One of the biggest concerns new professors face when first entering the classroom for the first time is do I tell my students that I have never taught a law school course before? As a brand new legal research and writing professor I am uniquely situated to share my perspective on this question. Prior to my first day of class I read many articles written by established academics and received numerous tips from my experienced colleagues. I found all of this assistance immensely helpful, but none of that advice fully answered this difficult question. So, I would like to address the question from the perspective of someone who recently stepped into the classroom as a professor for the first time—and lived (so far) to tell about it. This article is geared towards those making the transition from practice to academia, particularly, young professors who do not have many years between time spent as a student and the new experience of standing behind the podium.

So, should you be transparent with students regarding your teaching experience (or lack thereof)? I received diverse and conflicting advice from my experienced colleagues as to whether such transparency was necessary, and whether being transparent about my lack of teaching experience would be helpful or harmful to my credibility. Ultimately I decided to be transparent and tell my students that this was my first time teaching a law school course. In today’s information age it is not at all difficult for students to gather immense amounts of information on the professional background of their professors. A quick review of my bar number indicates that I am only a few years out of school. Googling my name brings up articles about my first few years in practice. And, a quick view of my LinkedIn page provides a detailed account of my education and experience. Knowing that I could not hide my lack of experience in the classroom, I instead decided to be fully transparent and position it as a strength. I wanted to clearly communicate to my students that while this was my first time teaching the course, I was confident and fully prepared to provide them with an excellent academic experience.

On the first day of class I described my professional experience, building credibility by discussing the prior positions I have held and the types of cases I have worked on. After building this professional credibility, I positioned my lack of experience in the classroom and my relative youth in a positive way: “I remember what it is was like to sit in your seat because I was there not long ago. I can answer your questions on the local legal market, how to navigate law school, and how to build your professional identity in the digital age because I have done it—and not twenty years ago, but recently, and while facing the same challenges and pressures you will face.” I also made clear to my students that while this was my first time teaching the course, our law school’s legal writing faculty is one of the best in the country, and that I intended to utilize my colleagues as a resource to ensure that each of my students received the best quality instruction. Finally, I made it clear that we are “all in this together.” That as students they will have good and bad days, and that holds true for me as a new professor as well. I encouraged the students to speak up if my explanations of new concepts were unclear, and to trust in the process.
The reaction to this transparent approach has been very positive. My transparency has created an environment of trust and open dialogue. Students have been active in attending my office hours and often approach me in the hallways to ask questions not only about my class, but also about law school and the legal profession in general. I have not seen any indications that students have doubts about what I am asking them to do, nor have I been challenged (any more than any law school professor is challenged) on substance of my instruction.

While I recognize that not every situation is the same, and that such transparency carries with it potential pitfalls, on balance I believe that transparency is a positive thing. It puts your students on notice early on that you have confidence in yourself as a professor. Just as important, it puts students on notice that you trust them, and that you view and will treat them as professionals.

It will always be important for the professor to be the authority in the classroom, but the mechanisms for establishing and maintaining that authority have changed. The days of the domineering (think The Paper Chase) professor are quickly coming to an end. Today’s law students (largely millennials) have grown-up in an environment where they are consistently told that they are intelligent and that their voice matters. Students today want to know that their thoughts and opinions are valued, and want to be treated as the intelligent young people they are. This is especially important in first year legal research and writing classes where professors generally interact on an intimate level with students. In this small class setting professors must lead by demonstrating competence instead of adopting an authoritarian, top-down approach. A professor’s willingness to be honest and transparent with students sets the tone for open dialogue, and breaks down the barriers of fear or intimidation faced by first year law students. This collegial, professional environment allows students to better focus on learning the critical skills taught in first year research and writing courses.