

## NARRATIVE 14.

# TEACHING IS PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL, AND INTELLECTUAL LABOR

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Although I couldn't quite put it in these words at the time, I realized this during week five of my first semester as a TA (in the fall of 2014). I was exhausted. Without a car, I had been biking to the grocery store and attempting to carry back bags of groceries on my bike with mixed success. I was finding, as most first-year TAs do, that commenting on student work and planning for a 50-minute class takes hours, which sometimes meant I didn't get to my own coursework until later in the week or on the weekend. In short, I was tired, lonely, and anxious, tasked with a responsibility that I tried to hide I was not prepared for.

In a diary entry from 1988, humorist David Sedaris writes of his stint as a teacher:

I realized I was a teacher when I felt warm during class and got up to open the door. Later on there was noise in the hallway, so I got up and shut it. Students can't open and close the door whenever they feel like it. For my first day I wore a white linen shirt with a striped tie, black trousers, and my good shoes. At the start of the session I had nine students. Then one dropped out, so now I have only eight. (Sedaris 193)

I laughed out loud when I read this because I was reminded of the early weeks of my first semester when I was painfully aware of performing an identity I was still coming to terms with.

I realized my students thought I was the teacher when I entered the classroom, forgot to flip the light switch on and spent the better part of my third class unaware that students were looking around in the dim room, wondering when the light would be turned on. I realized my students thought of me as their teacher when, miraculously, somehow, they did what I asked them to do. They submitted their assignments (for the most part) on time, worked in the small groups I formed for them, and looked expectantly at me when a question was asked in class.

But I realized I was becoming a teacher when I became more focused on getting my students to answer each other's questions (rather than answering them myself)—and when I learned the hard lesson that a classroom plan that worked last semester did not necessarily mean it would work another semester. I realized I was becoming a teacher when I set aside concerns about my inexperience and focused on the factors that influenced my students' development as writers, including cultural and material conditions, my students' lived experiences with academic genres, and the culture of our classroom.

Most of all, I realized I was becoming a teacher when I caught myself calling myself a teacher when people asked what I did for work. I didn't start with the fact that I was a graduate student, but a teacher.

## WORKS CITED

Sedaris, David. *Theft by Finding Diaries 1977-2002*. Hachette Book Group, 2017.