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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Reflections on the First Day of Teaching: The Time I Stood Up in Front of the Class and Fell Down

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“I’m just so sick of feeling awkward,” I told my spouse the night before the first day of classes this semester. After having taught for eight years in another school across the country, I was about to begin teaching at a new institution. I was bemoaning the fact that everything was different at my new job, and I felt like a fish-out-of-water most of the time.

My new colleagues were extremely warm, welcoming, and supportive. But I was still learning the ropes at my new institution. I had to ask questions about nearly everything: how to use the copy machine, if I could use the coffee maker at the end of the hall, how to navigate the learning management system, and who to go to on campus for what.

I was also feeling unsure about the new age range of students I’d be teaching. I had been at a small graduate school, comprised of adult students (generally ages 40-70), and I was now at a medium-sized liberal arts institution, teaching mostly undergraduate students (typically 18-21 years old). I hadn’t taught undergraduate students since I had completed my PhD, over 9 years ago. When I was chatting about my nervousness with a friend, she consoled me by saying, “You’ll be fine. Just don’t dress frumpy!”

So, when I was getting ready for work on the first day of classes, I went to my closet in search

of my least frumpy ensemble. I donned a brightly colored geometric-print skirt and a pair of 3-inch heeled sandals in hopes that my students, over twenty years younger than me, might approve.

My first two classes that day went well. I introduced them to the syllabus and assignments, but also sprinkled in some course content. I also tried to introduce them to my teaching style, by using music, 1-min journal writes, and a think-pair-share exercise.

By the third class of the day, I was getting into the groove and feeling more confident, which means I began to walk around in the classroom. Then, right in the middle of class, when I was near the front of the room, I stumbled. I lost balance on my right foot—remember: I was wearing 3-inch sandals—and then tried to regain balance by putting all of my weight on my left foot. The next thing I knew, I was tripping around the front of the class and flailing my arms in big circular motions until I went crashing into the whiteboard behind me. The only saving grace was that my skirt remained in place.

When I regained my composure and looked up, the 24 students in the room (nearly all of whom were first-years) were staring at me wide-eyed, their mouths gaping. One cried out, “Are you okay?!?!?” I managed to mumble a joke about them not expecting an acrobatics performance in a theology class, but it had no effect. No one laughed. They were, I’m guessing, still in shock.

I had to keep talking and teaching, because what else could I do? After class (thankfully my last class for the day), I headed back to my office. I passed my new colleagues in the hall, and did what any self-respecting introvert would do: When they asked me how my first day went, I smiled and said, “Fine!” Then, I went into my office, closed the door, and posted about it on Facebook.

The next day, I could laugh about it (and could also tell my new colleagues about it). I laughed about it with my students, which gave them permission to laugh about it too. And now that we are almost at the mid-term mark in the semester, I realize, like most awkward and humbling experiences, there’s a teaching and learning moment in this one too.

Here’s what I learned:

1) *Embrace the awkward; it may help in relating to students.* Even before I fell, I was feeling awkward, but I’m guessing that many of my students were too. As first-year students, it was also their first day of class in a new institution too. Some students had to present me with sheets verifying their learning accommodation needs, which, based on societal stigmas, they might not have preferred to do. Others, I later learned, were first-generation college students and were wondering if they belonged on campus. And a few were single mothers, trying to balance a full course load with parenting and part-time jobs. When I stopped worrying about how I looked and felt, I could be more in tune with their needs.

2) *Think about how to help first-year students succeed in a new learning environment.* I had been learning the ropes in a new school, but so had they. Many had left home, family, friends,

and partners, and they were living away from all of their most stable relationships. They were also learning to manage their time and new freedom. Realizing this, I decided I could do more than simply list on my syllabi the contact information for the Student Success Center. I set some time aside in the course schedule for supportive activities. For example, I had a representative from the Student Success Center come into class and talk about the services they offer; I asked a librarian to demonstrate the research database to them; I led workshops on how to avoid plagiarism, how to read critically, and how to write a theology paper. I also passed around informal evaluations after the first few weeks of class, and I learned that students were feeling nervous about disagreeing (even respectfully) with other students in small groups. So, I led another workshop on respectful, critical dialogue.

3) *Be comfortable*. I'm back to wearing flats and 1" heels, even if they are frumpy. But it's not just my shoes that have to feel comfortable, I have learned. So does my teaching style. When I over-plan or am too calculated about what I want to do in any given class session, the delivery usually falls flat (pun fully intended). When I relax, loosen my grip on the lesson plan, and let the feel of the room and the students' questions and concerns guide the way I present the material, it usually works much better. The students are more engaged and take on a more active role in their learning.

Have any of you had big embarrassments in the classroom? If so, I'd love to hear about them—not just to stroke my bruised ego, but to hear what you've learned from them too! Please comment below.

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