In the Pits: Teaching from the Bottom Up

Sean Michael Cox, *Dogus University*

I felt compelled to write this brief essay after glancing through "The Teacher" section of the recent issues of *PS.* There are several articles exhorting young educators, soon-to-be educators, or those considering pursuing a career in academia to think about what it means to get in front of a classroom and impart that information which we believe will make a world of difference to our students. These eminent scholars with years of cumulative experience offer sage advice, relevant anecdotes, and a rosy perspective on how exploring alternative avenues of information dissemination will make the classroom experience more positive and fruitful for instructor and student alike.

I thought, "Why don't I offer another perspective, one from the bottom of the educational ladder, down and dirty in the pits of academia?" By this last I mean offering insights into the occupation of teaching from one who sits in the ranks of academia's enlisted, and not as a member of the elite "officer corp." While we may all aspire to be Harvard research professors, the truth is that the great majority of us will never come close. This means employment at schools that tend to value teaching over research, schools that require you to do a lot more of the former than the latter. My perspective on teaching at the lower end of the academic spectrum, where an instructor doesn't have the luxury of teaching only two courses per term, comes from nine years of classroom experience: five in political science; three with a Ph.D.; and four outside the United States. I have taught at the university level in both the United States (as a graduate student and adjunct faculty) and in Turkey (as full-time staff). I have taught at a state university (in the US) and at a private university (in Turkey). The types of courses I have taught range from continuing education, to distance learning, to special session courses, in addition to the traditional classroom work. I have never won a teaching award (I don't think that the majority of my students have even known that I could be nominated for one), but I do consistently rank the highest in my department in terms of student evaluations, and among the top in my faculty.

So, what has this experience taught me? First, I believe that students everywhere are basically the same. Now, I don't mean that they are the same in that every student has the same ideas and attitudes regarding school, work, or life. What I mean is (and I can't back this up with any fancy statistics, just a gut feeling) that the overall demographic distribution of students' interest is nearly universal. You will always have the back-row slackers, the front-row "look at me, look at me" students, and rows of students in between who, on any given day, would rather be at the beach, at a movie, or at a kegger. While education is terribly important for developing the careers and futures of our students, for building character and opening minds, the fact remains that it is the sheepskin at the end of four (or five or six) years that will be the most valuable part of the educational experience for the great majority of students attending higher educational institutions. Active learning, PBL, discussions, and special projects aside, most students attend class because Mom and Dad are shelling out big money to allow them to become productive members of society. Understanding this is the first step in becoming an instructor who can teach a course effectively and impart information to the broadest cross section of students in the classroom, in the process preventing any painfully-learned lessons regarding student enthusiasm and drive.

A second point: we, as instructors, will make mistakes when we are in front of our classes. It isn't the end of the world. When you are teaching up to five courses (usually not with the same preparation if it is at a small school) it is sometimes difficult to keep the information straight. The key to salvaging a mistake is to be comfortable in what you know, and act authoritative if you are unsure. Don't be afraid to tell your students that you don't know something, or that you don't remember. Most students accept the fact that you don't have perfect recall—if you did, you probably would be working at Columbia writing learned articles for obscure journals that most academics will cite but not read. If you happen to steer your students wrong on a certain subject, don't worry about that either. You will set things straight sooner or later. Personally, I use notes in my class to remind me of the points I need to cover. I teach classes ranging from Diplomatic History to Comparative Politics to Political Thought, and sometimes it is difficult to keep it all in order. Don't worry if you have to glance at notes periodically to keep things on track. Just because your favorite Princeton-trained graduate professor could go for hours without blinking, doesn't mean that you have to as well.

Third, we should understand where our students are coming from. Too often instructors have no ability whatsoever to relate to their students. Education is not entertainment, nor are educators supposed to be entertainers. But the competition for our students' attention from MTV's Carson Daly and whatever Kid Rock happens to be doing at the time. Pop culture is a significant part of modern life, especially in America. If we can't meet our students on some common ground, if we can't hold our own in this arena, then students' interest is dulled before we even get to the books. Save the magnificent oratory for graduate students and conferences, or better yet for working in the "Bigs." Our students need to communicate with us, and we with them, on a level at which they can relate. This doesn't mean you should participate in X-Games events, but you should be able to understand the difference between "Celebrity Death Match" and "Monday Nitro." While MTV ought not be mandatory viewing for university faculty, it wouldn't hurt to occasionally flip past the History Channel or C-SPAN and tune in to discover Marilyn Manson's latest hairstyle or see what Rachel will do with her life once the baby is born (if any of these references have escaped you, you are already behind the pop culture learning curve).

Sean Michael Cox *is assistant professor and chairman of the Department of International Relations at Dogus University in Istanbul, Turkey, where he has worked for the past four years. While he teaches a wide range of courses, he focuses mainly on the field of comparative politics. He is also the co-director of the Black Sea Area Research Group (BSARG), a consortium of scholars conducting work on Black Sea issues. His research interests can be found in the areas of Black Sea studies, European security and institutionalization, and European elite/leadership studies.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096503001720 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Fourth, education is serious business, but not for most students. I have had classroom experiences with a number of well-educated, erudite scholars who couldn't take the time to laugh or to see the humor in certain situations. Students don't want robots and Einsteins in front of the class, they want robots and Einsteins (and human beings) who can laugh with them, take a joke, or even make a joke. One personal experience is an excellent illustration of this point. While an undergraduate at the University of Utah, I had the opportunity to take a class from Dr. Roger Paxton of the history department. His was an intense class, with manic note scribbling the norm. My fellow students and I were so busy trying to capture his every word, heads bent over our notebooks, we failed to notice the day he pulled out a starter's pistol from under the podium and fired it in class to illustrate the importance of the Russian Revolution of 1917—the "shot truly heard 'round the world!" That is one lecture I will never forget, and one professor whom I will always remember.

Fifth, we all want to be good teachers, but we won't be. Accept this and deal with it. There is nothing worse than a bad instructor trying mightily to teach well. Often we will read (this journal included) articles telling us to try different approaches, different methodologies, and different techniques to see what works. I agree with this—up to a point. At some time, and sooner than later for the sake of the students, an instructor must take stock of his or her effectiveness through honest evaluation. If you can admit that you are not the most effective teacher, and that you have done your best, then stop punishing your students with the latest fad technique or program. Simply work with the strengths that you have gleaned from your attempts at improvement. The students will like you better for it. They may never enjoy taking a class from you, but that doesn't mean they won't like you. One thing I have learned about students—they are very good at separating the classroom from the office. Ineffectiveness as a teacher rarely interferes with your ability to communicate with and advise a student with a problem or a need. One-on-one interaction with students is just as important as the classroom work, particularly at smaller schools that place an emphasis on teacher-student communication.

Finally, don't be obscure, in either your speech or your assignments. Your students are attending the school where you are working because they couldn't get into the school from where you graduated. Raising students' awareness and educational ability doesn't mean you should be cryptic and incomprehensible. The majority of students whom we are teaching don't understand our in-jokes ("Buddy, can you paradigm?") any more than we political scientists understand computer hackers' jargon. Explain everything, and make your explanations relevant and contemporary. This is not a call for "dumbing down" a student's education. Rather, it is an appeal to think about and balance your need (and methodology) for teaching students complex ideas with their need (and ability) for understanding and comprehension.

One-on-one interaction with students is just as important as the classroom work,

Teaching is a thrill for me. And I am good at it. When I step in front of a class it is a natural high. Often I can't wait to get a class started because I am interested in finding out what my students think about current issues, or how they will react to concepts or theories that I am going to explain. I love to engage and challenge my students. Yet, I know that this feeling, this excitement, is not always shared by the students themselves. There are down times when it is a real struggle to get students to respond to anything. If you consider the advice I have offered above, it will help minimize the number of slow periods and help you cope with them when they do appear.

One parting thought for any administrators who are reading this. It is in your power to help instructors develop the abilities needed to advance in their career path. Graduate schools do a good job of cultivating the skills needed to conduct research. Developing the skills to become more effective classroom communicators is another story. I was fortunate enough to attend a graduate program, and a university, where the development of such skills was taken seriously. At the University of Delaware it was an unofficial graduation requirement for Ph.D. students to teach a class-independently—as part of the program of study in political science. To assist in this task, the university's Center for Teaching Effectiveness makes itself available to videotape classroom work and have it critiqued by trained and experienced education specialists, who then offer practical comments on improving your abilities in front of a class. This type of consideration for graduate students on the part of department and university administrators is probably the longest lasting service a university can provide to those graduates who will enter academia for the long haul. The return on this type of investment is incalculable.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096503001720 Published online by Cambridge University Press