

On Becoming a “Real” Professor
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Good afternoon, my name is John Adkins and I am employed by the University of Charleston as the Reference, Instruction, & Technology Librarian. I am a 2004 graduate of the University of Kentucky, School of Library and Information Science and have previously worked as a historian and environmental analyst in the consulting industry as well as in state government.

In library school at the University of Kentucky we frequently discussed the difficulties academic librarians face in trying to be thought of as “real” professors. Two common suggestions for overcoming these difficulties were the acquisition of a second, subject Masters Degree and teaching “for credit”, subject based classes at the institution. Having possession of a Masters in Humanities (Historical Studies) I took the next step this past semester and signed up to teach a class in the Social Science Department here at UC, SSCI 330: West Virginia and the Appalachian Region or as it is more commonly known, West Virginia History.

While I truly believe that I have found my calling as a librarian I had always wanted to teach history at the collegiate level. Further, I have spent the last several years working in the consulting industry as a historian writing cultural resource surveys and my personal field of interest is West Virginia labor history. I have a research interest in the activities of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency which was active in the West Virginia

coal fields from the 1890s to the 1930s. The class seemed a perfect fit. The only question seemed to be what I should teach next.

The previous instructor had not left any materials to help me get started though I was able to get a copy of his syllabus. I was not happy with many of the assignments but was wary of making too many changes to the course my first semester. I did, however, add a second textbook to the class. I spent a good part of the Christmas break excited about the class; reviewing my syllabus and looking forward to the wonderful job I was certain I would do.

My excitement lasted until a week or so prior to the beginning of class when I began to lose sleep and worry that I had gotten in over my head. I came to the sudden realization that in spite of my two Masters degrees no one had taught me how to organize and teach a college class. As the weekend before my first class approached I began looking for a way out. I knew that I simply could not do this and became convinced that I would most certainly die of a heart attack if I did not somehow escape. Luckily, my wife Lissa convinced me that I would be ok and kindly offered to assist me in developing my lesson plans and Power Point presentations. She also explained to me that I had to be realistic about my expectations as a first year teacher and made me understand that I would not be able to do all of the things that I had imagined I would be able to do as a teacher in my first class.

My excitement returned as I began to outline the early chapters of the textbooks, adding supplementary materials to the outline from other resources. I continued to dread my first class session where I would be expected to somehow keep the attention of an entire classroom full of students for nearly three hours. While I teach bibliographic

instruction sessions here in the library, I had not spoken in front of a large group in some time and never for this length of time. Moreover, the teaching of history does not lend itself as readily as some other disciplines to hands on, active learning based instruction. It is instead primarily lecture based. I was afraid that the monotony of three hour lectures would sap my new student's interest in the field that I love.

Luckily, the West Virginia Humanities Council produced a documentary mini-series on the history of the state that is an integral part of the elementary and secondary school curriculums. As my students are primarily education majors, it would be appropriate to show parts of the mini-series in each class and it had the added benefit of providing the students and me with a change of pace not to mention being effective in reaching those students who were more visual learners..

As the first class began I learned my first hard lesson: scout the territory before the first class. I arrived in the classroom to find what appeared to be a keyboard and monitor but no computer. As class time quickly approached, I called our Audio Visual department to let them know that I had a keyboard and a monitor but no computer and that I needed help. When the AV technician arrived he asked if I had checked the cabinet below the television, where, surprise, the computer resided.

As I handed out the syllabi I explained to the class that I was teaching my first course and talked about my background and research interests. I also explained to them that I would appreciate any constructive criticism they had to offer. While I am not certain that being this honest and open is the right choice for every first course, it has worked out quite well in my case. The students reassured me as the class went along and

were much more attentive and polite than I remember being as an undergraduate. I am deeply indebted to this first class of students for their understanding and support.

My next hard lesson came with my first exam. As a non-standard course (as opposed to US or World History), West Virginia history does not come with an instructor's manual with a bank of test questions or assignments. As I designed my first test I tried to use a variety of question types to ensure that I tested the breadth as well as the depth of my students' knowledge and avoided biasing the test against students who have difficulties with any one particular type of question. My test included twenty matching questions arranged into two banks of ten; one of frontier and Civil War battles and one consisting of persons to identify. The next section included twenty multiple choice and three short answer/essay questions of which two were required. There was also a single five point extra credit question.

My main worry was that this class of bright young education students would find my test to be overly simple and lose respect for me. This proved to not be something that I needed to worry about. The test scores varied from 35 to 78. I was horrified as some of the scores were low enough that they could ruin the student's grades for the entire semester. In response, I made my first change to my syllabus. Students could now drop the lowest score of the three assigned tests. Moreover, the students went out of their way to assure me that the test was not the problem and that now they knew what to expect that they would all do better on the next test.

Making this small change to the syllabus was somewhat freeing to me. It allowed me to feel more comfortable making a couple of other changes. I had never liked the map assignment that came as part of the original syllabus for the class. It called for the

students to hand label over forty individual sites and rivers on a blank 8 ½ x 11 map of the state. I had visions of my students spending hours trying to scrawl these areas onto these maps and of myself spending still more hours trying to decipher their maps. I altered the assignment to be more in line with the predominant major (education) of the students and asked them to instead prepare a map showing ten to fifteen sites associated with a single theme in West Virginia history (an assignment that I hoped they might later use to produce a bulletin board or display for a unit they might teach to their students). I encouraged the students to have a little fun with the assignment and was not disappointed. On the due date I received a sugar cookie in the shape of the state with M&Ms marking Civil War battle sites, a brownie showing the same, a poster board showing the birthplaces of the first ten governors, a couple of maps showing the birthplaces of 'famous West Virginians' (including notably on one map, the student presenting the map). I quickly graded the maps so that the students could eat the brownie and cookie. My only regret is that I did not photograph the maps.

The major project for the term for most of the students (those who were education majors) was to develop a week long unit of instruction for either a 4th or 8th grade classroom. Non-education majors were assigned to write an 8-10 page research paper. While I was largely happy with the lesson plans, the research papers were dismal. As a librarian, I should have expected that my students would need more guidance during the research paper process than I provided. Instead, I allowed myself to assume that the juniors and seniors taking the class had already developed considerable skills in doing research and writing. I was horrified when I received several papers that resembled

nothing so much as the kind of “reports” that are frequently assigned to grade school students.

Two papers consisted of little more than paragraphs plucked from various websites and strung together one after the other. These students did not intend to plagiarize, as was evidenced by their dutiful citing of each paragraph in a style that they themselves had developed. Truly, I had become one of the professors that I so often groused about. My content was so important to me that I had not provided my students with the same library instruction session that I spend so much time begging other instructors to bring me in to provide for their classes.

The students, as they had promised me, did much better on the second and third exams and for the most part finished the course with acceptable grades. I should say a word about finishing classes and grading. I had neglected to provide deadlines in the syllabus for when I would accept makeup work. Never again! Students were turning in work well beyond the ‘deadline’ for professors to have all grades in to the registrar. Build a deadline (such as no longer than one week past the due date into your syllabus and stick by it).

The university uses the Individual Development & Educational Assessment (or IDEA) form to allow students to rate the performance of classroom instructors. The questions are designed to evaluate an instructor’s progress on self identified objectives as well as their performance as an instructor. My IDEA rating for the class was 4.5 on a 5 point scale. While student ratings are only a single factor in determining the effectiveness of an educational experience it is reassuring to know that my students felt that the class was worthwhile.

Does the faculty at the University of Charleston think of me as a real faculty member now? I think many of them do. I have been asked to do more library instruction sessions this semester than were done in the last two years combined. Several times in meetings when I have introduced myself as the university's reference librarian the then provost (she has since moved on to a position with another university) interrupted to add that I also taught classes in the Social Science department. I also find myself being listened to in faculty and committee meetings. My one-on-one interactions with faculty members seem positive and collegial.

However, some other faculty members continue to question the qualifications of the "non-teaching" faculty members as a group (though I have never heard anyone specifically refer to me in this way). More telling is the fact that I am not paid as a "real" professor. While I have two masters degrees including a terminal masters, am actively involved in research and publication and work a twelve month schedule I am paid over 16% (almost \$7,000) less than a similarly credentialed "real" professor who works a nine month schedule. This discrepancy suggests that much remains to be done to bring library faculty to a state of equality with "teaching" faculty.

Nonetheless, the experience of teaching a "for credit" course in a subject field has been a rich one. I am more confident in my ability to speak in front of people and in my grasp of the subject matter. The bonds that I built with the students in my class are strong and these students continue to seek me out in the library and around campus. I look forward to the next time that I will teach West Virginia History and next Fall I will also be teaching Historic Preservation. I am sure that teaching my first service-learning based course will also be a great learning experience both for my students and for me.