

Harvard, Chicago, and Teaching

(or: “Why being a Harvard TF makes me appreciate the University of Chicago”)

by Francis X. Shen
September 2007

It is September. This means the start of the school year, and when you're a Harvard graduate student, the start of emails with subjects like this: “Econ Department Desperate for Teaching Fellows”. (You can check my Inbox – I'm not making that one up.)

Harvard gets desperate for teaching fellows (TFs) because in most courses it is TFs – not professors - who do the teaching. The typical Harvard teaching mode for non-lab based courses are large lectures twice (or if a professor is especially lazy, once) a week, plus a “discussion section” that is led by the TF. It is in section that the course materials are actually discussed and analyzed. It is through the section that papers are developed and graded. In short, it is in section where the learning actually occurs.

Harvard sections are notoriously boring, ineffective, and sometimes downright pointless. It's no surprise that every year students write in the student newspaper complaining about section. I compiled a list of these for my students last year.¹ One student sums it up well: “The most tangible problem with sections is the people who teach them. TFs, with rare exception, tend to fall into one of two categories. Either they are disinterested and aloof, primarily using their section time as a chance to hit on undergraduate girls, or they are lacking confidence—confused and naïve to the point where they seem to know little more about the subject than the section all-stars.”²

As a TF, and as a former Resident Tutor who lived with the undergrads, I feel bad for the Harvard students. I have met many conscientious, hard-working TFs. When my best friend was a TF, he did everything humanly possible to help his students. I try to follow his model. But based on my experiences, and bolstered by student evaluations, it seems that most TFs would rather not be teaching. They do it because they get paid and need the money. They're not out to do a bad job, but they're not exactly out to do a great job either.

Case in point: it is not uncommon for a TF to not even read all of the materials they are supposed to be leading discussion on. The TF's reasoning is that they can get by without doing it, so why bother? I recall one student telling me about their section in which the TF would stop halfway through so he could take a smoke break. Another reported that the TF would just sit and stare at them in silence to pass the time.

To be fair to the Harvard TFs, they're entering a profession that is going to reward them for research, not teaching. TFs need to finish dissertations, and spending too much time preparing for a section may cut into valuable writing time. Harvard TFs aren't lazy. They're just focused on research and writing. Teaching is an afterthought.

¹ The list of articles is online at: <http://gov97.blogspot.com/2007/01/favorite-tf-section-observations.html>

² From [“The Blind Leading the Blind: Why letting TFs control such a large part of our Harvard education is a disservice.”](#) by Andrew Kreicher, October 13, 2005. *Harvard Crimson*.

The irony is that Harvard undergrads understand, and begrudgingly accept this state of affairs. They know that their professors are too busy for them, and that their TAs would probably like to be somewhere else. Harvard students rationalize their experiences. They figure that they get to hear a famous professor give a lecture twice a week. Their TAs, in many cases, are soon to be professors at highly ranked schools. They recognize that there's a tradeoff, and that a big research university has to sacrifice its teaching.

Given this mindset, Harvard students are often surprised when I tell them about my experiences at the University of Chicago. To be on the level – I started as a freshman at Harvard, lasted all of a month, and transferred to the U. of C. because I thought it was a better fit. It turned out to be everything I had hoped for. At Chicago, I did not have a single class, except for a lab in core biology, taught by a TA. Harvard students are particularly impressed that I sat around a table with my professors for three hours every week. Even in my core Science and the Earth course my Professors (big names in their fields) were in the labs to give us help.

Many liberal arts schools, of course, pride themselves on great teaching. But Chicago, unlike most small liberal arts colleges, is both a teaching *and research* institution. The Chicago School has been influential in fields too numerous to name: economics, English, physics, chemistry, political science, philosophy, sociology, and on and on. The track record of Nobel Laureates (79 and counting) is incredible.

How does Chicago do it? How can they combine top notch research without sacrificing teaching? The answer, in my view, is self-selection. Professors who wind up at the U. of C. know what they're getting into. They understand that they can't get away (as they could at Harvard) with pulling out the same lecture notes each year. They know that they will be challenged by eager students who have actually read the books. They know they will have to work harder. And they love it.

I suspect this to be the answer because it is has been my own experience as a U. of C. grad teaching as a Harvard TA. Teaching doesn't stifle my research; it energizes it. Challenging my students, and being challenged in return, leads to the sorts of intellectual exchanges that reverberate at Chicago. I find myself frequently asking of my own research the same questions I am posing to my students.

This Fall I will again be a TA at Harvard. I will be telling my bad jokes to a new group of students, and hoping they don't groan too much. I will be asking my students to join the scholarly community by digging deep into texts, refusing to settle for easy answers, and tracking down evidence to support claims.

I will, I realize now, be asking of my students the same things my professors asked of me at the University of Chicago.

*** About the author:** Francis X. Shen graduated from the University of Chicago in 2000. At the U. of C. he ran track and majored in the three E's: english, economics, and eating. He holds the Chicago record in the 400m intermediate hurdles (53.16), and still competes with the

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