

#### NARRATIVE 4.

## BACK TO THE START: THE TRANSITION FROM ADJUNCT PROFESSOR TO PH.D. STUDENT

**Matt Schering**

Illinois State University

The start to my teaching career was built on isolation. When I interviewed for my first adjunct teaching position, I was hired, given a textbook, and essentially told to “figure it out.” At the same time, my master’s institution was transitioning into a four-year university, so all my previous mentors were understandably busy with this change and unable to provide the support they had throughout my degree. This trial by fire is the reality of many TAs and adjuncts, and though it was a rough start, I adapted. After three years of adjuncting I decided to go back and earn my Ph.D.

Before my first day of Ph.D. orientation, I felt like I had a pretty good handle on teaching. In addition to my adjunct experience, I also had high scores on evaluations and [ratemyprofessor.com](http://ratemyprofessor.com) to further inflate my ego. I looked at the ten-day orientation as a formality—and a chance to score some free meals—but it turned out to be so much more than that. The orientation was hands on: multiple people were talking to me about my course, my assignments, and even the formatting choices I made on my syllabus! All of this attention was giving me anxiety, and imposter syndrome made its first of many appearances. Throughout my adjunct days there was never any attention paid to what I was doing, and I had free reign to teach as I saw fit. To suddenly have long conversations, and to have an overarching department philosophy was a lot to take in—and I initially resisted.

Resistance turned out to be a mistake. As time went on—and as I adapted to the program and saw the value in their approach—I realized it was a great opportunity to learn from more experienced educators. Teaching can be scary – teaching is scary – but I was lucky enough to have people around to help. I am grateful to have mentors, both faculty and peers, that have the time to answer any questions, and to listen to my ideas about teaching in the program. I thought I knew everything about teaching from my adjunct experience, but there is always something new, new perspectives, new assignments, new assessment models, and you have to be willing to adapt.

Transitions are tough. Going from master's student, to adjunct, to Ph.D. student can be difficult, but it is important to realize there are people around to help! I was someone used to working alone, so the thought of working closely with a department terrified me. I resisted and isolated myself during the first days of my Ph.D. experience, and that was a mistake. When I started to listen I made myself open to learning, and I am a much better teacher and scholar because of it.

As I write this final paragraph, I am now a Ph.D. candidate, on the precipice of finishing my dissertation. Having the opportunity to pause and reflect on my time as a doctoral student made me realize that while the transition from adjunct to Ph.D. student was tough, what I have learned and experienced was worth it. The lessons I have learned, the people that I have met have made me a better teacher and a better scholar. Uprooting your life to start anew can be terrifying, but for me, it was absolutely worth it.