Balancing Acts
William Gleason

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LAST year, when I was asked to participate in the session “Learning to Teach,” I was in the midst of a semester unlike any I had experienced since becoming an assistant professor in 1993. I was teaching at the poles of my department’s curriculum. Three days a week (at least as the registrar counts these things), I was running a lecture and discussion course that satisfied the university’s freshman composition requirement: I gave the lectures, led a section, and supervised four graduate teaching assistants. One day a week, I was teaching my first graduate seminar. I was also preparing a dossier of published and in-progress work for my tenure review, which would begin at the end of the term. Because this particular semester brought together so many different aspects of junior faculty teaching at a research-oriented institution, I draw on specific examples from it to make broader observations about my own process of learning to teach.

As my title indicates, I see the driving metaphor of this process very much as Lisa Gordis does: as a question of balance (or at least aimed-at balance). When she and I discovered that the titles of our presentations were similar, we asked whether one of us should concoct a different metaphor. We were told no—the similarity appropriately signaled the overlapping concerns of faculty members at different kinds of institutions. And I still think balance is the best metaphor for the particular challenge that junior faculty members in research universities confront: finding a balance between effective teaching and productive scholarship. Of course, there are other metaphors. Juggling comes to mind, especially that odd and wonderful juggling in which the performer keeps balls (or other items) of dramatically different size and weight in the air simultaneously—now launching this one, now catching that one, each move a slip away from utter disaster. I often feel that my professional life more closely resembles this frantic catching and tossing than the presumably calmer activity of achieving balance. In the more pessimistic moments of this past year, I had also considered retitling this essay “Balancing Ax,” to hint at the sword-of-Damoclean anxieties about tenure and professional standing that I often feel hovering just above me. After all, whether or not I have learned to strike a professionally appropriate balance of teaching and research will have been determined by the time you read this. In what follows, however, I want to suggest that finding a personally appropriate balance of these activities is perhaps the better goal. To do so, I describe how I came to recognize that my teaching and my research are not as fundamentally opposed as I long considered them to be. I propose, in fact, that integration is perhaps not only the term that best describes the ideal relation between teaching and scholarship but also the objective that I learned last spring to desire most deeply.

But enough of metaphors, on to the classrooms. Princeton English faculty members teach a two-two schedule, and last spring my two courses couldn’t have been more dissimilar. The freshman-level survey that also satisfies the university’s writing requirement is one of my department’s service courses, and I have taught it nearly every spring since arriving at Princeton. It is not uncommon for junior faculty members at research universities to be assigned such courses, while the senior faculty teaches upper-division classes and graduate seminars. (Though to be fair, my senior colleagues had been teaching this particular course for many years before my arrival.) This is a division of labor one might resent—or, instead, attempt to transform. One reason I look forward to teaching the course each spring is that a few years back, in response to a university call for more comparative courses, I had revised the focus of the course from major American authors to comparative American literatures, not only broadening its scope but also aligning it more closely with my own interests. Teaching the course suddenly became an opportunity rather than a duty, and it reminded me of what I think I should have known all along: courses are what you make them, and not the other way around, even when, on the surface, they are “only” service courses.

The author is Associate Professor of English at Princeton University. A version of this paper was presented at the 1999 MLA Annual Convention in Chicago.
Thinking closely about the survey course also reminded me of one of the principal differences between the teaching I was doing as an assistant professor and the teaching I had done as a graduate TA: I was now spending much more time writing lectures. I had taught or assisted in twelve courses as a graduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles, and yet had never given a fifty-minute lecture. There weren’t in fact many opportunities to do so, though in retrospect I wish I had seized the few that had been offered. It is only now, seven years into this position, that I feel I have some idea of what I’m trying to accomplish from the lecture podium. I could say much more about the role that learning to lecture plays in learning to teach, particularly at a research-oriented institution, but I want instead to turn to two other central components of my experience in the service course: leading discussion and supervising TAs.

At UCLA I had a great deal of practice leading discussion, often in freshman composition courses. My experience in Princeton’s survey course largely confirmed what I felt I had learned as a graduate TA: classrooms that encourage collaboration over competition produce better discussion and more active learning. Thus I have continued to use various forms of small-group work in my discussion sections, ranging from the sudden and temporary splitting of a class into groups to tackle a particularly knotty issue to carefully planned sessions of student paper exchanges, especially of essay drafts. These are, of course, standard tools of many composition teachers. What I find I have done in recent years is experiment even more with forms of student-led discussion, not only in the freshman survey but in all the courses I teach. These discussion formats have ranged from fairly traditional student presentations at the beginning of a section to more active roles for students as ongoing discussion leaders—that is, having them assume the teacher’s role for all or part of a session. I’m starting to find that this last form of student-based learning can work particularly well when the students lead discussion in pairs rather than alone; pairs not only reinforce the importance of collaboration, they help lessen the anxiety students often feel about leading discussion. I’ve also made greater use of e-mail discussion lists, asking students to post and then read entries before our class meeting, so that in a sense the discussion has already begun by the time we enter the classroom.

Ironically, I think that my impulse toward these strategies follows not only as a consequence of my early training in teaching composition but also as a reaction to my increased role as a lecturer. It’s not that I don’t like to hear myself talk (I do); but I noticed in my first year or so as an assistant professor that when I got to my discussion sections, I sometimes found myself seizing the imaginary podium either to finish the lecture or to deliver the plum outtakes from it, both strategies that tended to silence rather than enliven the participants. Over time, I developed a new strategy to combat this tendency: during the discussion, I began to take notes on what the students were saying. I have found that this accomplishes a number of interesting things. For one, it keeps me quiet. I’m jotting down instead of jumping into the conversation. It also tends to make the students talk more directly to one another. When they see that I’m not replying to every comment but instead recording what they’re saying, students make communicating with one another more of a priority. Physically, in fact, the act of taking notes allows me momentarily to break that one-to-one gaze you often get when a student is making a comment in discussion. When I look down to take notes, by necessity the student starts to look at classmates, who are in turn looking back at the student. Taking brief notes also helps me refer very specifically to what students have actually been saying in class, even several comments back. Thus when I do reenter the discussion, I can do so by recapitulating the specific way an argument has developed or by reintroducing a point that a student has made but that we might have overlooked. This latter tactic is especially helpful if the discussion is student-led and bounces a bit from topic to topic; I can reenter not only as a participant but also as someone who can help return the conversation to a particularly compelling intersection. I suspect as well that my note taking—which students recognize as my way not of grading their contributions but of tracking the flow of discussion—communicates to them that their ideas matter. Whenever I try this approach, I find that students refer more often to one another’s previous comments and also to their classmates by name, even in fairly large sections.

The second instructive aspect of my experience in the service course has more to do with the specific responsibilities of teaching in a research-oriented university, where undergraduate classes are often very large and the bulk of the section teaching is handled by graduate TAs. I learned quickly that teaching a course with its own teaching assistants involves several extra layers of administrative duties. Such duties take time, but they can also be an opportunity to learn more about what makes effective teaching. For example, as the faculty member in charge, you might be asked to sit in on a TA’s discussion section for the purpose of writing a teaching letter for that student’s dossier. If you are not asked to do so, you might consider offering. Watching other people teach—even when they are under the strain of being watched—can be enormously informing for one’s own practices. Getting to see a whole range of TAs at work over a semester is in some ways like attending a series of teaching workshops. The follow-up discussions with the TAs, in which you talk together about classroom strategies, can
also help you articulate and evaluate your own methods. I think we could benefit all levels of teaching by having more cross-classroom contact: invite assistant professors to visit senior faculty seminars or to attend lectures by particularly effective teachers—or vice versa. More frequent team-teaching is another route to consider. Time is of course a limiting factor, as is perhaps our natural hesitancy (at least mine) about being watched at work. So are FTEs. But at the very least, we should encourage more conversations about teaching along the lines of our research colloquia: get together once a month to talk about what teachers are doing in their classrooms. We often organize such meetings (even courses) for first-time instructors; experienced teachers can benefit as well.

I’ve had the good fortune in recent semesters to experience what are in essence regular teaching colloquia with the graduate preceptors in my lecture courses. (At Princeton, discussion sections are called precepts; discussion leaders, whether graduate students or other faculty members, are called preceptors.) In the survey course, for example, I meet with the preceptors for lunch once a week. We talk about course mechanics and work together to generate paper topics and exams; but we also talk about what’s going on in our classrooms, about what’s working and what isn’t. We try not only to solve one another’s problems (students who won’t talk, students who won’t stop talking) but also to pick each other’s brains for new techniques. It was in one of these teaching lunches that I learned from a preceptor an especially effective way to run writing workshops: use excerpts from student essays not as models of good or weak writing but as problems to be solved through group discussion. (For example, “This introduction seems to be heading in two directions. How can we help this writer decide which argument will be the most compelling?”) This is now my standard method of approach to workshops on such elements as developing a thesis, shaping an argument, and so on. These weekly teaching meetings are paid for by the university as part of its new preceptor mentoring program. Given how much I’ve learned, it could easily be called a faculty development program. If your institution doesn’t already have such a program, you might consider proposing one. (At Princeton, all courses with over fifty students are eligible for a preceptor mentoring grant.)

Universities are often looking for ways to improve graduate teacher training, and I have found at Princeton that any proposal for curricular revision that includes a TA training component is often regarded favorably. Another lesson is this: we can enlist our university’s help in making us better teachers, even if that’s not exactly what the university thinks it’s doing.

Okay. Here it is three-quarters of the way through my essay and I still haven’t addressed the difficulty that I said at the outset most crucially confronts assistant professors in research institutions: how to balance effective teaching and productive scholarship. In many ways, the shape of this essay is probably symptomatic of the way that I address this balance, at least during the teaching semester. To be perfectly honest, I find, as I did when I was a graduate TA, that it is very difficult to spend only half my time on teaching. It seems that to do it well always takes more time. Just how demanding the early teaching years are, particularly when nearly every course is new, was brought vividly home to me this past spring in the freshman survey. I was, in fact, not teaching my discussion section by myself; I was team-teaching it with a preceptor whose recent and severe visual impairment had made him hesitant to lead a section entirely on his own. This was also his first semester teaching, and the time he put into the course, above and beyond the physical demands of his impairment, was extraordinary. Moreover, because this student is also one of my dissertation advisees, I could see firsthand how little work he was able to get done on his project during the term. I tried to help him contain the hours, but I know that doing so was very difficult.

What I discovered in my graduate seminar is that as a professor I have a strategy for balancing teaching and research that is largely unavailable to a graduate student: teaching a course in an active area of my scholarship. Even this strategy has its limits. Princeton junior faculty members, for example, are guaranteed only one graduate course in their six years—and this was indeed my first and only such seminar. It came, however, at the right time. My first book had just appeared in print, and I had begun a new project. The graduate seminar, thanks to the shrewd advice of the director of graduate studies, was organized around the new project, not the old. It wasn’t exactly the new project—that same director had asked me to shift the course from the turn of the century to the nineteenth century, to fill a curricular void—but it was focused very closely on questions and issues, both literary and historical, that I wanted to be investigating.

One might then guess that the lesson of this seminar is that there are two kinds of courses: those that help you become a better teacher, like the survey course, and those that help you become a better scholar, like the graduate seminar. But in fact the lessons for me were quite different. Although the seminar did have a salutary effect on my scholarship (by the end of the semester, I had written a chapter-by-chapter abstract of my next book project to put in my tenure portfolio), I also came to realize that the teaching I had done in the graduate course was very similar to the teaching I was doing in the survey course. I took notes, I kept quiet, and then I either joined or redirected the conversation. It was a collaborative investigation that taught me as much from the discussion as from the texts themselves. I had become used to thinking of
teaching as my responsibility to others and of research as
my time for myself, but this seminar helped me recognize
the chiastic possibility that my research is also for others
and that my teaching is very much for me. Perhaps
everyone already knows this, but I did not. And when I
realized the truth of it, I suddenly recognized that my
teaching and my scholarship had been more interwoven,
all along, than I understood. In the abstract of my new
project, for example, much to my surprise, none of the
primary texts from the graduate seminar appear, but a
central text is one that I had first taught in the American
literature survey.

Perhaps all this says more about the idiosyncrasies of
my own methods of teaching and writing than about any
larger claims for how one learns to teach effectively in a
research institution or how one balances multiple aca-
demic responsibilities. I find, for example, that I work
best in concentrated periods of time rather than in short
segments grabbed here and there along the way. I admire
those who carve out a few hours every day for their “own”
work; I’m rarely able to do that. But what last spring’s
classes taught me is that I am doing a certain kind of re-
search work—thinking, exploring, testing ideas—even
when I am not in the archives or in the library, even, in-
deed, when I’m in the freshman composition classroom.
And recognizing the insistent integration of these activi-
ties has made me less anxious about achieving the proper
professional balance and more interested in understand-
ing (and valuing) the personal balances I have struck be-
tween teaching and writing. Above all, I no longer feel
that if I don’t spend precisely half my professional hours
doing research, I have somehow failed. As for balancing
the demands of one’s academic life with those of one’s
personal life as a junior faculty member—an important
topic that Lisa Gordis has thankfully broached—that’s a
conversation we should continue further as well.

Notes

I would like to thank Lee Talley, Janet Gray, and the many tal-
ented preceptors in my survey course for so liberally sharing their
insights on teaching over the past several years. I also want to thank
the ADE for its commitment to making teaching a larger part of
our professional discussions.

1 Were I to say more about lecturing here, I would make three
observations: (1) writing a lecture for the first time will likely take
much longer than you expect, even when lecturing in an area of ex-
pertise; (2) lectures that encourage active learning during the lec-
ture itself are often much more effective than traditional models;
(3) the well-integrated use of new media technology (or old media
such as slides and film clips) not only can get students’ attention
but also can reenergize familiar material and open it up to surpris-
ing new questions.
Research-oriented: Course content emphasizes procedural knowledge about the research interest(s) of the faculty member or learning about the process by which knowledge is produced. Expand all. Research-Led Teaching. Invite students to spend time in a research lab or site and observe real-world research. Make a presentation of research methods and approaches. Demonstrate experimental techniques and real hands-on computational aspects in science disciplines. Research-oriented Faculty. Clinical-oriented Faculty. Division Chiefs and Chairs. Academic Careers. Education-oriented Faculty. During my PhD, I took part in a community science outreach project where we taught general scientific principles to elementary school children in local underserved areas, from kindergarten to third grade. I always enjoyed the change of environment and pace these school trips brought and the fact that it made me step out of lab for an hour or two. At the University of Pennsylvania, I created a centralized database for teaching materials developed by residents. And, to this database, I created a digital version of "chalk talks" that I give to medical students so that they could be shared with other residents and medical students. Each adjunct faculty member should have a specified teaching role. Many campuses are fortunate, for example, to have USDA personnel who may supervise graduate students in research. However, it is unfortunate that these scientists must teach on their own time, if they so desire and if their own and affiliated administrations approve (we know of only one exception). Teaching should be flexible with respect to the times and credit offered. Such flexibility could permit a reduction in a particular faculty members teaching time by fewer credit hour requirements or at least offer more efficient use of time. All the courses in colleges of agriculture seem to be tied to a standard daytime regimen.