Postdoc Academic Chat #9

Hitting the Ground Running as a New Professor - What to do an NOT do)

June 29, 2012

Questions/Discussion Items to Consider

1. What steps can you take with your current advisor to identify areas of independent research for you after you leave Stanford?

2. What specific comments in the article or in the reactions from letter writers in reading #2 particularly resonated with you and why?

3. Based on the readings below, what 1-2 things would you NOT want to do in your first year as a professor?

Readings

#1 Lessons for New Professors
#2. Starting Out Right
#3. Twelve Suggestions for Optimizing Academic Careers Success

. 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 weeken*d). 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. Starting Out Right

By Gabriela Montell

August 4, 2010

From the Chronicle of Higher Education

http://chronicle.com/blogs/onhiring/starting-out-right/25990

With the fall semester imminent, Tenured Radical offers some sage advice for tenure-track faculty newbies on how to succeed on the job without succumbing to work overload

and burnout.

Her first tip is know where your job begins and ends:

Knowing your appropriate load allows you to know your overload. *In consultation with a senior colleague, figure out what are the minimum number of bodies you are expected to manage, and what the department average is for each category and at each rank of the faculty. In the category of "body management," I am counting major advisees, non-major advisees, enrolled students, honors students, and any other person you need to manage (postdocs, graduate students, other faculty.) These categories can overlap—but count them twice when they do (for example, a thesis advisee who is also a major advisee = two bodies, as these are distinct activities that cannot be folded into the same hour of your time).*

Whatever the category is, count it and stay at, or preferably under, that number. Anyone extra is an overload. This is the basic outline of your job description, because whatever people say, a full-time teaching job is primarily about the students. That said, you have to come up with a strategy for how—particularly if you are a popular teacher, or are teaching in an underrepresented field (more on this below)—you are going to say no to students that you don't have time for; and you will send them away to someone whose job it is to help them.

Be willing to help if asked, but don't get sucked into being a doormat, she writes:

Do not volunteer, stupid. *You know who you are—whatever your biological gender, you are a girl. You are the one who finds the silence insufferable when the chair has asked for someone to step up, and you think it is your job to make everyone feel good again. Why you? And why now? At least go away and consult your job description before you go all Do-Bee on everyone. It isn't your job to see to it that everything gets done—it is the chair's job, and believe me, s/he will figure out how to do it.*

Tenured Radical notes that minority and gay and lesbian faculty members may find it especially hard to draw boundaries. Her advice to them? Learn to say no.

Underrepresented faculty in underrepresented fields have no obligation to extend themselves without end to underserved students. *Sometimes I look around me and it is so frackin' obvious why the scholars who are perpetually sicker, angrier, more exhausted, and frantic about meeting deadlines for their scholarship share certain characteristics. We are queer, we are of color, we are international scholars, we are women, we are feminist men. We are the ones who, in order to make space for what we care about in institutions, do it ourselves. We invent the programs, then we chair them. This is what Jean O'Brien and Lisa Disch write about in an article I strongly recommend (and that partly inspired this post): "Innovation Is Overtime: An Ethical Analysis of 'Politically Committed Labor'" (in Aikau, Erickson, and Pierce, Feminist Waves, Feminist Generations: Life Stories From the Academy, Minnesota, 2007). We are the ones that advertise our universities' "diversity" when we labor outside the classroom.*

We are the ones who students seek out to teach the things they never had a chance to learn in high school. ...
The best thing a tenure-track faculty member can do is "get your damn writing done," she says.

Your scholarship is part of your job. *Schedule between 25 and 30% of the time you allot for work during the week to keeping your scholarship going. You know you should do this—and yet many of us see our writing as the thing that we have time for when our family, teaching, and committee responsibilities are done. Which means it can get put off—sometimes fatally—for months at a time, causing us to get out of touch with projects we care about and go without sleep at various points in the semester to meet a commitment that has now become a burden.*

What other tips would you add to TR's list?

This entry was posted in Work and Life. Bookmark the permalink.

E-mail comments - 11 Responses to *Starting Out Right*
mraymond - August 4, 2010 at 3:56 pm
Keep track of everything. Make a folder every year for "Teaching," "Scholarship," and "Service," and put a note about everything you do into one of those folders. It helps you to remember everything you did when it's time to report on your activities in those three areas.

starrett - August 4, 2010 at 4:08 pm
Be a good friend to the office staff. They, more than almost anyone else, can help make your first year a good one.

nyhist - August 4, 2010 at 5:31 pm
Frequently consult senior colleagues for advice. Don't just ask one person, ask several, and seek a consensus. In addition to helping you make decisions about teaching, dealing with students or staff, or just about anything else, the very process will teach you about your new colleagues. Which of them will be helpful to you in the future? who has the best advice and insights? Plus, you will start to build important relationships with them.

drrom - August 4, 2010 at 6:32 pm
Trust yourself and your decisions. Don't spend 2 years guessing if you should speak up at a meeting. (What are you doing at that meeting and on that committee anyway?)

pchoffer - August 4, 2010 at 6:47 pm
Folks: the advice is adversarial, no? You have the job, and your job is to give to the institution that picked you out of the 300 equally qualified applicants as little of your time, your energy, and your spirit as you can. Find and keep boundaries–do not let the institution (faculty self-governance? departmental commitment?) take your eyes off the prize–your own time, space, and satisfaction. Do not under any circumstances go the

extra mile for a student, a colleague, or the school. Protect yourself at all times (as if employment were a boxing match and your opponent is the institution). And if your colleagues start to think that you are selfish, well, that's just too bad. Humanistic scholarship and teaching in a college setting would simply grind to all halt if all of us, throughout our careers, followed the advice of the radical tenured mentor: don't volunteer to read one another's work, don't volunteer to referee mss for journals, don't volunteer to serve on grad student thesis, dissertation or exam committee, be only for yourself. Perfect advice–if we all followed it–what would our world be? Best, Peter

22011344 - August 4, 2010 at 8:58 pm
Oh, Peter, you miss the main point: advice to the newbies. I have seen too many youngsters burn out because they responded to all the flattering requests for their "help." "Old Prof. so-and-so won't help me." So Assistant Prof. Rookie-do ends up with the life-sucking chronic student cases that have been around and have not been helped by [fill in the blank - student advisor, department chair, Veteran Affairs, etc.]. Then, Rookie-do doesn't publish; and — after perhaps being voted teacher/advisor of the year, Rookie-do either burns out and quits or Rookie-do gets turned down on [fill in 3 year review, tenure application]. Some — not all — of the best young professors in my 30 years in higher ed — are now no longer in higher education because no one told them how to protect themselves long enough to get job security and avoid pre-mature burnout. Everyone is not born to be Audie Murphies.

richeym - August 5, 2010 at 12:11 am
I agree with Peter. That this sort of "advice" is offered is a sad commentary on the state of the professorate. We wonder why this honorable, can I even say noble, profession is under assault from all sides. Part of the reason is that we have created a situation in which such sad and disheartening advice is considered worthwhile. I, too, have been in higher ed for almost 30 years. I know many examples of successful colleagues who took a very different approach than the one offered in this depressing column.

rthull - August 5, 2010 at 6:45 am
With your chair, set specific personal goals for the year, especially completion of manuscripts, manuscripts in circulation (both to conferences and to journals/publishers. The goal for the first review should be meeting or exceeding these goals.Look for areas into which you can expand your scholarship beyond your dissertation, while milking the latter for what it can yield. Be prepared at that first review to propose some new interest that doesn't duplicate colleagues' interests. Look to adding one course that has the potential to grow into a cash cow for the department, meaning one that attracts students, becomes a requirement for other majors, or generates majors for your department.If in a lab science, make a goal for the year to get your lab up and running so that data begins to flow. Mine your first semester classes for the best and brightest looking for lab experience.

firstyearttguy - August 5, 2010 at 8:12 am
I'll add one important piece of advice: learn as much as you can about your university, college, and department. What does the administration REALLY care about when it

comes to tenure and promotion? What is the history of your department's relationship with the administration? Who has been denied tenure and why? Is the current adminstration continuing the policies of the past or is the school's/department's culture changing? Talk to as many people as possible and try to understand your school. General advice is great, but you need to understand your own school's scholarship/teaching/service expectations in order to succeed. That being said, err on the side of investing extra time into scholarship/publishing… since only that is likely to land you another position if things at your current school don't work out!

tuxthepenguin - August 5, 2010 at 9:23 am
Research comes first. In many departments, the assistant professors are expected to do the research, because the senior faculty are busy with other things. You are the department's strongest connection to the scholarly world. Write that on an index card and place it somewhere so that you can see it first thing every morning.Don't overprepare for your teaching. Spending two more hours to research this or that little fact will add nothing of value to the course. Your first semester just do your best while you learn the school's culture. But be realistic.Make a good set of lecture notes. Spend a little extra time scanning everything, and marking down the schedule you followed, so that you don't have to prepare all over again the next time you teach the class. I speak from unfortunate experience.Most importantly: Make a realistic set of goals, and then set a schedule for each day, so that you can achieve them. Adjust as necessary. At the end of the week, spend 10 minutes reviewing how well you stuck with your schedule. Again, I speak from unfortunate experience, having fallen into the trap of doing the urgent rather than the important. Meeting with students is urgent, not important. Spending a minimum of two hours working on research without interruption is important, not urgent. Learn the difference.

nyhist - August 5, 2010 at 10:37 am
Peter Hoffer, above, is right. . .and wrong. Especially when you are just starting out, it's hard to judge what you should spend your time on, what you should volunteer for, and what you should say no to. That's why I suggested in my first post on this thread that you should consult senior colleagues. Make use of their experience and wisdom to help you strike a balance between helping yourself and helping others. It worked for me! I learned to say yes to the things I wanted to do, and no to the others, using the prior yes as an excuse for the no. Long ago I read a book entitled, "Only You, Dick Daring!" I don't recall much about it other than the title and the theme, which was basically that only in the movies is there only 'Dick Daring' to save. . .you name it. My motto is: I am not Dick Daring. There are always other people around if one says no to something one really does not want to spend time on.

#3. 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!"