

## Postdoc Academic Chat #8

Tuesday, May 12, 2015

### Successful Start-Up Strategies For New Professors

#### READINGS

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##### **#1. Lessons for New Professors**

May 28, 2010 - 3:00am Inside Higher Education <http://www.insidehighered.com>  
By Elizabeth Parfitt

Dear Future Teachers for Fall 2010: We've finally finished a grueling spring semester. After months of job searching and training in your graduate programs, you are now prepped and poised to attack your first semester teaching. Most of you will consider yourselves educated in basic pedagogy, and what it means to teach an introductory course in your field. You've read the theory and debated the methods. You've crafted assignments and completed countless peer reviews. And you've discovered the joys of discensus in a collaborative learning environment. But before you enter into that contact zone and hand out your 20-page, excuse-proof syllabus, it is my hope that the academy has demystified some of the pedagogical theories that you'll need to know in order to decode that first semester teaching.

In other words, I hope you've learned something useful.

In my graduate course — “Teaching College Composition” — we covered a lot this spring, yet I feel like a few things were left off the syllabus that would be valuable for any course about teaching, no matter the discipline. I can't recall exactly how many times my students commented, "Well this is fine 'in theory,' but what about in practice?" at which point I'd smile, sigh, lean back in my chair and try to explain the method to the theoretical madness. My weekly shoulder shrugs likely indicated that there is little that can replace classroom experience, but that every teacher must start somewhere.

Fortunately, my class of future teachers was engaged, hardworking and curious about what it meant to be an authority in a classroom while still decentralizing that authority for student learners. It was only in their private class logs that I detected the steady undercurrent of pragmatist-driven anxiety that is often absent in academic theory. But perhaps that is the point of a course on teaching — to raise theories and practices to

critical consciousness in a way that forces you to make choices about your future pedagogies. Regardless of the course you'll be teaching or department you'll be situated in, these unanswered questions about our work drive our research and learning. While this may be the case, it wasn't so long ago that I was in your position, and I recognize the uncertainty and power that comes with teaching your own course. As exciting as it is to have the whole summer to prepare for your new gig, it is equally unnerving to feel ... well, completely freaked out. Without thorough preparation, I fear you might do what any new teacher in your situation would: worry, obtain anxiety meds, complain, use your teaching theory course as inspiration for your epic novel on the pitfalls of modern education, and above all email your adviser daily with questions about how you will possibly manage to teach your course come fall.

Thus, for the sake of those lucky soon-to-be teachers (and adviser inboxes everywhere), I've decided to write this short addendum in an effort to address 5 major lessons that were probably left off the syllabus in your teacher training this year.

### 1. Time management is essential.

To preface, let me provide an example. If you want to be a teacher AND go the gym, have a social life or do any kind of pleasure reading, you won't have time to \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank with: grade, write your thesis, shower, read for your grad classes, email your mother that you're still alive, sleep, keep any sort of pet, or eat meals that don't come in a take-out container).

OK, so I exaggerate slightly. Think of it as a scare tactic to keep you organized. Unfortunately, as a new instructor, time will not be on your side. This is not a 9 to 5 job and this is not the type of work that is easy to leave at the office. My first semester teaching, I obsessed about it seven days a week, all hours of the day. I replayed moments in my head, I second-guessed answers I gave, I worried that I wasn't doing enough or that I was doing too much and not getting the right results. Alas, this is the life of a young professional in a challenging work environment with a slew of high-maintenance clients who require time and attention to bring them to their full potential.

Welcome to academe and the real world.

While free time may be hard to come by, teaching does help you to quickly prioritize what needs to get done in class today, what needs to get done before 10 p.m. tonight, and what can wait until tomorrow morning. The purpose of time management is to prioritize. If you want to get out of your first year of teaching with a balanced diet of caffeine and Dunkin Donuts, you'll be fine. But if you want to actually have the energy to walk home at the end of the day, you'll need to make some choices. Trust your instincts, both in the classroom and in life. Make time for yourself so you don't resent the work. And above all, realize that no teacher gets it perfect the first time around (or the second, or the third...).

### 2. You may not change the world, but you might change one student's world.

So we return to the mind-blowing theories that seem great on paper but you can't imagine ever working in a society where students are consumers and grades are their currency. Sure, it would be amazing if society changed its static view of language to allow for growth, globalization, culture, and economics. "This is great to imagine," you said in my class, "but is this ever really plausible?"

While it's true that theory can be an idealized version of the perfect utopian classroom where students always participate and ideas can change the world, I'd like to ask: What's so wrong with that as an ideal? Isn't that why we're in education in the first place? To change the way people think and communicate? To believe that our work can change the world?

As you begin teaching this fall, try to remember this: those theories changed many of your minds this semester and also gave you the tools to teach your students. You might not teach every student to write with unity, cohesion, and a strong, supported argument, but you might connect with one student in a way that forces him to think critically about your class and the world around him. And that's a triumph.

### 3. Establish a teaching persona that is unique to you.

We talked a lot in my class about the role of authority and the teacher's presence in a classroom, as well as in your comments on the page. But we didn't talk about the nuts and bolts of this presentation: What do you wear? What should they call you? What do you do when they friend you on Facebook? (Ignore, ignore, ignore...)

Many people like to talk about "teaching personas" as this role that we play when we step into a classroom. Some may think that as soon as you cross the threshold to your classroom, you will instantly be transported to a world where people respect and admire you simply because you are holding a dry erase marker at the front of the room. I know that none of you are that naive. Rather, a teaching persona is something that must be developed, articulated and formed within each individual instructor based on his or her personality and methods. With this in mind, I have only two words of advice: Be yourself.

When I started teaching I was 23, looked like I was 17, and the most frequent comment I received on student evaluations was: "This teacher never tells anyone he is wrong."

While this was a writing class, and it's not common to tell a student his or her opinion is "wrong," I'm sure these comments were largely a response to my inexperience facilitating conversations and pushing students to think further about their ideas. My first semester teaching, I thought I had the brightest, most articulate, most exciting students ever! They could never be wrong — and who was I, a first-time teacher, to question them? There were many days when I thought I was the one who was wrong.

Students are experts in creating personas. They've grown up developing online characters that they've designed and cultivated to full realization. They're sharp and clever, and can

see through any teacher who is playing the role of the authority instead of allowing themselves to just be an authority. But while it may have taken me a few semesters to fully develop my persona in the classroom, I never tried to be anything that I wasn't. Students called me by my first name, I dressed like any young professional going from day to night would, and I didn't flaunt my authority. I just tried to be the best authority I could at the time. This approach allowed me to bring my personality into the classroom and to gain confidence in my work. Students can see the insecurities in a young teacher barking no-tolerance lateness policies in a Brooks Brothers suit, but they won't blink at a guy in a Pearl Jam t-shirt who can facilitate a room with flair, a music reference or two, and a few great questions.

#### 4. Learn and accept the ugly truth about grading.

You will get to know your students — and that will make grading difficult. With a small class, and a community of learners, you will become engaged in their work, their discussions, their writing, and their lives (at least what you read in their papers, e-mails, and hear while you're eavesdropping from the front of the room, waiting for class to begin.) Grading will not be easy — in fact, I'd go so far to say that some of the most difficult work you do all term will be the simple act of placing a letter on a page. You will torture yourself over pluses and minuses. You will feel the need to justify what that letter claims. And you will probably ask your roommate who had to take Freshman Composition twice what he/she thinks of this paper — “just out of curiosity.” Grading is not fun, but it plays an important part in teaching and learning. It is part of the job that requires distance and perspective. One grade does not define a student, just as one assignment or class does not define your teaching. Once you accept that, the red letter on the page will begin to represent an emphatic marker of achievement and knowledge, and less a Hawthorne-esque metaphor for individual character and efforts

#### 5. Expect the unexpected.

Many of you asked me what you do when things don't exactly go your way in the classroom. For example, you get a group of students who don't \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank with all that apply: talk, read, write, work, behave like adults, respect your authority, understand your assignments, enjoy collaborative learning as much as you do, want to be at college, know how much this course is costing them, respect the classroom space, or appreciate the fact that you're wearing the same sweater they picked up on the Gap clearance rack this weekend). When this happens, how should you handle it? The answer: in the moment.

So much of teaching is thinking on your feet, working in the moment, responding to the questions, energy and work that you receive from your students. You will experience major failures and minor victories. You will have assignments that bomb and discussions that blow your mind. Your students will excel in class, but struggle on the page. You will experience days when you think you've lost all control and others when you can't believe the class is over. But as long as you are aware that this is the nature of the beast, and not always an indicator of your effort or intelligence, you'll get through it, rewrite, revise and

try again.

In closing this final chapter to your teacher training, I'd like to add that no matter what you learned or didn't learn in your pedagogical theory courses, this job, these students, the work you do in your classroom will change who you are and how you view the world. Some of you will use this experience to inform your applications for Ph.D. programs, some of you will be amazed at how much you learn about yourselves in the process, and some of you — like me just a few years back — will find a career.

In the meantime, enjoy your summer break. Hit the gym, read a few mass-market paperbacks, visit your Mom. Come fall, you'll be glad you did. I look forward to teaching with you in September.

Read more: <http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2010/05/28/parfitt#ixzz1pEtnOq1g>  
Inside Higher Ed

## **#2. Twelve Suggestions for Optimizing Academic Careers Success**

The material below is taken from a chapter, "Lessons Learned Along the Way: Twelve Suggestions for Optimizing Career Success," by Arthur Bedeian, appearing in an excellent book, *Rhythms of Academic Life: Personal Accounts of Careers in Academia*, P.J. Frost and M. Susan Taylor, editors, SAGE Publications, 1996. [Available from Amazon.com, ISBN 0803972636, \$31.95]

The book deals primarily with issues in management and industrial engineering academic fields for faculty at Research universities, however, it has much good advice for all of us in higher education. Bedeian is a professor of management, and chairman, Department of Management, at Louisiana State University.

### **1. Hit The Ground Running**

"It has been frequently observed that developing a successful career is much like riding a train. Both require having your ticket punched along the way. Getting a quick start, [particularly with research and publications] or hitting the ground running can do much to ensure that the journey from assistant, to associate, to full-professor proceeds in a timely fashion, as one's ticket is properly punched at all the appropriate stations."

### **2. Locate The Best Predictor Of Future Performance**

"The pedigree of the institution from which you graduated may be helpful in obtaining a desired position, it is of little value in keeping such a position." "Demonstrate independent scholarly ability and make sure you have publications that go well beyond your dissertation."

"A sustained level of performance is critical to success - the best predictor of future performance is past performance."

### **3. Location, Location, Location**

"If I were asked to name the most important factor in a successful career, my answer would unhesitatingly be locating with colleagues one can work with - that is, having a critical mass of colleagues involved in researching, writing, and publishing."

#### 4. Publish, Publish, Publish

"In economic analogy, publications are the major currency of the realm...Publications means visibility, esteem, and career mobility."

#### 5. Be Proactive

"The aspiring scholar bent on a successful career must quickly appreciate that no individual has enough time to dispense effort endlessly to all comers without regard to the ultimate consequences. Given my previous emphasis on earning academic currency, my comments at this point are directed primarily at the individual's proactive management of workload so that he or she can transcend the immediate environment and establish a cosmopolitan role identity."

6. Do Different Things "Academics should do different things at different points in their careers."

"[Beginning faculty] need to provide early evidence of their teaching competence and scholarly abilities, both being prerequisites of promotion and tenure....Stay away from writing textbooks early on."

"Over time [faculty] are capable of making different contributions to the academic enterprise. ... Senior faculty are also more likely to be in a better position to divert time from their research to pursue research grants, accept administrative appointments, and become involved in such activities as faculty governance."

#### 7. Achieve Academic Credibility

"Those that go into administration should carry with them a measure of academic credibility. This is especially important because it avoids situations in which deans or department chairs demand that faculty members do things (e.g., conduct research, publish, secure grants) that the administrators have not done and perhaps could not do themselves."

#### 8. Take Quantum Leaps

"At least two moves are typically required to maximize a career. The first involves that all-important initial academic appointment; the second is the seemingly mandatory quantum leap to secure a named professorship or endowed chair. Why the second more often than not requires a move from one institution to another is a conundrum. A partial answer might involve a second observation: An individual's academic accomplishments are almost invariably honored more by others than by those at his or her own institution."

#### 9. Balance Work And Family

"In my salad days, I could routinely spend 14-16 hours a day locked in my study revising a textbook. The burnout that ultimately resulted, and the death of a well-known contemporary, actually found dead at his desk, occasioned a simple question: Did I want to spend the rest of my life writing textbooks? My answer was no."

#### 10. Continue Your Education

"Perhaps the smartest decision I have made in my entire career involved "going back to school." I enrolled in my first multivariate statistics course while I was a faculty member at Auburn. I spent a sabbatical taking a course in research design. To this day, I take methodological notes on every journal to which I subscribe....Be forewarned: When one submits to the temptation to jump from a research report's abstract to its conclusion, bypassing the methods section, it is time to go back to school."

#### 11. Become Involved In The Associations

"The career benefits of professional association involvement extend well beyond those provided by formal paper sessions. Interacting with other in one's discipline is not only a means of establishing a professional identity, but a way to find points of reference for one's career."

#### 12. Have Fun!

"Putting aside my earlier comment on the need for a song work ethic, having fun (at work and play) requires that one not take one's career too seriously. There will always be conflicts and trade-offs. No matter how sharp one is, there is always someone sharper. And the more career success one enjoys, the harder it is to reach the next level of achievement. In the end, when that last lecture is given and that last manuscript is in the mail, one must define career success for oneself, and one's own personal happiness. Good luck! Enjoy!"

### **#3. The Top Ten Things New Faculty Would Like to Hear from Colleagues**

The posting below gives some excellent advice for beginning professors on how to balance work and family life. It is by Mary Deane Sorcinelli, University of Massachusetts, and is number 22 in a series of selected excerpts from the National Teaching and Learning Forum newsletter reproduced here as part of our "Shared Mission Partnership." NT&LF has a wealth of information on all aspects of teaching and learning. If you are not already a subscriber, you can check it out at [<http://www.ntlf.com/>] The on-line edition of the Forum--like the printed version - offers subscribers insight from colleagues eager to share new ways of helping students reach the highest levels of learning. National Teaching and Learning Forum Newsletter, March, 2004, Volume 11, Number 3, © Copyright 1996-2004. Published by James Rhem & Associates, Inc. (ISSN 1057-2880) All rights reserved worldwide. Reprinted with permission.

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When we seasoned faculty look back at the early years of our careers in academia, what advice do we wish we had received as we started out? What issues do new faculty struggle with today and what kind of guidance might we offer them? More than a decade of research has identified three core, consistent and interwoven concerns that affect early career faculty as they navigate their way through the first years. New faculty want:

- \* a more comprehensible tenure system,
- \* a stronger sense of community, and

\* a balanced and integrated life.

Studies also show that senior colleagues and department chairs can play an important role in creating the kind of academic environment that supports the success of early career faculty (Rice, Sorcinelli & Austin, 2000; Sorcinelli, 2000).

As an antidote to the triple threat of evaluation, isolation, and overwork, I'd like to offer some advice drawn not only from research on what helps new faculty succeed, but also from my interactions with hundreds of new and early career faculty members, their mentors, and their chairs. The following are the top ten things I believe new faculty members would most like to hear from their chair (or senior colleagues) as they try to figure out how to live an academic life-that is, how to teach well, produce fruitful research, earn tenure, pay attention to a partner and children, lead an examined life, and make plans for the future.

### Getting Started

1) Remember: you are great.

We hired you for a reason-you may think that you somehow faked your way in here, but my colleagues and I are pretty smart judges of quality. And, we hired you for success. We make a huge, up front effort to get talented young faculty and the goal is to have you succeed. Newcomers, with new energy and ideas, help us improve our department. You are rising stock, an investment in the future of the department and institution. Despite your greatness, however, you aren't expected to figure out everything about this department and institution on your own. Reach out to all of us in the department. Ask questions. Ask for help.

2) You don't have to be superman or woman tomorrow.

Or even next month. That superstar older professor who is an outstanding teacher, has built a daunting research program, and is president of his professional society did not get there in a year. I'm sure there are one or two new faculty members who may appear to manage it all in their first year, but in my experience, such an expectation is unrealistic. It takes new faculty two or three years to get established; so, pace yourself for the long run. Things will take off more quickly than you think.

You might start by setting goals for your first two or three years and reviewing them with me. You are entitled to your big dreams, but try to sort them into manageable goals -that you can actually accomplish-for yourself. Small successes are likely to motivate you more than struggling to meet an unattainable plan.

### Tenure Truisms

3) Figure out what matters.



Every department and college differs in its expectations for research, teaching and service. And every department and college's requirements will be vague or contradictory at least sometimes. Here again, don't try to figure things out on your own. Talk to everyone. Talk to your department chair and to the dean, but remember that what we say may be constrained by pressures bearing on us at the moment. We'll probably be at the helm for some time, but you can't always guarantee the same administrators will be around when you go up for tenure. Talk to recently tenured faculty and talk to that respected, older, straight shooting professor who can give you solid, realistic advice. Talk with members of the personnel committee to find out what they think is necessary for a successful case. Better yet, along the way, try to sit on the department personnel committee so that you can measure the official version of how things happen against what happens in practice. Finally, make an appointment to meet with the department chair at least once a year- to review those manageable goals we talked about earlier as well as your teaching and research, your annual faculty report, and the tenure timetable.

#### 4) Decide what doesn't matter.

Everyone works hard. But you're not going to help your career development if you are working hard on something that does not matter. For example, we all want and need you to be a good department and campus citizen. Here is where advice from older heads can help. Someone might relish your chairing the department space or website committee, but let's talk about how you can make the best investments in terms of citizenship in your early years. For example, it's okay to be a bit mercenary and serve in places that will be of some benefit to you. For example, being on undergraduate or graduate admissions may garner you excellent students with whom to work on projects. Being in charge of the departmental seminar series may help you establish relationships with important colleagues in your field. Invite them to give a departmental seminar. Their input about your work will be valuable, and you will be expanding your network of colleagues beyond our campus. A positive, national reputation does not hurt in influencing local tenure decisions.

#### 5) Teaching matters.

In your doctoral program, external funding, journal papers, and books may have been pretty much all that mattered. But teaching, especially a commitment to undergraduate students, increasingly matters a lot in most departments. We know that early career faculty find great satisfaction in being valued as a teacher and advisor by students. At the same time, they find it challenging to sustain satisfaction in teaching if it is ill-defined, poorly evaluated and undervalued.

We, your senior colleagues, are here to help you figure out where your teaching is going and why you are taking it there. You may get off to a great start but even if you falter you will improve over time. Someone in the teaching and learning center or your dean or your department chair can introduce you to teachers in and outside of our department who are committed to teaching and student learning. They have a range of skills and experiences worth tapping-for making lectures more effective, facilitating discussion, testing and

assigning grades, and teaching with technology. And you can also sign up for consultation, seminars, grants and other offerings through the teaching and learning center on most campuses. Put simply, departments can't afford faculty who can't teach their way out of a paper bag. So instead, we subscribe to the "open-bag policy": we regard teaching as worthy, public, and always developing and evolving. We'll be talking about and assessing teaching and student learning all along the way with you.

#### 6) Make a plan.

As you are figuring out 3, 4, and 5, make a plan. Consult with me (your department chair) about the priorities you set. As you pursue your plan, here are a few tips.

Play to your strengths. This may seem obvious, but it can get lost. Think about what you know, what you are comfortable with, and what you are ready to teach.

Cultivate a specialty that you enjoy and do well (e.g., large classes, junior year writing) as it will make your teaching more coherent and enjoyable.

Just as you develop a "big picture" for your teaching, you also should develop a big picture for your research and service. Think about the kinds of questions you want to learn more about and are ready to explore in your research.

Trust that we hired you because we recognize and want to capitalize on your strengths. Do your thing well.

In a related vein, take a look at your department's planning documents. Think about how you fit into the scheme of things. How are you helping to define and complement the department's avowed teaching and research mission? How will your work help to enhance the department? Finally, try not to avoid or procrastinate on the important tasks in your plan-on the things that matter. You should remember though, every task and every handout does not have to be perfect. For some tasks, "good enough" is good enough.

### Collegiality and Community

#### 7) Think "mentors," plural.

Those who are older are sometimes wise and can give you realistic and solid advice on a lot of issues. I'll introduce you to one or two senior faculty members in the department who have volunteered to meet with you on an ongoing basis. Mentors inside the department can help you with issues of teaching and scholarship and also on how to read the culture-who's who, what visions people have. Again, I also encourage you to reach out to colleagues beyond the department. There might be someone in the college or at another institution who can provide some distance from our community, and give you a broader view of the discipline and academia. Your senior colleagues are ready to help, but they are as busy as you, so you may have to seek them out. Stop by our offices, e-mail us, make an appointment for coffee or lunch. You're not being pushy or needy. You're being smart.

## 8) Invite community.

It's the rare department that can unanimously achieve the ideal in relationship harmony. But most of us want more collegiality. If you share a sense of excitement about your teaching and scholarship, it will bring colleagues to you who can contribute to your work. Invite us to attend one of your classes or to read a manuscript. Attend departmental colloquia and lectures; spend time in the faculty lounge. This is a place where we meet to share works in progress, to talk about our teaching and our students, and to socialize.

Almost everything you encounter, someone else has too. Track down our successful scholars and teachers and consult with them. And don't hide your own teaching and scholarship away. Tell us what you're doing. Reach outside of the department as well—for example, once again, to our teaching and learning center, our scholarly writing group for junior faculty, or our community-service learning initiatives. Of course, don't forget your own students. Be sure to invite their feedback—they just might be your best teachers.

## The Balancing Act

## 9) Don't work on 15 things equally all at once.

Nothing will ever get done. The good news is that as a new faculty member, you'll probably get better at juggling multiple roles and tasks. The bad news is it remains a challenge throughout an academic career. Over the years, I've picked up a book or two on time management and thumb back through them at the start of every semester. You're welcome to borrow them. Something I did in my early career was to pick one thing that mattered out of all the responsibilities and tasks I'd outlined. I tried to make sure I was devoting at least a quarter of my time to that one thing and splitting the other three-fourths of my time among the 14 other things I had to do. Once that one thing went "out the door," be it developing a new course or writing a book chapter, I turned to the next thing that mattered, so there was always one project getting a good chunk of my time. It didn't always work, but it was helpful to hold as an ideal plan.

## 10) Have a life.

Take care of yourself and your life outside of work. Whether the fatigue is emotional or physical, work can be an effort when you are too tired to put on a public face, to smile and chat at the mailboxes, to stand in front of the classroom. So you must take care of yourself, "fill the tank," whatever that is to you—working out at the gym, seeing a show, jogging, getting away from town for a weekend, playing with your kids or someone else's. If you are drained, you can't be imaginative in the ways your teaching and research require. If you take care of yourself, you'll have more time and energy to do what matters and you'll enjoy this job, despite all the pressures. An academic career reminds me of what Mark Twain once said of Richard Wagner's music: "It's better than it sounds." For most of us, an academic career is better than it sounds. For some of us, it remains the greatest job in the world.

## Conclusion

My advice ends where it began, by focusing on the personal-on what newcomers, chairs, and senior colleagues can do to improve the quality of academic life as we now know it. There is no doubt from studies of new faculty that despite our best personal efforts, systemic problems remain that prevent faculty, departments, and institutions from being the best that they can be, especially in the pursuit of excellence in teaching and student learning. But proactive, individual actions can build hopes, dreams, and accomplishments. Re-envision your career and your future in higher education. What is a meaningful faculty career? What is meaningful faculty work to you? What will you need to give-and receive-to shape an academic life and workplace that matters?

## References

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  - \* Sorcinelli, M.D. 2000. *Principles of Good Practice: Supporting Early Career Faculty*. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Higher Education.
- Note: I gratefully acknowledge suggestions from Dennis Goeckel, Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, and Jung Yun, Department of English, University of Massachusetts Amherst.