**Practicum Reflection**

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HE685 Higher Education Practicum

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**Abstract**

This course is designed to provide a practical application of skills knowledge into the higher education world. Students were required to secure their own practicum experience, be it a teaching assistant (TA), internship or some other work related to their chosen career field. This paper is a reflection of and summary of my experience as a teaching assistant for Professor Andrew W. White for HIST302 Classical Rome at George Mason University for the Spring 2023 semester. It covers the process to obtain the position, the goals for the position and how it will help achieve future career and academic goals, along with lessons learned and how my thinking about higher education has changed through the semester.

As a part of my pursuit of a Masters of Art in History and Higher Education at George Mason University, I knew that I would have to meet certain criteria for the core requirements. Aside from the normal general history courses for the history portion of the degree, I also would be needing four courses in higher education, with two specific required courses: HE602 – College Teaching; and HE685 – Higher Education Practicum. Since I was pursuing this degree to eventually teach history at the undergraduate level, pursuing a practicum related to that was the best path to choose to give me the experience I would need to start down that career path.

I started my degree with George Mason in the fall of 2021 following completion of my Bachelors of Art in History from American Military University (AMU), part of the American Public University System (APUS), in 2011, and a Masters of Science in Information Technology Leadership and Project Management from Marymount University in 2021. I always desired to teach history at some level, originally thinking at the high school level when pursuing my undergraduate, but instead shifting towards the undergraduate level following getting out of active service in the Marine Corps. I enrolled and completed a full-time schedule, putting me on pace to graduate in May 2023, but first I would need to complete the practicum and gain relevant experience in my chosen field.

During the Fall 2022 semester, while taking HE624 Financial and Fiscal Management in Higher Education with Dr. Chen, I began laying the groundwork to secure a position within the History Department at George Mason to be a TA for the Spring 2023 semester to coincide with the HE685 course requirements, also taught by Dr. Chen. With his guidance, I was able to get approved to work with Prof. Andrew White to TA for his HIST302 Classical Rome course. This would be ideal because I had taken a similar course, it even utilized the same text book, while pursuing my own undergraduate degree, as well as working perfectly with my current work schedule and other courses I was attending. I drafted my Practicum Proposal (Micallef, 2022) as a part of the requirements to get into HE685 and was able to be approved for enrollment in the course, the final puzzle of my degree requirements.

The course was a straight forward class on Classical Rome from the founding of the city through the end of the Western Empire in the 5th century. We met twice a week from 1:30 pm until 2:45 pm on Tuesday and Thursday. Though there were 40 students enrolled in the course, on average only 12 were actually present in class following the first week of class. This was facilitated by the delivery methods utilized by Prof White – in-person lecture that was broadcast online via Blackboard Collaborate tool. This presented the opportunity to allow students to attend virtually, listening to the live lecture and able to talk to the class or communicate via the chat function. The same number of students would typically be online as in person, meaning that on average over half the class did not attend the live lecture. This was again facilitated by the policies of Prof White whereby he recorded the lectures and posted them on Blackboard. I felt the original intent of that was to allow students to refer to the lecture at a later date to confirm or refresh what was covered during the week. This brought to mind the issues with online teaching discussed by Dr. Carolyn J. Lawes at Old Dominion University and converting history courses to online and hybrid formats and the advantages, and disadvantages, that it offers. She stresses that “it behooves faculty to learn something about the online environment” (Lawes, 2015, p 1204) instead of dismissing it out of hand. This is what Prof White has done, because of COVID restrictions that were in place since early 2020, but has not reverted following the return to normal operations at George Mason. I spoke to him about this, especially the attendance issue and turning in assignments, and there was a belief and understanding that he has that the students need the flexibility and perform better when allowed to operate at their own pace. This seemed counter intuitive to my own perceptions and my own education experience. Instituting hard attendance and class participation requirements helps to keep students accountable, in my own opinion.

Early in the semester, Prof White and I divided the grading responsibilities of the course 50/50. There are 40 students enrolled, so logically I covered 20 students, taking A – M, and Prof White would grade the latter half of the alphabet. What became apparent quite early with the students was that there was no incentive to turn assignments in at the listed due date. This was reinforced by Prof White that the due dates listed in Blackboard and the syllabus were more guidelines, conjuring images of Captain Barbossa from *Pirates of the Caribbean* when discussing the Pirate Code: they’re more like guidelines than actual rules. That was further reflected when grading the mid-term essays. While some students did outstanding work, there was also a wide range of products submitted. I attempted to provide detailed feedback, but was also informed that as long as the students were meeting the assignment thresholds, they would be given full credit. If there were any issues, they would be provided an opportunity to provide corrections. This leniency towards grading appears endemic to the system now, not just this course, and where this will lead to would be the students shirking their course work (Boleslavksy, 2015, 250). This failure in the system could undermine higher education and people’s faith in the degree.

A big concern presented by Prof White at the beginning of the semester, and stressed throughout, was combatting the use of ChatGPT in course work. I had never heard of the software prior to Prof White bringing it up in our pre-semester meeting, as it was an alien and new thing to me. While I see that potential benefits that could be utilized in the classroom with this new software, such as making lessons more interactive for students, help with literacy (especially in ESL situations) and possibly even save time with lesson planning (Heaven, 2023). At this point in time, being so new to myself and Prof White, the best policy he had in place to combat the use was to require weekly assignments be submitted in a specific three paragraph format that would increase our ability to detect ChatGPT use, allegedly. I know that there were a small group of students that I repeatedly would question their writing due to their style, and would address those few to Prof White for his feedback and subsequent advice on grading, so it did not appear to be an issue for now. I will need to familiarize myself more with the new AI tools that are growing in popularity as I further my career.

Another aspect that Prof White discussed, though we did not ever get a chance to discuss in class at this point was utilizing video games to help teach history. I had covered an article for another course about utilizing video games to teach history (Wainwright, 2014), and was hoping to be able to incorporate that into the lesson that we were going to discuss, but that never materialized. I will be keeping that in my pocket for future use, though.

In all, I felt that this time with Prof White allowed me to learn and see what teaching in the classroom was like, not just from the perspective of the student, even teaching a lecture myself when Prof White was unavailable. I think that my time in the class allowed me to see aspects of teaching that I might have had preconceptions on played out in the practical sense, and allows me to get a better understanding of how I might want to handle similar situations in the future, or change those reactions I would have had due to past bias. I look forward to being able to pursue an Adjunct position in the future following the completion of my degree with George Mason this May, 2023.

**Works Cited**

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