

On-Campus Job Interviews and the Teaching Demonstration

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How can a graduating doctoral student best prepare for success in this tight academic job market? A completed dissertation, teaching experience, publications, professional service, and strong letters of support from your mentors are the key ingredients to making the first cut. But for those of you lucky enough to get invited to an on-campus job interview, some additional preparation is necessary. Katherine Hajar of the AHA's Graduate and Early Career Committee organized a panel for the 2010 AHA meeting in San Diego titled "The Campus Visit: Strategies for Success," including advice on teaching and research presentations, meetings with deans, faculty, and students, and dining with faculty. The following is an excerpt from my advice on the teaching demonstration.

EXPECTATIONS

In general, you will be expected to lecture, while also demonstrating an ability to connect with students and use modern teaching methods and tools. The hiring committee or faculty observers quite simply want to observe your performance in front of a classroom. They will be judging your style, composure, speaking ability, and classroom demeanor as well as the content of your lecture. You should dress and act with professional decorum, even if they encourage you be informal. Be prepared to lecture before a mock class comprised of random students and faculty. This can happen when a real class is not available to you and is disconcerting.

PREPARATION

Acquire as much information as possible in advance about the expectations and classroom conditions for your teaching demonstration: topic of lecture, audience, nature of the class/course, length of time, AV equipment, etc. You may receive clear direction, vague direction, or no direction. Try to nail down an agreed upon topic instead of leaving it ambiguous.

It is critical to know whether you will speak to an actual class or not. If it is an actual class, ask for a copy of the syllabus. Talk to the instructor if available. Determine what the students are reading. Try to make your lecture fit the class as much as possible. If it is not an actual class, you will have more leeway but a more difficult time. A mock classroom of students and faculty feels artificial and awkward. Who do you pitch your lecture to? Communicate with those in charge and pitch it to an agreed-upon grade level. Verbally acknowledge that decision before

beginning your mock presentation.

For example, you might say: "I was asked to prepare a lecture for a survey course in post-1865 US History so I prepared a presentation on political corruption and reform in the Gilded Age. I will pretend you are a classroom of freshman and sophomore students and present a 30-minute lecture on the topic. After such lectures I normally engage the students in discussion, but instead I will simply discuss the methods I use to stimulate active student engagement in the course material." Get agreement from your faculty contact (search committee chair usually) on any decisions that you make about your lecture.

Determine if it is a 50-minute or a 75-minute class. Ask your faculty contact if you should fill the whole class period or just a portion. Even if it is not a real class there will be a designated time period, but don't assume they want you to lecture for the entire period. Ask. "Mock" classes made up of mostly faculty are difficult. Professors are generally not a generous audience for undergraduate course lectures. After seeing enough of your performance to make a judgment about your likelihood for success as a teacher, they will want to speak with you about your teaching goals and methods. Leave time for that. But speak with your faculty contact and get an agreement ahead of time.

Be very, very careful about preparing lectures dependent on audio-visual bells and whistles. The institutions where you are likely to get your first job interviews may not have the kinds of AV technologies to which you have grown accustomed. You are skating on thin ice if you prepare a lecture that depends on Powerpoint, video, or Internet access and the technology is unavailable or breaks down. Always have a back-up plan. You won't have a second chance at the lecture or at making a first impression. Show that you can effectively use the latest technologies but don't be dependent on them.

DELIVERY

Be yourself. Find a golden mean between enthusiasm and composure. Give eye contact as much as possible. Do NOT read your lecture. If it is a mock lecture (not a real class) you can start by talking about what you decided to prepare for the teaching demonstration and why. Then launch into your mock lecture. Then come back to a direct engagement with your non-student audience to talk about your teaching philosophy and the various tools and strategies you use to be an effective teacher. That will launch the discussion. Often professors are less interested in talking about the content of your lecture, although those questions may come up.

Make sure you can be heard in the back of the room without shouting over the heads of the people in front. Watch for visual cues, ask questions if anything is unclear to you. Keep track of the time. Don't exceed the time frame assigned to you. Try not to get rattled if something goes wrong. Improbable advice, I know, but how you respond in these situations reveals much about yourself. Show that you can adapt to changes and remain composed when

challenged. And there will be challenges.

Most importantly: respect your audience. Respond to all questions thoughtfully and directly—even hostile questions. This interview may be the beginning of a long-term relationship with the colleagues in the room. Show that you respect them and their institution, and that you take your professional responsibilities seriously.

AFTERWARD

After a teaching demonstration, whether a real class or a mock audience, most people will quickly disappear and you will be left with a handler or two. It will feel anti-climactic to you. Don't worry. It was all just a "demonstration." It is different than a research presentation in which you expect to engage with the audience about intellectual issues. The exception might be for a job at a teaching college in which one's teaching abilities are of paramount concern to the search committee. Then you might have a vigorous conversation about pedagogy after your lecture.

Usually you will want to have a break to relax or get some caffeine after your teaching demonstration. Your voice will be tired. You may be exhausted from the stress. Don't hesitate to ask for something to drink (nonalcoholic!) or for a quiet room where you can take a brief break before the next event. Your handlers will often schedule you tightly, with little down time. If that's the case, ask someone sympathetic ahead of time to bring you a favorite beverage between meetings. Ask about bathrooms ahead of time so you know where they are.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

At all times carry with you your schedule of meetings, contact information for key members of the search committee, a cell phone in silent mode, a map of campus with key buildings marked, medication for headaches, cash, a toothbrush, and breath mints.

Good luck!
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