

## Being a Confident New Teacher

Your first teaching assignment is an exciting opportunity for professional and personal development, but this time can also be fraught with worries and even fears. Read through the scenario below and consider how one new TA is managing her thoughts about this new experience in her graduate career.

*Tekedra is teaching Introduction to Calculus and is wondering how the semester will go.*

*“It’s really great to have a chance to start teaching since it’s something I might want to do with my degree,” she thinks. “But I’m so worried that I’ll make a mistake in front of the students or not know how to respond to one of their questions. I need to make sure that they see me as a confident teacher. I have been warned that some of the students can be challenging with new TAs, so I don’t want them to know that I’m new in the program and a new TA. This is all so much more complicated given the fact that many of them won’t expect to see a young Black, female instructor! Will they take me seriously?”*

*I think I’m going to show them that I mean business and make sure they can see that this isn’t going to be an easy class by reminding them that they will have homework due in every class. I’ll work through some pretty challenging problems that first day so that they see my level of expertise. I’m also going to be sure to dress the part and make sure I look older than them. And I’ll take attendance every day so they know that I take the class seriously. I hope I can manage my nerves!”*

Take a moment to consider Tekedra’s concerns and how she’s thinking of managing those worries. Do you think her ideas will help her feel more confident and less anxious?

### What builds confidence?

It’s natural for new teachers to want their students to see them as highly skilled experts in their field. Tekedra wants to demonstrate a certain level of brilliance and wants to impress her students by showing them how she can make sophisticated calculations. Other new teachers want to appear funny or entertaining and hope to capture student attention and admiration by being skilled orators. In these situations, new teachers hope to develop and demonstrate confidence by being sure that they can appear a certain way to their students. But this approach to being confident can easily backfire! The likely result is that these new teachers will spend a lot of time trying to perform for their students, exhausting themselves and constantly (and nervously) monitoring their own performance. And quite frankly this approach will not help students learn because these new teachers will spend their preparation time concerned with what *they* are to do rather than planning practice and feedback opportunities for their *students*.

If teachers think their job is to be an infallible performer (as Tekedra is doing), then they will probably wind up tense and lacking self-confidence. But if you think of yourself as a person whose job is to help students learn, you take some pressure off yourself. There are some key strategies that will help you develop confidence as a new teacher that involve stepping out of the spotlight and making yourself more comfortable.

***Let your students do the work.***

Tekedra has made plans for the work *she* will do on the first day of class, but it would be more helpful for her to think about how to get her *students* working right away. When you plan class meetings around work that students will do, this takes the pressure off you and allows you to calmly observe student work and provide support and feedback. These kinds of class sessions are fun to prepare and much less anxiety-provoking than trying to plan a class meeting where you have to be the central figure who models, demonstrates, or lectures. And quite frankly, students learn better when *they* do the work rather than watching *you* do the work. The best way to get students to take you seriously as a teacher is to show them that when they come to class, they will have exciting and meaningful work to do, and you will be there to guide them and give them feedback on their efforts.

A productive way to structure student work into your class is to have students do some work right away at the start of each class meeting. You might have students work on a problem, analyze a short case, write down two questions they have based on the assigned reading for the day, or predict the results of a study or an experiment. This routine gets you out of the spotlight, and it gives you some time to organize yourself and get settled in the class. You may want to review your notes for the day one more time, walk through the room to hear how students are thinking, drink some water or coffee, and get any materials or media prepared. When students finish work, ask for a few ideas and then guide them into your own short lecture after clearing up any confusions and giving recognition to the new ideas or solutions students have generated. Using an opening routine like this can help you feel confident and calm as you plan your class meetings and as you implement them. You can have students do work in the middle and at the close of class as well. Use the last few minutes of class to help students see how the work they've done is helping them by having them write a minute paper about one thing that is now clearer to them. Alternately you can have them write about one thing that is still confusing them. You can find many ideas for getting students working in Angelo and Cross's *Classroom Assessment Techniques* (see reference below).

Keep in mind that the point of giving students work to do isn't to make them feel that you are a strict task master, but rather to help them learn. When we use work as a threat as Tekedra is planning to, we send the message to students that we are harsh and unapproachable and that the course will be unpleasant. These kinds of attempts to appear serious to our students usually have the effect of creating anxiety and frustration on the part of students, interfering in their relationship with us. Tekedra worries that her students might challenge her, but she will make them more likely to do so if they resent her—and they might if she uses work as a way to threaten or punish them.

***Respond honestly if you don't know an answer.***

Tekedra is fearful about making mistakes in front of her students and this is a common fear among new teachers. Keep in mind that if you use the strategy of having students do work throughout the class meeting, you'll be less worried about making mistakes. But no matter how we've organized class time or how well we've prepared, it is inevitable that students will ask questions we can't answer. Not being able to answer a question does not mean you are foolish,

unprepared, or a poor teacher. As a graduate student you are developing your expertise and probably know a lot about some things in your discipline and less in other areas in your discipline. That is normal and it is the case for your professors as well! It's important to normalize the situation so that it doesn't worry you and keep you up at night.

So, what do you do when you don't know an answer to a student question? Respond honestly! Here are some ways to do that:

- “That’s an interesting question and I’m not sure I know the answer. But I’m going to write it down and do some research and respond to you at our next class meeting.”
- “That’s a question that is a bit outside my area of expertise. I’m going to talk to Professor X who specializes in that area. I’ll share her ideas on Blackboard in an announcement.”
- “You’ve asked an important question. I have a couple potential ideas about that, but I want to mull that over a bit. Let me do some careful thinking before I respond. How about I address that at our next class meeting?”
- “I want to answer your question, but it is going to take us into an area I’d planned to explore later in the semester, when we look at Y and Z. Let me think of some answers that will suffice until we dig into those topics later. I’ll send out an email with some ideas before our next class meeting.”
- “That’s a big question. I think it could be useful if we all do a little research on this. I’m going to think about how we can investigate this together and share our ideas.”

In all these cases, make good on your promise to do more research or gather answers from others or from the class. When you respond in this way, students see that you take them and their questions seriously and they also appreciate that you want to take the time to answer their questions fully. This doesn't make you look foolish: it simply demonstrates that you are reflective and want to make sure they learn.

### ***Start from a place of expertise.***

While you don't need to be the expert or to know everything about the subject you are teaching, it can make you feel confident to start out the semester working on a theme, topic, or focal question that you do know a lot about and feel excited about. Tekedra wants to demonstrate expertise but she decides to do so mostly out of fear. A more productive way to frame your expertise is in terms of your enthusiasm. By kicking off the semester with content that you are most comfortable with, your students will sense your motivation and the ease you feel. This means you are starting off feeling optimistic about the class, and your students will pick up on this feeling. This doesn't mean that you will baffle and astound them with your expertise, but rather that you will communicate your interest in and energy for the content with them. And it is perfectly acceptable for you to share with them that you are doing research or advanced study in this area, just as it is acceptable for you to share with them honestly when you don't have the answer to a question they pose. All teachers, even the most experienced, teach outside of their area of expertise. The trick is to work happily with what you know best and to work honestly with content you are learning or mastering right along with the students (Huston, 2009).

Tekedra's ideas that she should hide her status as a new graduate student from the students is likely to make her feel more nervous and will only serve to make her feel more like an imposter.

***Don't take student behavior personally.***

Tekedra, like many new teachers, is worried about students being challenging. Misbehaviors from students will be minimized when students feel that we are honest with them and attempt to create a class that gives them opportunities to try out their thinking and get feedback. However, students will, sometimes, act out in class. Many new teachers frame student misbehaviors as entitlement, laziness, or worse. And some new teachers see misbehaviors as a personal attack and feel that their students are somehow trying to make things difficult or to get under their skin. Thinking about students and their behaviors in this way would make anyone nervous! This kind of thinking is not only unproductive, but it is also not based in reality.

It's good to think through how you will manage challenging behavior ahead of time and this resource about [understanding and responding to challenging behaviors](#) will help you with that preparation. However, one key way to maintain a calm outlook about student misbehaviors is to use the strategy of depersonalizing these behaviors. This means recognizing that often student anger and frustration has little to do with us and has much to do with how a student is experiencing their life and circumstances. Our undergraduate students are balancing many responsibilities and stressors—school, work, family obligations, and worries about health, politics, the climate, and their own personal lives. That is a lot for young people to try to manage and integrate. Student worry and stress can bubble over and out into the classroom, but this doesn't mean you have to take their behaviors personally. You can prepare for the occasional student misbehavior and respond with compassion. By seeing student behaviors as a coping response to a complex life, we can recognize that these behaviors are not directed at us nor are they about us. By depersonalizing student behaviors, we can gain confidence and help our students.

***Practice self-care.***

Just as you need to recognize that stress is part of your students' lives, it is crucial to recognize that adding teaching to your graduate student career brings a certain amount of stress. It is worth noting that in the scenario above, Tekedra does not stop to consider how she can help herself be less nervous by taking better care of herself. What can you do to take better care of yourself, to reduce stress generally, and to reduce anxiety before and during class? To reduce stress generally, eat healthy meals, sleep eight hours a night, and get fresh air and exercise every day. That may sound obvious, but many graduate students start to prioritize work over these basic necessities. You will be a better student and professional if you take care of yourself in these elementary ways.

To reduce anxiety before and during and after class, follow these guidelines:

- Eat balanced meals before class. Skipping breakfast or lunch will result in low blood sugar; you'll not be at your best as brain work requires fuel! Some instructors find that a small snack such as a yoghurt, hard-boiled egg, or whole grain before class helps them maintain energy throughout class.

- Take time before class to calm down. This might mean doing some deep breathing or yoga poses. It might mean taking a ten-minute walk in a pretty part of the campus. Create a ritual for calming down that you use before each class.
- Use positive self-talk. This means reminding yourself aloud of the ways in which you are prepared and of the ways that you don't have to be perfect. You might say something like, "I've prepared a good set of activities for today. I am ready to provide support for my students. I don't need to be the expert, but rather a compassionate teacher. And I can do that."
- Bring water with you to class. When we are anticipatory, we often get thirsty. Stay hydrated during class by sipping water. You will feel more cared for when you bring something for yourself to drink.
- Center yourself if you get nervous during class. You may at times feel waves of nervousness during class. Pause during these moments and take a sip of water and remind yourself that nervousness is not a sign that anything is wrong. Remind yourself that you are gaining experiences and things will get easier.
- Reflect after class. Take a few minutes after class to jot down what went well and what you might want to adjust in a small teacher's journal. Getting your thoughts out in this way can calm you down and also help you plan a little for your next class meeting. It also gives you some control over your experiences and perceptions.

***Make yourself comfortable and not vulnerable.***

Tekedra recognizes that managing her new teacher anxiety involves thinking about her students' impressions of her in relation to her gender, her ethnicity, and her age. New teachers who don't fit the stereotype of the bearded white man in the tweed jacket may fear that students who cling to those stereotypes will doubt their preparation and their ability to teach. As a new teacher, it is wise to recognize that students may hold stereotypical or prejudicial beliefs about teachers. The best way to combat those beliefs is to plan class meetings that focus on students' learning and development. But worrying about fulfilling students' negative stereotypes does compound new teacher stress and may not be something that can easily be set aside. If this is a persistent concern for you, it is wise to seek out support from colleagues who share elements of your identity to learn how they are managing this stress and to get support (Harris, Sellers, Clerge, & Gooding, 2017).

Tekedra is planning to manage some of her stress by attempting to look older than she is, but this strategy may put more pressure on her as she will have to pretend to be something she is not. It is, however, a good idea to "dress the part" if you are a younger teacher or are concerned about how to manage your image with students. It can make you feel less vulnerable if you add a few smart elements to your wardrobe. Dress in ways that make you feel professional, but don't wear clothes that are uncomfortable or that are a far departure from your usual wardrobe. And just as you choose clothes to show your professionalism, address your professional preparation a little on the first day of class. It is appropriate to let students know that you are a PhD student, what you are studying, and to tell them something about your research. You may also wish to share

with them how you'd like to be addressed: Mr. or Ms. can be helpful prefixes which establish a little distinction between you and your students if you are a young teacher. Remember, you don't need to pretend to be someone you're not, but it can be beneficial and comforting to help students recognize you as a teacher in these subtle but meaningful ways.

### **Resources**

Angelo, T.A., & Cross, K.P. (1992). *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers*. 2nd ed. Jossey-Bass.

Harris, M., Sellers, S. L., Clerge, O., & Gooding, F. W. (Eds.). (2017). *Stories from the front of the room: How higher education faculty of color overcome challenges and thrive in the academy*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Huston, T. (2009). *Teaching what you don't know*. Harvard University Press.

If you would like to learn more about approaching your teaching with greater confidence, please feel free to [request a consultation](#) with ITLAL.