

BOXED IN

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My tale dates from my first semester in Sigonella, Sicily, in 1999. I was a prof of history and government, and I was into my second full year as a traveling faculty.

Word had it that relations between UMUC faculty and local DODDS teachers was sometimes tense, as we used their classrooms in the evenings for our classes. University faculty rarely saw or interacted with their daytime counterparts. We were merely 'ghosts of the night,' who, it was hoped, would leave their classrooms in the condition that we found them.

I was teaching a government class in what I recall was a temporary facility at Sigonella. One day, perhaps week two of the term, I received a polite note from the daytime DODDS instructor that informed me that her desk was, indeed hers, and that I should neither sit there nor lecture from it.

Given that I had no other option – such as a podium or alternative desk, I elected to disregard the note and to pay extra attention to my fastidious rendering of the classroom. A week later, I found the desk to be encircled by a line of empty cardboard boxes, perhaps 1 foot in height. No note. Just boxes. I stepped over the boxes, explained the situation to my students, as best I could, and taught my class.

The following week, the boxes had grown to perhaps 2 feet in height around the desk, and a small, student desk had been placed in the corner of the classroom. A note informed me that the small desk was for me, and that I should vacate the main desk that was surrounded by empty cardboard boxes.

I made a good faith effort to lecture from the student desk, but found it small, stifling and ridiculous. I wrote a kind note to the teacher, to which she (equally kindly) responded that she had 'space and control issues onto which I was intruding.' I shared our correspondence with my class, and we all had a good laugh.

Until....

It must have been around week 5 or 6 when I entered the class to find boxes stacked around the desk at a level of perhaps 3-4 feet. A true cardboard fortress. By this time, I needed to actually dismantle the structure in order to teach. Moreover, my students could no longer see me when I was seated at the desk. I was lecturing blind. Occasionally, I stood to remind them of the source for the voice behind the boxes. Still, it was a running joke with my students and myself.

In Week 7, I arrived in class to find the desk free of boxes, but the DODDS teacher herself sitting in a chair next to the desk. Her classes had ended at 3pm or so, and it was now 6pm, but, nonetheless, there she was, enforcing her territoriality. I welcomed her to the class, rolled my eyes to the students (they were fully aware of the dynamic), and taught my class standing and wandering around the desk, while the DODDS teacher sat there quietly in front of my students.

She left after the first break, and I resumed my lecture at her desk. One can't argue with crazy, but I got to see crazy up close and personal. Overseas living and shared quarters isn't for everyone! For the tried-and-true UMUC faculty, adaptation and minimalism was and is the rule.

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