An approach to rejuvenating our teaching – and ourselves

Joan Flaherty
University of Guelph

Author's Contact Information

Joan Flaherty, Assistant Professor
University of Guelph
Guelph, Ontario, N1G 2W1
phone: 519 824-4120, extension 58759
email: jflahert@uoguelph.ca

Abstract:

This article addresses one of teaching's occupational hazards: emotional fatigue that undermines our motivation to teach effectively and, consequently, the intrinsic satisfaction we derive from teaching. Whether this fatigue is caused by increasing workload, unsupportive administration, or boredom from repeatedly teaching the same material, the result is the same: we become derailed from pursuing what poet Mary Oliver describes as our "one wild and precious life".

And yet the classroom offers rich opportunities to pursue that life by fostering our own self-development on a number of levels: intellectual, career, and personal. This article explains the why – and, most importantly, the how – of that statement.

Key Words:

Burn out; faculty renewal; learner-centeredness; teaching strategies.

Introduction

"Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"
(Oliver, 2008, p. 65)

I first came across this line of poetry at a *Teaching Professor* conference. The keynote speaker, Tom Brown, explained that he posted the question prominently in his office for students to see -- and, he hoped -- reflect on. He intended it as an interrogative mantra, of sorts, to help students navigate the path from late adolescence to adulthood.

But the poet's question is relevant to us all – a fact made clear in Maryellen Weimer's blog posting "When teaching grows tired: A wake up call for faculty". Her thesis calls for us to be aware of, and vigilant against, one of teaching's occupational hazards: emotional fatigue that undermines our motivation to teach effectively and, consequently, our satisfaction in having taught well.

Indeed, the research indicates we have cause to be vigilant. In 2007, the Canadian Association of University Teachers conducted a national survey of stress among postsecondary academics, concluding that "the overall stress (of academic faculty) in Canadian universities is very high" and in fact "exceeds that found in the general population" (Catano et al, 2007, pp. 7, 8). Five years later, the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California Los Angeles released its latest report on faculty stress within the United States. A significant number of the 23,824 full time faculty and 3,547 part time faculty who teach undergraduates at four year degree-granting institutions described the following as the source of "some" or "extensive" stress: self-imposed high expectations; lack of personal time; institutional budget cuts; institutional procedures and red tape; and working with underprepared students. (2012, p. 3).

Whether we attribute our own particular fatigue to these same factors or simply to boredom from teaching the same material over and over again, the result, is the same: we become derailed from pursuing our "one wild and precious life".

And yet the classroom can offer us rich opportunities to pursue that life by following a path that honours who we truly are. In order to take advantage of those opportunities, however, we first must *remember* who we truly are. This article suggests three possibilities:

Learners

Many us arrived at our teaching responsibilities indirectly: a love of pursuing our own studies led to a faculty appointment, which involved, perhaps incidentally, teaching. Or perhaps our passion for a particular subject led directly to a teaching appointment. Either way, teaching is the outcome, rather than the definition, of who we are. Our heart's desire is to learn. We can honour that desire by using the classroom as a venue not just for our students' learning but also for our own learning.

The students in our classes represent, after all, a living library of diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and expertise. We have access to this "library" when we engage students in a dialogue, either oral or written, through

- Providing time for focused class discussion (in addition to lectures).
- Being available for informal chats before or after class (in addition to office consultations)
- Promoting an exchange of ideas on student work through Web 2.0-based assignments, such as tweets, blog postings, and on-line peer evaluations (in addition to uni-directional grading rubrics).

The resulting dialogue can introduce us, and make us more receptive, to different views regarding our area of specialization. It can enrich our understanding of others – an insight brought home to me during an after-class conversation with a student who spoke about his year in a refugee camp. Or it can simply provide us with factual information that we might not otherwise have encountered. (Thanks to a student's re-Tweet, I now know what a hashtag is and how to use it).

And while the first two learning outcomes are probably preferable, the third is no small thing – a sentiment that will resonate with any teacher who is, at heart, a learner

Careerists

Critiquing papers, thinking on our feet during question period, and maintaining the focus of wide-ranging class discussions can sharpen our analytical skills and powers of logic. Developing and experimenting with tools besides the lecture to get the point across can enhance our creativity and our ability to think outside the box. In other words, teaching can help faculty hone the skills needed to research, write, and publish -- and thus impress the promotion and tenure committee.

Indeed, some of those impressive publications might directly result from time spent in the classroom. Pedagogical journals are full of research articles and reflective essays based on data extracted from the classroom: student focus groups, surveys, case studies, and anecdotal examples. Thus, teaching provides faculty from any discipline with an additional publication path: the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Individualists

Faculty are generally not hired because of their team-playing abilities or their deep interest in advancing the lot of others. Not that these attributes are completely overlooked, but hiring committees tend to focus on academic achievements, honours, and publications – all of which require hours of solitary work. In other words, our advanced degrees taught us to think and work independently, so that we can now succeed in an academic career that requires us to think and work independently. We have been trained through years of schooling and the nature of our jobs to be alone.

No doubt we chose that path because it suits who we are. As measured by the well-known Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, 54% of post-secondary faculty indicate a preference for introversion and 64% for intuition – a combination “relatively rare in the general population” but particularly suitable for those who “are interested in the world of ideas and comfortable with the solitary time needed to focus on their studies” (Scherdin, 2002, pp. 242, 243). Paradoxically, however, E.M. Forster’s dictum of “only connect” seems particularly appropriate to people who, like many faculty, choose to spend a good deal of their working time alone. Not to connect regularly with others during our work day means our individualism runs the risk of devolving into isolationism; and thus the satisfaction of following our unique path becomes diminished, stymied by loneliness and the insularity of our own preoccupations.

A classroom of students provides an ongoing opportunity for connection. Granted, the quality of these connections will vary from superficial to in-depth; transient to long lasting; and annoying, even frustrating, to deeply enriching. Obviously we prefer more on the positive end of the spectrum, but all these classroom-forged connections – including the superficial, the transient, and the annoying – have the potential to help us pursue with greater vigour our self-directed and independent-minded path.

Bridging the gap between our needs and our students' needs

This article's thesis contains a simple – yet counterintuitive – corollary: when we use the classroom to honour who we truly are, as suggested by the three possibilities above, we also end up honouring our students' needs as learners.

Those needs, as described in Weimer's *Learner-Centered Teaching* (2002), revolve around five elements: sharing power with students; extending the boundaries of course content into our students' lives; encouraging their participation; increasing their responsibility for their own learning; and allowing them greater involvement in their own assessment. In other words, learner-centered teaching enhances the student's role in the classroom – an outcome that, ironically enough, also follows when we use the classroom to nurture our own identities as learners, careerists, or individualists.

For example, as learners, we want and solicit our students' different perspectives. As careerists, we consider all the ways our students contribute to our professional growth. And as individualists we express gratitude to our students for accompanying us on our mostly solitary journey.

Our interests and our students' interests are, thus, intrinsically linked when we pursue our path of greater self-awareness.

”Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good;
if it doesn't, it is of no use.”
(Castenadas, 1968, p. 76)

Dedicated faculty can all too easily become overwhelmed – and disheartened -- by the demands of the classroom. External factors no doubt play a role here, but perhaps the real problem lies within. Perhaps we become *disheartened* when we don't pay enough attention to the dictates of our *heart* – and what it can tell us about who we truly are. This article suggests three possibilities: learner, careerist, and individualist. Whether any or all of those possibilities resonate, consider that by honouring the heart's desire we find new energy and rejuvenation – which benefits not just ourselves but our students as well. When this happens, we can then know that we're making the best possible use of our “one wild and precious life”.

References

Catano, V., Francis, L., Haines, T., Kirpalani, H., Shannon, H., Stringer, B., & Lozanski, L., (2007). *A survey of occupational stress among Canadian university academic staff*. Canadian Association of University Teachers. Retrieved from http://www.caut.ca/uploads/CAUTStressStudy.pdf

Hertado, S., Eagan, K., Pryor, J., Whang, H., & Tran, S. (2012). *Undergraduate teaching faculty: The 2010-2011 faculty survey.* Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA.

Weimer, M. (October 3, 2012). “When teaching grows tired: A wake-up call for faculty” in *Faculty Focus*. Retrieved from http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/when-teaching-grows-tired-a-wake-up-call-for-faculty/

Weimer, M. (2002*) Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Oliver, M. (2008). “The Summer Day” in *The Truro bear and other adventures: Poems & essays* (p. 65). Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press.
Castaneda, C. (1968). *The teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui way of knowledge*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.