INTERVIEW 1 of 2: TRANSCRIPT

Note: this transcript was typed by the interviewer as the subject was speaking. It attempted to be as close to verbatim as possible, but is still largely a paraphrase. Interviewer comments were omitted (they were few and far between, and most of them were variants on "mhm") and bracketed text was inserted after the interview in order to be clearer. Thus the document is written as if it were a transcription of a monologue – because it basically is.

I'm in my fifth and hopefully last year of my PhD in Social Psychology. I've taught 6 classes; 3 of those were writing courses on Introductory Social Psychology, so let's talk about that. There are a lot of sections, and there's a common book and grading [rubric] across sections, and there's always 2 midterms and a final and 6 papers, but it's up to you what the questions on the midterm and the final and the papers are. There's flexibility.

When you become a new TA [for this class] they'd give you a CD of previous things past TAs had done, previous paper prompts they'd used, all the way down to here are the lecture slides. It was unofficial, the TAs did it themselves. I think faculty were aware of it and thought it was a good thing but they didn't do anything about it. It was a wonderful resource, because why reinvent the wheel -- if there's stuff from someone who's taught this 7 times, I can just use that.

It's really interesting to think about [how I modified the course materials]. I started off with copying questions from the CD, and [the questions] were more about having my students define terms. I took a 10-week summer teaching class over the summer before I [first] taught, [but] as a new TA I was a complete newcomer to teaching, so the CD of materials was very comforting. I'd use things from the people with good credentials, like did they win a teaching award, ok, I'll use their stuff. Sometimes I'd combine their materials, look at a couple slide decks and sort of synthesize my own slides from that, because from looking at that CD I could tell there were different teaching styles,

that different people taught different ways. Midway through the first time I taught it I got more comfortable and started changing questions and writing my own questions, less about defining terms and more about moving into usage, how would you apply this [social psychology concept] in real situations.

[The nature of the midterm and paper questions I assigned] kept changing the second and third time I taught the class. It was an evolution. I would reuse [questions in subsequent years] if I thought they were good. It wasn't so much about making everything from scratch, it's not that on principle I had to create new things, because I think that once I have a good idea I should stop and just use that because my next ideas would not be as good. Sometimes I would update questions -- if something was really big in pop culture I'd write a question about that -- but not making [new questions] for the sake of making things.

[As I modified my curriculum more and more, it was comforting] knowing there were mentors and peers around, because it was a required course so there were a lot of sections and other people teaching the course. Even if you didn't actually ask [those people for help], they were there. That support was definitely helpful, that availability. I remember having these moments of "aha" insight during teaching, I remember that I had them, but I don't remember what they were, so it's probably better to have people tell their stories while they're still doing it instead of afterwards.

As I went on I started making activities and games for my students to do [instead of using materials from the TA CD] and actually this last time I taught it I didn't use slides at all. And I think one of the things that made that work was that I was clear up front. Here's what I'm going to do, and if you don't like that you can leave. And I also addressed their learning goals, [asking them] what do you want to get out of this class? And doing that up front was really important.

For my student evaluations [of the last, most heavily-modified curriculum] I asked them about specific learning goals, both mine and theirs, and I found I got much better feedback when I asked "how did we do in meeting this specific goal?" than when I asked them just about "what did you like about the class, what didn't you like about the class." I got probably the best student feedback I have ever seen, I did not expect that, [it] surprised me how much the students engaged with that.

There's this thing [in psychology] called the "end of history" illusion where people always think they've changed in the past but they aren't going to change in the future. Looking back [at my earlier self when I was just starting to teach], I changed a lot. I was so scared of public speaking. And you're expected to be a subject matter expert and you're really just a second-year grad student! And now it's not a big deal, and now I know that I've done it and could do it again. And that mistakes don't matter. One time I drank too much water and realized I wasn't going to make it [all the way through class] and finally said "Ok class, take a break!" and then dashed to the bathroom and it felt really silly at the time -- then I looked at that and think "wait, they probably didn't even know, and even if they do, they don't care." And it doesn't matter. You can recover from your mistakes. And even if you screw something up, the next class is a blank slate.