

A RELUCTANT TA

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In the fall of 1991, I arrived at UC Davis as an eager new graduate student in physics.

I was undaunted by the rumors of the enormous workload ahead: the purported 80 hours of homework a week, the never-ending midterms and finals, the dreaded qualifying examination. "Be prepared to give up your social life for the next two years," the older students wisely advised.

But I was confident I could handle it. I wasn't even frightened by the fifth-year graduate students who haunted the hallways of the physics department clutching empty coffee cups and muttering, "Just one more chapter to finish my dissertation."

The real struck when I showed up the first day of the quarter in the physics department office and discovered I had been assigned to teach the laboratory section of Physics 5A. I was terrified. I had never taught before. Sure, I'd given a presentation here and there throughout my undergraduate years, but (gasp) *teach a class?* This was an entirely different matter.

Somehow my vision of life in academia just hadn't included teaching. I had imagined bustling laboratories filled with high-tech gadgets and high-speed computers, long fascinating discussions with other graduate students who were just as excited as I was about esoteric physics problems. I even fantasized about late nights in the library perusing scientific journals in the quest for higher knowledge. How did teaching fit into this?

The night before my first section was filled with nightmares. I dreamed I had been assigned the wrong class and was expected to teach Conversational Russian, that I was standing before the class and suddenly realized I was wearing my bathrobe. I awoke praying that no one would show up to my sections. As I rode my bicycle to campus, I constructed last-minute desperate plans to avoid teaching. I would say I had permanent laryngitis. Maybe I could limit each section to three students.

Despite my fears and irrational escape plans, the inevitable moment finally came. I faced the class nervously. Twenty faces eyed me, sizing me up. I could almost hear their thoughts: Would I be an easy grader? Would I be able to explain the mysterious workings of physics in a comprehensible manner? Would I let them out early today?

"Today we're going to learn about inertia," I began shakily.

As I talked, it got easier. The walls didn't come crashing down. I didn't discover halfway through that I still had my slippers on. The students asked intelligent questions and I replied with intelligible answers. I realized they genuinely wanted to learn.

Students came to my office hours in droves. And as I prepared my notes for each section, a funny thing happened. I realized I was comprehending the material in a way I never had before. I'd often heard that there is no better way to learn than to teach. After that quarter I finally really believed it. I made it through that first quarter with an incredible sense of accomplishment; I hadn't just survived the grueling coursework and difficult exams, I had taught a class. And amazingly, I discovered that teaching, in addition to being rewarding and inspirational, was downright fun.

That first quarter I also started to work in a bustling laboratory with lasers and spectrometers and other gadgets. I learned to use high-speed computers, and I enjoyed many late-night discussions with other graduate students, just as I had envisioned. But in addition, there was something I never imagined I would get out of graduate school: the satisfaction of helping others learn and a deeper understanding of physics through teaching.

Next quarter, Physics 5B. I stared at the roll sheet, recognizing some of the names.

More students crowded into the room.

"Is there room in this section?"

"Come on in," I said, grinning from ear to ear, silently thanking the physics department for making me a TA again this quarter.