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Juggling Teaching and Ph.D. Studies – GROWing Tips

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Dr. Shrehan Lynch was a Ph.D. student and Graduate Assistant in the Department of Kinesiology at the University of Alabama in Tusculosa, USA. In her Ph.D., she examined transformative pedagogies in primary and secondary physical education and teacher education. Additionally, she paid close attention to her own teaching. Currently, Shrehan is a Lecturer of Secondary Education at the University of East London where she is responsible for physical education teacher education programmes. Specifically, she educates teachers on all teacher training routes including Postgraduate Certificate in Education, School Direct, and Apprenticeship programmes. Her research focuses on teacher education, physical education, and social justice, framed through critical and feminist theories.

In the fall of 2015, I began my Ph.D. journey in Sport Pedagogy at the University of Alabama. I was fortunate to gain the position of a Graduate Assistant in the Department of Kinesiology. This allowed me to teach in physical education courses including women's self-defense, swimming, water aerobics, and tennis, along with lecture courses such as the ecology of health and well-being and methods classes for physical education majors. Coming from England, my first semester was one of a juggling act. I had to successfully navigate a new university system, the culture, my academic studies, and teaching requirements.

As a graduate student in teacher education, I hoped to become a lecturer in education and therefore, when I began the Ph.D. journey of self-discovery, I started a Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) research project. This is a pedagogic focused type of research methodology that is concerned with improving, examining and acting on one's own practice (Ovens, 2014). I undertook the task of S-STEP to improve my teaching practice but also as a means of understanding what it meant to juggle teaching with my academic studies, which seemed to be demonstrating what it meant to be an effective pedagogue in higher education. Over the next couple of years until the spring of 2017, I studied my practice and incessantly wrote a journal and carried out various other data collection techniques. Consequently, I transformed my learning journey into two academic papers to share with others. This article is a

summary of those two papers combined with a personal touch on how I would advise other graduate students to grow into a higher education lecturer, juggling teaching and academia. That being said, the recommendations might be appropriate for some but certainly not for others, thus, take what you need and grow on your own journey!

Garner interest in your subject! The way I juggled delivering exciting, relevant and meaningful content to students was through being myself. Students want to know about you, who you are, what you do and where you are from, and equally, as a teacher, you should be invested to know the same about all of your students. Without learning about your students, the content becomes irrelevant. Think back to your schooling before higher education; almost everyone recalls the teacher rather than the subject matter. I believe fostering a love for yourself, prior to a love for your shared subject matter, is highly important. I attempted to have a highly democratic approach to teaching my classes and encouraged student involvement and discussion, and I was more than open to changing my syllabus to suit the needs of my students. By getting to know your students, you will be able to co-create relevant curriculum materials such as syllabi, assessments and course lectures/seminars. To give you an example, when teaching my ecology of health and wellbeing lecture class I co-designed an assessment that spoke to student's strengths.

Rather than using a traditional standardized test at the end of the course, students were required to create an informative, interactive, digital DVD on the content learned in class. This group assessment project was well received by students as they enjoyed working cooperatively with each other to fulfil class tasks. In the end of semester feedback, students reported that they enjoyed the experience of an alternative assessment and that they learned more than having to recite information for a traditional memory recall test. While on occasions a typical lecture style is necessary, future educators in higher education should attempt to use imaginative approaches for lectures and assessments. Enright, Coll, Ní Chróinín, and Fitzpatrick (2017) have spoken at length about the need for student voice in higher education, through negotiating parts of a higher education course. Their paper showed the importance of a more democratic process towards educating in kinesiology but warning of its riskiness – furthermore, the need to appreciate students in education.

Read read read! Almost every professor at the institutional level will assign more reading to you, on top of the reading for your studies. Reading is transformative in itself because it will stimulate questions. It is these questions that require even more reading of you! At the University of Alabama, we were required to take graduate classes, something different to most European Ph.D. courses: (see Kehm, 2006 for more differences between doctoral

programs). I was lucky to have taken class electives related to my discipline and through the reading in these classes my research and teaching were transformed. After taking classes in the educational foundations, my dissertation took a completely different turn. I became interested in a sociocultural physical education experience and addressing issues of social justice and equity within my work. Through reading more, leaving myself open to new perspectives, I became more focused, dedicated and excited by social change through research. The more I read, the more I wanted to read, and the more I realized I knew less and less. As an educator, it was this part of reading that reminded me I did not know all the answers and I had more to learn, and realistically that I would always be a student.

Organize yourself. Timelines, calendars, agreed on deadlines with supervisors and planned study breaks are all things I did to organize my academic schedule. My teaching requirements were organized with a grade book printed with each student's picture in it (I attempted to learn a few names too before day one of the classes) and I frequently used Blackboard, the universities virtual learning platform, and ensured it was ready for students to view class materials prior to classes beginning along with the workable syllabus. I tended to use a lot of personal visual displays to remind myself of deadlines, but also I set all reminders on Blackboard that automatically emailed students. This was all set up before the class began. When the semester started, the organizational aspect moved to maintaining and adjusting, which always occurs when you meet new students and are flexible with your syllabi. I pre-booked alternate teaching spaces. As a dynamic teacher, I avoided teaching in the same lecture room; I attempted to engage students in active learning in gyms and outside spaces wherever possible. Though I would say I was particularly organized short term, I think long-term goals are highly important; something I always kept at the forefront of my mind was my graduation date. While I knew, in some respects, this had to be kept flexible, it kept my short-term goals achievable and meaningful because I knew when the intended end goal was.

Workout what you need to improve on in your teaching. Through S-STEP, I had the

opportunity of gaining student feedback in all of my courses. This was an invaluable tool that has allowed me to change my practice with the hope of improving it. This can be done in several ways, surveys, exit slips, and small focus groups. Feedback at the end of each class was highly useful because it identifies ways in which you can instantly address your pedagogical practice. I used the Socrative application; this allowed an instant connect with students as learning happens and provides a platform for feedback on pre-set questions. Socrative is also a valuable tool for multiple-choice surveys and quizzes. Failure to technology not being a preferred method or complimenting Socrative attempt to use exit slips at the end of each class. Exit slips can be premade with questions or left very open by simply asking students to write on a piece of paper. Questions or prompts I would suggest asking are: What can I improve upon as teacher? What did you understand today? What didn't you understand today? What can I change to help you be more successful in this class? Additionally, use large-scale anonymous surveys in the middle and at the end of each semester. These surveys allow you to ask more detailed questions to change long-term aspects of the course. This type of feedback privileges student's voice and becomes most important when you address it explicitly. Students should be able to see that you are truly trying to improve your practice so do ensure you act on what is being said and change your practices to suit the needs of your students or, the feedback process becomes obsolete. If you need help in finding support on how to change your teaching practice then reach out to others. I specifically use technology as a means of continued professional development. I have used Voxer, Twitter (@DrLynchPE), and blogging, all as a means to learn more about pedagogical practices. Furthermore, technology allowed me to have a direct professional support network of other Ph.D. students and faculty members from across the world that I was able to tap into when I needed advice on changing my teaching. A highly valuable component of higher education is listening to others outside of your department and university. One of my confidants throughout my Ph.D., I met on Twitter and was a fellow graduate student from the University of Auckland. As a sounding board and interested in similar

ideas we were able to share knowledge from our respective institutions and share alternative perspectives towards teaching.

The life of juggling a Ph.D. and teaching can be tiresome, so ensure you leave time for self-care in your schedule. I can't say the process isn't hard, but you can make it enjoyable, circle yourself with people that care about your success and well-being, seek out encouraging mentors and advisors and lastly, be passionate about what you are doing. Feel free to get in touch with any questions and considerations.

References

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