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Lessons Learned About Teaching Adults

Dennis W. Kellison, EdD

Assistant Professor of Leadership Studies

Shenandoah University

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The purpose of this paper is to describe my personal transition from a K – 12 teacher/administrator to an instructor of graduate students. I am using the approach of sharing some lessons learned as a new college professor with the caveat that the reader understands it is a personalized experience and relatively brief in the scheme of things. With that being said, however, I believe there is something to be learned from my naive approach to teaching graduate students. The lessons learned are mostly simple in nature but ones we sometimes learn over and over again as teachers. The portal to viewing the experience will be mostly my preparation for and teaching ‘LST 624 Financial Planning and Management in the Public Sector and Nonprofit Organizational Settings,’ the latest course I have taught, and my experience teaching Administration 624 School Finance and Theory.

Before we get to those lessons learned, it will be good to talk a little about that past experience. I first walked into a classroom, as a professional teacher, in the fall of 1969. (Not too digress too far, but my first real experience was as a first grader in the fall of 1953 in a one room schoolhouse in Bingamon Junction, West Virginia, but I will save that discussion for another time). Back to the professional experience, I was given the responsibility of teaching about one hundred and fifty seventh through twelfth grade students wanting to learn Civics, United States History, and West Virginia history. What I knew about teaching I had learned from a few methods courses in college and three months of practice teaching or “student teaching” as it was called. Those ideas and the help of colleagues got me through two years.

Following that two years of teaching experience, I did not return to a classroom on any consistent basis until 1995 when I became an adjunct professor at Shenandoah University, teaching School and Community Relations to first year graduate students in an Administrative Master’s Degree program. I had spent the previous twenty-two years as a counselor and school

administrator with virtually no 'classroom' responsibilities. Although there were no consistent classroom or course responsibilities, there were enough reports, faculty meetings, and board and conference presentations to help me progress from the chalkboard, to the overhead projector, to the modern day computer as useful methods of teaching and presenting. In addition, hundreds of hours were spent inside K to 12 teacher's classrooms observing their work, often judging or critiquing it.

Walking into the classroom in 1995 and being responsible for the learning of those graduate students made me realize the expectations of teaching and instructing were not only different for those students and me, but also quite new and unique from my past experience.

The experience from 1995 to the fall of 2009 proved to be a limited introduction into the world of teaching graduate students and the role of adjunct faculty. In those first few years I taught the same course, School and Community Relations, for both Shenandoah University and George Mason University. Originally, I taught it just once per year, the course syllabus was handed to me and, thus I had little need for preparation or pre-course responsibilities. I relied on the same methods each term. I occasionally made adjustments to the course but did not devote the time or energy that I now recognize the effort needed.

After a brief hiatus from adjunct teaching, I returned to the classroom in the fall of 2007 to teach School Finance to graduate students who were preparing to be school administrators. It was at that time that I began to think of retirement from K-12 education. Since I enjoyed the teaching that I had been doing, it appeared that venturing into the field of graduate school teaching would be something I would find fulfilling and give me the opportunity to continue to contribute to the profession to which I had devoted the last forty years of my adult life.

With this thought in mind, I began to take the role of adjunct professor more seriously and envisioned the impact that role could have on students, if I were willing to become a better teacher. Therefore, as I approached the fall of 2009, having retired as a full time K-12 educator that summer, I began to ask myself how I could improve my teaching skills. I was not sure where to start, but I turned to others, the research and advice that had been documented, and began my quest. In addition, I began to keep a journal of my thoughts and reaction after every class session. I was teaching School Finance in the fall of 2009, content with which I was comfortable, but attempting to become very conscious of my skills as an instructor. By 2011, I had transitioned from part-time adjunct to a full-time Assistant Professor. The realization that I had a lot to learn about my new job was upon me.

It is from this base and my now limited full-time experience, I am beginning to reflect upon what I have learned thus far about this thing called being a college professor.

Lesson 1 - Move out of your comfort zone

In my overview of my past experience, I talked about the beginnings of my adjunct experience. If I was going to teach, it seemed easy to move into course work where I had a great deal of practical knowledge and experience. It did not take a great deal of preparation and others had organized much of the course.

In my quest to be a better instructor, the best thing that has occurred thus far was the invitation to teach a course out of the education administration program. The course was LST 624 Financial Planning and Management in the Public Sector and Nonprofit Organizational Settings. The students taking this course were not teachers nor were they aspiring school administrators. Rather they worked in local government or non-profit agencies that provide many human services around the community. I was much more comfortable with teachers. I

knew them. I knew what they thought, how they behaved, and what they expected. This would be different, much different.

At first, I did not recognize the opportunity that teaching a new course, out of my field of experience, offered. I reluctantly agreed believing it would be time consuming and require more effort than I wanted to expend. The former was true but the time and experience more than paid off. As soon as I accepted the assignment, I began to feel uneasy. Questions and concerns were bouncing around my head. The course had not been taught prior to this. What did the students expect? In addition to their expectations, what needed to be taught? What knowledge did they need to carry away with them as they left the course? How could the content be best delivered? I could not totally rely on my own experience. Sure I knew government finance well enough, but I knew very little about non-profits in general and how they operated, particularly financially. What would the students think? Many of them knew me and that I had spent a number of years in public education. Would they see me as someone knowledgeable in this area? This lack of comfort on my part, however, proved to be a positive as I began to think about my approach to the course. It made me take a fresh look at what I knew and did not know. I had to do some research on content a little unfamiliar to me. I needed to think of ways of giving the students a positive learning experience. I was being forced out of some complacency and being led into a new arena with a different environment. I realized though, I was thinking! My mind was working. I was being challenged in a way from which I could learn. The bottom line was that it was okay to be uncomfortable, in fact, it was inspiring. Thus, the first lesson, move out of that comfort zone.

By the way, this does not mean that I had to create everything on my own. Many other professors in the department were willing to help. I did not need to reinvent the wheel. There are

many online resources, lesson plans, videos, simulations, and other materials that have been created by experienced professors. Merlot.org is a good example of this kind of resource that provides excellent help. (Mangan, 2009)

There is a reciprocal lesson to be learned about the comfort zone from which the students will benefit. The lesson learned by me is to not let the students get comfortable. My observation is that they become comfortable with the style of the professor and get comfortable, in fact friendly, with the students around them. Although there is obviously some benefit to this, there is also what Joe Ben Hoyle (2006) calls the ‘comfort slump’. Hoyle simply suggests changing the seating chart to make the students move around. He believes this helps keep the edge on their attentiveness in the class. I used a modified approach to this ‘reciprocal’ lesson by assigning and rotating different pairs or groups on class assignments or projects. This helped disperse a table of students that had gotten too comfortable and ‘chatty’ early in the term. Keeping the classroom from becoming dull or boring is helpful in creating an environment in which learning becomes center stage.

Lesson 2 – Students are people too (and adults)

As I began to think seriously about teaching adults I envisioned a somewhat different environment than what I began to experience. I expected energetic adults who would be well prepared each class session, eager to learn, hang on my every word, and be very independent workers. I expected that they would clearly understand assignments and go to work with little direction or concern.

What I encountered, however, was a little different. Although some met this description, many demonstrated characteristics not dissimilar to what I encountered in K – 12. Questions or comments like: Did the paper have to be exactly ten pages or could it be nine or eleven? Should

it be doubled spaced or something less? I did my assignment but forgot it on my desk. I do not like to be in front of groups, do I have to present? Can I do my project independently because I do not like to work in groups? I do not know how to do this; I have never done it before. And the list goes on and on. All of those little things that students encounter from the time they enter school until they exit, at whatever age. In addition, graduate students also have adult burdens. Things like spouses, jobs, children, and family ‘stuff’ are always surrounding them. I had to be cautious not to let these things become excuses but yet had to be mindful of what emotions or distractions students may be bringing to class. I was presented with a variety of personal problems or conflicts that prevented class attendance, caused late arrivals or early departures. My conclusion is obvious; students are students and human beings regardless of age. What was important to these students was that they felt ‘I knew them’ and that their individual concerns were addressed. In addition, some were dependent upon specific direction and needed frequent reinforcement or reassurance about what they were doing.

Surprisingly, my limited observations seemed to be supported by others in regard to adult learners. According to Lyons (2004), “knowledge of subject” was found to be the ninth most important thing to students, both undergraduates and graduates. Things deemed more important to the student were clarity of presentation and materials, stimulation of interest in the course content, openness to opinions, and articulation of course expectations. In addition to these important expectations of students, Lyons says students want professors who: know them and care about them, use class time wisely, create an environment that values student input, and present a classroom demeanor that is humorous and spontaneous. Joe Ben Hoyle, in his book *Tips and Thoughts on the Teaching Process in College*, sums up the expectations that students

have of their professors as follows: “Challenge the Students, Engage the Students, and Care about the Students.” (2006, pp. 29-30)

An aspect of being an adult learner that makes them a little different may simply be related to life experiences. For most children in a classroom there are correct or incorrect answers, often in the back of the textbook. For adults, life has taught them that the significant problems they face have no one ‘correct or incorrect’ answer. Solutions in life experiences have put correctness in the context of religion, culture, or tradition. Further, while the child comes to school to learn what the school is teaching, the adult may already have other ideas and concepts about the content. Lastly, most adults continue to learn well because they concentrate their learning in the areas of their experience and interest. Motivation can be substantial under these conditions as opposed to children. (Kidd, 1973) Thus, the view from the classroom chair for an adult may be quite different from that of a child.

Lesson 3 – Be Prepared

The challenge of going beyond my level of comfort exposed another lesson learned. Preparation prior to the start of a class is crucial to the success of the students and instructor. Wilber J. McKeachie (2002), in his book *McKeachie’s Teaching Tips; Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers* offers a three month countdown of things to do prior to the first class. These range from writing goals and objectives three months out to selecting a textbook and other resources. The timeline then takes the reader down to specific lesson plans and what to do that first day of class.

In preparing for LST 624, I began about two months from the start of class. The approach I used was similar to that recommended by McKeachie. I began by writing down some course objectives and just straight- forward ideas about what I thought the students should learn.

Simultaneously, I began the search for an appropriate textbook. After reviewing three or four texts, I settled on one for the course. The text offered additional ideas and some helpful learning activities. In the meantime, I gained access to the course roster and student email addresses. I made the course available on Blackboard and established a Discussion Board page. On this page I asked the students to talk about their background and experiences, their education, their current job, and what they expected to gain from the course. This proved to be extremely helpful in planning the course objectives and learning activities.

In the process of developing the learning activities and instructional strategies, it became apparent to me that my knowledge in some areas was not going to be sufficient to lead the class. I did two things. First, I began researching the topics and reading more in depth about them. This gave me a broader background than just government finance. Secondly, I contacted community people who had some particular expertise in government or non – profit finance. By interviewing them and having some general discussion I learned a great deal about their work and organization. In addition, I asked them if they would speak to the class during the term. Most agreed. This gave me a panel of experts to present relevant content and experiences that most students had identified as important to their learning.

With all of this information in hand, I developed a course syllabus, calendar, assignments and grading documents. These were all then posted on Blackboard ahead of the first meeting of the class. I left them in draft form and told the students we would finalize them after the first day of class, once all the questions and concerns were answered. As students asked for clarity, I revised the documents to be as clear and precise as possible. Being prepared is an important part of being successful in a course. However, be aware that it takes time and effort. (Otto, 2002)

Lesson 4 – Be reflective and flexible

According to McKeachie (2002) an important element of improvement is reflection. He says it is important to think about what you want to accomplish and what you and the students need to do in order to accomplish the goals. During the course of teaching LST 624 I was both reflective and flexible. Appendix A of this paper is a reflective journal that I kept during the course. My reflections focused on some events in the class as well as my reaction to the group as we progressed. I was able to reflect upon the student comments and responses and, in some cases, make adjustments the following week. There are two examples that make the point.

First, one of the assignments was to read an article in a journal or newspaper about something related to the activity of a non-profit and submit a one page review and reflection about what the student had read. At the start of each class, I then called upon three or four to share what they had read. Although they shared enthusiastically, it did seem there was more class interest in discussing the meetings I had them attend. Many were attending local government meetings for the first time and wanted to talk about what they were seeing. Therefore, I eased off of the articles and began to focus on expanding the discussions about the meetings.

Secondly, the class had done a couple of ‘hands on’ activities including one with one of the presenters. This appeared to stimulate a great deal of discussion. To promote more of this, I devised a class activity during which they had the opportunity to make some budget decisions on their own. Since they had heard presentations on the City of Winchester budget, Winchester City School budget, and the United Way budget, I used those budgets as background to the assigned task. The students were divided into four groups, one for each of the aforementioned budgets and one at-large group. They were to then to decide individually how to restore one

million dollars to the respective budgets. After this discussion, I then had them go back and take \$400,000 out. The entire activity was lively and stimulated good discussion about the pros and cons of various government services. Had I not been both reflective and flexible, these activities would not have occurred.

Lesson 5 – Humor and Stories are okay

No doubt, students like professors to tell stories about past experiences. The general school of thought is that if they can get the professor off the germane topic and on to telling a story of the past, the class period will be wasted and the students can go another class period without being held accountable for much content. From time to time I was too tempted and got pulled into the story telling routine. However, after the first time or two I came upon a simple and obvious method (not obvious to me but probably to the reader) to help with the approach. I would tell the story but not complete it. I would then ask the students what they thought the ending would be, what would I do or say or what would someone else in the story do or say. Further, I would ask someone to sum up the relevance of the story to the course. Why did I tell it? This approach kept me on task and kept the course discussion relevant. Students do relate to the real life stories, particularly those that are current and may be playing out in the local news. One superintendent of schools teaching adjunct reports that students said they appreciated the stories for background on events that they know have occurred (Roberson, 2002). When I wanted to intentionally tell a story that was off task or not so relevant (only remotely) I would declare that I was ‘bird walking’ but that we would shortly return to task.

There is always room for humor in a classroom. A class cannot become the ‘Comedy Hour’ but it can have its moments. I mention this here because some of my off task stories were funny incidents that occurred that showed my own culpability. Letting students laugh at your

own follies is a way of connecting with them. In the recent finance class, I told them about the time I signed a teacher's travel voucher paying him mileage for a school professional trip he took, only to find out later he had robbed a bank on the way and had included the mileage for reimbursement!! A funny story for sure but also a reminder to them that anything can and will happen when it comes to dealing with people.

Sometimes just let them have a good laugh about something funny that you or a classmate said. As my wife always says when it comes to eating habits, "Everything in moderation" is the goal.

Lesson – 6 Keep Your Enthusiasm

Joe Ben Hoyle (2006) tells the story of how a Broadway actor told him about keeping his enthusiasm for a role in a show that went on for weeks and months. The actor explained that he and all the cast knew that each night the audience was new and deserved their best effort. This lesson learned applies to not only teaching the same course over and over again for years, but also within the term. From time to time I found myself being complacent with the material. When I became complacent so did the students. I realized that one of the things they enjoyed about the class was my passion and enthusiasm for some topics. Keeping and demonstrating your enthusiasm for the topic is the best source for demonstrating to students its relevance and the passion one can have for a topic. We cannot let this opportunity to demonstrate a deep desire for learning pass without taking advantage of it. Be on the look out for complacency and when you find it, change things up. Allow time for a discussion, possibly about a current event that is relevant to the course or at least the course of study or program in which the students are enrolled. Relevance and enthusiasm go a long way in sparking student learning.

Lesson 7 – Informal Feedback helps

Although course evaluations are a helpful and necessary part of university life, the gathering of informal feedback from your students can also be very helpful. In Appendix B, I have included the informal feedback I received for LST 624. It does not have to be complex or burdensome. Simply asking what worked best for them and/or what they learned, as well as soliciting suggestions for improvement of the course, opened the door to some good ideas for improvement. From this I can understand which approaches worked best for students and which were least effective. In addition, asking what they learned gave me a sense of whether they learned what I intended, as well as whether they learned what they expected to learn.

Although my suggested method of feedback is very informal and for personal use, McKeachie (2002) provides more structured methods and suggestions for such a process in his book. For example, he suggests informal feedback more frequently during the course. In addition, he points out that although some are skeptical of student feedback, and may in fact believe it is not valid nor are the students qualified to provide it, he believes research on the topic supports this kind of informal feedback and that many faculties across the nation use it as a method of improvement. Choose whatever method works best for you and pay attention along the way. A great deal can be learned from the students (Ceniceros, 2005).

Lesson 8 - Realize You Have Not Learned All There is to Know

Teaching is a complex, challenging profession. I guess I have known that for a long time. Part of the complexity of teaching is translating the ‘knowing’, knowing the content knowledge, into an arena of understanding in which others can learn. Every course and every class period

has presented me with something new. How could I say or do something differently to help more students understand? What else did I need to know that would help? What skill did I need? This challenge keeps me on my toes. The important part is to realize the challenges will not end, nor should they. Karl Weick (2010), in a lecture at the Center for the Study of Learning at George Washington University, said, “Things that never happened before, happen all the time”. Truer words were never spoken about the graduate school classroom for an adjunct professor!

Lesson 9 – Remember Stephen Covey?

The change I am experiencing is slow and incremental. Hoyle (2006) points out that there is a Zen philosophy that proclaims that ‘the journey is everything.’ I have started the journey of being a better instructor with the realization that it is a journey without end but has its rewards. Hoyle (2006) says he sees the result to be constantly new and better ways to motivate students and to stimulate their thinking.

Lyons (2004) recommends using Stephen Covey’s Seven Habits of Highly Effective People (he replaces ‘people’ with the term “Adjunct Professors”) to continue a personal journey of improvement. This approach provides a systematic means to improvement. Right now, I am working on ‘sharpening the saw’. Covey best explains the meaning of this habit through the parable of watching a man use a saw to cut down a tree. The man looks exhausted and worn out and admits he has been at the task for more than five hours. When asked why he did not stop in order to sharpen his saw, he replied, “there was no time to do that,” he was too busy sawing. The conclusion is that we all need to take time to invest in ourselves. The investment will result, in this case, in better teaching and a more enriched experience for our students. As Hoyle says - it is all a journey.

In my case, after forty years as a practicing educator, I find myself back in the classroom as a teacher. As a teacher, I want to learn more about how we learn and how that can be better facilitated. I am fascinated by technology and the new ways of learning it is presenting to us. We have access to more knowledge and ideas than we ever have had as a civilization. The speed of that access is equally overwhelming. Our challenge as teachers is to appropriately channel that access and speed and to help the learning of our students to continue to expand beyond the classroom walls.

Hoyle concludes his book in a fitting manner. The motto of every classroom should be the words of Plutarch: “The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled.”

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