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Cultures of Teaching *The Ongoing Commitment to Conservatism*

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Abstract

Cultures of teaching represent the habits, knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs that educators share or embody as a professional body or group. To learn more about teaching cultures, specifically cultures of graduate teaching assistants (TAs), I interviewed 17 TAs at a large Canadian university. I adopted Dan Lortie's classic work on teaching cultures as a theoretical framework and analyzed interviews using grounded theory principles. Results implied that TAs had various teaching habits, including conservative teaching tendencies. According to Lortie, conservatism stands for ways educators rely on their past (schooling) experience to guide how they teach. I build on this, using the phrase 'Teaching with Ghosts' to call attention to how an educator's past experience or prior knowledge, history, and memories haunt classrooms and hinder educational change. While I found evidence of conservatism among TAs, literature indicates that schoolteachers, professors, and teacher candidates for example all have conservative orientations. I conclude with a teaching audit and encourage educators to nurture more sustainable teaching dispositions.



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Introduction

All educators – professors, teachers, teacher candidates, and so on, have their own cultures of teaching. Teaching cultures refer to the shared “beliefs, values, habits and assumed ways of doing things” among a teaching community (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 165). Teaching cultures are invisible structures, unwritten rules that frame how educators “do their work” (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1984, p. 16). These cultures serve as a direction or guide, a map of sorts to navigate teaching. They encapsulate “the very core of teachers’ own self-understandings of their work and its real meaning as a professional practice” (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, p. 2506). Like Giroux, I argue that there is a power and subversiveness to teaching cultures that needs to be made visible (MacPherson Institute, 2015).

Teaching cultures have been studied since the 1930s. Some early works include Waller’s (1932) *The Sociology of Teaching* and Jackson’s (1968/1990) *Life in Classrooms*. But perhaps one of the most influential texts on cultures of teaching is Lortie’s (1975/2002) *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*.

Lortie (2002) portrays teaching cultures as a combination of three orientations: presentism, conservatism, individualism, underpinned by psychic rewards (intrinsic satisfaction). Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) explain that Lortie’s presentism refers to the pressure teachers feel to maintain “short-term perspectives and unable or unwilling to envision or plan collaboratively for long-term, systemic change” (p. 2506). Individualism references “teachers’ preferences for working alone” (p. 2506). As for conservatism, it corresponds to “teachers’ mistrust of reform initiatives and their loyalty to established classroom practices that worked for them regardless of research findings or pupil learning outcomes” (p. 2506).

There is an abundant of literature that is situated around Lortie’s understanding of teaching cultures. However, much of this research is on teachers (Bryan, 2017; Channa, 2020; Gray, 2019; Vinogradova & Ross, 2019), teacher candidates (Botha, 2020; Cancino et al., 2020; Knapp, 2012; Rinke et al., 2014), and professors (Taylor et al., 2022). In my research, I explore Lortie’s teaching cultures in relation to graduate teaching assistants (TAs).

In this paper, TAs are defined as full-time graduate students at universities who work part-time in undergraduate courses. There are no standard TA duties. But generally speaking, TAs assist professors by performing teaching-related duties like leading tutorials, holding office hours, and grading student work (Alhija & Fresko, 2018; Korpan, 2014; Muzaka, 2009). Performing these tasks helps to ease the workload of the professor. For example, when a TA grades student work, it makes “evaluation of students even more efficient for the professor” (Ritzer, 2000, p. 49).

Like Chewbacca is to Han Solo (*Star Wars*) or Goose is to Maverick (*Top Gun*), TAs are the sidekicks of professors. But TAs are also their own teaching group or community. This is emphasized by TAs having their own unions (Herbert et al., 2024; Wang, 2023), news coverage (Nerestant, 2024; Passfield, 2024), professional development programs (Angus, 2016; Avargil et al., 2019; Boman, 2013; Goodwin et al., 2021), academic journals (“Postgraduate Pedagogies”), and communities of practice (Camarao & Din, 2023). But to what extent is Lortie’s presentism, conservatism, individualism and associated ‘psychic rewards’ relevant to TA cultures? The research question that guides this paper is as follows: *What teaching activities do graduate students do as teaching assistants (at a university in southern Ontario), how and why? What ‘psychic rewards’ underpin this teaching?*

While each of Lortie's orientations is important (presentism, conservatism, and individualism), in this article I outline my findings on conservatism. Lortie (2002) explains that conservatism has to do with how "teachers... are heavily influenced by past experience", linking "present practice to historical rather than recent standards" (p. 208). Conservatism represents how teachers "cling to what they know from the past" to perform teaching tasks (p. 209).

This paper starts to unravel the problem with conservatism being rooted in teaching cultures. Educators with conservative tendencies adopt established teaching practices, locked into an 'old-school' or 'old-fashion' mindset. But new practices are needed (Hargreaves, 2024; Younge, 2021). To create sustainable futures requires forward-thinking. New and different perspectives, ideas, and ways of doing things drives innovation, experimentation, creativity, economic success, and societal progress (Platt et al., 2021; Teschers et al., 2024).

Reaffirming and Extending Lortie's Conservatism

While teaching cultures are intricate and complex, understanding Lortie's conservatism is a crucial first step. This is because conservatism is a past orientation, a reductionist tendency. It interferes with educational change. Hargreaves (2010) states that breaking from conservatism "must first be needed, wanted, and acknowledged... before the other two of individualism and presentism follow on behind. Otherwise, the outcome will always be eventual resistance and renewed or reinvented conservatism" (p. 153).

For Lortie, the conservative teacher is stuck in their ways, holding onto bygone days. They reduce and simplify, limit their teaching to what once was (past tense). Their teaching is defined by "personal standards" of achievement (Lortie, 2002, p. 208). Their teaching is consistent. They teach using the same (old) curriculum and pedagogy, making their practices predictable, static, a matter of habit and routine. Lortie remarks, the conservative teacher assumes "that current instructional tactics are adequate if properly supported" and has no interest "in finding more efficacious ways to instruct" (p. 209).

In this section, I turn to current literature to support Lortie's conservatism, showing how teachers, teacher candidates, professors, and graduate teaching assistants all have conservative tendencies. This is not a comprehensive review of conservatism in teaching. Rather my intention is to demonstrate that conservatism is widespread in the teaching profession and warrants further investigation.

Apprenticeship of Observation (Past Schooling Experience)

In *Schoolteacher*, Lortie (2002) states that conservatism in teaching is a product of past schooling experience or what he calls, the *Apprenticeship of Observation*. In simple terms, this apprenticeship involves three steps: students go to school, they see teaching (happen) and become a replica of the teacher. This model is based on cultural transmission (Mewborn & Tyminski, 2006).

Lortie argues that from kindergarten to grade 12, students spend thousands of hours in school observing teachers work. This leads students to imagine that they can do as the teacher does. Lortie asks, "what child cannot, after all, do a reasonably accurate portrayal of a classroom teacher's actions?" (Lortie, 2002, p. 62). But seldom are students able to name pedagogies or explain why certain curriculum was introduced in classrooms. Knowledge students acquire about

teaching is generally limited. Students see teachers work but are unlikely “to make useful linkages between teaching objectives and teacher actions” (p. 63). “What students learn about teaching, then,” Lortie insists “is intuitive and imitative rather than explicit and analytical” (p. 62).

Lortie interviewed elementary and high school teachers in the United States in the early 1960s. During these interviews, teachers discussed teaching like they were taught: some imitated the practices of their past elementary teachers, others adopted methods used by their former high school or college instructors. Lortie comments, “The data at my disposal suggest... the continuing influence of former teachers... where teachers realize that their current behavior reflects former teachers” (Lortie, 2002, p. 64).

While Lortie wrote about the *Apprenticeship of Observation* half a century ago, current literature helps to highlight its continued relevance. For example, in her teaching autobiography, Khanna (2017) writes about teaching like she was taught. Khanna tells a story about how, growing up, she attended a strict boarding school in India. Khanna explains that this schooling experience was “painful” (p. 68). But when she started teaching, she passed this pain down to students. Her former teachers used strict “rules” and “discipline” and now she did too (p. 95). Negative school memories can leave a footprint. But so can positive schooling experiences. Channa (2020) researches elementary teachers in Pakistan. He discovers that these teachers “attempted to exhibit the same characteristics” as their former teachers (p. 124). Channa states, “They wanted to become the identical English language teachers they idolized and cherished” (p. 124).

Literature points to teacher candidates teaching (or planning to teach) like they were taught. Furlong (2013) interviews student teachers at a university in Ireland about their teaching aspirations. She finds that one student teacher in particular wants “to be approachable” which “seems to be fuelled by... memories of... [their] favourite teacher” (p. 74). In South Africa, Botha (2020) surveyed a new cohort of preservice teachers days after starting a teaching program. Results indicated that a majority of these preservice teachers already felt prepared to teach. A dominant reason related to past schooling experience. Having “paid close attention to their [former] teachers... they now felt that they possessed the basic skills needed to be teachers themselves” (p. 57). This reinforces Lortie (2002), who claims that “education training has low impact on students” compared to past schooling experience (p. 66).

There are reports of professors imitating their former instructors. In an opinion piece for *The New York Times*, McCaulley (2022) gives an account of his former high school history teacher, openly admitting that he teaches like she taught. McCaulley is a professor at Wheaton College. Van Canh (2018), a college instructor in Vietnam, states that early in his career he taught like his former professors. Van Canh declares, “During my first years of teaching, I had no idea of the nuts and bolts of teaching English, and I taught my students the way I had been taught by my teachers at the College” (p. 5).

Literature confirms that graduate teaching assistants are similar. Harris et al. (2009) found that a professional development course had “no effect” on some TAs at a university in southwestern United States (p. 167). This was because these TAs had conservative tendencies: either set in their ways (i.e., unwilling to change their teaching practices) or inclined to teach like they were taught as undergraduates. Likewise, Wan et al. (2023) describe a TA at a university in southeast United States having difficulty implementing ‘error framing’ because it did not align with their “prior experience as an undergraduate student... had never seen his own instructors modeling error framing” (p. 7).

Extending Lortie (Past Teaching Experience)

Lortie (2002) says that a teacher learns about teaching by being a student, being in classrooms, observing teachers teach. But observation is a passive approach to learning. What about something more experiential?

Literature implies that teachers learn about teaching by working as teachers. Past teaching experience becomes a guide, directing teaching decisions. For example, Snyder (2017) researches veteran K-12 teachers in the United States. He finds that, for some of these teachers, their past teaching experience is a reminder of how they taught before, serving as a benchmark or personal standard. In a related study, McKee (2016) finds that elementary teachers in southeast United States made teaching decisions based on “the storehouse of information, ideas, and projects that they possessed as a result of teaching in excess of 10 years” (p. 137).

What about professors? Cox (2014) interviews STEM instructors at higher education institutions in Utah. Results show that some of these instructors “teach according to their own past experience in the classroom, seeing what works and what doesn’t (trial and error)” (p. 35).

Research reveals that graduate teaching assistants fall into the same conservative trap, teaching in ways that they taught before. Jackson (2020) reports that a TA at a university in southern United States “relied on her prior teaching experience” to perform TA work (p. 99). Rosales et al. (2013) state that a TA at Memorial University applied what she learned from being a TA in one course “to other TA experiences” (p. 5). And Wheeler et al. (2018) discover that a TA at an American university “valued her status as a returning TA in that she perceived this meant she needed to do no outside preparation for teaching” (p. 60). This stresses how drawing on past teaching experience may be perceived as an efficiency measure, reducing workload.

Psychic Rewards

What keeps educators stuck in the past, committed to conservatism? For Lortie (2002), a teacher gains psychic rewards or intrinsic satisfaction from continuity. Lortie specifies that “teachers [have]... a conservative frame of mind – a preference for doing things as they have been done in the past” (p. 210). Lortie says that for teachers “the drift is toward continuity rather than change” (p. 210).

For example, Khanna (2017) discloses how teaching like she was taught provided “a lingering sense of familiarity” and comfort (p. 95). Fairbrother (2012) worked as a TA at University of Sheffield. She states that being a TA was “very much linked to... making sense of and validating... [her] previous [schooling and teaching] experience” (p. 354). Others like Boyd et al. (2013) research teacher candidates at a university in southeastern United States. They find that a high number (39%) of these candidates plan to teach like they were taught, having a “preference for... pedagogies” (p. 37) that they “remember” from their past schooldays (p. 36).

Psychic rewards are also connected to past teaching experience. During focus groups, McKee (2016) finds that elementary teachers “seemed to enjoy” drawing on their “deep reservoir” of past teaching experience (p. 138), having access to “a wealth of ideas and options to utilize when teaching” (p. 137). Goodwin et al. (2021) interview TAs at a university in the Pacific Northwest. They find that these TAs are generally “very confident” teaching an introductory biology course and “the key to their confidence was experience... having taught the... [course] once [before]” (p. 5). Oleson and Hora (2014) find that some STEM instructors at American

universities feel that having taught for years, their teaching practice is “satisfactory and does not require any adjustment” (p. 41). It is an educator’s satisfaction with their teaching that maintains conservatism. In the remaining sections, I discuss my research on TA cultures, calling attention to how it adds to existing literature on conservatism.

Methodology

My research was designed to explore cultures of teaching, with a special interest in TA cultures. Having worked as a TA, I was inspired to study TAs, educators who are often cast as “invisible” in the university system (Jaines, 2021, p. 50).

This research involved me recruiting graduate students who worked as TAs at a large public research university in southern Ontario, Canada. There were 1000+ TAs working at this university. Emailing was essential to the recruitment process (Seidman, 2013). I emailed different departments and groups at the university and with their help distributed a ‘call for participants’ over their listservs. The bulk of participants were found through these listservs. I specifically recruited graduate students who had some 1) experience working as TAs at the university within the last one to two years and 2) some broad commitments to environmental/sustainability education.

Seventeen TAs participated in my study. Four Master’s students took part in this research. The majority of participants identified as PhD students (13). More women (9) took part in my study compared to men (7) (1 undisclosed). Racially, participants identified as: White (9); Pakistani/Indian (1); Black/Jamaican (1); Latinx (1); Iranian (1); Persian (1); Punjabi/Tamil (1); Mixed race (1) (1 undisclosed). Participants had between four to 40 months of TA work experience with an average of 18.5 months. Most participants had worked as TAs in one or more of the following academic departments: Environmental Studies, Liberal Arts, and Education. Participants were between the ages of 24 and 48 (1 undisclosed).

At the time of this research, I was a full-time PhD student in the Faculty of Education at York University. I identified as a White female in my early 30s, heterosexual, working-class, and without a disability. I had worked for five years as a Sociology TA at YorkU. I had (and continue to have) broad commitments to environmental/sustainability education with a particular interest in intergenerational equity, intercultural competency, and interdisciplinary thinking. My commitments influence me to pushback against conservatism and look to the future, to use my position as an educator and researcher to support more harmonious relationships between people, the planet, and more-than-human beings (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012). I keep these commitments, even in hard times – when surrounded by pessimism and antagonizing voices that insist things will never change.

In my present study, I interviewed TAs for the purpose of understanding the work they do, how and why. Fontana and Frey (1994) state, “interviewing is one of the most common and most powerful ways we use to try to understand our fellow human beings” (p. 361). There are different types of interviews: structured and unstructured interviews, situational interviews, technical interviews, stress interviews, and so on. In my research, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews. This type of interviewing generally involves “a dialogue between researcher and participant, guided by a flexible interview protocol and supplemented by follow-up questions, probes and comments” (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019, p. 1).

In my study, I conducted 17 TA interviews. Each TA was interviewed individually and only once. Interviews involved me sitting down with each TA and having a dialogue about their practices. I used an interview protocol to guide these conversations. Questions on this protocol were open-ended and centered around topics like duties and responsibilities TAs perform (e.g., Tell me the typical duties and responsibilities you performed in your most recent teaching assistantship? Why did you perform these duties and responsibilities?). I also asked probing questions to have participants clarify or expand on their responses (for more information on sampling techniques and interviewing, see Harrell & Bradley, 2009).

I conducted these interviews between March and May 2017. Participants signed an informed consent to be interviewed and audio-recorded. There was approximately 15 hours of interview recordings. I transcribed the interviews verbatim, with a total word count of 118, 549. Most interviews took place in a private conference room at the case university with the exception of a few interviews that took place over the phone. Each participant received a \$20 gift card (of their choice) for their participation in my study. This research was completely voluntary and received ethical clearance from the Office of Research Ethics at York University.

Following participant recruitment and data collection, my next step was data analysis. To analyze the interview data, I drew on principles of grounded theory. I started with constant comparison, a traditional grounded theory method that involved me comparing my data for general similarities and differences (Glaser & Strauss, 2006). Later, I supplemented this technique with a more modern grounded theory approach: “situational maps and analyses” (Clarke, 2003, p. 553).

According to Clarke (2003), “*situational maps... lay out the major human, nonhuman, discursive, and other elements in the research situation of concern and provoke analyses of relations among them*” (p. 554; original embed). I created situational maps to organize and draw connections between different elements in the interview data. For example, I included elements on my map like ‘teaching orientations’, ‘students’, and ‘professional autonomy’ and asked questions to consider relationships between them. *How is professional autonomy related to teaching orientations? How are students impacted by these orientations?* I was then able to find patterns and group the data into categories and codes.

Since I framed my research around Lortie (2002) and followers (i.e., Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009), a main part of my data analysis was to consider the relation between my data and the three teaching orientations: presentism, conservatism, individualism, and underlying psychic rewards. I needed to determine how my data fit, and possibly expanded, Lortie’s thinking about teaching cultures. In line with traditional grounded theory, I coded the data until “no additional data” was discovered, reaching “*theoretical saturation*” (Glaser & Strauss, 2006, p. 61; original embed).

All research studies have limitations. A limitation of my study is that it focuses on pedagogy. During interviews, I asked TAs about their ‘teaching approaches’: the pedagogical methods, techniques, processes that they used to teach course content. But I neglected asking questions about this content (e.g., book chapters, articles, videos included on course syllabi). This was intentional. In my study, I was interested in exploring the agency or autonomy TAs had, the decisions that they made as educators. Having been a TA (for years), I was aware that TAs generally are able to make decisions about pedagogy, but have no control over course curriculum (e.g., Di Benedetti et al., 2023).

Another limitation is that I conducted this research prior to the introduction of generative artificial intelligence (AI) (Giannini, 2023). A future study could be designed as a collaborative

action research project, where TAs work together to explore their practices, consider how their teaching is shaped by AI, and grapple with self-improvement (Briscoe, 2017).

Findings

To research TA cultures, I investigated the patterns within TA practices, the tendencies shared among TAs. This research involved me exploring 1) the teaching tasks TAs perform, 2) how and why they perform these tasks and 3) the psychic rewards or intrinsic satisfaction that underpins this teaching.

From analyzing the interview data, what I discovered was that TAs shared a common tendency, what Lortie describes as *conservatism* or what I explain as *Teaching with Ghosts* – calling attention to how an educator’s past experience or prior knowledge, history, and memories haunt classrooms. Past experience has a lasting spirit. It can shadow classrooms in darkness, making teaching and learning (out)dated or expired. TAs in my study talked about their past schooldays and teaching experience having an influence over their teaching decisions, manifesting as (old) practices and beliefs. These TAs said that it was psychically rewarding to teach in ways that they remembered from their past.

Past Schooling Experience

The Latin proverb, *Ut est rerum omnium magister usus* is credited to Julius Caesar. Translated it means: “Experience is the teacher of all things”. But what is learned from experience (Soyer & Hogarth, 2020)? And how is past experience pregnant with meaning?

TAs that I interviewed were not new or fresh to teaching. Rather they were ‘full’ of teaching knowledge (Freire, 2005). This was partly due to their past schooling experience. During interviews, TAs (10) told me that their school memories influenced their teaching decisions, often choosing to teach like their former instructors. For example, Harriet, a PhD student, worked as an Environmental Studies TA. When I asked her why she used certain teaching approaches, Harriet commented:

What I kind of experienced as an undergrad myself, right?

Charles also a PhD student, with experience working as a TA in Environmental Studies courses, explained that how he led tutorials was influenced by his former TAs. Charles said:

I have never been taught how [a] tutorial is supposed to look. So, I am basing it on my own memories of tutorials that I had in undergrad. [...] I think my memories of what my tutorials looked like are pretty vague. But basically, it was the TA either lecturing or kind of opening up for discussion around things.

Nellie, a Master’s student, worked as a TA in Liberal Arts and Education courses. She revealed that how she taught was influenced by the many colleges and universities she attended over the years. As Nellie put it:

All the places where I have been educated – at the university that I did my undergrad, the college that I did my teacher training, plus at – – – [a Canadian university]. All of those institutions influenced the way I think, the way I behave, and the way I carried out my duties as an educator myself.

Harriet, Charles, and Nellie talked about teaching in ways that they had “experienced” as students. This provides further proof of Lortie’s (2002) *Apprenticeship of Observation*. While Lortie wrote about this apprenticeship model in relation to teachers, my study demonstrates the relevance of this model to TAs. TAs in my study described imitating the teaching methods of former teachers. This shows how “education traditions [are]... transferred from generation to generation, often unconsciously” (Dragon, 2015, p. 31).

TAs that I interviewed admitted to putting time and energy into recreating moments from their past schooldays, using their school “memories” to guide their practices. However, memories are an unreliable resource. Broadly speaking, memories are selective, partial, limited, and emotional (Waring & Kensinger, 2011). School memories offer a poor understanding of teaching: empty of specifics, analysis, and pedagogical theory (Lortie, 2002, pp. 62–63).

Past Teaching Experience

Lortie (2002) depicts conservatism as synonymous with the teaching profession, a product of what he terms, the *Apprenticeship of Observation*. But my interview data helps to expand this thinking, exposing how “conservatism is different and deeper” (Hargreaves, 2010, p. 150), the result of “a varied repertoire of knowledge and prior experiences” (Oleson & Hora, 2014, p. 29). During interviews, TAs (10) spoke about having taught before in some capacity. Some TAs had taught in traditional classroom spaces. Others had experience in alternative teaching environments. Having this prior teaching experience shaped their approach to TA work. For example, Nels, a PhD student, worked as a TA in Natural Science and Engineering courses. He said that his past teaching experience as a “swimming instructor” influenced how he led tutorials. Nels stated:

I was a swimming instructor for a number of years in high school. And so that was sort of like my intro to thinking about teaching styles and teaching environments. So, some of that, I think sticks around in the back of my brain.

Nancy, a PhD student, worked as a TA in Environmental Studies courses. She said that her prior teaching experience as a “professor” impacted how she graded student work. Nancy explained:

I’m an experienced professor. I’m not just a TA. When you find a change in the pace, maybe the rhythm of the text... makes you notice something is different. Then you put that piece into the internet and you notice that the last is copied and pasted from something else. Ya, it was terrible. You have to deal with that.

Albert, a Master’s student, was also a TA in the Environmental Studies department. He said that his prior teaching experience as an “Education Director” affected how he facilitated tutorials. Albert disclosed:

I used to be an Education Director out of the Faculty of Science at [a Canadian university]. So, I ran a lot of science programming for youth. So, between Grades 3 to 12. [...] You know, a lot of the methods that kinda came up, from having taught so many students over time there, I kind of applied here. Even though I was dealing with a much younger crowd, the method of learning or the pathways to learning are pretty much the same. It’s just, you know, grow them up a little bit and apply them in a tutorial rather than in a classroom.

Nels, Nancy, and Albert all had prior teaching experience. Years ago, Nels was a “swimming instructor.” Nancy was a “professor.” Albert once worked as an “Education Director.” These TAs told me that their past teaching experience served as a blueprint for teaching, an exemplar for how to teach (again). It was an instance of knowledge transfer. Teaching methods were perceived as transferrable from one teaching situation to another (e.g., “a lot of the methods that kinda came up, from having taught so many students over time there, I kind of applied here”). This emphasizes how teaching was decontextualized. Teaching methods were pulled from their original context and used across different educational settings.

Psychic Rewards

Why consent to conservatism? Again, Lortie (2002) argues that teachers have “a preference for doing things as they have been done in the past” (p. 210). My research shows how this is also true for TAs. In my study, TAs (14) reported it being psychically rewarding to teach in ways that they were familiar with based on their past schooling or teaching experience. Nancy, for example, talked about teaching like she taught before, preferring to use the “same” teaching methods every year. Nancy said:

I always try to teach in a way, to give the classes in a way I know how to do it. I've been teaching the same class [as a TA] for 4 years.

Harriet preferred to teach like she was taught as an undergraduate, saying:

Not that I am partial to certain, you know, techniques or methods but it's kind of what I know.

Nellie said that, as a TA, she was “comfortable” using teaching methods that she knew well from her days as a schoolteacher. Nellie remarked:

I am comfortable using those because these are methods that I have used in the past [as a teacher for 10 years] and it worked for me. And I used it with my class and I got results. So, moving forward it's something that I would want to use and use again because it worked.

Nancy, Harriet, and Nellie implied that it was psychically rewarding to use teaching approaches that they were acquainted with, methods that they had used as teachers or observed as students. This is because they assumed that these methods “worked” for them and would work “again.” As Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) state, there is “technical effectiveness in the conservative present” (p. 2529). In other words, educators can be productive by teaching in ways that they are familiar with or know well. But it is also limiting, relying on “existing and somewhat conservative definitions of achievement, rather than also bringing about long-term change and transformation” (p. 2526).

Discussion and Suggestions

What is conservatism? Is it not adherence to the old and tried, against the new and untried? – Abraham Lincoln's Cooper Institute Address, 1860

In Western society, conservatism can be found everywhere. Past experience influences self-expression to institutional missions. Keeping mementos, photos, and souvenirs help us to validate our past (Mohnot, 2025). Tattoos are a way of preserving memories (Klug et al., 2024). There are

libraries and museums filled with archives and historical artifacts (Harvard Museum of Natural History, 2024). Rewatching movies and TV shows is common (Naweed, 2024). The English idiom *better the devil you know than the devil you don't* is defined as “better to deal with a difficult person or situation one knows than with a new person or situation that could be worse” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Companies bank on nostalgia marketing (Carroll, 2023). The past is even a theme in popular culture (Becker & Georgiou, 2024), embedded in stories (e.g., Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*), movies (e.g., *Field of Dreams*), TV shows (e.g., *The Way Home*), and music (e.g., Ed Sheeran “Castle On The Hill”). Therefore, it is unsurprising, perhaps expected, that the past plays a central role in cultures of teaching.

Everyday, around the world, billions of students attend school (Li & Lalani, 2020). This means that billions of students are impacted by teaching cultures. Fifty years ago, Lortie (2002) argued that conservatism was central to cultures of teaching, that teachers were greatly impacted by their past (schooling) experience when performing teaching tasks, preferring “continuity rather than change” (p. 210). Current educational literature suggests that this continues to be the case. Conservatism in teaching is real and ongoing. There are examples in the literature of teachers (Snyder, 2017), professors (McCaulley, 2022), teacher candidates (Botha, 2020), and graduate teaching assistants (Wan et al., 2023) having conservative dispositions, using their past schooling and teaching experience to guide their teaching decisions. My present research on TA cultures reinforce these findings.

I interviewed 17 graduate teaching assistants at a large Canadian university. During interviews, TAs talked about their past experience having a substantial presence in their practice. It was their past as students and teachers that affected how and why they taught, finding it psychically rewarding to maintain continuity, to continue teaching in a manner that they were accustomed to or knew well. However, interestingly, these TAs did not mention having a reflective practice. Their past experience was something that they referred to, respected, honored, but generally did not question.

Past experience has value. This is evidenced by job postings and the requirements placed on job applicants to have professional experience performing certain roles or skills (Mohr, 2014). Yet, the issue emerges when past experience is left unquestioned and *history repeats itself*. Past experience needs to be reframed as an opportunity for reflection and improvement.

Teaching without reflection undermines thoughtful practice. Whether teaching is considered ‘progressive’ or ‘traditional’ or both, without reflection the usefulness of the teaching is limited. Politics and ideologies inherent in curriculum and pedagogy are unchallenged and normalized. As Martin and Russell (2009) ask, “Can we afford to continue to teach as we were taught, leaving unexamined our personal assumptions about teaching and learning?” (p. 320). Thirty years after writing his classic text, *Schoolteacher*, Lortie further clarified his position on past schooling experience. Lortie (2005) stated: “I do not wish to imply that emulation – even extensive emulation – is, per se, undesirable; in my opinion, it becomes so only when it has not been examined carefully and subjected to reconsideration” (p. 139).

About 15 years ago, I took a course on popular education at York University. Popular education is a branch of critical pedagogy, a form of education that aims to advance social change (Laginder et al., 2013). This course took a progressive approach. Course texts included Freire’s (2005) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Marino’s (1997) *Wild Garden*. Course assignments involved making zines (Jones, 2024) and journaling (Fritson et al., 2013). Throughout the

semester, the instructor introduced popular education exercises that encouraged community building, teamwork, and self-expression (for examples, see Highlander Research and Education Center, 2021; Women for Change, 2009).

The following year, when I started working as a TA at York University, I attempted to replicate this course experience. During tutorials, I used the same team-building exercises and icebreaker activities. I had students create zines. I had students journal. I even tried to recreate the feeling of connectedness, arranging the classroom furniture in the same way, pushing desks aside and having students sit in one large circle. I believed that all these practices were democratic and empowering, challenging the education status quo (e.g., traditional norms and practices). But was my teaching truly emancipatory (Ellsworth, 1989)? Without pausing to reflect, how were my “good intentions... unintentionally limiting” (Briscoe, 2017, p. 52)?

Younge (2021) states that statues of historical figures are designed to be fixed, permanent, not ever “moved, removed, adapted or engaged with beyond popular reverence” and “values they represent are the preserve of the establishment” (para. 21). But in recent years, these statues have been the subject of much criticism and debate. Many of these monuments have been removed due to their ties to racism and colonialism (for examples, see Block, 2020; CBC Docs, 2023).

Statues of historical figures are bold – they are visible, standing in parks and on school grounds. But what about the ‘invisible statues’ we carry in our heads? Conservatism in teaching is like an invisible statue, towering over classrooms, impacting teaching decisions. Conservatism is connected to legacies of our past, our personal histories – memories of our former selves and teachers. The great danger is that conservatism is often unconscious, unseen, hidden, making it more difficult to move, remove, disconnect or detach from. To what extent does an educator’s conservative teaching tendencies preserve social traditions like competition, meritocracy, privilege, individualism, hierarchy, authority, and settler colonialism (Bryan, 2017; Critical Theory, 2025; França, 2019; Jaramillo & McLaren, 2009)?

Like Boyd et al. (2013) and others (Knapp, 2012; Moodie, 2016; Taylor et al., 2022; Westrick & Morris, 2016), I encourage TAs and other educators to challenge conservatism by developing a reflective practice. Reflection can take a variety of forms (e.g., reflective journaling, critical reflection, collaborative reflection, video reflection, arts-based reflection). Offering my thoughts, some reflection prompts:

- Create a visual metaphor to describe how you identify as an educator (Erickson & Pinnegar, 2017). How does your past experience influence your identity?
- By having conservative tendencies, what do you sustain? By holding onto your past (i.e., past schooldays, past teaching experience), what “origins, purposes, or philosophies” underpin your practice (Dragon, 2015, p. 25)?
- Who benefits from your conservative tendencies? Who is disadvantaged?
- How is your teaching messy, a combination of both tradition (e.g., conformity, consensus, power, colonialism) and critical and creative education (Marino, 1997)?
- What are your “unconscious biases and thought-patterns”, your “unrecognized and uninterrupted beliefs” about teaching and learning (Briscoe, 2017, p. 43)?

- Discuss conservatism with your colleagues. How is it difficult, complicated, a struggle to let go of your conservative habits?

These questions are designed to inspire educators to edit and delete conservatism from their teaching practices. While complete or total erosion of conservatism is unlikely (i.e., continuity tendencies are deeply rooted in teaching), any disruption to conservatism (even in trace amounts) can be impactful. Taking steps to quietly quit conservatism creates opportunities for more sustainable teaching that promotes positive change for people, the planet, and more-than-human beings (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012; Sterling, 2003). Inspired by Marino (1997), I encourage educators to draw their visions of ‘sustainable teaching’ and discuss their drawings with their colleagues. Some discussion questions:

- How can you model ‘sustainable teaching’? How might it involve adaptability and experimentation? Duffelmeyer (2005) states, “creative, effective, *sustainable* teaching is a matter of experimentation” (p. 51; original embed).
- How can you strengthen student autonomy (Han, 2021)?
- How can you prioritize dialogue over echo chambers (TED, 2012)?
- How might you sustain a growth mindset in your practice opposed to deficit thinking (Lombardi, 2016)?
- How might you add counter-narratives to your course curriculum? Counter-narratives help to acknowledge Indigenous perspectives (Daschuk, 2019), challenge cultural norms (Bernhardt, 2018), give voice to marginalized communities (Matebekwane, 2022), and introduce different worldviews and alternative ideas (Wolff, 2022).
- We live in a throwaway world. How can you tackle the issue of consumption and waste (Fockler, 2024, 2025)?
- To support Indigenous peoples, how can reconciliation be a teaching objective (Butler et al., 2019)? How can you incorporate land-based pedagogy in your practice (Wildcat et al., 2014)?
- In neoliberal times, there is an emphasis on short-termism. But we must also think long-term to move forward and think about the future (Clark, 2021; Sijbesma, 2016). How can you encourage students to think long-term, about relationships and the world? How might you emphasize intergenerational equity in your classroom?
- Homework is a school tradition. How might you rethink the purpose of homework (Boryga, 2024)?
- How might podcasting be an alternative to having students write a traditional school essay (Hitchcock et al., 2021)?
- Fast, quick, high-speed is synonymous with modern life. But how might deep thinking, creativity, and mental health and wellness require slowing

down and being present in the moment? How can you include aspects of ‘the slow movement’ in your everyday teaching (Honoré, 2004)?

- How can you introduce curriculum and pedagogy that is relevant to the ‘real world’ (Morley & Jamil, 2021; O’Neill & Short, 2025)?
- How can students be involved in course design (Maharajan et al., 2025)?
- How can you reimagine your course curriculum? Instead of traditional academic readings and book chapters, how can you use podcasts, films, artwork, music, news articles, novels, guest speakers, advertisements, picture books, and documentaries to explore course topics and issues (McMurtrie, 2025)?
- How might fostering school-community partnerships benefit students (Olson, 2018)?
- How can you encourage students to envision a better world, seek alternatives, innovate?
- How can you develop a positive learning environment (defined by respect, care, empathy, and so on) (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018)? What about ‘wicked learning environments’ (Hanstedt, 2018)?
- Can grading be made more sustainable or optional (Kohn, 2012; Schinske & Tanner, 2014)?
- How can you create space for expressive arts (Gardner, 2012), high-impact practices (Kilgo et al., 2015), culturally responsive pedagogies (Markey et al., 2023), project-based learning (Bielefeldt, 2013), community-based learning (Assaf & López, 2015; Brayko, 2013)?

To move away from conservatism and towards more sustainable teaching, think of removing pavement (depaving). Drawing on Baraniuk (2024), pavement is traditional infrastructure. It stands for conservatism. Pavement covers over nature, keeping it confined, oppressed, and unchanged. Depaving is a ‘re-greening’ or sustainability initiative. It involves removing paved surfaces (like asphalt or concrete) and exposing the soil underneath. Soil is life, creating opportunities for growth, change, and renewal. Much like depaving, educators need to break from ‘pavement’ (i.e., established teaching traditions) and ‘expose the soil’ (e.g., implement regenerative approaches, decolonizing teaching practices, holistic methods).

Sustainable teaching requires transition, always looking forward. The sustainable educator provides transparency, is “explicit” about their teaching cultures (Dragon, 2015, p. 25), sharing with students “substantial information about values, meanings, hierarchies, notions of time, spatial relations, behaviors, and motives regarding... [their] pedagogic choices” (p. 31). Also, the sustainable educator must continually reflect on their practices, make modifications, and consider the values, politics, and ideologies that they carry into classrooms (Ferlazzo, 2020). They must be open to different perspectives and ways of thinking. Marino (1997) states, “A good sign of danger is when you teach students the ‘same answers’ two or three years in a row – things are not quite that immutable” (pp. 142–143). Again, if the conservative teacher is faithful “to established classroom practices that worked for them regardless of research findings or pupil learning

outcomes” (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, p. 2506), then the sustainable educator must strive to include evidence-based teaching.

Conclusion

Pivot! Pivot! Pivot!— Ross Geller from “Friends” (Season 5, Episode 16)

Tackling conservatism will not be easy. There will be obstacles. To start, conservatism is emotional. Psychic rewards are keeping educators content with conservatism (Hargreaves, 1999). Second, in the neoliberal era, accountability measures (Leung & Wan, 2025), heavy workloads (Creagh et al., 2025), and time constraints (Tuohilampi et al., 2024) are preventing educators from needing, wanting, and acknowledging change (Hargreaves, 2010). Third, there is always the possibility of student resistance. Providing an example from dance education, Dragon (2015) writes:

Another problem is that many dance education students enter higher education dance classrooms expecting to be taught as they were taught. They often believe there is only one way to teach and to learn – generally through traditional authoritarian paradigms based in hierarchical systems of privilege, or the “demonstrate and do” model. This expectation poses many challenges for dance educators offering differing teaching methodologies, especially for those using more democratic or somatic paradigms. (p. 26)

Conservatism acts like a stonewall keeping new ideas out. How can this wall be dismantled? It is risky business to challenge conservatism. It involves discomfort in the sense that the established and familiar is questioned and usual patterns overturned. Also, any disruption to conservatism will likely take years, maybe even decades (Burner, 2018; Fullan, 2006; Hargreaves, 2005, 2022). Drawing on Lortie (2002) and Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), challenging conservatism in teaching will require a long-term commitment and needs the support of a variety of education stakeholders, including but not limited to educators, students, parents, education consultants, school principals, and policymakers. The entire education community must come together to break conservatism and improve outcomes for students, schools, and communities (Dyck, 2012; Munroe, 2022). Carrying on in the same (old) ways is easy, unsurprising, and risk-free. Change, well that takes courage.

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