

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

THE REVIEW

Award-Winning Teachers Reflect on Their Training

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We asked several faculty members who have won awards for their teaching to tell us what they wished they had learned or are grateful they did learn about teaching when they were doctoral students. Here are their responses.

AMY L. BRANDZEL

Associate professor of American studies and women studies, University of New Mexico

Compared to the experiences of most of my colleagues, my training as a Ph.D. student was exceptional. That's because I come from a feminist-studies doctoral program that required a course on feminist pedagogies before I was tossed into the classroom. The majority of my colleagues were only given the most basic introductions into their teaching careers through what can only be described as weak universitywide "TA training" modules. These modules at best offer a few days of so-called teacher training to Ph.D. students from throughout the disciplines. Science and humanities scholars are thrown together and given a few samples of teaching strategies. This is what my former university did, and this is what my current university does.



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Doctoral training hasn't traditionally been concerned with whether future faculty members are good teachers. New programs are meant to change that.

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When I was a graduate student, I went to a few of these trainings, but it wasn't until I was in a semester-long course with like-minded graduate students, all of us invested in questions of feminist studies, that I finally began to construct my own teaching practice. It was in this space that I started to figure out what my priorities and investments were as a teacher, and began to construct diverse classroom methods to try on and to see if they fit.

The trial and error of teaching happens for all of us, but only the few, only the lucky, are allowed the opportunity to reflect on what we are trying to achieve in the classroom.

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KIRK DORAN

Associate professor of economics, University of Notre Dame

When I was a Ph.D. student we didn't talk much about teaching; we just did it. But experience alone isn't as good as experience plus good advice. I wish someone had told me then the three things I would need now in order to be a good teacher.

These three things are: to forget, to give courage, and to inspire perseverance. First, a teacher needs to forget what he knows and think like someone who is learning something for the first time, piecing together arguments that can persuade and guide students who don't already understand a topic intuitively. Forgetting is unnatural for us and mentally painful, and I wish I had known I would need to make it a habit from the start.

Second, a teacher needs to give courage to students. As Ph.D.s, we spend years interacting with people who are intellectually self-critical. But this is a rare trait; once we take our first job, most of our students will arrive committed to various ideologies on the basis of limited evidence. These ideologies give them a sense of comfort and identity in an uncertain world. They won't abandon this comfort in order to seek the truth and follow it wherever it leads unless we give them the courage to do so. We can give courage by modeling it, by telling the students that we believe they have courage inside of them, and by praising them when they exhibit it.

Finally, we need to inspire perseverance; often a student is just a few days away from understanding a fundamental idea, and their continued progress depends on just a little more perseverance than they are used to giving.

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MARK LEE

Associate professor of biology, Spelman College

As a graduate student, I wish I had learned to focus my efforts more on students' learning than on my own teaching. If I complete a stellar job of teaching and no one learns anything, what is the point?

I wish I knew that my approach to scientific research could be used to improve student learning. As a scientist, I used a rigor informed by current thinking in the field, collected my own data, and determined how that data should help decide what I should do next. If I had known that I should bring that same rigor to my classroom, I would have been a better educator at a much earlier stage of my teaching career.

I wish I had gathered and analyzed data from students to help me figure out what was working. If students consistently met a learning goal, I would have known to keep that learning approach for future use. If students were not adequately prepared for assessments and did not meet the learning goals, then I would have known to revisit that teaching approach or toss it altogether. Basically, I should have engaged in a significant level of self-assessment based on student performance and not student attitudes about how much they “liked” my class.

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SARAH LEUPEN

Senior lecturer in biology, University of Maryland-Baltimore County

I wish I had been taught that there is an evidence base of best practices in university teaching, and what some of those practices are. That it is well established, for example, that students can only learn well when they are given an opportunity to practice using the information, or performing the skills, that they are expected to learn, while receiving frequent feedback on the quality of their understanding. But beyond being exposed to specific ideas in the teaching literature, simply being made aware that there was such a literature — that there was already a good deal of theoretical and empirical work on the topic — would have been a revelation to me.

Of course, being familiar with a variety of evidence-based practices doesn't, by itself, allow one to make a good course. The next step would have been learning (including practicing!) how to design a course: how I could best choose and incorporate these practices into a structure that

would best promote student learning, as well as allowing me to assess how successful I'd been in doing so.

Happily, there has been some improvement in the above since I was a graduate student in the 1990s. What remains almost totally unchanged is something I was taught then, implicitly: that teaching is not important, or intellectually interesting, but rather something to get over with in order to get back to the lab bench as quickly as possible. No matter what we tell our graduate students about teaching, as long as incentive structures — especially those for hiring, tenure, and promotion — remain almost exclusively research-focused (even at many “teaching oriented” schools), we will continue to teach this unfortunate lesson. This must change if teaching is to improve broadly.

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BETH SEVERY-HOVEN

Professor of classics, Macalester College

On the whole I was extremely well served by my graduate education, but in terms of preparing to teach I would have appreciated a better sense of the institutional landscape. Being a TA at an R1 prepared me to teach at an R1. You can see this just in terms of course structure — undergraduate courses at my graduate institution had lectures three times a week for 100-400 students AND discussion sections led by TAs like me with 20 students once or twice a week. But that doesn't hold everywhere.

In my field, lots of jobs are at liberal-arts colleges, where courses are three days a week with 10 to 25 students. A friend went to a state university with classes of 70-100, but without TAs or discussion sections. I have no idea how classes are organized at community colleges, and these differences just scratch the surface. I remember learning how to apply to these different types of schools, but not how to teach at them. Fortunately for me, I started out during the “Wild West” days of the internet, when many if not most new professors made webpages for their courses. I

could surf my way to a range of syllabi appropriate for my domain. Now those beautifully designed models hide inside courseware like Blackboard or Moodle. I should think a packet of syllabi from alums at a wide range of institutions — and a conversation about them — would be a gift.

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SCOTT A. SNYDER

Professor of chemistry, University of Chicago

Although I had valuable opportunities to teach classes and guide others in laboratory experiments as an undergraduate and graduate teaching assistant, I had no experience in course development until I became a faculty member. In confronting that challenge with my first classes, two elements proved invaluable.

The first element is something I learned during my graduate training, though I did not fully appreciate its direct connection to teaching until I had to develop an entire course from scratch. Namely, just as the best scientific research lectures attempt to tell a coherent story with a clear beginning, middle, and end, so, too, should each individual class have a narrative, with the course as a whole similarly possessing continuity and chapter-like organization. A well-structured course provides clarity and a meaningful framework for student engagement, especially for those encountering a subject for the first time.

The second element is having sufficient breadth of background to ensure that the core classroom narrative has the stories needed to make it truly engaging. When I was earning my doctorate, I focused principally on having a depth of understanding in my specialty and becoming the best experimentalist possible. But, because I did not want to let some of my other passions, such as an interest in history, wither in the process, I tried whenever possible to read articles and books targeted at more general audiences that merged such topics with science. While done at the time

for personal enjoyment, I realize now that the knowledge garnered from those readings has afforded many of the most compelling enrichments to my classes.

A version of this article appeared in the [August 4, 2017, issue](#).

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OPINION



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