

The Educator's Journey

By Jeremy Grifski

Growing up, I always had a deep-seated curiosity for the world around me. In many cases, this curiosity manifested itself in hobbies like gaming, music, and travel. Together, these three hobbies formed the core of who I am today as an educator.

Travel

None of those experiences had more of a profound impact on my teaching than travel. In 2014, I hopped on a plane to leave the country for the first time. Over the next six months, I lived as a foreign exchange student in Manchester, England. To this day, I don't think I've ever had a *worse* experience.

When most people describe their study abroad experience, they talk about how life changing it was. While I couldn't agree more, I don't think we'd share the same reasons why. Sure, living abroad was fun and exciting. However, over time, I grew increasingly lonely as I struggled to make any connection with the locals. Since then, I haven't been in touch with anyone I met.

As traumatic of an experience as that was for me, I immediately made an effort to ensure that international students back home felt welcomed. For example, I took a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) course and ultimately earned my 200-hour TEFL certification. As a result, I am more capable of working with students with English as their second language.

That said, my desire for inclusion doesn't stop with international students. In particular, I make sure that I always learn my students' names. In my experience, most professors don't bother getting to know their students, but I think it's incredibly important. Every student should feel welcome in the classroom.

Music

When I was 12, I decided to pick up music for the first time. Back then, I joined the 6th grade concert band as a trombone player, and it stuck with me ever since. Over the years, I've played in many bands, but my favorite style of music to play is jazz. As of today, you can find me playing with the Greater Columbus Concert Band.

In all this time, music has taught me a lot of skills that help me in my teaching. For example, performing in a group is all about blend and balance. As an educator, I take that skill to the classroom by limiting my talk time. While a teacher may occasionally be a soloist, their primary role is to find ways to make each of their students shine. For me, that means getting to know my students needs and learning styles through open dialogue. If I can tell something isn't working with a student, I make sure to try something else.

As mentioned previously, my favorite style of music is jazz. Naturally, I think jazz can serve as an excellent model for education. After all, jazz is all about experimentation based in the fundamentals. In a classroom, that means teaching material in a pedagogically sound way while not being afraid to try something new.

Gaming

When I was growing up, I was first exposed to video games during the Nintendo 64 era. Back then, games were just exploring the world of 3D. At the time, I was playing a lot of

platformers like Super Mario and role-playing games like Pokémon. As a result, I was developing skills in problem solving, critical thinking, and reading.

Over the years, I moved into more competitive 3D games like Halo, Gears of War, and Call of Duty. Each of these games helped me develop skills like reaction time, strategic planning, and quick decision making—not to mention communication. Together, video games made me who I am today.

As an educator, I find a lot of value in using gamification as a teaching mechanism. In particular, I like to introduce periodic questions throughout a lecture to increase engagement and address misconceptions. For instance, I've taught a lot of introductory programming courses, and I always like to ask questions about common misconceptions related to pass-by-value and object copying.

Recently, I've adapted my periodic question activity to include peer instruction. Specifically, I will have students answer the question individually. Then, I'll share the results and ask them to discuss their thoughts in groups. After the discussion, I'll hold a revote and address any misconceptions if the votes don't converge on the correct answer. As a result, this sort of activity brings in a lot of what I love about video games: reading, problem solving, critical thinking, and communication.

One of the reasons I love peer instruction is that provides value to both novice and expert learners. In other words, it scales in any setting. For novice learners, peer instruction provides a mechanism by which they can address their misconceptions and begin to add keywords to their vocabulary. For expert learners, peer instruction provides an opportunity for deeper discussions and debates which can expose blind spots and biases.

Teaching

Together, these core themes bring me to who I am today: an educator. Since 2014, I have been teaching in various capacities. For example, I scored my first teaching gig as an undergraduate teaching assistant for an introduction to Java course at Case Western Reserve University. Over the next two years, I ran two labs a week, held regular office hours, and graded several homework assignments including labs and projects.

After graduating, I spent about a year working as the sole software developer on a team at GE Transportation. As a result, part of my duties involved explaining software to colleagues with various engineering backgrounds. In addition, I spent one summer mentoring an intern who was happy to learn data structures from me.

Today, I am a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) for the Computer Science and Engineering department at The Ohio State University. Over the last year, I taught an introduction to Java course as the instructor. In other words, I held three lectures, a lab, and three office hours a week while also grading all labs, assignments, projects, and exams.

Since then, I've moved into an instructor role for the subsequent Software Components course. Now, I manage two undergraduate teaching assistants (UTA) who handle most of my grading. In addition, I hold two lectures, two labs, and three office hours a week.

In total, I have about 3 and a half years of teaching experience, and I don't plan to stop now. Currently, my goal is to end up as a Computer Science professor at the university level. In particular, I'm interested in working with beginners, so I can be on the frontlines of a positive cultural shift in the tech industry.