TROUBLESHOOTING:

I. Life as a Graduate Student Teacher

My appointment isn't in my area of dissertation research

There is not much you can do about having to teach a course outside your area of dissertation research. Luckily, it is extremely unlikely that your course will be too far from your area of expertise. You should certainly voice your concerns when you meet with the course professor. Explain your background and ask what you could do to maximize your effectiveness as a teacher. Be sure to clarify the level of understanding the professor would like you to have. Also keep in mind that a variety of teaching appointments, including those in general education programs like the Morse Academic Plan, contribute to your professional training. Despite your anxieties, remember that your students will see you as a knowledgeable resource, even if you do not feel that way. Don't forget that you already possess substantially more knowledge than do your undergraduate students. Typically, keeping up with the readings and attending lectures will adequately prepare you for your duties.

Some of my students are my age

Age only becomes a factor if you make it one. If you don't bring it up, neither will they. In fact, looking young may make you seem approachable to your students. At the same time, you may want to be especially conscientious about professionalism, dressing nicely, and maintaining a little more formality than you frequently do. Regardless of the age differential, your first priority is to demonstrate your competence as a teacher by being prepared and organized for every class. If you are able to grasp their questions and respond to them effectively, students won't be concerned that you may seem young.

Some of my friends are in my class

Do your best to maintain professionalism with your friends in the classroom. Treat them as you would any other student. If your friend has a difficult time maintaining appropriate boundaries with respect to the course, do not neglect this situation; at some point outside of class, preferably during your office hours, try to talk to your friend about your respective roles in and out of the classroom. You may decide it is best to pretend you don't know each other in the classroom, even if you get together at other times. If there are no alternatives, and you are uncomfortable with the situation, discuss solutions with your professor (e.g., ask the professor to double-check some of your grading to ensure fairness).
My students don’t understand my accent

Teachers with accents must be especially careful to speak slowly and clearly. Don’t be shy about asking students or other graduate students for suggestions on how you can make yourself more understood. Always remember to utilize the resources of the University that exist to help you improve your teaching and language skills, such as the American Language Institute (998.7040).

I have “culture shock”

One of the best ways to counter culture shock is to seek out other students who come from similar backgrounds. The NYU Office of Student Activities has information on ethnic and cultural clubs and organizations throughout the University. Additional resources that may prove helpful are the Center for Multi-Cultural Education Program (CMEP) and the Office of International Students and Scholars (OISS), which sponsors many world culture programs. Of course, your department becomes another place where teaching itself becomes a thread of commonality that can make you feel less “shocked” by the newness of your position.

One of my students has a learning or physical disability

Any qualified student with a physical or learning disability is entitled by law to reasonable accommodations according to the Americans with Disabilities Act. When a student identifies himself or herself as having such a disability, teachers can ask if the student has a letter of certification, which documents the disability and describes the accommodations to be made. Be sure the student is registered with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities and appropriate arrangements for study and/or exam help will be made. If a student does not have proper documentation, it is up to the discretion of the professor to accommodate the student’s needs.

My students want me to come to their parties or be Facebook “friends”

No matter the intention, it is never appropriate for teachers to “hang out” with students at parties (especially with alcohol). You must always respect the boundaries between you and your students and maintain a sense of professionalism when interacting with them. Decline their offers gracefully and suggest that the class may want to have a more informal meeting, such as a pizza party or movie night.

I (or my students) disagree with the professor

There may be times when you (or your students) do not agree with a professor on a pedagogical or academic issue. While it is not necessary for
anyone to silence his or her views, it is imperative that everyone keeps a respectful stance towards the faculty member. This is especially true when you are in agreement with your students against a faculty member. Always use such instances of disagreement to model for your students appropriate ways of handling differences of opinion. That is, show them how scholars can stand by different theories in their disciplines and think critically about their fields, while maintaining respect for other views. Bear in mind that your students may not initially have the sophistication you do to appreciate the complexities of multiple approaches to a problem. Simply contradicting what the professor says without respectfully explaining the value of different approaches will only confuse and frustrate your students. A graduate student’s personal disagreements with a faculty member should be kept between that graduate student and the faculty member, and should never include or involve the undergraduates in any way.