cramming for an exam; it may work well for a select few individuals, but no one really recommends it as the best study method.

If I loyally followed the textbook for too long I could feel myself droning on and disconnecting not only with the material but with my students; however, when I spoke from experience my entire demeanor changed. I relaxed and became naturally animated from the comfort of speaking about my real-life encounters with concepts. In my human geography course, whether it was describing my negative association with Disney World based on my experience as a 6-year-old of getting pooped on by a seagull and being too short to ride Space Mountain, or slamming into globalization when a young girl in India asked me if I liked Hannah Montana, invoking personal experience as a teaching tool made me feel more knowledgeable and more accessible and relatable to my students. It made the information less formal and rigid, transforming terms only memorized for the classroom into potentially useful ideas for helping organize and understand one’s own experience in the world. Speaking of personal experiences, even (or especially) ones that may expose moments of naiveté or ignorance, can open up an entirely different dialogue with students who often return the favor with their own stories that are more memorable and meaningful as teaching examples than those any textbook could provide.

Just as class concepts easily relate to everyday life, so too does human geography relate to much of the media information we are bombarded by. While you don’t want to rely too heavily on YouTube videos, NPR stories, or Google image searches, making use of multimedia to diversify your teaching style and connect with current events is refreshing for both you and your students. With a reliable internet connection in my classroom, I made use of all of the above online resources and found them very easy to imbed into PowerPoint for a fairly seamless integration with my lectures. I admittedly avoided using most of the media provided by the textbook.
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Publisher because, let’s face it, students are sharp and they can tell when you’ve pulled generic material from a publisher rather than made an effort to find outside resources. In the areas of the human geography course where I struggled to find the subject matter personally intriguing (I’m talking about you, economic development!), rather than omit these sections solely because of my disinterest, I sought out sources that could breathe some life into the topic for both myself and my students. For example, in the case of economic development, I used a radio program where a researcher discussed how people in different parts of the world live on $2 a day. After discussing international debt, we watched a documentary focusing on Jamaica’s economic woes and issues with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This information from beyond the textbook provided evidence to support and understand the topic for both the students and myself; I ended up learning the most from that section of my course and truly enjoyed it. After all, if you can’t make the material interesting for yourself, there is little hope in selling the students on its importance (unless you are a very good actor and, if so, might I mention a more glamorous career option that is available to you should this graduate school thing not work out). Seeing and recognizing these glimpses of geography in action is a good mental exercise for you and your students alike.

Teaching introductory human geography, or any introductory geography topic for that matter, is challenging since the course grazes the surface of many different topics without adequate time to delve very deep into any of them. Just as you get comfortable with one topical arena, it is time to move on to the next. However, we can take the approach of trying to create an engaging trailer for each course section to lure students into wanting to find out more, to see what else geographers do concerning these widely varying issues. With your introductory course likely populated by a majority of undeclared freshmen, you have the opportunity to potentially recruit new majors and maybe even revive your interest in the field while you’re at it. There truly is something for everyone in a human or physical geography course no matter how diverse your student body (I had majors ranging from mechanical engineering to history). Not every student will like everything in the discipline, but there is typically at least one component that can be related to a student’s interests. My building construction student in the course perked up when we looked at urbanization and city structures, while the sociology major enjoyed our discussions of language and religion. Introductory geography courses are wide open for you to choose your own adventure, just make sure you bring your students along with you on that journey.

FIRST-TIME TEACHING ADVICE, 5¢
(THANKS TO LUCY OF THE PEANUTS GANG)

This article is not a how-to guide for teaching or even a logical progression through the finer points of developing your own class. It is simply a small collection of some of the revelations I encountered during my first frenzied teaching experience as a graduate student. Below are my eight bits of advice (tiny pause for anyone chuckling at that nerdy computer reference).

1. I want to be a Mrs. Berry or a Mr. Farris

Regardless of how much or little we paid attention throughout our own schooling, we all have had our favorite teachers, the people that we would want to be like. Once I knew I had been assigned my own course to teach, I immediately started brainstorming teachers I had in the past, both good and bad, trying to remember what it was that made me like or dislike each of them. I compiled mental lists of different tricks of the trade and tried to think of how I could incorporate them, or avoid them, to become the sum of my favorite teachers combined and the antithesis of my least favorite teachers! The feasibility of this
idea quickly diminished though as I realized that the teaching styles of my favorites from grade school, high school, and beyond were rarely compatible. I couldn't be all of them; in fact, I couldn't be any of them. Good news, that's okay! Throw all of those old teacher profiles out, except maybe the things you most despised as a student; those experiences are extremely useful examples of teaching practices to avoid. While you can learn tactics to incorporate from others, simply teach in a way that makes you yourself best enjoy the class. After all, if you are enjoying your class, there is a much better chance your students are enjoying it too!

2. What To Do When They Call You “Dr.”

On the first day of class I quickly acknowledged that I was a graduate student, yet to achieve my doctoral degree. With it being a summer course and a small class, I simply offered up my first name as a suitable form of address. However, out of habit, respect, or of course flattery, you may occasionally be called “Dr.” First, if this occurs in class, refrain from chuckling, no matter how difficult. It could be the first time you ever hear the title that may eventually be the culmination of your efforts. Now here is the crux of the situation. Should you correct them (since other students know this is not your title), or let it slide and enjoy the momentary promotion? If its use is intended for flattery, you hate to acknowledge it, but there is no harm in allowing yourself a small smile. It will, after all, be all yours if you can live through teaching the course among other small hoops to jump through such as your own coursework, preliminary exams, and dissertation defense. Your reaction is your choice; just be forewarned that being called “Dr.” may actually happen despite your disbelief that anyone would mistake you for a Ph.D.-holding member of society.

3. To Tell or Not to Tell

I do not find lying to students to be an admirable stratagem; however, did I dare tell my students that I had never taught before? Here I am, standing in front of them desperately hoping to appear cool, calm, and competent; wouldn't that charade be dashed if I immediately announced that I had never done this before? I knew that it was possible with time, or perhaps just one lecture, that the truth would likely cross their minds. Did I let them hypothesize this as the class progressed or just lay it out on the table on the first day? Here’s what I did. I didn’t tell them, but I would have responded honestly if asked. In the end, I had the obvious realization that my students were adults and they responded to my performance regardless of my experience. They didn’t so much care whether I had been teaching for twenty minutes or twenty years; they just cared whether or not I could hold their interest and share information that was worth their time.

4. Teaching Wall-to-Wall

Although I try to engage my entire audience when I give conference presentations, I tend to (spoiler alert) dispense my eye contact to only a few points scattered about the room. It appears (or so I’ve convinced myself) that I am engaging the entire audience when actually I just have a few repeat eye contact customers, who often appear uncomfortable with their selection. I noticed that I had to fight this same urge when I gave lectures as well, often fixating my gaze on the same students (Sorry about that, Dakota, John, and Rachel!). Make an effort to diversify your focal point locations so that each student gets a decent amount of face time every class period. It will feel awkward at first but it will keep your students on their toes and you as well. You will be less predictable in your teaching style if they never know when you’ll be talking directly to them. Also, and trust me on this one, your students will notice if you are looking just slightly above their heads to the back wall or repeating a pattern of eye contact around the room. They really do pay attention to some things more than you realize!
You can also move around the classroom of course and indeed should. You will simply teach better if you’re not always affixed to a podium or clinging for dear life to your notes. Ditching your notes and your post at the front of the room is sometimes the best move you can make and leads to a more natural, conversational lecture than would have occurred otherwise. Of course moving around is another great tactic to keep your students alert and on edge, unsure when to dash their cell phones and iPods into their bags. You know, those annoying devices that all students these days travel with and face instantaneous collapse of their social circle if they abandon for even one hour? Don’t forget to mention on your syllabus, in bold perhaps, any devices whose noises annoy you with explicit instructions to turn them off during class (students are surprisingly ‘forgetful’ about this). I also want to add a reminder about keeping your voice at a commanding level. The further into lectures I got, the more I started to drop off in volume and become more monotonous in tone with the predictable result of entirely losing my students’ attention. Obviously I slacked on my pre-semester training and had not built up the necessary speaking stamina for 75 minutes without a break. Keep in mind that you are in charge of the entire space, wall-to-wall, and teach to every corner of it and character in it.

5. Put on your student hat

So most likely you don’t know the kind of instructor you are yet. That’s perfectly understandable, but what we do know is what kind of students we are. You know, do you speak up or try to remain as mute as possible? Do you sit in the front or the back? Do you turn in your assignments ahead of schedule or procrastinate? Do you love group work or internally groan at the thought of it? Grab your student hat that you momentarily set aside while you are teaching and think, would I enjoy being a student in my own class? Would I, as a student, like the structure, teaching style, and assignments that I am doling out as an instructor? Keep in mind that students can be harsh critics. For example, while I had fun inserting bits on globalization throughout my course, my students commented that they were sick of the topic after the first week. Ouch. So, if you are completely honest with yourself, be prepared to be knocked off-kilter by your own instructor evaluation. This line of thought helped me sift through different class ideas and strategies and recognize, not always in time, the course elements that were well-intentioned, but just too drab. By the way, you (the reader) are not like the typical student. With your inborn desire to learn and passionate commitment to the subject you are more the exception than the rule. If all students were like you, we’d have an easy job ahead of us! Keeping this in mind, really focus on making the content relevant to them, not just to you.

6. Give your material a chance

Do not play down the material before you present it. When I wasn’t particularly confident about portions of the course, I made the mistake of doing this a few times. I announced how the upcoming material would be a bit tedious to go through but that we had to do it. I was sacrificing my own course material by dismissing it, all for the sake of possibly garnering a little camaraderie from my students via commiseration. I do not recommend this move. Telling my students that I didn’t like the material right before I had to discuss it for 75 minutes really wasn’t a great way to start the class period. An occasional acknowledgement about dry material is ok; courses often get a bit dry every now and then. However, don’t start your lectures off this way. You basically give your students permission to drift off into la-la land, or worse yet, immediately fall asleep. There is a fine line between self-deprecation and simply undermining yourself in the classroom. It’s a difficult boundary to detect without experience, but you should make your best effort to do so.
7. Getting Their Money’s Worth

Do not focus on the fact that the students, or their financial backers, are paying for you to teach them. This revelation will alarm you considerably, especially considering how money conscious you most likely are as a full-time graduate student. However, don’t underestimate your own net worth. Once you have reached graduate school status, a considerable amount of money has been put forth to support your own educational endeavors. You are a sizeable educational investment standing in front of your students. If you’re still feeling uneasy about students paying to be in your class, just take a peek at your small stipend check and you’ll realize that all of their money definitely isn’t ending up in your hands!

8. Don’t Panic – Get a Guest Speaker!

Initially, when some faculty members volunteered to do guest spots in my class I felt as if I was shirking responsibility. Of course with teaching a summer course that meets 5 days a week for 6 weeks, practicality quickly killed this moral high-ground thought. However, I also came to realize that bringing in the occasional guest speaker simply made my class better. Granted you can’t just grab any person with a potential presentation. Further, scheduling, finding the right connections to your course material, and generating assignments or exam portions related to the speakers is often time-consuming and almost as much preparation as a typical lecture (another reason it is not a cop-out). The bottom line is that guest speakers can add so much more to your course by exposing your students to another teaching style, and in the case of an introductory geography course, revealing what a real-life (some even employed) geographer does. It provides a snapshot of at least one type of research conducted by geographers and the depth that exists in our sub-disciplines beyond the brief handling they receive in entry-level courses.

Recruit your colleagues, faculty and graduate students alike. It never hurts for their work to reach a new audience and when they cash in the favor for you to be their guest speaker, you will have the opportunity to do the same.

Speaking of textbooks (and yes, I realize I wasn’t but I’m really stuck on my nerdy eight-bit reference so I had to put this somewhere so as not to create a #9), you may find yourself in the role of selecting the one that will accompany your course. After years of paying hefty prices for these often hefty items, it is odd to find yourself determining what textbook your students will be recommended or required to buy (but I must admit it felt like a promotion of sorts to be making such a decision). Just a short time ago I received the best piece of advice on this topic: use the second-best textbook in the field for your students; reserve the best text for yourself and use examples from it in your lectures. If only I had known this before; it’s a brilliant suggestion! However, regardless of how wonderful a textbook you are using, know that you don’t have to cover everything in the textbook, just as you don’t have to cover only what is in the textbook.

WE AREN’T THE FIRST: REFLECTIONS FROM MY ADVISOR’S EXPERIENCE

Candice has relinquished the pen so to speak for a moment here for me, Candice’s advisor, to add in my own experience both with having an advisee teach and with having taught myself during my graduate student stint. As Candice’s advisor, I thought that letting her take the reins of her own class was a great idea – one of the best ways to learn a subject is by teaching it to someone else! As someone who also learned to teach through the “trial by fire” method, I knew there was little that I could do to truly help her prepare. I shared my own lecture materials and exercises, with the suggestion that she borrow liberally where appropriate, along with a few tricks of the trade, but there is little...
that a graduate student instructor can read or be told in preparation of being in charge of one’s own classroom. That said, there are bits of information that can be gleaned from others to at least make the transition easier. Ask around – get ideas on everything from teaching techniques to handling classroom management issues from other faculty members and fellow graduate student instructors. Remember, while you may feel like you still have a lot to learn about the subject you’re teaching, you still know more than your students and you certainly have much wisdom to impart! Teaching DOES get easier with practice, but a new semester always brings new nerves – and I don’t think I would be an effective instructor without at least a little bit of apprehension in the final seconds before walking to the front of a new class at the beginning of the semester! So your own nerves are expected and will make you a better instructor.

**SOME FINAL THOUGHTS**  
**HOPEFULLY MORE USEFUL THAN JACK HANDEY’S**

First, let me point out an important consideration in your attempts to relate to your students that can be illustrated by this section’s heading. While many readers who are my age or older will hopefully smile at the Jack Handey reference, none of my students would have gotten it. Popular culture can change faster than I can change topics in an uncomfortable conversation (and that’s pretty fast). The minimum five- to six-year gap between your age and that of your freshmen students is a lifetime in popular culture, so don’t be surprised if you receive nothing but blank stares after referring to something from your recent college years in an effort to connect with them. It probably won’t work; it will probably just age you in their eyes.

If you do have some time to spare for your course preparation I would recommend two things: observing and reading. Sit in on a few introductory classes, observing them with teaching technique in mind, not the subject matter at hand. There is a reason that elementary and secondary teachers are required to have so many student observation hours. We can learn from their example. Also, if you can tear yourself away from your research-related literature, there are a number of valuable references concerning teaching and academics in general that I wish I had known about beforehand. Here’s hoping you’ll have the chance to read a couple of the list that follows this paper.

A veteran professor might quickly argue that this article provides no new information, that it is a rendition of previously known pedagogical tactics presented in a less-than-academic manner. Well, yes, this is true. Good thing this article isn’t for them! This work is intended for fellow graduate students who are about to be thrown to the lions (and by lions, I mean undergraduates) armed with nothing but “We’re #1” foam fingers, which is what solo teaching a course for the first time with no formal instruction is like. This article is something that I would like to have stumbled upon during my initial freak-out stage when I was desperately searching for new and engaging material to somehow amass into useful lectures. It is simply a candid discussion by a graduate student for other graduate students about to be put to task with a teaching assignment. Workshops, literature on educational practices, and conversations with your advisor(s) are definitely excellent sources of inspiration and knowhow, but often you might not have enough preparation time to pursue them thoroughly. For those of you who only have time to learn from the experience itself, this is essentially my testimonial letting you know that it can be done and that your fears are neither ridiculous nor insurmountable.

Yes, you may and can be a student and an instructor at the same time, alternating one hour in front of the desks lecturing with one hour behind a desk taking notes from someone else’s lecture. Countless graduate students do this, some tackling this role from day one of graduate school (yikes!). Yes, it is a precarious position, but our status as gradu-
ate students prepares us for this. We linger in a setting dominated by two social groups, undergraduates and professors, no longer a member of one and not yet a member of the other. If you find yourself thrown into a solo teaching scenario with little time to prepare, it is much like wayfinding with a recreation-grade GPS, if you’ll allow me the nerdy geographic analogy. If you are using a recreation-grade GPS to locate a point in the field and you stop moving, the compass begins to spin every which way. If you keep moving steadily, however, the digital compass needle stays the course. The same is true for learning how to teach in a short span of time. If you stop moving and get caught up in the minutiae and all the different things you could do, you’ll get confused and overwhelmed in a hurry. Just keep going with the flow, with your flow, and see where it takes you.

In teaching a summer course taught five days a week for six weeks, I didn’t have time to breathe, much less reflect, so all of the above is naught for my first batch of geography students. I didn’t convert any new majors, inspire anyone to become a professor, or even really receive much feedback when the class ended. However, the students did make it through, they did get a core course requirement completed, and no one asked for a refund. I will take that as a successful start and hope that the reflections on where I faltered may help ease some of the first time teaching jitters you may have. Let’s aim for that.

TEACHING RESOURCES


CAREER RESOURCES


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