

# GREETING FROM A GEM ALUMNUS: ON TEACHING AND CRITICAL THINKING

BY G. GAYGER MÜLLER

**I defended my PhD thesis at the Université libre de Bruxelles in an afternoon of January 2016. In my research, I had worked on overlapping and multi-level regional governance. Post-PhD life as an academic, it turns out, is also overlapping and multi-level. Earlier that same day in January, I had finished my first post-doc job interview in Leuven, Belgium. I guess I was able to show some motivation with this overlap as I did get offered the position and have been working at KU Leuven since March 2016.**

Of course, motivation wouldn't suffice without experience. I still remember vividly being offered to teach a group of 20 students a semester-long seminar on history of political thought at the ULB in 2011. The language would be French, and the content did not have a direct connection to my PhD process. Faced with this seemingly crazy combination only three months into the GEM programme, I could have said no and gone back to the self-centered experience of refining my PhD research project. But that is the thing with academia - if people trust you with a task, you take the opportunity. So, I said yes and started teaching a few weeks later. I told my students that it was the first time I was teaching in French, but it was in fact the first time I was teaching at all.

Teaching exposes your way of reasoning to a wider audience beyond the comfort zone of PhD workshops and academic conferences. It forces you to present a topic in the best way possible: you need to be clear, concise and make sure that you pass the message and cover the content of the course. There is no "let's follow up and discuss further during the coffee break" because students rely on you to present the necessary knowledge and to dissect it. I have come to agree, for instance, with the idea that if one can't present a topic or explain an issue in an intelligible way, one doesn't fully understand it. It is also important to ensure that everyone understands the course content without failing to deliver something exciting to those students who understood it from the very beginning. How many recaps and repetitions, for example, are too many? Can I take this knowledge for granted or should I

elaborate on it during class? How does my course relate to all the other courses the students are attending? What if I just refer to the academic literature? All these questions are constant issues in every semester.

When I moved to Coventry in the UK in autumn 2012 to start my second year in the GEM PhD School at the University of Warwick, I didn't expect to teach once again. With the first semester over, when I was spending seasonal holidays in Brazil, I received an invitation to teach two small groups on world politics. I have always been an IR person and gladly accepted the offer. At the time I was doing substantial research on the core theoretical and conceptual aspects of my PhD, which has to do with legitimacy and authority of a variety of entities, regional polities mainly. And I recall being fascinated by how the classroom can serve as a micro-cosmos to observe social relations of authority. There is, of course, institutional authority invested in the teacher - marking, designing syllabi and assignments, and scheduling classes. Then there is also the authority coming from established practices and norms: first-time teachers are certainly amazed by silence in the classroom that follows when they speak their first words - or at least I was.

Finally, there is authority in the sense of being an authoritative source of knowledge in the classroom. Before starting to teach at the University of Warwick, PhD students can follow a few seminars on best practices. A key point of discussions was the main goals of teaching or why do we teach? I quickly answered that my motivation to teach was

to foster critical thinking among students. Some participants in the seminar looked at me as if I were some sort of two-meter tall Latin American Marxist revolutionary aiming at converting students to (capitalized) Critical Theory. But I really did mean critical thinking with small letters. This is for me the biggest impact of academia in society: to equip people with the capacity to properly observe the world around them, to have information to interpret them and to challenge conventional thinking.

And it is unfortunately very easy to abuse one's authority and try to guide students into one's own path. Teaching also makes you more aware of your own biases as an academic. We all tend to side with theories and approaches and have gradually constructed world views of our own as researchers. The challenge here, however, is to give space to alternative world views and interpretations when teaching. This is a horizontal task, especially in humanities and social sciences, and includes the suggested literature, proper lecture during class, the discussions, and of course marking. Because of the inherent authority relations in the classroom, it is important to present a variety of readings, views and interpretations.

During the last seven years, I have taught in various academic environments in different countries, to BA and MA students, to a handful of students in a seminar setting and to hundreds in auditoria. I have taught in person, online, and via video conference. I have introduced the fashionable active learning and problem-based learning ideas into some of my courses, while in others I just speak for two hours. I have finally been able to teach 'comparative regionalism', which connects directly to my PhD research interest, but I have also discovered other interests while teaching topics and fields with which I was previously unfamiliar. All in all, I have benefited immensely from the daily interaction with students, their questions, comments and written assignments. It has gradually become clear to me that a key element of academic life is to find synergies in overlapping tasks and to sustain meaningful connections in its multiple institutional levels. And I still believe that critical thinking (with small letters), to help students find their own views with informed decisions, is the biggest impact of academia.

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