

WHAT ARE YOU DOING THE REST OF YOUR LIFE? STRATEGIES FOR FOSTERING FACULTY VITALITY AND DEVELOPMENT MID-CAREER

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ABSTRACT

Faculty mid-career sometimes become cynical about and disengaged from their teaching. The consequences can be severe, from alienating their students in the classroom to causing faculty to abandon teaching altogether. This paper explores this vocational disconnect; and, more importantly, proposes remedies for re-energizing faculty; for helping them to bloom anew.

*And you—what of your rushed
and useful life? Imagine setting it all down--
papers, plans appointments, everything--
leaving only a note: "Gone
to the fields to be lovely. Be back
when I'm through with blooming."*

Ungar (1995)

INTRODUCTION

Patrice, an Assistant Professor in the School of Business, at an urban university stood on the sky bridge looking at the white-capped mountain on that misty May morning. Anne, a professor in the Graduate School of Education, had just surprised her with some exciting news. "I'm moving to New York," she blurted out to Patrice. This summer. I'm so excited about my new position with Hunter College."

"We'll miss you," Patrice offered while she thought to herself: "You are one lucky professor, going to the Big Apple where you won't have to deal with a possible faculty strike, overcrowded classrooms with ceiling tiles raining down on the unsuspecting; so much construction noise that students can't hear my lectures; dirty bathrooms; and students

demanding more coaching time and instant email responses, all the while appearing resentful about the creative assignments that I'm working so hard on." As she wandered back to her hot office (the university hadn't turned the air conditioning on yet in their efforts to hold utility costs down), she wondered if she was in the right profession. She wondered what had happened to her original enthusiasm for her job that now seemed to be replaced with some sort of free floating dread and discouragement.

In conversations with educators about what they found fulfilling in a workshop regarding teaching that the author facilitated, responses were varied. Participants talked about the value of seeing learning occur among their students; seeing the transformation in their students; observing the 'aha' experience; getting positive feedback from their students; experiencing the excitement and passion that comes with teaching a topic that one knows well; and connecting with stu-

dents through this discovery experience. People attending represented faculty members from the local university and a neighboring community college.

However, somewhere during mid-career some faculty begin to experience doubts about their effectiveness and can become plagued with uncertainties about their career choice.

In an article addressing problems and challenges facing faculty mid-career, Romano, Hoelsing, O'Donovan, and Weinsheimer (2004) indicated that "the number of faculty in higher education reaching the mid and later years of their careers is significant" (p. 2). If this lack of motivation is indeed an issue for many, it would seem that the challenge of helping faculty to continue to grow and develop is one that will not disappear soon but will, rather, continue to increasingly confront administrators.

William Bridges writes about an important transition that often takes place in a person's work-life: from being motivated by demonstrating technical competence to being motivated by finding meaning, value, and purpose...from exploring the question of *how* to the question of *why* (Bridges, 2004). They may experience a shift in motivation from the desire for exhibiting technical expertise to a focus on value and purpose to more centrally define their efforts.

The world knows all about competence. Most evaluation and rewards are determined by a person's competence.... In business and the professions, you get in and get ahead by demonstrating your competence.....But somewhere along the way—as early as thirty-five for some and as late as fifty-five for others—competence begins to lose its force as a source of motivation (Bridges, pp. 84-85).

No longer motivated by the thought of teaching, yet again, that introductory class, the tenured professor may try being proactive by seeking help at the center for teaching at her university or, sadly, just deciding to continue using her yellowing transparencies instead of creating readable and engaging power point slides. The "why bother?" question seems to be constantly throbbing in her head.

BACKGROUND: I'M TOO TIRED TO CARE ANY MORE

There are many reasons why faculty may experience "career blues." As Clawson and Haskins have observed, "They have lost their motivation for their work and the pleasure they once derived from it. They have become...disengaged from their work, and although they may partially recognize that fact, they feel lost and uncertain about what to do about it" (Clawson and Haskins, 2000, p. 91). Because they may lack enthusiasm, energy, or excitement for the job, the organization as a whole loses, too, because faculty are often only doing a mediocre job; they are being "just good enough" to get by.

Other authors have written about the lack of vitality among mid-career faculty and suggest that there are many reasons for this condition ranging from burnout, dissatisfaction, low morale and workload issues to changes in the student population, the tenure system, reward structure, and general dissatisfaction with administrative changes and departmental climate (Eastman, 1996; Johnson, 1989; Kelly, 1990; and Meyers, 1991). Bowen and Schuster (1986) describe a professorate with a sense of "stuckness" regarding their career projectory. Palmer (1998) has another name for this: "losing heart."

We lose heart, in part, because teaching is a daily exercise in vulnerability. I need not reveal personal secrets to feel naked in front of a class. I need only parse a sentence or work a proof on the board while my students doze off or pass notes.

No matter how technical my subject may be, the things I teach are things I care about—and what I care about helps define my selfhood (Palmer, 1998, p. 17).

In a chapter devoted to discussing issues of power in the classroom, Weimer wades into the conversation about vulnerability when she asserts that faculty are motivated to control "because teaching makes us vulnerable" (Weimer, 2002, p. 26). She continues her analysis of classroom control, power issues and vulnerability by adding that "Most faculty do not feel vulnerable in the

classroom because students are not learning” (Weimer, p. 27).

Whatever the cause, the institution of higher learning loses out on the wasted potential of faculty. Often this condition goes undiagnosed and is shrugged off as simply being part of a mid-life crisis.

Observing and commenting on this condition is not limited to those in academe, however. In a chapter entitled, “Renewal,” Sheehy has written that “The point is to defeat the entropy that says slow down, give it up, watch TV and open up another pathway that can enliven all the senses, including the sense that one is not just an old dog” (Sheehy, 1974, p. 346). She further suggests that if we don’t grow, we aren’t really living. She continues this theme in her follow-up book, *New Passages*, where she elaborates on what she terms the “meaning crisis” which, she asserts is the major preoccupation of the second half of our lives (Sheehy, 1995). In a similar vein, Boldt (1999) asks a related question, “How can we make of work a genuine art—an expression of our deepest selves?” (p. 39).

Bridges writes, “The task is to find the connection between the change in your work or career and the underlying development rhythm of your life” (Bridges, p. 86). It is these questions that often preoccupy faculty mid-career in their search for meaningful answers.

Boldt (1999) continues by suggesting that one’s life’s work should reflect four qualities: integrity, service, enjoyment, and excellence (p. 51). In contrast, in a study of university professors mid-life, Karpiak (1997) has written that the population she sampled is reflective of four attitudes regarding their careers: meaning, malaise, marginality, and mattering. Part of her population clearly cares about teaching and making a difference but others feel marginalized and view the university to be a “cold, isolated, fragmented environment” (p. 34). These attitudes manifest themselves through “fatigue, exhaustion, low self-esteem, and need for renewal” (p. 30).

Certainly many authors have suggested a variety of answers to this sense of disconnect by faculty (Karpiak, 1996; Feldman & Paulsen, 1999; Romano et al, 2004; and Kelly, 1990). This writer

describes one method for engaging faculty that has proven motivating in a variety of settings.

ONE REMEDY: AN APPRECIATIVE WORKSHOP

Phillips (1997) has written about the creative potential in all of us. She states that “Creativity is not something that has to be worked at, but something that is released automatically when we are on the right path” (Phillips, p. 163). Bryan, Cameron and Allen (1998) maintain that all of us are creative and that creativity is teachable and that all of us have the capacity to become more creative than we already are (Bryan et al., pp. xx-xxi). Crafting a workshop based on these assumptions became the means through which to revitalize discouraged faculty in order to help them reconnect with their creative core. The workshop has been presented to university faculty, to a state conference for women in higher education; and another state conference involving faculty and staff who work in early childhood training. It was designed to be the first step in a journey to help faculty reconnect with their original enthusiasm and passion for teaching and faculty life. It was about creating opportunities for the participants and facilitator to generate “... a spark of possibility for others to share” (Zander and Zander, 2000, p. 125) It was also about creating a space so that faculty could hear what they had to say of value about their vocational directions. A variety of approaches were used including reflection and journaling, viewing film, listening to music, reading and writing poetry and experiencing a variety of art forms. An added bonus was the creation of an immediate support system.

Much of what happened in the workshop was designed to get momentum going and help faculty tune into their natural gifts. Palmer has written about this recalibration process: “Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you.” (Palmer, 2000, p. 3). The intent at this point was not to spend time identifying the various sources of their malaise; but, rather, to determine aspects of their professional lives that they found fulfilling, celebrate those forces, and, most importantly, discuss how

to expand those influences in their daily lives. The emphasis was on having fun and letting go; sometimes a challenge for academics.

When queried regarding why they had decided to attend the session, the participants responded with a variety of reasons:

- Curious about the topic
- Feeling burned out
- Wanting to reorient my career during my sabbatical
- Wanting to help colleagues re-energize
- In need of revitalization
- Looking to “spark up my teaching”

After an appropriate introduction and overview of the workshop, participants were asked to do an ice breaker, borrowed from the world of improvisation. The Word-at-a-Time Story is designed to help energize workshop participants and also foster a feeling of togetherness since the success of this activity truly depends on everyone’s participation. It is an exercise that builds sentences one word at a time. As simple as this may sound, it is usually a challenge for most and can help to focus attention on themes of the workshop as well as emphasize the skill of “letting go” since participants are only able to add one word at a time to the flow of the sentence. It was also fun and helped people to shift gears, leave other worries behind them, and generally lighten up a bit (Huffaker and West, 2005).

Appreciative Inquiry

After a quick debrief, the workshop shifted gears and background was provided with regard to Appreciative Inquiry, a philosophy and world view that inquires about what is “right” in an organization and one’s life (Elliott, 1999). It invites workshop participants to view potential within the present rather than focusing on problems to be solved. It is an approach to change that is based on strengths rather than weaknesses, envisioning what is possible rather than analyzing what is not (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). Appreciative Inquiry (AI) builds on that view as a way to create a frame or perspective for an imagined future based on the forces in one’s life

that are energetic, joyful, life-giving and transformative. It is a very flexible process useful for both personal reflection as well as for engaging people in building the kinds of organizations that they would like to work in (Watkins and Mohr, 2001). It unleashes creativity through affirming, participatory, and energizing processes (Preskill and Coghlan, 2003).

The AI approach consists of four phases: discovering, dreaming, and designing and delivering (Watkins & Mohr, 2001).

A scene from the film “Mr. Holland’s Opus” was shown. It is the scene in which Richard Dreyfus, who portrays a high school music teacher, helps a very discouraged clarinet player find her “clarinet voice” and experience a moment of profound joy through her playing. It served to focus participants on how a teacher can make a difference using an appreciative approach and also helped to frame a subsequent exercise. In the discussion after viewing the film clip, participants were eager to offer examples of teachers, coaches and friends who had made a positive difference in terms of their development. The discussion usually overflows with excellent examples and provides an opportunity to reinforce some of the basic ideas of AI.

A short explanation of the various phases of the AI process followed. After that brief introduction, the participants were asked to briefly interview one another and answer the following two questions which represent the first phase of AI, the discovery phase:

1. Describe the best time you have had as an instructor...when you felt most alive and most excited about your work. What made it that way? Who was involved? What was it about you and your contribution that helped this to happen? Describe in detail.
2. What are the things that you value deeply about yourself and your job? Without being humble, what do you value about yourself as a person and as an instructor?

After a few moments of hesitation, the room was filled with conversation, laughter, energy and

joy. Everyone had lots to say; this portion of the exercise lasted for twenty minutes. It should be mentioned that this introductory phase could certainly last longer given other time parameters. When the author was first introduced to AI, she spent an hour over lunch with another workshop participant “discovering” what each found uplifting about their respective jobs.

Next, groups of six participants were formed and their earlier stories were shared. This part of the conversation took another twenty minutes and represented a continuation and refinement of the discovery phase of AI. It should be added that this phase can sometimes take much longer; but usually enough ground can be covered in 20-30 minutes to help the group determine the common themes that emerged from the process of sharing their various stories. The groups were asked to brainstorm a list of themes that were evident in the stories that represented highpoints, life-giving forces, and ideas about what college teaching was like when things were at their best. Hammond has suggested requesting that each person share the best story or most ‘quotable quote.’ She also mentions that this sharing will surface common “themes of success” which are critical to the rest of the process (Hammond, 1998, p. 37).

Some of the themes that were shared on the board with the larger group were:

- Seeing learning occur
- Observing transformation in students
- Getting positive feedback in the form of applause
- Feeling excitement and passion through teaching a subject you know well
- Creating a bigger vision
- Honoring student contributions
- What’s inside shines through
- At a crossroad.

After a discussion of what the themes meant, groups were then asked to do a bit of dreaming about what their careers would look like if they woke up in five years, happy and content with their jobs. Having some soothing music playing in the background often helps to facilitate this

process. Scenes from “Extraordinary Visions,” a film by Dewitt Jones, a photographer for the National Geographic, that “celebrates what’s right with the world,” were shown and helped to promote positive reflection and conversation about the natural beauty that surrounds us. Viewing the film also reinforced the idea about what was joyful as well as inspiring with regard to their academic positions. It should be noted that comparing notes among members in this collaborative fashion almost always guarantees that the conversation will be very positive.

Lively discussion followed and participants were asked to generate a list of locations on campus where reflection and repose were possible. Several art galleries were mentioned as possibilities in addition to the park blocks that are centrally located at this urban campus. Ideally there would be adequate time during the workshop to take a walk to one of these sanctuaries and continue to reflect. Other ideas included walking to the nearby city art museum; touring the university community garden; and observing the various sculptures available on campus. In addition, another possibility at this point could be sharing poetry that acts as a trigger for further reflection such as “The Way It Is” by William Stafford (1998) and “Wild Geese” by Mary Oliver (2004).

Additional discussion prompts that encourage the process include:

- List five things that nourish me as an instructor;
- If I knew there was no way to fail, I would....
- What are the three principles that guide me as an academic?
- If all my dreams come true about teaching, I would like...?
- List one specific thing I can do this week to make this dream happen.

It should be noted that sometimes participants in this workshop have been called upon to create an artful response to the dreaming phase. In the case of those who attended the state conference dealing with early childhood training, one group shared the following poem they had written after their dreaming conversation:

*Imagine no contention
People working together*

*Imagine no complaining
People excited to work*

*Imagine everyone being
Happy, healthy and safe*

*Imagine no complacency
People caring for each other*

*Imagine no crying
People filled with laughter*

*Imagine everyone being
Happy, healthy and safe.*

Finally, the participants were asked to do some action planning and share ideas with each other that they wanted to explore during the current term as well as make a commitment to report the results of that activity. These activities reflect the designing and delivering phases of AI. Contact information was exchanged and connections with others were finalized in order to reinforce moving ahead with their ideas and results. This could take the form of a “recalibration phase” as discussed by Levin (2005). “Little by little, we get in touch with that elusive potential, our passions” (Levin, p. 20).

RESULTS

In their written evaluations regarding what they found most helpful about the workshop, participants have commented that:

- It got me thinking about the future and focused on the positive
- Connecting with other faculty with similar struggles was useful
- Positively provocative, a non-pedagogical interlude
- Reminder to allow the staleness to go away
- Talking with colleagues about teaching, positive focus
- Enjoyed the opportunity to reflect.

A number of faculty also commented about how reassuring it was to be able to converse with other faculty about these issues. One specifically mentioned that “I especially liked the phrase that

people in mid-life are no longer motivated to find competence but are motivated to find meaning.”

NEXT STEPS

Since the workshop represents but a first step in the process of rediscovery, the following steps might be considered in order to create a pathway toward continuation of this “recalibration” process.

1. Create an ongoing support group at the university in order to provide assistance and resources regarding revitalizing faculty. This might most effectively be done by emulating the inspiring “Mid-Career Teaching Program” that Romano and others have written about (Romano et al, 2004). It might also be housed in a center for learning if the college has one.
2. Consider linking up with other like-minded groups at regional universities in the area as well as neighboring community colleges. Creating an online “community of practice” or learning community would be an innovative way to foster this development (Sherer, Shea, and Kristensen, 2003).
3. Design a regional conference focused on this issue.
4. Do follow-up interviews with workshop members to gauge the effectiveness of the workshop and improve the content. This could be the beginning of an important longitudinal study. Use internet survey techniques to collect data (e.g., Survey Monkey).
5. Establish a blog in order to share related ideas and reflections. Consider establishing a page on Facebook.
6. A more ambitious next step might be approaching the administration with a comprehensive career development strategy as several community colleges and other institutions of higher learning

have done (Baldwin, 1982; Sherer et al., 2003). There are many models available for replication. Although this step would certainly go beyond the design and intent of the original workshop, having a conversation with the administration could be an energizing and motivating step by itself.

Researchers have identified that people who believe they make a difference in the role they value most in life actually live longer than those who don't experience a similar sense of control (*Harvard Women's Health Watch*, 2001). For many, work represents that critical role. Faced with an aging baby boomer workforce, the prospect of keeping faculty engaged remains a challenging as well as intriguing one.

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