



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## REFLECTION: AN ADJUNCT'S EXPERIENCE

I had gathered my supplies before I left my house: textbook...check, pens and pencils...check, class notes...check (double check). I looked at the time and noticed that if I didn't get a move on I was going to be late for class. It was hard to believe that the fall semester had finally come to a close and it was time to start the spring semester. I was going back to college, that part of the equation was easy. I had spent most of my life in a classroom, sitting at a desk, taking notes, studying for exams. However, this time my social role had changed slightly. I was now the professor, actually a part-time adjunct lecturer. I was the one who had to teach students, give exams, assign projects, and probably listen to a variety of excuses about missed deadlines and poor performance on exams. Just thinking about my new role sent an army of butterflies into my stomach.

People continuously ask me how I got into teaching at a community college. My response is, "It's just one of those things I fell into." After I graduated with my master's degree, like most of my fellow graduates, I began mailing what seemed like thousands of résumés and completing thousands of job applications. Then someone suggested that I apply to become an adjunct, so I did. For a couple of weeks, I did not hear anything from any of the colleges where I had applied until one Thursday afternoon when I received a telephone call from a local community college asking if I would be interested in teaching two introductory psychology courses. "Yes! Yes! Yes!" I responded. With the excitement that I finally had a job, I failed to pay close attention and missed hearing that the first day of class was the next Monday, three days away. My classes would be held on Mondays and Wednesdays, a morning and evening course.

On Friday morning, I traveled to the college to pick up the course material. As I looked through the instructor's manual, I began to panic. I literally had only about 48 hours to prepare for an entire semester's course. As I began to evaluate my situation, I realized

that I was overreacting and really getting all worked up for no reason. "How difficult could it actually be to teach an introductory class?" I asked myself. There is nothing to it but preparing PowerPoint presentations, talking about the chapters, asking a few questions, and throwing in a few quizzes and tests here and there. I had given many class presentations during my undergraduate and graduate years; it would be the same thing. Little did I know there was a lot more to it!

Before I knew it, I was standing in front of a diverse group of students, with all eyes on me. There were older, nontraditional students, freshmen, and a few high school students who were taking the course for dual credit. As I was reviewing the syllabus, I noticed the students were not focusing on the course requirements, exam dates, or other course expectations. They were focusing on me, many of them with confused looks on their faces. I overheard one of the older students comment to another that she had purses that were older than I.

At first, it was a little difficult getting into the swing of things. I had no way of knowing if I was doing my job correctly. The first time I asked the class a question I had no response. It was so quiet that we could hear crickets chirping outside the classroom window, so quiet you could hear a student's phone on vibrate mode and the clicking sound of a student typing a text message.

Throughout the semester I encountered several situations—some humorous, others not so. I had one of my more amusing moments toward the end of the semester, one that still makes me chuckle. The syllabus included a class period dedicated to an exam review. I was to cover a few of the theories that would be tested on the exam and give the students study tips on how to remember which psychologist went with which theory. One of my dual-credit high school students emailed me the night before our class to ask if she was going to miss anything important during the review because she really needed to get ready for senior prom—she was having such a difficult time finding a prom dress. Keep in mind the class was on Monday, the exam was scheduled for Wednesday, and prom was Saturday. I emailed her that attending the class was important if



she wanted to do well on the exam. “But prom is on Saturday,” she emailed and attached a smiley face icon to her message. That comment let me know about her priorities. She did not attend class for the exam review session and, as expected, did not perform well on the exam. But as she commented to me later, “prom was awesome.”

I had other interesting incidents when students tried to negotiate their grades, complained because I refused to give open-book tests, and asked if we were still meeting or if I had thought about canceling class. I had one student email after the final exam and after final grades for the semester had been posted, asking if we still had class the following week. I guess she enjoyed my class so much she did not want it to end.

As my first semester of teaching came to a close, I realized I had gotten into the swing of things and enjoyed teaching. Reflecting on this experience, I believe that I created a learning environment that was open, fun, and educational. This was not as easy as I had imagined. It required that I spend hours and hours planning that, based on my adjunct’s pay, probably averaged less than minimum wage. But I wanted to be effective in teaching material that was not the easiest to grasp, so I worked hard to make psychology fun, interesting, and relevant to the students’ lives. These students would be able to take the information they learned and apply the principles to their everyday lives—e.g., learning why waiting until the last minute to study for an exam and an all-night cramming session before an exam are not good ideas.

I have used this experience to help me become a better instructor and let others know that they are not alone. I was put into a position for which I had no experience, no training, and very little time to prepare; yet, I believe that I performed well. I have been rehired to teach several classes next year. But more important are the emails I continue to receive from former students, telling me how much they enjoyed the class. A couple are even considering going into psychology or a related field, and several have registered to take other courses with me next year.

### Recommendations

I offer here a few simple recommendations that require minimal financial resources to help adjuncts transition smoothly into teaching. Remember that these recommendations are not scientifically based; they are simply the results of one person’s experience, a small sample (n=1).

- I know that often adjuncts are hired at the last minute. As excited as they are to be asked to teach a class, this last-minute situation can be stressful and could affect the quality of education the

students receive, their college experience, and the reputation of the college as it strives to hire future adjuncts. Consider scheduling an orientation session, assigning a mentor, and/or creating a support group for first-time professors.

- A large number of adjuncts have full-time jobs and teach for enjoyment and personal satisfaction, so not getting paid in a timely manner may not create a hardship. But then there are others whose adjunct position is the only source of income. Imagine my surprise at the end of January, my first month of teaching, when I was informed that I would not be paid until the end of February—two months without a paycheck! Make sure adjuncts are paid on time, or inform them of the pay schedule so that they can make appropriate financial arrangements.
- I taught an evening course and assumed the classroom would be open. On several occasions I had to call campus police or find a custodian to unlock the classroom door. In at least one instance, I thought I would have to cancel class or meet with my students in the hallway because I could not find someone with a key. Make sure that adjuncts have keys to their classrooms.

I look forward to teaching in future semesters. I now have a great appreciation for all professors everywhere, especially those who taught me during my undergraduate and graduate years. I thank them for sharing their wisdom and giving me ideas that I now incorporate into my own classroom.

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