

# **Becoming a Scholar: Everything I Need to Know I Learned on Sabbatical**

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### **Abstract:**

*Teaching-oriented universities present critical opportunities and threats for professional development of their tenured business professors. These faculty members are at particular risk of a career plateau accompanied by diminished productivity and satisfaction. The author uses autoethnographic methods to reflect on personal experience and posit initiatives for career revitalization.*

### **Key Words:**

Professional Development, Scholarship, Knowledge Work, Protean Careers, Autoethnography.

### **Introduction**

Covey (1989) calls it “sharpening the saw,” and Senge (1990) calls it “personal mastery.” Both refer to the need for continuous professional development. While everyone needs to “keep their batteries charged,” university faculty members face their own set of challenges that require professional development. Being an academic requires a high level of mental, emotional, and physical energy. Without adequate attention to professional development, university faculty can experience boredom and burnout resulting in low or misdirected energy that can immobilize career productivity and satisfaction. The purpose of this essay is to stimulate consideration of those special professional development needs of academicians—in particular, mid-career, tenured business faculty at small, private or public, teaching-oriented colleges or universities.

With reference to the Greek god Proteus who could change shape at will, Hall (1996a, 1996b) observes that, in the twenty-first century, some careers are “protean”--defined by the *person* not the organization, and reinvented by the person as circumstances evolve. Academic careers have always been capable of being protean. Success in a protean career requires adaptability that comes from continuous learning--acquisition of emerging knowledge and skill sets--as well as from greater awareness of one’s self. Hence, academic work holds the promise of being creative and boundaryless

(Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). For many faculty members, these qualities make an academic career, in the words of Don Juan, “a path with a heart” (Castaneda, 1968).

As with all careers, however, the academic path is open to developmental stages. Although the various models of career-stage development possess slight differences, a thematic evolutionary process is revealed across models: preparation and entry, growth and advancement, plateau and maintenance, disengagement and exit (Baldwin, 1990). Among these developmental stages, maintenance can be paramount with respect to its effect on self identity. During the maintenance stage, career goals may diminish in motivational power resulting in a professional plateau accompanied by a mid-life experience of career-related disappointment, frustration, and reassessment. During this season, what once was a path with a heart may become routine and no longer engrossing, subjecting faculty to special risk, because the routines they have refined through longevity may result in inertia that stymies what could continue to be a creative and boundaryless career.

Social Construction Theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) submits that reality is formed by the meanings ascribed to experience. To some extent, the mental models established and reified by these faculty about the nature of their work end up forming psychic structures that imprison rather than liberate. To realize true academic freedom, these faculty might improve the quality of their work experience by redefining their work. This manuscript, therefore, proposes that these faculty may benefit from reframing and refocusing their perceptions of the “real” work of a professor.

### **Quest for Renewal**

I became an academician because I love to learn. I get the most excited about those things of which I know the least. I especially enjoy learning about organizational dynamics in a business context. For me, the study of strategic management strikes a chord harmonizing practical and philosophical lessons.

Upon completing my doctoral education, I transitioned to an assistant professor at a teaching university where the school of business was accredited but far from top tier. Because I was excited by learning, I enjoyed helping others to experience that same excitement. Consequently, I focused my energy on developing pedagogical excellence. I consider my teaching to be learning-focused and the resultant learning to be of high quality. My teaching practices have been validated with accolades and awards from both students and colleagues.

Commensurate with efforts to obtain accreditation, even teaching institutions now expect faculty to publish in peer-reviewed journals. My university is no exception. Of course, I appreciate that all institutions of higher learning—even those with a teaching mission—need faculty who are intellectually active and current in their fields. Nevertheless, as more of my effort went into teaching, less effort went into research—especially after being granted promotion and tenure. In turn, the less effort I put into research, the fewer original ideas I had to share with my students in the classroom.

The demands of teaching and service, however, left little spare time for doing meaningful research. Obviously, at universities with a teaching mission, teaching loads are heavy; I teach four classes each semester, or 12 credits. Time spent preparing for

class meetings, teaching in the classroom, as well as evaluating student performance and counseling students adds up. Further, at a small university, the obligation to render institutional service is greater per faculty member than at larger universities simply because there are fewer faculty members to staff the same necessary committees. The most pressing need for institutional service is on time-intensive faculty governance committees that require leadership from senior faculty.

Consequently, these time demands made it difficult—even seemingly impossible—to find time for doing quality research. And, if the research could not be of high quality, why bother? After all, this research won't be given the Nobel Prize in Economics. So, what difference is that research going to make? And, who would really read this kind of publication anyway?

I was caught in this vicious cycle when the dean of a highly ranked graduate business school at a well known private university learned of my academic accomplishments and extended to me the offer of a visiting professorship. I accepted the appointment for an academic year. To facilitate this opportunity, I was granted a sabbatical from my public, home university which further afforded the opportunity to step outside the boundaries of my institution and look for a solution to my dilemma.

Social scientists have begun to view themselves as the object of study and to write evocative personal narratives with the primary purpose of understanding a life as lived in a cultural context. Autoethnography—an autobiographical genre of research and writing connecting the personal to the cultural (Ellis & Bochner, 2000)—is a compelling method for this form of research. Reed-Danahay (1997) provides a notable review of the evolving literature on autoethnographic methods. Autoethnographic methodology is a synthesis of postmodern ethnography and postmodern biography—ethnographic autobiography, auto-biographical writing that has ethnographic interests.

Originating in cultural anthropology, autoethnographic studies entail research conducted by natives of their own culture. Telling the story of the researcher is in the foreground with the cultural context forming the background. This produces self-consciousness within the social structure resulting in a rewriting of the self and the social. The researcher encounters self discovery and creation through making sense of, and giving coherence to, life's experiences. Hence, autoethnographic research can be approached as problem solving akin to action research (Stringer, 2008) or action science (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985) for the individual, or even as therapeutic. Because the life story is contextualized by the researcher's culture, that life experience may be generalized to a larger audience comprising that same culture. Readers are invited to use what they learn from the autoethnographic work to reflect on, understand, and direct their own lives.

Autoethnography fits within the interpretive paradigm (Burrell & Morgan, 2007); human presence in the data collection and interpretation process is a central feature of the method. Beginning with the premise that social science is human research, personal experience cannot be separated from data collection and interpretation. Therefore, all research is constructed experience. The purpose of autoethnography is to make human experience transparent through personal experience narratives (Reinharz, 1979).

Following that purpose, I report the lessons derived from the application of autoethnographic methods of data collection and analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Ellis, 1991). My sabbatical experience produced substantial professional and personal growth. I underwent meaningful professional development, learning some lessons unique to my own situation and other lessons that are more generalizable to faculty in need of renewal. Following are a few of those generalizable lessons about professional development. Some of these lessons might be the same words of advice passed along by wise mentors to their doctoral students or junior faculty. Even so, these lessons have the potential to take on new meaning for the mid-career professor.

### **The Knowledge Worker**

The “knowledge worker” (Drucker, 1992)—one who adds value through intellectual activity—is prevalent among the labor force of today’s global economy. University faculty members can claim the distinction of being the original and enduring knowledge workers. The purpose of the academy has always been to add value to society by attaining true understanding through improved quality of thought. Therefore, this essay begins with the premise that, although evaluated relative to performance in teaching, publishing, and service, university faculty members; basic occupation is to learn, and their basic title is that of scholar.

It is easy to get caught in the bi-polar struggle between being a teacher or a researcher. In actuality, effective faculty members are not teachers or researchers. They are scholars; their job is to think. As thinkers, they have several venues for cultivating and distributing their thoughts. They share thoughts with future organizational leaders who are now students in educational settings. They also share thoughts with practicing organizational leaders in consultative settings. In addition, they contribute their ideas to other professional academics through academic dialogue in journals and at conferences. None of these activities, though, will produce quality results unless the core function of thinking takes place.

Consequently, faculty development is mostly about enhancing the quality of one’s thinking, and the following suggests ways to revitalize this essential activity. Revitalization, though, is not an event; it is a process. Faculty development is not achieved by attending a workshop, but instead by taking personal responsibility for professional development and making revitalization an integral part of continual professional improvement (Drucker, 1999).

### **Create a Thinking Agenda**

Of course one is always thinking; it is not something that can be turned on and off. However, the quality of one’s thinking is affected by the attention given to what one thinks and how one thinks about it. Thinking is more productive if it is focused with purpose. Therefore, the mid-career business scholar who is recovering from distractions needs a thinking agenda—a master plan of intellectual contribution to the collective pool of thought on organizations and management (Boyer, 1990).

A thinking agenda requires three pillars: 1) definition of an organization/management phenomenon that will be the focus of thought; 2) identification of a theory as the lens

through which to make sense of that phenomenon; and 3) selection of a research method to empirically study the phenomenon (Guba, 1990). Given a phenomenon, a theory, and a method, what questions remain unanswered about the nature or process of this phenomenon? From a personal standpoint, what part of this puzzle warrants further examination and evokes sufficient curiosity to be the groundwork of a thinking agenda?

A thinking agenda is the source of projects that address questions about the focal phenomenon. Projects are the hallmark of the knowledge worker in the professional service firm (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996; Peters, 1992). In the professional service firm known as the university, a project is a scholarly endeavor producing insights that can be assembled and packaged in a variety of output forms. Overall, the results of a scholar's thinking should lead to the education of students and the publication of manuscripts. Working on a project, though, is not the same as working on a lecture for classroom use or on a paper for publication. A project is more encompassing than a single product. From one project, several genuinely distinct products could be generated. For example, the results of a project could be presented as a conceptual exposition, theoretical tract, methodological manual, empirical report, management translation, or pedagogical application.

The selection of the right project is critical. There are two criteria to consider in making this selection. First, does the project advance the scholar's learning as intended through the thinking agenda? Projects should remain focused on the area of knowledge that the thinking agenda is designed to construct. Effort should not be scattered across an array of activities that do not gain from the synergy of the thinking agenda. Second, does the project intellectually animate or agitate the scholar enough to incite passionate pursuit? The essence of a thinking agenda is to infuse energy into the scholar's professional development. If not totally energized by the thought of undertaking a particular project, one should pass on it, and keep searching for a project that actually generates excitement. The mid-career, tenured scholar should avoid the snare of a curriculum vitae littered with rubbish. While one's vita must demonstrate research activity, the scholar should not invest thinking in publications that, in spite of being published, have no worth to colleagues—not to mention oneself. Thinking should be invested in projects that lead to genuine learning—at the very least one's own learning.

## **Thinking**

The significance of a thinking agenda is determined by the extent to which the knowledge generated from its projects is insightful. To produce insight, one must be adept at critical and creative thinking. The process of thinking, though, requires some thoughts to process. To rouse thoughts, one must cultivate curiosity and be exposed to thought-provoking stimuli.

Thinking is accomplished in two symbiotic stages. Thinking begins with the acquisition of existing knowledge. This is breathing in—consumption. As those bits of knowledge are classified, compared, and connected, new questions arise leading to the production of new knowledge. This is breathing out—creation. Before one can breathe out insightful ideas in the form of a project, one needs to breathe in new ideas that provide grist. This entails studying the thoughts of others who are seeking answers to

the same or similar questions. Through exposure to others' thoughts, one gains knowledge of their interpretive frameworks and methods as well as their interpretations. Further, sifting the thoughts of others kindles the discovery of one's own thoughts.

Of course, reading the academic literature that supports one's thinking agenda is requisite. In addition, the business scholar should regularly peruse trade publications, business periodicals such as *The Wall Street Journal* (see Lehmann, 2000) and *Business Week*, as well as popular press business books to learn what is important to practicing managers and how academic research might apply.

One can also gain access to new ideas through direct conversations with other faculty and practicing professionals. These conversations may even develop into collaborative projects. The scholar should cultivate a "community of practice"--academic partners with whom to refine individual thinking (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). These colleagues might be employed at one's home institution or at another institution. Academic partners are especially useful in discussing matters of theory and research methods. However, to think about organizational/management issues, the scholar needs more than academic partners with whom to have discussions. The scholar needs to also network with executive partners who are experiencing the phenomenon central to the thinking agenda. Such contacts could lead to an arrangement in which the executive partner's organization becomes a learning laboratory for the scholar's thinking agenda (Adler, Shani, & Styhre, 2004; Leonard-Barton, 1992).

The process of translating observations into insights is the essence of thinking and requires discipline as well as spontaneity. Insights are formed according to the mind's schedule which is at times seemingly fickle. Consequently, one must always be on alert for insights—whenever and wherever they may surface. Nevertheless, the mind's process can be facilitated by scheduling some time every day for uninterrupted thinking (Gray, 2005). Moreover, thoughts should be captured in writing, enabling continued development of previous thoughts with each session.

## Presence at Conferences

As universities' standards for publication rise—even at teaching-oriented schools—in response to heightened accreditation requirements, conference presentations (and inclusion in their proceedings) may not be valued as much by administration as they once were. Consequently, a conference presentation may not have any direct affect on annual evaluations. A dean will say, "It's nice that you presented a paper; but, I'm really only interested in your publications." In spite of the lack of credit for presentations, one should still make good use of conferences.

At the typical conference, authors have several minutes to present an abstract of their research. Ordinarily, no one in the audience has read the author's work in advance. So, based only on the brief description, audience members ask a few questions and make a few comments. Then, at the end of the allotted time, everyone applauds politely and turns their attention to the next presenter. Given that the purpose of presenting at a conference is to get feedback on one's thinking that will lead to better thinking and published work, this format does not seem like the most fruitful way to get feedback. However, with proper planning, a scholar can facilitate the acquisition of

feedback—in spite of the format--that will be helpful in further developing research toward a published work.

Conferences are invaluable, because they provide deadlines that force one to write thoughts in a manner comprehensible to reviewers. Further, the reviewers' comments offer a perspective on the work beyond one's own. Although sometimes brief, vague, and blunt, reviewer comments should never be dismissed. Always assume the reviewers have a legitimate point. One's defenses must be lowered to understand the reviewer's point of view. When merited, the necessary changes to one's thinking should be made.

The conference date becomes another deadline for organizing one's thoughts in preparation for the presentation. Each occasion for revisiting one's thinking is an opportunity to rethink that thinking. At the conference, the scholar should make note of audience members who seem to show special interest in the presentation and should ask if they would be willing to read and comment on the full work. This request could lead to an extended dialogue or even a partnership on a project.

The importance of giving attention to other's comments on one's work cannot be overstated. The scholar should actively seek colleagues—academic and executive partners--who would be willing to examine work in progress. One way conferences can facilitate this search for willing colleagues is through the published conference program. By perusing the program, one can identify presenters with similar research interests. Whether before or after the conference, these presenters could be contacted to discuss mutual interests and ascertain their willingness to read one's work.

### **Integrate Teaching, Publishing and Service**

Business school faculty members are constantly juggling a portfolio of three general categories of activities which in teaching-oriented universities tend to be prioritized as teaching, publishing, and providing service to the institutional and professional communities. If ill-managed, these eclectic activities can pull a faculty member in diverse directions creating low levels of productivity. The scholar must form synergy among pedagogical, publication, and service activities. Rather than being treated as three categories of activities with separate agendas, they should be leveraged through integration with one's thinking agenda.

Teaching is, of course, the highest priority at universities with a teaching mission and, therefore, symbolically—if not substantively--takes precedence over everything else. Consequently, one will have difficulty finding time to think, if one does not manage the teaching component effectively. Conversely, one will not squeeze the full potential out of teaching unless one integrates teaching with scholarship (Andre & Frost, 1996). Teaching should always be approached as an adventure in learning—as much for the teaching scholar as for the student. Hence, scholars—especially those at teaching-oriented universities--should continually improve their pedagogical craft (see Clawson & Haskins, 2006; Vance, 1993). Scholars who approach their classes with this attitude find teaching to be an avenue for discovery rather than for merely imparting extant knowledge.

To integrate teaching with a thinking agenda, the scholar could begin by experimenting with new pedagogical methods that challenge both teaching scholar and students to think. Since the scholar's thinking agenda is grounded in projects, why should it be any different for the scholar's students? Project-based learning is a natural extension of a scholar's own scholarship (Corey, 1990; Gundry & Buchko, 1996). By minimizing use of lecture notes and maximizing use of experiential vehicles for learning, the scholar creates an environment of learning by discovery. Student projects can be either applied or basic research (see Polonsky & Waller, 2010). For most effective integration, the student projects should be linked to one's own thinking agenda. With adequate direction, even most undergraduate students are capable of making valued contributions—whether literature reviews, data collection or analysis—to one's projects (Wisker, 2009).

Another way to achieve greater pedagogical integration with one's scholarship is to develop new courses. The momentum of teaching the same courses with the same notes and assignments creates an alluring stability that leads students as well as oneself down the undesirable path of intellectual monotony. Developing a new course requires the scholar to step outside well-worn ruts and think new thoughts. Moreover, these new courses should have a logical relationship to one's thinking agenda. Further, while committed to teaching a certain number of courses in certain subject areas, one may have some flexibility in determining the days and times the courses are offered. If so, these courses should be scheduled at times allowing maximum productivity during one's scheduled thinking time.

Institutional service is vital to the governance and socio-cultural climate of the university. Service on faculty governance committees is an obligation for every tenured faculty member. However, it is vital to keep one's service commitments in proportion to the size of one's plate and the total amount of work on that plate. To be successful at any given institution, some things must always be on one's plate—such as teaching and governance committees. In spite of the urgent pressures of classroom and committee meetings, the scholar needs to maintain time for the thinking agenda. Little time, then, remains for additional service activities. Nevertheless, a major reason many scholars chose an academic profession was because of their desire to serve others. Consequently, scholars should engage in service activities that support their thinking agendas. Following are two such examples:

### **Invite a Guest Speaker to the University**

The guest speaker could be from the private or public sector, or could be a professor from another university. The speaker, though, must be a thought leader, arousing interest among other faculty members and students. Further, to gain full advantage from this occasion, the speaker's thoughts should relate to one's thinking agenda. Inviting a thought leader in one's field of interest to be a guest speaker prepares an opening for an extended conversation during the speaker's visit. This conversation may even result in a collaborative project.

## **Organize a Conference at the University**

Making a pedagogical linkage, the conference could be a student research symposium highlighting the projects completed by students for credit in one's courses. Yet, another type of conference could be along the lines of a traditional consortium of scholars. The conference theme could be the theme of one's thinking agenda. Presentations at the conference could be open to all submissions pending reviewer approval or exclusive to invited submissions.

Professional service maintains the community of scholars with whom one shares a thinking agenda. Scholars should be generous in sustaining the infrastructures of the professional associations to which they subscribe. Scholars should volunteer to review for conferences or a journal if the association sponsors one. In addition to sustaining the association, reviewing the work of colleagues who have thinking agendas similar to one's own agenda extends the scholar's perspective and potentially reveals new insights. Further, as mentioned, professional associations are an apparent source of academic partners.

Community service gives back to the community not only in which one works, but in which one lives. No different than with the foregoing types of service, universities vary in their definitions of community service and their guidelines for faculty involvement. It makes sense, though, that an important community for business school faculty to serve is the business community. Therefore, scholars should consider offering their expertise on a consultative basis or as a board member (see Barrington, 2011; Metzger, 1993). Such service facilitates one's ability to translate academic knowledge into practical knowledge. In addition, the organizations with which one establishes associations may become "laboratories" for the collection and analysis of data relating to one's thinking agenda. Further, the contacts made through this type of service can lead to the cultivation of executive partners who will contribute to the scholar's thinking agenda.

## **New Beginnings**

This manuscript contains the lessons revealed through an autoethnographic study of my experience as a mid-career, tenured business professor at a university with a teaching mission. At a point after being granted tenure, I had put so much emphasis on becoming a "teacher" that I neglected to develop as a "scholar." To many—even in the academy, the term "scholarship" carries a meaning associated with—or relegated to—the publishing of academic research. This connotation, though, is unnecessarily myopic and is not the meaning of scholarship advanced in this manuscript. Scholarship derives from the act of study which is to intensely, intensively, and intentionally think profound thoughts. Neither teaching nor publishing is the essence of a self-actualized faculty member. Rather, teaching, publishing, and consulting are channels for the knowledge work of the scholar.

The essence of being a faculty member is to be a scholar. And, the work of a scholar is to think. However, the demands of academic life correlated with mid-career concerns can form a distraction away from this essential activity. Consequently, professional development is vital at this career stage. Effective professional development, though, calls for more than attendance at a workshop; it necessitates a change of perception

and work habits. Perceptions must change regarding the true work of a scholar. Work habits must change to support the work of a scholar. In sum, effective professional development must become a way of life that facilitates the work of scholarship—robust thinking.

This manuscript posits several means for assuming personal responsibility for professional development. Professional development begins with the creation of a thinking agenda that defines the scholar's field of study and the particular projects to be studied. At the core of the thinking agenda is "breathing in"—the acquisition of grist that stimulates thinking. As ideas congeal, academic conferences serve as a vehicle for "breathing out"—putting thoughts on public display for evaluation and feedback. Finally, effective professional development is manifested by the integration of the scholar's channels for knowledge creation and dissemination—teaching, publishing, and consulting.

### **Concluding Note:**

The suggestions offered in this essay were inspired by a sabbatical experience that offered the opportunity for career reflection. Other scholars, if fitting with professional and personal plans, are encouraged to follow their institution's procedures for taking a sabbatical (Zahorski, 1994). Time away from one's home institution can be experienced in a variety of productive modes. For example: secure a visiting professorship at a university enabling more time for thinking, while experiencing a different institution and perhaps even a different national culture. Or, negotiate an internship with a corporation that would augment professional knowledge and skills. Although not everyone has career plans that include a sabbatical, those who need an injection of new professional life can begin by taking responsibility for their own professional development drawing on the suggestions proffered in this manuscript.

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