

Laura Heath-Stout
Personal Statement

“I love archaeology, but I have to drop the course. I don’t think I can recover from this test grade,” Cohen told me, not meeting my eyes. He was a first-year undergraduate at Boston University, where I was his teaching assistant for an introductory global archaeology course. He slumped, dejected, in the chair next to my desk in the bustling TA office. Disappointed to see a student with a passion for my subject withdraw from the course, I decided to probe deeper. Cohen explained that because he was a non-native English speaker, the professor’s data-heavy lectures were difficult for him to follow. Showing me his notebook, Cohen told me that he would hear one sentence he did not understand, and then lose the thread of the lecture for several minutes, during which he would doodle until he heard something that made sense, at which point he would start taking notes again. I made a deal with Cohen: if he didn’t drop the course, I would meet with him every week. He would bring scrap paper to draw on, and leave blank spaces in his notes. At our meetings, we would try to identify what had caused him to get lost and fill in the blank parts.

I was often surprised by which skills and concepts Cohen had trouble with, and which came easily. “I can never find Pompeii on the map,” he told me. “Do you remember what country it’s in?” I asked. “No... was that in the lecture?” Cohen inquired, flipping through his notes. I pulled up the professor’s slides, and sure enough, the location of Pompeii was not included in the lecture! Well, this would be easy to fix, I assumed. “Pompeii is in Italy, near Naples,” I informed Cohen. He looked at me blankly, and I realized that the mnemonic I had learned as a young white child in the U.S., that Italy is the one shaped like a boot, had not been part of Cohen’s elementary education in China.

A few weeks later, after a lecture on the terra cotta army buried with Qin Shi Huangdi, the first emperor of China, Cohen had a new kind of question: “Why was that lecture so much more basic than all of the others? Doesn’t everyone already know this stuff? I learned all of this information in elementary school!” he exclaimed. As we discussed what we had been taught in social studies throughout our educations, it became more and more clear that Cohen was correct about the terra cotta army lecture being basic. The lecture on the Parthenon assumed that students already knew the basic history and geography of ancient Greece (which Cohen did not), while the lecture on Qin Shi Huangdi’s mausoleum had begun with a brief overview of Chinese imperial history. The professor, despite being a specialist in Chinese archaeology himself, had assumed that students had been taught about ancient Greece but not ancient China. For the students who had grown up in North America or Western Europe, he was likely correct. But 12% of Boston University’s student body is comprised of international students from China alone! Why were we assuming that all students knew about Athens and Sparta but none knew about the Qin dynasty?

Tutoring Cohen taught me to question my assumptions about what students know when they enter my classroom. Now, as an instructor myself, I design my courses so that students from a variety of cultural backgrounds can succeed. Some of my inclusivity practices are small fixes, like beginning every lesson by placing that day’s content on a map and a timeline with all of the other events and sites we have learned about. On a curricular level, I have diversified my course content, removing some of the content on Greek and Roman archaeology in order to cover a broader range of human cultures. Last fall, in my first-year writing seminar on “The Politics of Archaeological Heritage,” we discussed case studies from every continent. After our discussion of the contentious religious history of Ayodhya, India, one South Asian-American student emailed me a thank you, writing that, “I have never been in a class before that has had discussions about India, whether it be about its history or its present issues.”

Diversity and inclusion issues have become central to all of my work in the years since I met Cohen. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the ways systemic racism, sexism, and heterosexism shape the demographics and practices of the discipline of archaeology. I am now turning that dissertation into a book, *Identity, Oppression, and Diversity in Archaeology: Career Arts*, to be published by Routledge. In my research, I identify the barriers that prevent marginalized students from entering and succeeding in archaeological careers, and advocate for best practices to make archaeology classrooms and workplaces as inclusive, equitable, and accessible as possible.

I have applied this research to advocacy work within my workplaces and professional organizations. As an instructor in the Boston University Writing Program, I co-organized a six-session professional development seminar for faculty on the topic of “Diversities in the Writing Classroom,” and convened a reading discussion group on the same topic. More recently, I participated in a panel discussion for Emory University English Department faculty on the topic of disability access in the classroom. As a founding co-chair of the Society for American Archaeology’s Meeting Safety Committee, I have worked to make my professional organization’s conferences more welcoming to people of all identities, and designed and presented workshops on identifying and interrupting sexual harassment.

My meetings with Cohen were seeds of this transformative work, but they not typical for TAs in my graduate program. “That student is here *again*? Wasn’t he just here last week?” I overheard one colleague say. “Laura, you should stand up for yourself! Don’t let students take up so much of your time, or you’ll never have time to publish anything” a well-meaning acquaintance told me. I was flummoxed by this advice. Meeting with Cohen was my favorite part of my week. He was intelligent, hard-working, and most importantly curious, asking me questions that went well beyond the lecture content. He earned a B on the second test, and an A on the cumulative final exam. I could not have been prouder if those grades had been my own. But the experience made clear to me that the work I loved most was seen as a burden by everyone around me. Teaching—especially undergraduates, especially first-year students—was something research university faculty and graduate students did to pay the rent, not because it is essential and meaningful work.

Over the years of my career in higher education, I have encountered this mismatch in priorities over and over again. I have been advised many times to minimize the time I spend on teaching, to do the bare minimum and focus on my research. Only when I ventured beyond my archaeology program to teach first-year writing did I find pedagogy courses and mentorship focused on teaching. I have been primarily a teacher in institutions where teaching is secondary, and now seek to leave higher education for a career in which teaching is central.

I seek a position as a teacher at an independent school because I want to continue to grow as a teacher in an institutional context that is centered on students and pedagogy. I hope to continue the work of teaching young people about world history and cultures in ways that nurture and celebrate students of all identities and backgrounds.