

Forty Weeks of Teaching... and my Penny's Worth.

(a.k.a. Chicken Soup for the Teaching Assistant Soul)

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If there are two absolutely surreal experiences that LSE has given me, without a blink I'd say it would be my exposure to math and my experience as a teaching assistant. The former was the subject of my sentimental babble in my previous post - but my year as a teacher has rarely popped up in my writing (except for one painful encounter).

If there ever was a genre of careers that carried 'instant rewards', teaching Economics would probably be a crown jewel in that glee club. Seriously, if you ever forget what life was like being a first year undergrad, and feel like your research is burying you knee deep in boring adult calculus babble, run like crazy to your teaching administrator's office and beg her like crazy to teach Economics 101. You won't regret it.

Forty odd weeks, one hundred and twenty odd hours, a partridge and a pear tree after starting life off as a TA... I thought I'd share the bowl of wisdom that my forty five tortured souls have helped me find this year. In short, if you are considering either taking up a job as a teaching assistant (and intend to care for your job) or are considering teaching as a career, read this post, and think of me laughing my arse off when your best students turn in work that would make you want to cry an ocean. My advice is slightly off the beaten path, so don't get too upset if this stuff freaks you out. Here goes:

Explore the lunatic in you. If your institution provides you with photographs of your students before your first class, choose to go the freaky way. What I did in my first week was memorize the names of my students and their photographs (before I had ever met them). It took me about three days of hard work to cog them up, and about another three days to make sure I had indeed clogged them up. When I showed up for my first class, I got there five minutes early, and as my students came in, I freaked the hell

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I'd like to thank Danny Quah, a true Jedi Master who did my very first teaching audit and continues to believe in my lunacy (sometimes more than I do). The latest version of this file is available at

<http://www.vinayak.com/docs/teachingadvice.pdf>

out of them. Luckily, they didn't think of me as a lunatic, and it really got the ball rolling - I started off with an Ice-Free class.

Be yourself. That smooth move however was my only creditable accomplishment in my first two weeks. If someone could have taken a straw poll at the time, I'm sure I would have easily been voted as *the* worst teacher on my course. Nothing went right. I overshot time by about thirty minutes, made silly mistakes with my graphs, and in general had about thirty panic attacks a minute (spaced every two seconds for the not so astute reader). Seriously - those two weeks were nightmarish. *nothing* went right at all. I just couldn't find a way to reach out to my students. In the middle of my second week of teaching, I decided to quit religiously reading my teaching manual and notes from my teacher training, and do something different. While I loved every minute of my training sessions, I realise that the one thing that institutional training can do is to bog you down with formalities that can often hinder your ability to reach out to students. Don't get me wrong - your teacher manual is your bible - don't *ever* mess with it. However, if you find that your own style and creativity are hindered, don't hesitate to spend a day trying to be yourself. That's when things started coming together for me.

Scream it out from your heart. I think that the single most important thing you can do as a teacher to open your students up is to unequivocally love your subject. Every time you teach, feel like you're going out there to do a Bruce Springsteen show. If your students genuinely believe that their teacher loves the subject, then there isn't a kid in the world that won't be inspired to wake up, be alert, and listen to you.

Be loud. Okay, don't be *too* loud (every single negative comment I got on my teacher review form was that I was too loud), but make sure you're loud enough to prevent your crowd from falling asleep. Keep your eyes open - if you find that someone is just about getting ready to tuck in a snooze, go near them and roar out the reason why indifference curves don't intersect... and then ask them if they'd expect such properties to be true in other galaxies.

Think crazy. Seriously... think crazy. Students spend their lives with Pizzas, DVDs, Circus Tickets, Bullfights. Find something absurd. My personal favourite was Concert Tickets to go watch Madonna sing with Shaggy (everyone hates the two of . Another favourite was telling my students to think they were taking a Stephen Hawking string theory class where he shows up with a pop quiz. As each of us (economics students) goes in the class average grade starts falling. Then Albert Einstein came in and the marginal product shoots up. But then Albert Einstein was *really* fat that day. In fact, *all* the smart physicists coming in after that were fat and only five of them could fit in. When they finally wanted Feynman to come in, there wasn't any space left. The room was too small to include any more inputs. We either had to move to a bigger room in the long run, or just make

do with what we had. Okay, this may not make a lot of sense now, and may seem utterly wrong, but at the time it all looked good. The point is - be creative. They'll *never* forget a good story. Create a little reality TV with your class. Spice up the course professors - make them look funky. When you discuss wages, tell them the professor drives a Mercedes while you're an impoverished teaching assistant and can't even join the damn union. In case my professors are reading this, thanks in advance for being good sports :) - I promise you my students won't ever forget the economics they learnt out of the fun superhero stories I've spun off you. The thing is... if you can bend and twist reality into exaggerated instances - you effectively help your students register these concepts on a more permanent level. No one ever forgets PEMDAS (Please Excuse my Dear Aunt Sally). In that same way, I hope none of my students will ever forget my tales of student poverty and despair (which of course... are sadly real, and *really sad*.)

Have a heart. Be accessible. Don't be obsessed with your boring life all the time. If your students are really motivated and need your help outside class, be supportive (to a limit of course). Some of my best students are scatter brained halflings who can never come up with a good doubt in class. Instead, they can constantly be found bumping into you at random places with extremely mammoth files that weigh more than two sumo wrestlers. Sadly, they are the ones you want to encourage the most. If you're rude to them, you'll lose them in class, and your subject loses them to the investment banks. Remember... you may be a teaching assistant, but to them you're a guide. Help them in any way possible (subject to your teaching manual limits of course). On the other hand, you will often find students who overstay their welcome. Be prompt about letting them know they're doing so. Its for their own good.

Know your stuff. Make sure you know what you're talking about. Trust me, your students know when you're farting through the wrong windpipe. Don't ever randomly pick an answer from thin air. If you don't know an answer, please make sure you say "I don't know the answer". Your students will respect you for it. They know their guide isn't Superman (especially mine, since I made my professors look like him). They know you won't know everything, and they will patiently wait for you to get back to them (which you should make sure you do).

Love them. I love my students - all of them - even the ones that can't stand the sight of me. I *love* waking up in the morning to teach my classes. I love waking my students up when they come in with hangovers and/or long days behind them. Ask them if everything is okay. Its a formality that always puts everyone at ease. They're *not* going to come talk to you about last night's binge drinking contest. However, just to let them know that you care is always a great way to start the class. It works like a charm!

Hate them. I blow like a pressure cooker when my students submit written work that could serve as a substitute for toilet paper. This one has

proven to be my most difficult problem to crack yet. I still haven't found a good way to inspire my students to produce written work that is a function of their genuine ability. However, I think I've come as close to it as I will this year. It all revolves around some heartfelt anger. I have most gleefully yelled at my lasses when they give me crap. I've even made some students cry. Okay... I didn't make them cry, but I think I got them into believing that they didn't do their best, and then they cried because they were angry with themselves. After that, ask them to resubmit something in the next week and you'll learn how elegant the exponential function really is. Use this tip with caution - my students put up with me when I get angry because I've always been tough on them. This may not always be the case.

Love what you do. If you don't then you can't use anything I've written, and that would just suck :-)