

Advice from the Teaching Fellows

ASIANetwork - Luce Foundation Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow Program

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The following advice is taken from the final reports of the teaching fellows and faculty mentors from 2010 - 2014.

Arrive on Campus Early

Two or three weeks before the first day of classes, faculty members begin to appear in their offices as they gear up for the new academic year. They know that once meetings and other beginning-of-the-year events begin, little time is left for class preparation and syllabus revision. For this reason, the fellows recommended arriving on campus by the beginning of August. Early arrival gives administrative staff members more time to help you get settled on campus and you more time to get settled at home. A few weeks later, when the campus starts to get busy, you'll be more relaxed as you get to know your new colleagues at orientation and other events.

Engage Students Outside of Class

Most of our teaching fellows work at residential liberal arts colleges, places that value student-faculty interaction and see undergraduate education as a 24/7 opportunity. The fellows spoke of office meetings, coffee shops and cafeterias, clubs, co-curricular activities, etc., as venues where they could interact with students in ways that enhance classroom learning. Knowing students in these contexts helped them understand their anxieties and aspirations. One fellow defined teaching as the "art of recognizing and utilizing students' motivations." Another described how she decided not to confront a class about her disappointment with their work on a writing assignment so as not to damage class rapport. "Instead, I managed to have meetings with the students individually--to listen and to convey my concerns."

Be Prepared for Student Diversity

Many of our fellows mentioned the diversity of students. More than the visible diversity of race, ethnicity, or gender, they tended to comment on the great variation in the knowledge, skills, and backgrounds of their students. In response, they developed strategies to better prepare students to engage course material. Courses must be "challenging, meaningful, but also *accessible*." Another type of diversity came from group differences. Classrooms of students all looked similar on the first day of classes, but they quickly took on different personalities. The difference in two sections of the same course led one fellow to suggest paying more attention to the creation of a supportive classroom culture during the first weeks of the semester.

The Big "D"

The prefix in the word "postdoctoral" can become a bit fuzzy during the job search process. In the enthusiasm of an interview in March, it is easy to predict completion of your dissertation by early autumn. Fellows who arrived on campus without the Ph.D. in hand, however, usually left a year later in the same incomplete state. Keeping the "post" in postdoctoral was advice given by fellows and mentors alike. In other words, let the "D" be for "done"!

Make Use of the Course Management System

Before classes begin, attend a workshop or set up a meeting where you can learn about the campus course management system. Then talk with faculty members about their use of scanned materials, textbooks, assignments, group learning strategies, test, quizzes, and other pedagogical tools. Department faculty members sometimes fall into a pattern regarding these things. And if there is a pattern that is familiar to students, it might help to follow it.

Don't Forget Your Research

Even though the dissertation seemed too big a task to complete during the teaching fellow year, most fellows noted the importance of finding time for research. One suggestion was to turn attention to manageable tasks, such as writing an article from the dissertation instead of trying to pull together a book manuscript. Others attempted to incorporate research into teaching as a way to keep up their graduate school momentum. Making research part of your routine and holding yourself to realistic expectations was common advice.

Courses

Most colleges designate a faculty member or associate dean to assist faculty with teaching and learning issues. If possible, talk with this person about your syllabuses and classes prior to and during the semester. Our fellows also recommended some variation on team teaching. Teaching exchanges and guest lectures, too, give you a chance to observe other people's styles.

The topic of class discussion came up often, especially the difficulty of finding a balance between important content and student interest and engagement. One fellow summed up the issue by saying that she "began to use the textbook in a more nuanced way--as a starting point for discussions." Another commented that her best classes were about things she was less familiar with "because I was able to keep a clear focus and not overwhelm the students with information." On the other hand, a third fellow suggested creating "at least one upper-level course in which you can demonstrate to some extent the application of your research to your teaching."

Getting out in the Field

Depending on the discipline, there may be significant opportunities for class enhancements in the local and regional community. Art exhibits, school visits, field-based research, and other off-campus activities can become complicated, so ask your mentor and administrative assistant for assistance with things like transportation, college policies for field study, risk management, insurance, procedures for excusing students from classes, allowances for meals, reimbursement policies, etc. None of this is easy the first time through.

Books on Teaching

Colleges typically have a collection of academic reference books in their teaching and learning center, dean's offices, or library. One fellow mentioned how much she learned from reading John C. Bean's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (2011). There are dozens of similar books available. Ask faculty and library colleagues to recommend their favorites.

Offer What You Can

Although the postdoc position is set up to be a time of learning for the teaching fellow, the reverse also is true. The fellow has a lot to contribute to the campus. Offer to give a lecture on your area of research, share insights into technology in your field, meet with students who are interested in graduate school, sponsor a student club activity. Look for ways to contribute.

Visit Classes; Interview Faculty

The position of teaching fellow gives you permission to ask questions and seek opportunities. Request meetings with department chairpersons, deans, and others. Visit your colleagues' classes. When committee meetings are open to the faculty community, attend them as an observer with the goal of learning the immediate concerns of your college and long-term issues in higher education. Your faculty mentor can help you set an agenda and make connections for you. But people are busy, so you need to take initiative.

Teaching

One of the hallmarks of a liberal arts education is a focus on engaging students in active discussions of course content, the application of course content to real-world issues, etc. Some of the fellows commented on the change that took place in their understanding of the role of professor. They went from thinking primarily about content to thinking about how their students were engaging that content. "Looking back, I wish that I had learned earlier to avoid over preparation for teaching. After all, the classroom is for the growth of students; my role there is to facilitate their learning experience." Having time to focus on teaching had other benefits. "Foreseeing that over time I would grow into a more mature educator has helped ease my novice anxiety and made me more confident about the teaching tasks at hand."