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HONORS 397

Final Peer Educator Reflection

From the time I volunteered to read a narrative essay of my favorite elementary school memory at my fifth-grade graduation, I've always considered myself a good public speaker. But this teaching opportunity was the first time I've truly had "the stage" to myself. I had a group of students coming to my section every other week just to listen to me whereas in the past I've usually presented at one-off events like lab meetings or class presentations. In this context, there was no higher-up supervisor to defer to if I was unsure of something, and I had to re-evaluate how good I was at communicating when in the spotlight. Thankfully, it was surprisingly gratifying to find that students respected me and could stand to listen to me enough to come back to my section each time, and I found that I enjoyed the responsibility of shaping the space and tone of the classroom. Being able to put my personality into how I "run" a classroom allowed me to be true to myself in the process of getting to know each of my students better and helping connect them individually to applicable resources. Thus, the responsibility of being the sole teacher forced me to grow to be a better public speaker by becoming a better listener. I had to cue into my students' moods and needs to execute a lesson in the best way possible; I learned that sticking to the script in teaching is rarely the best way to effectively convey material. This was probably the main challenge for me this quarter, as I'm a textbook Type A planner. It was helpful to remember not to take myself too seriously and to instead focus on the students—their needs are far more important than my desire to follow my plan exactly.

While the responsibility of teaching alone helped me grow, in other respects, I was surprised by the weight of the responsibility of teaching. Specifically for this class, I was responsible for being the first point of contact for students struggling with adjusting to college life. Fortunately, I didn't have any scary situations involving students' struggles in my section, but I was surprised at the personal involvement that this kind of teaching requires. It makes me wonder how responsible professors and TAs generally feel for their students' well-being. I've heard many TAs feel burdened by the emotional labor they have to perform in these (poorly compensated) roles. As a human, you of course want to care about your students' wellbeing, but how much capacity does one person have when they have their own set of problems to worry about? Relatedly, I recently read an [article on grade inflation](#) that suggested that some professors feel that giving students an A is the only way to avoid stressing both the students' and the professor's mental health (to say nothing of the potential consequences of the course evaluations on the professor's tenure bid!). As higher education emerges from what I think is mainly a COVID-19-induced struggle between mental health and learning, this experience has made me more attuned to the viewpoints of both the instructor and the student. It will be interesting to see how the responsibilities and expectations of instructors change in the future, especially as I begin TA'ing high-pressure STEM classes in graduate school.

I think this sense of responsibility is now at the heart of how I define "leadership." In all honesty, I had not thought much about leadership before this course. I internally rolled my eyes at high school leadership classes and leadership certifications because it seemed to me that you either are a leader or are not. I thought there must be some innate quality that means people either listen to what you say or not. However, examining the nuances of leadership and the many different leadership styles throughout this course has proved my initial conception of leadership

wrong. For example, I've learned that you don't have to be an outspoken person to be a leader. It now seems obvious to say, but having the space to think about the concept of leadership, notoriously difficult to define, allowed me to see that one truly can be quietly inspirational and people will still consider you a leader. My grandma had a quote, "You have two ears and one mouth, so you should always listen twice as much as you should talk." I think this advice is particularly applicable to leadership and is how I'm trying to shape how I live my life and lead others when that role falls to me.