

Finding Yourself in the Classroom; Finding the Classroom in Your Life

Jeffrey L. Newcomer
Western Washington University

Kristen A. Larson
Pacific Lutheran University

Introduction

Many new faculty members find themselves in a classroom having received neither experience as teachers nor instruction on teaching during graduate school. While mentoring programs^{1,2} and short course options³ do exist for some, most new faculty head into the classroom for the first time armed with only a packet of lecture notes and a recollection of the professors that they had found to be most engaging and a vague plan for emulating them. In a situation such as this, material coverage and mere survival become classroom priorities. It is easy for new faculty to overly concentrate on the academic content of each lecture, not concerning themselves with the context in which the classroom resides. Comfortably and confidently creating a dynamic learning environment takes more than just command of course material. To be happy and effective in the classroom, new faculty need to address two issues outside of the classroom: how teaching fits with personal priorities and career goals, and how teaching is valued and supported in the local academic culture. This paper offers tips for new faculty on learning to place the classroom in the context of personal priorities and local culture garnered from two different perspectives and points on the learning curve. This paper addresses issues of balancing teaching, research, and service from the perspective of personal priorities and goals. It discusses approaches to developing and maintaining a personal identity in the local teaching culture, while at the same time finding or creating a support network that works to meet individual needs. Finally, it offers some advice for improving classroom mechanics through preparation and record keeping, and for improving communication with students.

Teaching and Personal Priorities

The job of a professor is multi-faceted. Most institutions say that the job has three components: teaching, scholarship, and service, and balancing these is a constant challenge.^{4,5} The reality is that at least one of these components is valued above the others at every institution.⁶ While it is important to discover what the explicit and implied priorities are at a particular school, it is also important to discover which of these aspects are personally interesting, engaging, and rewarding. There are many traps that are easy to fall into, such as committing yourself to more activities than you can possibly do well. One of the greatest dangers, however, is a subtler pitfall: trying to mold yourself into the professor that you believe senior faculty and administrators want you to be. Certainly you want to heed the advice of your seniors, but always tempered with an understanding of your own strengths and weaknesses, and most importantly your own priorities.

*“Proceedings of the 2001 American Society for Engineering Education Annual Conference & Exposition
Copyright © 2001, American Society for Engineering Education”*

There are two extreme strategies to adopt as one starts a career: new faculty members can examine the requirements for tenure and promotion at their schools and endeavor to exceed those standards as early as possible, or they can pursue what they find enjoyable and satisfying and trust that tenure and promotion will work out in the end. Each extreme approach has its own merits, but both are swimming upstream.

A sole devotion to the expectations for tenure and promotion may make goal setting simple and even help a new faculty break the land speed record for achieving these milestones, but the end result had better be worthwhile because the journey will not be enjoyable. Candidates may achieve tenure only to find that they are burned-out as academic innovators and lack-luster as educators. Conversely, disregarding expectations for tenure and promotion may ensure an enjoyable few years and perhaps commendations for a certain job well done, but will inevitably lead to a disconnect between the candidate and colleagues at the institution, which may eventually be perceived as a lack of ability or dedication for the job. The best strategies fall somewhere between these two extremes. That is not to say, however, that the ideal course of action falls exactly at the midpoint between these two but rather that each candidate should sway toward the end that best fits his or her own personality. If you are goal oriented, as one of us is, it makes sense to set short-term and long-term achievement targets, but be realistic and keep in mind that there are many factors outside of your immediate control. If you are more of a process person, as the other of us is, concentrate on the journey instead of the destination and do what you enjoy, but stop to look around every so often to make sure that you are still headed in the right direction. Still, without any experience how does a new faculty member know which approach is best?

The reality is that there is no substitute for experience. Once you get a job you need to be willing to walk away from it if it becomes clear that it is not a good match for you. This idea may sound appalling to anyone who has just landed his or her first tenure track job, but the truth is that this job is not the only opportunity available. Certainly, prospective faculty members must be reflective and understand their own priorities when submitting applications, but even this does not guarantee success. New faculty members must take a hard look at themselves, their desires, and their situation repeatedly even after that first job has been obtained. There must be a certain level of match between the new faculty member and the position. Exactly how much match must exist for mutual satisfaction depends on the individual faculty member and the institution.

While it is preferable to start with a job that is a good fit for you, nothing will help you discover the importance of your personal priorities like having the wrong job. This is an effective way to find out how much congruity there must be between you and your institution, and what your strengths and needs really are. Keep in mind that there are limits to how far you can flex and still be satisfied over the long haul. Likewise, there is only so much flexibility in the system. Even the most talented new faculty member runs the risk of failure at a place that does not value or support that which he or she truly wants to do in the first place. Sacrificing those true loves can make you a freshly tenured faculty member who does not even enjoy the position that you have struggled so hard to attain. As you navigate the range between hell-bent for tenure and devil-may-care attitudes, do not despair if you cannot make a particular job work for you. Find

out who you are and what you need to be happy. There are other opportunities available and you should not be afraid to move on and try to find a better match.

Teaching in the Context of Local Culture

Along with finding an institution that is a good match for you, one that values teaching in the academic context as you do, you must also find your own style in the classroom. Once again, this is a matter of striking a balance. While you can ignore the expectations of neither your peers nor the students, one common mistake is to adopt the style of the prevailing departmental academic culture simply to blend in with new colleagues. Some adaptation to the local student-faculty culture must occur, but do not become a chameleon. Do not adopt a style simply because it seems consistent or because it seems to meet an expected image if that style does not work for you. Style includes everything from how you interact with students to how you structure your courses to how you present material in the classroom. Detail counts. Do you want scheduled office hours or an open-door policy? Do you assign projects or homework or papers or a combination of all three? Do you prefer chalkboards or overhead transparencies? It is important to establish an identity early as a teacher, as an educator, that is a genuine reflection of you. Think carefully about the goals for each course and what you want students to accomplish and experience by the end of your course.

You do not have to develop your teaching style in a vacuum. In fact, you probably should not try. There is a wealth of experience and support available at every institution, not to mention numerous good books and articles,⁷⁻¹⁴ and only the very foolhardy will try to reinvent the wheel. Certainly, different people need varying amounts of support. For example, one of us needs a great deal of personal interaction with colleagues and encouragement from nearby mentors, while the other is more of a free spirit and seeks involvement beyond the local department. Indeed, many faculty chose this profession because it offers a great deal of independence and autonomy. This is not the only road to success, however. Support is out there if you need it, but it will not necessarily come to you. Most schools have mentoring programs for new faculty that can be very helpful when they work. If not, search out mentoring for yourself. Be willing to look beyond your own department, especially if you find that your perspective or needs are not represented in your department. You can choose the type of support that you need. Support is available in the form of advice about pedagogy, lesson plans, or classroom review, depending on your needs. As you make decisions about your courses, your research, and your service to the university, find someone who will discuss these issues with you. The interaction between mentor and new faculty need not be formal. Even e-mail can be a useful medium of support. Again, the key is to know yourself. If you realize that you need support, encouragement, or simply collegiality, seek these things out.

Hints for Survival: Classroom Mechanics

In the previous two sections, we have emphasized the importance of figuring out how you as a new faculty member fit into the context of the institution and the local academic culture. There are, however, some bits of wisdom that we have come to value. Realize that the courses will not be perfect the first time you teach them. Do not spend large amounts of time boning up on advanced derivations; you are trying to teach the students, not impress them with your

*“Proceedings of the 2001 American Society for Engineering Education Annual Conference & Exposition
Copyright © 2001, American Society for Engineering Education”*

knowledge or intellect. Likewise, do not try to incorporate every new cutting-edge teaching method into your courses the first time through. The structure of the course should be elegant and graceful, not cluttered and forced. Make note of those good ideas because there will be opportunity to try them all in turn at some later date. Recognizing that the course will not be perfect the first time, take detailed notes about what worked and what did not work. Keep course notes organized and leave plenty of room with the lecture notes to reflect at the end of each lecture on the improvements that you will make next time. You will make mistakes and it is wise to admit these mistakes, sometimes even to the students. Be flexible and adaptable and prepared to discard techniques that clearly do not work. If, or rather when, you are asked a question to which you do not know the answer, simply admit that you do not know but remember to bring the answer with you to the next class. Again, write this down. The first years in a new faculty job are hectic, and these details are easy to forget.

It is the details that make the difference to your students. Let the students know what you are trying to accomplish. Let them know about the goals of the course and what you expect them to learn during the course. Remind them of where you have been and where you are going, and remember what it was like to be a student. Be honest with your students, but maintain some professional distance from them. After all, you are the one who assigns grades at the end of the term. This distance can also be a useful teaching tool when you make a lecture into a performance. Develop a flair for the dramatic, the funny, the amazing. Remind them (and yourself) that learning is fun, that the material and its applications can be exciting. Reinforce this message by remembering to smile. Even laugh occasionally! Finally, work your strengths into the learning experience and be creative.

Conclusion

Teaching can be an incredibly rewarding experience, but it is not necessarily a calling. To enjoy the experience of teaching and be effective in the classroom, new faculty must learn to put teaching into perspective in both their own lives and the culture in which they work. First and foremost, it is important to confirm that there is a good match between your personal priorities and those of your institution. Find the combination of goal-focused and process-focused orientations that work best for you. Frequent self-reflection is important, especially when undertaking a new job, but it is critical when navigating the many paths from unpacking books in your new office to tenure and long-term happiness as a professor. While the prospect of quitting a tenure track job and starting over may seem overwhelming, it may be the best way to eventually achieve satisfaction. If you got one job you can get another.

Once you have established your priorities, it is important to develop your own teaching style. Rather than trying to mimic those around you or working in a vacuum, search out the mentoring and support that you need. Support for teaching is available at every institution, but only you can determine how much and what type of support is necessary for your success and satisfaction. Try to be proactive in your approach, for the help you need is unlikely to arrive uninvited. Finally, remember to be patient. Becoming an effective and confident instructor takes time and practice. New classes can be especially frustrating for even the most promising new professor,

so make thoughtful notes after every class and be ready to do things differently the next time around.

Bibliography

1. Sherwood, J. L., J. N. Petersen, and J. M. Grandzielwski, "Faculty Mentoring: A Unique Approach to Training Graduate Students How to Teach," *Journal of Engineering Education*, Vol. 86, No. 2, April 1997, pp. 119-123
2. Gosink, J. P., and R. A. Streveler, "Bringing Adjunct Engineering Faculty into the Learning Community," *Journal of Engineering Education*, Vol. 89, No. 1, Jan. 2000, pp. 47-51
3. Conley, C. H., S. J. Ressler, T. A. Lenox, and J. W. Samples, "Teaching Teachers to Teach Engineering – T⁴E," *Journal of Engineering Education*, Vol., 89, No. 1, Jan. 2000, pp. 31-38
4. Kelly, V. M., "Time Out For Some Timely Advice," *ASEE Prism*, September 1995, pp. 30-33
5. Greene, T. J., and N. E. Van Kuren, "Preparing for Promotion and Tenure," *ASEE Prism*, March 1997, pp. 26-29
6. Hoback, A., and U. Dutta, "Faculty Experience," *Journal of Engineering Education*, Vol. 88, No. 3, July 1999, pp. 269-273
7. Wankat, P. C. and F. S. Oreovicz, *Teaching Engineering*, <http://www.asee.org/publications/teaching.cfm>
8. Hauser, D. L., E. S. Halsey, J. M. Weinfeld, and J. C. Fox, "What Works & What Doesn't in Undergraduate Teaching," *ASEE Prism*, November 1995, pp. 21-25
9. Panitz, B., "Stuck in the Lecture Rut?," *ASEE Prism*, February 1996, pp. 27-30
10. Richards, L. G., "Lights, Camera, Teach!," *ASEE Prism*, February 1997, pp. 24-27
11. Stice, J. E., "10 Habits of Highly Effective Teachers," *ASEE Prism*, November 1998, pp. 28-31
12. Wankat, P., and F. Oreovicz, "How Much is Enough?," *ASEE Prism*, September 2000, p. 41
13. Klinger, A., C. J. Finelli, and D. D. Budny, "Improving the Classroom Environment," *Proceedings of the 30th Annual ASEE/IEEE Frontiers in Education Conference*, Kansas City, MO, October 2000
14. Magnan, R., *147 Practical Tips for Teaching Professors*, Atwood Publishing (Madison, Wisconsin), 1990

JEFFREY L. NEWCOMER

Jeffrey L. Newcomer is an Assistant Professor of Manufacturing Engineering Technology at Western Washington University. He received a B.S. in 1988 and M.Eng. in 1989, both in Aeronautical Engineering, a M.S. in Science and Technology Studies in 1993 and a Ph.D. in Mechanical Engineering in 1994, all from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Prior to joining Western Washington University, Dr. Newcomer held positions at The University of Wisconsin – Platteville and New England Institute of Technology, and also taught as an Adjunct Assistant Professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

KRISTEN A. LARSON

Kristen A. Larson is an Assistant Professor of Physics at Pacific Lutheran University. She received a B.S. in Physics in 1993 from the University of California at San Diego, and M.S. and Ph.D. degrees, also in Physics, from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1996 and 1999, respectively. Dr. Larson's research interests are in the area of the extinction of background starlight by dust and star formation in clouds located at high latitude in the Milky Way. Prior to joining Pacific Lutheran University, Dr. Larson taught as an Adjunct Lecturer and Research Associate at Western Washington University.