

Lessons From Year 1 on the Faculty

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Image: New York Herald's 1906 Calendar

Well here it is already — the end of my first year of full-time teaching. With 25 years of experience in the music industry, and 20 of those years teaching music as an adjunct, I'd felt well-prepared for academia. In fact, I was raring to go.

Last fall, as I walked across campus during the first week of classes, I felt the excitement of being part of the whole enterprise. I traveled the hallowed halls, bustling with the commotion of students. I sat in faculty meetings and glanced around at my new colleagues, the collective braintrust charged with developing, monitoring, scrutinizing, and ultimately teaching the curriculum. I met with my classes for the first time, and in between, retired to the solitude of my very first faculty office. It felt exhilarating. It was what I'd been preparing for all those years in grad school.

As you can probably guess, the honeymoon period soon came to a close, as it does with any job. What remained was the business of getting down to work — teaching. My goal here is to reflect on year one, homing in on those lessons learned that were not necessarily part of my experience as an adjunct or my coursework as a doctoral student.

I knew I would learn a lot my first year. It's just not what I thought I would learn.

Lesson No. 1: Teaching isn't always about teaching. As graduate students, when we envision our future in academe, we tend to see ourselves pontificating to a group of pensive students. Likewise for many adjuncts, academia largely exists in the classroom, and when the day's session is over, we walk away — the service responsibilities that accompany full-time teaching are typically absent from adjuncting (at least that was my experience).

Of course, much teaching and learning *does* happen in the classroom. But what I learned over the course of this year is that, for students, the classroom is not always the central focus of their college experience. For example,

early in the semester, the administration sent out an email on advising to all faculty members. It cited studies that showed students consider advising to be one of the most important components of their college experience. I was skeptical. As the year rolled on, however, I began to notice that some of the more pivotal moments for my students came in our one-on-one discussions in my office — whether in a formal advising meeting or just an informal conversation.

In those quiet meetings, I found myself on the receiving end of stories that had nothing to do with school. I got my first hug from a student and had my first tearful student in my office. Students saw me as a confidant, and, after our talks, I observed that they tended to do better in class. Trust was built. In addition, I gained valuable insider information. For instance, I learned that some students view college as an opportunity to party — until their junior year when they begin to conceive of it as a means for learning and preparing for a career.

As a result, it occurred to me that I should not assume too much about my students, or their reasons for being in college. In turn, that made me think that I should reconceptualize my approach, particularly with younger students who may need extra guidance. In my music classes, I had not anticipated that I would need to teach students how to create a daily practice schedule or how to break passages of difficult music into small chunks. But I did.

Ultimately, as teachers, we may rightfully put our emphasis on what happens in the classroom. But for students, the classroom may be just one aspect of a larger whole that includes advising, a social life, basic life skills, and other things. That does not mean we should coddle students — we aren't doing them any favors by holding their hands through college. Rather, it may mean we need to supply additional instruction from a larger palette of skills to help them succeed.

Lesson No. 2: The “obvious” may not be so obvious. At times, I found myself getting frustrated when students weren't performing as I'd anticipated. Then I realized I probably hadn't communicated my expectations clearly.

I've learned that I may need to spell things out: "I expect you to practice your music and have it all learned — so that, at any rehearsal, whatever piece of music I call, you are ready to play it." That seemed obvious to me, as a professional performer accustomed to working for bandleaders who expected me to know my part. But to a college student, it may not always be clear. So I simply told my students what I expected them to have ready for each rehearsal. They agreed it was reasonable, and we moved forward from there. Lesson learned: Students are bright and capable but require clear expectations.

Lesson No. 3: Ask your students. One day during an ensemble rehearsal, it occurred to me that I had never asked the students what they thought about our progress on a piece of music. So I asked. I was pleasantly surprised at the response. They had all been listening closely to what needed work and made excellent suggestions. What a revelation! Why hadn't I thought of this before? Why not harness their collective brainpower? Once the students had been given a platform to express their views, it changed the dynamic in the rehearsals. It was less of me telling them what to do, and more of “we're all in this together.”

Naturally, not every last detail of a course can be driven by students. But there are multiple areas in which students can become equal partners in the educational process, or what [Randall Everett Allsup](#) calls the “democratic” model of music education.

Lesson No. 4: Students say what they think ... until they don't. End-of-semester evaluations can be a forum for disgruntled students to air grievances, particularly if they earned a poor grade. Some faculty members may view those evaluations as part of what [Christopher Yates](#) called the “consumerist logic” of academia. With my own doubts about their value, I asked a senior colleague for his perspective. What he said surprised me: He uses evaluations to identify areas where he could “tweak” his teaching and make it more useful to his students. He's been promoted to full professor and is well-respected so he must be doing something right. I followed his example.

Yet students don't always reveal everything on an evaluation — particularly the positive aspects of a course. They

may think, “I liked that part of the course. No need to say anything about it. The teacher knows it was fine.” Not necessarily. Let me illustrate.

I had a particularly large improvisation class during the fall semester. It was the first of a two-semester sequence. Typically, each student improvises, and the teacher provides individual feedback. But the large number of students made that challenging. So I devised a solution: Divide the class into three “combos.” It was the best I could come up with, but it felt like a compromise. As the semester progressed, I found myself inwardly wincing every time it came time for combos. And I imagined the students felt similarly. The second-semester course had fewer students so I dropped the combos. Then, during a one-on-one meeting, a student said, “It was kind of fun having your own combo.” I had no idea they’d liked it. I had wrongly assumed my solution was a failure because they hadn’t said anything about it.

Lesson No. 5: Build in accountability. My predecessor had retired after nearly 30 years. He and I met multiple times, and one thing he said caught my attention: Build accountability into the syllabus. I knew what he meant, but I didn’t appreciate just how important it was.

Students sometimes claim they are overworked (although the problem is often poor time management on their part). When class is cancelled, they rejoice. As the saying goes, college is the only place where people pay for something and are happy when they don’t get it. In that spirit, students may also look for places to exploit loopholes — like inconsistencies in a syllabus that allow them to miss class or turn in a paper late without penalty. Those situations are tricky to handle.

Two things helped me: setting a firm deadline for everything and outlining the consequences for missing it. I do that for attendance, exams, projects, and any other component evaluated as part of the overall grade. Without such specificity, students may decode that there *are* no penalties.

Lesson No. 6: Don’t say “the real world.” I am as guilty as the next person when it comes to using that phrase to distinguish college from life after graduation. But here’s the thing: College *is* the real world, and suggesting it’s not risks creating a false dichotomy.

Here’s why. The moment students step into a classroom, a dorm, or a student club, they are being judged. Opinions are being formed about the quality of their work and their ability to get along with others. When students fail to recognize that dynamic at play, they may act irresponsibly. For instance, when a student finds it easy to break commitments to a club, its faculty adviser may not be able to issue a bad grade but will come to view that student as unreliable. And perhaps, when a job opportunity arises in that student’s field, the faculty member will recommend someone else. The student has inaccurately perceived no repercussions to blowing off a commitment.

I have learned to advise my students that college is a network. Their professional life has already begun, and their classmates and professors will likely become the people they will rely on for job referrals, letters of recommendations, and other professional opportunities.

Lesson No. 7: Academia is not for the faint of heart. Anyone who has visions of carefree days teaching two or three specialty classes with the remaining time to indulge in the life of the mind is in for a surprise. Being a professor is hard work. The classroom represents the smallest fraction of your overall responsibilities. What happens behind the scenes is much more than meets the eye and can easily equal or eclipse the average work week in a nonacademic job.

For example, courses don’t magically teach themselves. When a professor walks into class with a structured lesson that seems natural, you can be assured that he or she invested a great deal of time to make the lesson appear as effortless and beneficial to students as it was. (And some lessons go better than others — best laid plans and all). Class prep is relentless. So is scholarship.

Then there is the service work. Just when you thought you finally had some free time to complete (fill in the blank),

the duty of the committee calls. The committee I'm on now is not intensely burdensome, but some of my colleagues serve on search committees and other types that carry weighty responsibilities and heavy time commitments. Eventually, I know I will find myself on just such a committee.

Lesson No. 8: Know when to punch out (metaphorically). At some point, each day must come to a close. I learned that during the first couple of weeks of the fall semester. I found myself staying late — beyond classes, beyond office hours, beyond everyone else leaving — and continuing to work. It was just me and our friendly maintenance man, Jim, in the building. He would walk in on me at my computer, surprised to find me still at my desk. But there was just so much to do. I would check off the last item on my list, and then I would think about what else needed to be done. And wouldn't you know it, I would always find something.

Then it occurred to me — there will always be something that needs doing. And with that mentality, I could easily never leave my desk.

Academia has no punch clock, no boss calling for quitting time. The autonomy of the professoriate is attractive, but it can become a seductively fine line to lose one's self in it if not placed in the context of broader pursuits. There is life beyond the ivory tower. My wife and children are waiting at home. There are opportunities in the community. Work will always be there. But if I don't designate an appointed stopping time each day, I will never stop working.

What I learned in my first year on the faculty is there must be a balance — yes, the inescapable work-life balance. Clichéd as it sounds, it is real. If you're not careful, you can find yourself sucked into the vortex of overwork. Occasionally, the scales are tipped, and I have to work more than my ideal balance. But for the most part — by being my own boss and designating my own quitting time — I can manage to achieve a relative equilibrium with life's other pursuits. And I've learned that that makes me a better teacher.