Playing the Academic Game

Explicit rules to level the playing field

Bryn Williams-Jones

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A BrynStorming
Project

Playing the Academic Game: Explicit rules to level the playing field
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A compilation of posts from the *BrynStorming* blog that make explicit the implicit norms and rules of academia. Structured in 5 major sections, each post addresses a particular topic or issue, is anchored in the personal experiences of the author, and provides practical suggestions so that all can compete fairly in the academic game.

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Contents

For all those who are passionate about learning and wish to play the academic game

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Thank you!

Preface

Photo by Florian Klauer on Unsplash

I started the *BrynStorming* blog in February 2023 because I needed a creative outlet for my thoughts. My role as director of a large university department meant that I had little time for scientific writing, and I missed this aspect of my job as professor. The free-form nature of a blog (and the excellent platform provided by Substack) gave me a space to write when and where I could; and it enabled me to find "my voice", that is, a sharing of experiences and lessons learned over more than 30 years in academia. Much to my surprise, I found that I had so much to say that I was able to produce a weekly blog; two years on, I've now published 85 posts and have no shortage of ideas for future publications.

As an ethicist long interested by questions of justice, an important motivator for this project has been my need to respond to the injustices that I perceived in academia. Growing up in an academic family, I had the good fortune to be in an environment where I could learn the "rules of the game" and so succeed in my studies and subsequent academic career. But throughout this journey, I've been struck by how many students or junior researchers fail (e.g., in obtaining funding, not getting the jobs they desire), not because they didn't have the intellectual abilities or drive, but simply because they didn't know what was expected of them or how to best present themselves in a competitive environment. And this wasn't simply their fault – the rules are rarely made explicit, and that's unfair.

This book brings together a selection of posts published between 2023 and 2025, organized into 5 major sections – *The Academic Career Path*, *Professional Identity*, *University Life*, *Productivity and Creativity*, and *Multiple Responsibilities and Mental Health* – with the aim of making explicit the often-implicit norms and rules of academic life, so that all who want to can fairly play the academic game.

Chapter 1: The Academic Career Path

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Should I do a PhD?

Ask the right questions before starting this journey

Bryn Williams-Jones
Mar 14, 2023

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/should-i-do-a-phd-devrais-je-faire
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/28367

Photo by Evan Dennis on Unsplash

Summary

Doing a PhD is hard, so it's important to help students ask the right questions, to know whether this journey is right for them, right now.

For those of us who've been in academia for many years, and for graduate students who've more recently discovered the joy of doing research and the pleasures (and challenges!) of navigating the stimulating university environment, it may seem "obvious" that the next steps after a Masters degree will be a PhD, followed by a post-doc, and eventually a career as a professor.

But the hours, weeks and years spent doing a PhD instead of starting a job (and having a salary), the stress of applying for scholarships and learning to publish (which is marked by innumerable rejections), and the effort invested in applying for a much-coveted professor position, are all non-negligible costs. Let's be honest: a PhD and an academic career are not for everyone. This "natural" path must be questioned before embarking on what is a long (and costly) journey.

So, when students come to me wanting to do a PhD, I systematically ask them: ***Why do you want to do a PhD?*** This is the start of a conversation that I would encourage all students (and professors) to have regarding the best path to take.

Questions to ask

- What are your career objectives?
  - What will you do when you finish your PhD?
  - Do you want to become a researcher, a professor, a consultant, a professional? Other?
  - And do you need a PhD to achieve these objectives, because it gives you the necessary status and recognition?
- Do you love doing research? Do you love teaching? What drives you?
- What program do you want to follow, and at which university?
- Have you identified a potential supervisor? This is a long-term relationship, so choose wisely!
  - Have you started building a shared project?
  - Is there "positive chemistry" in your exchanges, and a shared view of your PhD objectives and expectations?
  - Does your supervisor have the expertise, resources, team, etc., to supervise your project?
- How are you going to fund your 4-5 (or more) years of study – tuition, rent, research and travel expenses?
  - Do you have personal funds?
  - Will your supervisor support you financially, and if so, to what extent and for how long?
  - Are you eligible and competitive for scholarships?
  - Does your desired PhD program provide an integrated funding package (scholarships, teaching assistantships, etc.)?
  - Are the funds available sufficient to cover your needs for the coming years?

- Are you an international student?
    - Do you have to pay additional student fees?
    - Are you eligible for scholarships? Are you allowed to do part-time work?
    - Can you get a student visa in a timely fashion?
    - Will you be coming alone or with family (spouse, children)? If the latter, how will you cover your and their living expenses?
    - Do you plan to stay in country and build a career here, or return to your home country?
- Is now the best time to do a PhD?

Key take-home message

If you don't have the answers to these questions, consider doing something else and building your career elsewhere. In some domains, you can come back to a PhD when you have more experience and are able to answer these questions.

Do a PhD because it's right for you, not because it's what's normal or expected.

Choosing a Good PhD Supervisor

Finding the right person is not easy

Bryn Williams-Jones
Mar 28, 2023

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/choosing-a-good-phd-supervisor-choisir
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/28369

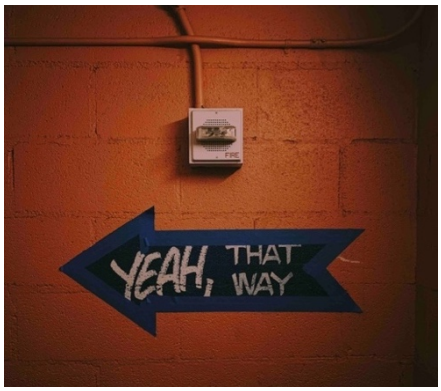

Photo by Jon Tyson on Unsplash

Summary

The PhD is a long journey, even a marathon, and it requires a good supervisor (or co-supervisors) to guide the project and the student's intellectual journey. So it's very important to seek a good supervisor at the start – but that also means having a clear and realistic view of what a supervisor can and cannot be, and what they can or cannot do for their students, during the PhD.

The PhD is a long journey – often taking 4-6 years (or longer!) – and one that requires a good supervisor (or co-supervisors) to guide the project and the student's intellectual journey.

I had the incredibly good fortune to find a PhD supervisor who was an intellectual guide, a mentor, and a friend. He was someone who pushed me to think critically and to challenge myself, who created opportunities for me, and who also let me grow and become an independent scholar. But I know that this is not always the case, that some (even many) PhD students do not have such a positive and rewarding experience, for various reasons. Some of these problems lie squarely on the shoulders of supervisors and their institutions, but others are within the purview of students to manage.

What follows are some suggestions for things upon which students can have some control during their process of choosing a PhD supervisor.

Future PhD students: manage your expectations!

It's important to seek a good supervisor but be realistic about what a supervisor can and cannot be and what they can or cannot do for you during your PhD.

What a Supervisor Can Be

- A teacher who is present and available
- A guide during this important stage of your academic journey
- A constructive critic who challenges you to do better
- An editor
- Someone you can trust
- A research collaborator
- A networker who opens doors and creates opportunities
- Someone who can help you find funding
- A mentor and career counsellor
- An advocate and champion for your success during and after the PhD
- A friend

What a Supervisor Cannot Be

- A replacement for your own hard work
- The "ghost author" of your thesis
- A free psychotherapist
- A surrogate parent

What a Supervisor Should Not Be

- An absentee
- A name on a form
- Definitely not a lover!

Know yourself, and you will know the sort of supervisor who will be a good fit. And this will allow you to better judge whether there's chemistry and potential in your preliminary meetings as you're negotiating the supervision and future PhD project. But accept that this person cannot necessarily be all things, at all times.

The PhD is fundamentally your journey, not your supervisor's – they already have a PhD! So, recognize your needs and responsibilities, as well as those of your supervisor, which may be different. Hopefully this clarity enables you to pick the right person and negotiate mutually agreeable objectives and expectations, so that you have the awesome PhD that you hope for.

Winning at the Scholarship Game

You need to learn the rules of the game and not be discouraged

Bryn Williams-Jones
Nov 21, 2023

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/scholarship-game
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Photo by Maarten van den Heuvel on Unsplash

Summary

Applying for scholarships is a high stress game and one where the rules often aren't clear, which is unfair. But they are also an important means to learning key academic skills, such as project management and scientific writing. So put your best game forward and don't despair when you fail. Learn from the experience, try again and find a way to win.

Having come through the Fall blitz where I supported current and former PhD students with doctoral and postdoctoral scholarship applications, I was struck by three things: 1) the significant work that is required to apply for 2) what is a relatively small amount of money in the main scholarships, and 3) the inequity of some super scholarships that are worth much more but are insanely hard to obtain.

As I coached my students, proofed their applications, and updated or wrote last minute letters of reference because one online grant system crashed near the deadline and another didn't prompt me to submit a letter even though it was required, it became evident how this process is a high stress game for all involved, but one where the rules are far from clear for those most concerned, i.e., students. If students don't know the rules of the game, then they can't compete with those who do, and that's unfair.

To start, I'm first going to rant about what is wrong with the student funding system in Canada, because it feels good to gripe even knowing that I can't change the system… but maybe this will help encourage those with influence to make changes so the system becomes more equitable. Second, this game is one in which I learned the rules from my mentors and through personal experience: I was fully funded with an annual award during my PhD and post-doc, and I've also been on the other side as a reviewer of scholarship applications.

Existing structural inequities will continue to stack the competition in favour of some students, so my hope is that sharing tips on how to play the game will help more students have a chance at winning in the academic scholarship competition.

Rant

This Fall (actually starting in the summer), my students and I invested a huge amount of time (literally months) and effort to crafting innovative, detailed, rigorous and thus hopefully competitive dossiers in order to have a chance at increasingly limited number of multi-year scholarships. These scholarship applications are now little different from major grant applications written by seasoned researchers: both have, over the years, increased in length and requirements (e.g., say the same thing differently in three places, justify why the project is ground-breaking), and become much more competitive.

Despite increased government funding invested in Canadian granting councils, budgets have not kept pace with demand and the number of applications far outstrips the funds available, with the result that many excellent dossiers are not funded – the success rates are depressingly low. So, in part to help evaluation committees select and fund "the best", more criteria have been added and additional variables provided to evaluate dossiers, to separate the wheat from the chaff. But in the process, this further bureaucratization – which unfortunately has not been accompanied by improved functionality on scholarship websites (they're decidedly 1990s in form and function) – has also massively increased the workload for volunteer reviewers, with the result that many now refuse to participate in the process.

Second, scholarship award amounts from provincial and federal granting agencies have not kept pace with inflation and the cost of living. I was shocked to learn – I've clearly had my head in the clouds since becoming a professor – that the amounts that students receive today have barely increased from what I got as a PhD student and post-doc 20 years ago! In the late 1990s and early 2000s, I was able to live comfortably with my scholarships because they were non-taxable and at a level well above minimum wage, allowing me to study and do research full-time. Today, many scholarships in Canada leave students effectively below the poverty line, so they have to top up with other smaller scholarships and part-time jobs.

Third, not all scholarships are created equal. While the "basic" scholarships are already extremely competitive but offer insufficient funds with which to live, the highly prestigious scholarships like Vanier and Trudeau Foundation, or those for students working on AI (the current buzz for funding), may pay double or triple what other students are receiving…and as a consequence, they're insanely competitive. To succeed with these super scholarships, students often have to perfectly fit their project into a niche subject area, have an impressive publication record (equivalent to junior professors), and have been actively involved in volunteer work and community outreach (preferably something that tugs on the heart-strings and changes the world, like solving the housing crisis). One has to wonder when these candidates had the time to sleep, think or live.

Yes, this model is perverse and even counterproductive to producing the "highly qualified personnel" needed for our knowledge economies. Who would want to play a game with such stressful conditions and a low chance of success?

Yes, there needs to be a lot more money invested in higher education institutions and infrastructure, in research grants… and in scholarships so that talented students do not have to juggle multiple part-time jobs with their studies, while also accumulating substantial debts from student loans.

But the harsh reality is that student funding in Canada and elsewhere remains largely insufficient to support the number of meritorious students applying for scholarships to support their studies and so progress into meaningful and rewarding careers. And, unfortunately, I don't see this situation changing in the near future. How then, in such an environment, can talented students play the academic game without losing themselves in the grind of work and demoralizing competition, where failure is more frequent than success?

Learn to Play the Game

First, you have to accept that it's a game, that you need to know the rules and learn how to use them to your advantage. For example, in Quebec, we have a parallel research funding system to that of the Canadian federal granting agencies, but with a particular focus on supporting the progression of junior scholars. Students (and early career researchers) can legitimately apply at the same time with the same proposal to two competitions, i.e., provincial and federal. If successful, an awardee can only accept one award – no double dipping! – but they can list the other on their CV as awarded but declined, which is an important mark of excellence.

Second, accept that scholarship writing is an experimental and experiential process, and like much of research in general, will involve far more failure than success. Writing scholarship applications is a great learning opportunity because every application gets better with time, forcing you to put down your ideas for your research project in more nuanced, clearer and more accessible ways. It hurts to get a rejection but it's not personal, it's part of the game – learning to accept and to learn from failure is the path to success.

Finally, remember that you're invariably writing for an interdisciplinary audience who are not experts on your topic. Show them why your research project is interesting, pertinent, and advances knowledge, and that you've the skills to make this research happen. The challenge is writing in a way that is both sophisticated and accessible – again, practice makes perfect.

Tips and tricks

- Plan a scholarship application calendar based on the previous year's deadlines, with automated reminders, so that you have lots of time to prepare.
- Start working well in advance of the deadlines to draft content and then solicit feedback from fellow students and your professors.
- Start thinking about the professors who you know well and can ask to write strong letters of reference.
- Read all the instructions, twice, and follow them closely.

- Write an exciting research proposal that's feasible (based on context, your skills, etc.), with details on the problem, methods, and (realistic) deliverables.
- Do not rely on one application. Apply for all major scholarships for which you're remotely eligible.
- Recycle content from your major scholarship application to use in small scholarships or awards (e.g., as pieces of the larger project) and in future applications; the proposal will continue to improve as your project evolves.
- Apply for lots of little scholarships and prizes because these can help you develop a track record of success and fund your work while you keep trying for the major scholarship, e.g., travel awards, research centre prizes for best paper, government awards for youth or professionals, graduate program scholarships.
- Make sure you've updated your CV, both your complete Word document (which should be maximally inclusive) and any online platforms, such as the dreaded CCV in Canada, ORCID, or LinkedIn.
- Proof, proof, proof! Nothing is more annoying for reviewers than reading an application full of bad formatting, spelling mistakes or typographical errors: this undermines your credibility and is an easy criteria for exclusion in comparison with more polished applications.
- Do not do last minute applications as they're invariably a waste of time and effort that could be better spent on other work (i.e., publications) or personal activities. If a competition appears on short notice, that you didn't know about, apply only if you already have a strong package from other applications and can quickly recycle it… and make sure your professors have already written strong letters that they can easily update.

Other funding sources

Explore other funding opportunities in addition to scholarships, because alongside generating much needed income, they also look great on a CV, showcasing the fact that you have pertinent skills and expertise… and that others have valued you highly enough to recruit you to a paid position.

- ***Research assistantships:*** with professors, working on their research projects; these provide opportunities to participate in publishing, learn research skills, start networking, attend conferences, etc.
- ***Research coordinator:*** here you demonstrate organizational and leadership abilities, have opportunities to mentor more junior colleagues, participate in publications, networking, etc.
- ***Teaching assistantships:*** you learn valuable teaching skills, how to evaluate work, begin experimenting with knowledge translation, etc.
- ***Short or long-term contracts:*** often with research centres or networks, but sometimes NGOs or government agencies; you engage in advanced knowledge translation, extended your networking, demonstrate research expertise, and participate in the production of scientific reports.

Conclusion

Even if you're not successful the first time (or subsequently) with applications for major scholarships, it's important to keep trying and leveraging all opportunities that are available. While this is evidently time consuming, it's also a way to generate some revenue to pay tuition and living expenses; and it can be a very important addition to your CV because it shows a track record of employment, productivity and "get up and go" that will be very positively viewed by scholarship review committees, but also by future employers.

Applying for scholarships is also an important means to learning key academic skills, such as project management and scientific writing; they are part of the academic game where, as researchers, we apply for money to fund knowledge production. So, recognize that the game is hard and highly competitive; understand the rules; and put your best game forward. Don't despair when you fail, which is inevitable; instead learn from the experience, try again and so find a way and place to win at the game.

The PhD Marathon

You have to learn to pace yourself, and to run your own race

Bryn Williams-Jones
Apr 2, 2024

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Photo by Mārtiņš Zemlickis on Unsplash

Summary

A multi-year project, the PhD is not a sprint but a long-distance race; it's not for the faint of heart, nor for those without the resources, staying power and support. You have to prepare and learn to pace yourself, but also to profit from an incredibly stimulating but sometimes gruelling race. Crossing the finish line is the reward, but so too are the lessons learned, experience gained, and friendships developed along the way.

Once you've decided to do a PhD (for many different reasons), and then chosen a good supervisor, you embark on a stimulating but lengthy intellectual and personal journey at the end of which you will hope to receive the coveted title of Doctor. While in Europe PhDs may take 3 years – because there may be little or no coursework required – in North America, PhDs normally take 4-6 years if all goes well, with the first 1-2 years focused on coursework. Unlike the Masters, which is a 2-year sprint, the PhD is a marathon – so you have to learn to pace yourself.

Another metaphor for the PhD journey, shared with me by women colleagues and mentors, was that of a pregnancy. The PhD involves numerous ups and downs, and sometimes you get sick to your stomach and fed-up with the topic. There is sustained emotional and financial investment by the student and their family in supporting what is a very lengthy and often exhausting project. In the final months, you just want it to be finished. And there is a much-anticipated culminating event, the defense, the bringing to life of a new entity that is the thesis.

As a single man in my late 20s with no children doing his PhD, the metaphor of a pregnancy remained too abstract for me. It only became meaningful a decade later when I had a child; and even then, as a father my role felt more like being a cheerleader or coach to my wife, than the person doing all the work and thus meriting recognition for completing this 9-month project. Instead, it was the metaphor of long-distance running that spoke to me, because in my early 20s I'd completed a couple of marathons.

The world's best runners complete the 42.2 km of the marathon in a little over 2 hours – for these elite athletes, the race is essentially a sprint. But for the vast majority of runners, me included, the marathon takes 3 to 4 hours or more. As a race, the time to completion is important, and there can only be one first place. Yet, while the 2-hour marathoner may be the winner, those who complete are not losers. For most participants, the marathon is an opportunity to test themselves – it is a personal challenge, to prove that they can run 42.2 kms, and finishing (at a hoped-for time) is the goal.

Similarly, whether a PhD is completed in 3 years or 5, it's still a PhD. Obviously, the quality of the work, the contribution to knowledge, and the publications produced are all important metrics. But so too are the skills developed by the student during this lengthy research and writing process, and their demonstration to themselves, and to those around them, that they can complete a long-term in-depth research project – like the marathon, finishing is a major mark of success.

The Start of the Race

The first 1-2 years of a North American PhD normally involve coursework, like during the Masters, but with less courses required and more freedom. You may get involved as part of a research team, start writing scholarship applications, doing academic networking and attending conferences to meet the experts in your field. You begin laying out the broad framework or scope of your research project, start the literature review, build the research protocol, and even start preliminary data collection. This is also when you start writing conference abstracts and presenting to different audiences, e.g., in research seminars, at major conferences (if you've got data or analyses), and in public events. And you may have opportunities to gain teaching experience, as a teaching assistant or guest lecturer in courses. These are fun, stimulating and very busy years!

Like the marathon, however, it's important not to sprint out of the gates and be so focused on productivity (e.g., publishing, conferences), that you don't have time to read, think, explore new ideas, and do your own research. It's easy to get caught up in a competitive mindset where you try to keep pace with others who you perceive to be running faster than you (i.e., are more productive). But remember that this is your own race, and others will necessarily be progressing at a different pace… and not all of those who appear to be moving quicker will cross the finish line or do so before you.

The first years of the PhD should be about learning how to set a sustainable pace of activity (whatever this may be) and to start developing the knowledge and skills for your research and future career (whether in academia or elsewhere). This learning comes by experimenting with different opportunities and so, through experience, determining what pace and mix of activities work best for you. With your pace set, you're ready to move into the more active phase of the PhD, the middle distance.

The Middle Distance and Getting Over "The Hump"

Once PhD course work is completed and you've passed your comprehensive exams, often at the end of the second year, you move into doing full-time research. For many students, this is when the fun starts. Fully invested in your research, you begin building real expertise in your topic and sharing it with the academic community. You start being recognized for your work, and this then may lead to invitations to collaborate in other research or teaching activities: you get invited to national and international conferences or to give guest lectures; you are asked to do peer-reviews; and you are solicited to submit to journals or edited books.

This can also be a destabilizing period: your time may be much less structured, and the externally imposed deliverables of coursework (exams, assignments) are replaced by the need for self-imposed objectives and deadlines, with collaboration of your supervisor, of course. Not surprisingly, this middle distance, like in the marathon, can be a point where you find yourself running out of energy or feeling like you're getting lost.

The experiment may not work, the analysis may be a dead-end, the paper you've been working on for months is refused for publication…and your friends and family who're not in academia start asking why you haven't yet finished or gotten a well-paying job by now. Worse, you may run out of funding or have parental responsibilities that force you to take on other work to pay your costs, thus taking you away from your research and slowing down the overall progress. This will be a time when many students abandon their PhD.

Getting over this low point, or "the hump" as it's referred to in running, requires both personal willpower and the support of your supervisor and fellow students. Having frank discussions with colleagues about how you feel can be enormously helpful. At a minimum, it's cathartic to externalize your concerns; but collectively, with the support of others, you can put these concerns into perspective. Fellow students may share similar worries – and most likely your supervisor experienced the same thing! – and together, you may see new ways to look at an issue, new avenues to explore, and so potential solutions to what were hitherto insurmountable problems.

The PhD can be a very lonely journey because it is such a personal project. For me, it was important to have regular and frank conversations with my supervisor, where we could talk through a wide range of topics (personal, professional, intellectual). But I also built a group of friends, each of whom were working on their Masters or PhDs (all in different fields), and we would meet bi-weekly to socialise and talk about our research and various concerns. This peer-support was hugely effective at alleviating the worst of my academic loneliness. More importantly, it helped me – and in turn, allowed me to help my colleagues – to address my/our concerns. Having someone from a different field or discipline ask "the naive question" is a great way to reframe an issue, so that the problem becomes an opportunity.

Crossing the Finish Line

As my PhD supervisor Mike Burgess told me, the thesis is not the *magnum opus* or "The Definitive Book" on the topic. It will not be perfect, and it cannot and should not try to do everything. And no one wants to read a 500- or 1000-page thesis – yes, I've heard cases of this! – so it's much better to focus on telling a coherent, even if incomplete, story. Remember: a good thesis is the one that is completed, submitted and defended.

Reaching and crossing this academic finish line of thesis submission and defence is stressful and exhausting. It takes months of final preparation to pull together all the chapters/articles, and to proof hundreds of pages of text that you are likely already fed-up with looking at, so you can submit the thesis for evaluation. Like the last few kilometres of the marathon, this stage of the PhD can be daunting. And it's also where you need your coach on the sidelines – i.e., your PhD supervisor – and your friends and family to cheer you on through these last steps.

As you do your defence and cross the finish line, remember that you've accomplished something that relatively few people in society are able to do. You've learned new things and developed new skills, and you've grown personally and professionally. The PhD project is not for the faint of heart, nor for those without the resources and staying power to invest in a multi-year endeavour. Regardless of what you do afterwards, you can be proud of this accomplishment – you finished the PhD marathon.

The Thesis Defence

Combat sport or collegial discussion, it pays to be prepared

Bryn Williams-Jones
Apr 30, 2024

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/thesis-defense
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Photo by Tengyart on Unsplash

Summary

The culminating event of a multi-year project, the PhD thesis defense is the final formal test of the knowledge and abilities of a doctoral candidate. An inevitably stressful experience, it pays to know the rules of the game, to practice in advance, and so be prepared to have the best possible experience.

The PhD is a particular experience, one that is marked by many ups and downs, and its share of stressful moments – deciding to apply to and be admitted into a PhD program, finding the right supervisor, submitting scholarship applications, preparing for and passing the comprehensive exam, and then doing the final write-up for submission. A veritable marathon, crossing the finish line and succeeding involves completing a final evaluation – the thesis defense.

The culminating exercise of a multi-year project, the defense is likely to be the last exam students will ever take in their professional or academic career. Like for every other stage of the PhD process, it's important to prepare and practice for this final examination; and that means having a very clear understanding of how the process works, what is expected, what pitfalls to avoid and what strategies to deploy in order to have the best possible experience.

While every PhD program will involve some form of final examination, the requirements and process will likely vary widely. The North America experience – which commonly involves a public event lasting 2-3 hours, with a 30 to 45 minute presentation by the candidate followed by 1-2 rounds of questions from the jury members – may be very different from that in the UK, or France or Italy, for example, which may be closed-door (with only the jury members) or public, and very polite or particularly combative.

Even within the same university system, the culture of the defense will vary across academic disciplines. In the PhD defenses that I've attended, both while a student and now as a professor, I noticed that in sociology and nursing, these where extremely polite affairs but sometimes with a passive-aggressive undercurrent: with a smile, I saw jury members ask the killer question that demolished the candidate's theoretical framework or methodology, like a stiletto in the back. By contrast, philosophy defenses involved full-on frontal assaults, with weapons bared; more a boxing match than a polite discussion, the expectation was that the candidate literally defend themself and show that they could riposte. I well-remember a philosophy PhD defense where, when challenged, that candidate responded forcefully "No, you don't understand! As I clearly explained on page 154, I demonstrated that…", and this was received by the jury member not with affront, but with a broad smile and polite nod of the head: "touché", point scored.

Another big difference I've experienced in the Canadian context is between two different models of thesis defence. The first involves a one-step "sudden-death" final exam, where the candidate goes in blind with no idea what the jury members think about their thesis, nor what questions they will ask. There is the real risk that the jury will be dissatisfied and ask for major revisions or even fail the thesis. The second involves a two-step process of pre-review by the jury, and then approval (or not) to go to defense, often with a summary (or even complete) report given to the candidate prior to the defense.

My PhD defence involved the former, a one-step process that included more than 2 hours and 2 rounds of intense questioning by the jury and then questions by the audience. Ironically, one of the hardest questions came from one of my fellow students! She confided to me afterwards that she'd asked the question because she knew I could answer it, but at the time, I was a bit destabilized, to say the least. The audience and I were then asked to leave the room so that the jury could deliberate. After 45min of waiting outside for the results, and as I was starting to despair that I'd failed the defense, the president of the jury and my supervisor came out to get me, apologizing for the long delay because they'd lost track of time – and frankly had forgotten about me! – as they'd been having such a good discussion with colleagues who they rarely had a chance to meet in person.

By contrast, my experience as a professor at the Université de Montréal is that, like at many other francophone universities in Québec, the defence is preceded by a formal pre-evaluation process. The jury members submit their respective evaluations and then meet to discuss the report of the external examiner and determine whether the thesis is good enough to go forward for defense. If the thesis is not deemed ready – e.g., because there are important conceptual or methodological weaknesses – then major corrections are required (with 6 months to 1 year to complete), followed by a second full evaluation by the jury, prior to the candidate being permitted to defend their thesis. The advantage of this two-stage process, in my view, is that only those projects that are good enough actually go forward to the defense, which avoids the public humiliation of a failure or request for major corrections after the defense. Nonetheless, the defense is still an exam where the candidate is expected to show that they are an expert, worthy of a PhD. And how the candidate performs invariably has a direct impact on the final grade or recognition awarded; and even at this stage a candidate could fail, although it's much less likely.

Regardless of how the PhD defense works at your university, it's critically important to prepare appropriately, and well in advance of the big day.

Before the Defense

- If thesis defenses are public at your institution, in second or third year of your PhD start attending those both in your field or discipline, as well as others.
    - Learn about the process: Who does what on the jury? How long does it take, in general?
    - Take notes on how things are done well, and badly, by both the jury and the candidate, e.g., the composition of the jury (is it well-balanced and fair or overly critical?), the candidate's presentation style, their response to questions, and especially how they deal with the arrogant jury member who makes long rambling comments.
- Prepare your presentation.
    - A good PowerPoint should be engaging, light on text, use images, etc. – it should be a support for you, not your talk.
    - The content should be sufficiently detailed to be of interest to the jury, while also covering the broad questions, results and deliverables of the thesis. And it must be accessible to a general public (when the event is open) and a reminder of the key points to the jury, who may not have re-read the thesis.
    - Practice your timing: stick to the required time limit (e.g., a 30-40min presentation, in my experience), and recognize that the shorter the better – the jury will be keen to ask their questions so don't keep them waiting.
    - Don't read a paper, even if that's common in your field; very few people can read in a manner that is engaging, so learn how to talk off a PowerPoint, with limited or no notes.
- Do a mock thesis defence a few weeks in advance of the actual event.
    - Organise a 2-hour meeting with your supervisor and/or a group of fellow students.
    - Give your presentation and ask the participants to dissect your talk in terms of content, coherence, style, pacing, etc. Take detailed notes so you can make the necessary corrections.
    - Have your colleagues ask you the toughest questions they can about your project, and from a range of different perspectives (and personality styles of the jury members, if known in advance), so you can practice various responses (both in terms of content and form).

On the Big Day

- Dress formally: you want to show that you're professional, confident, in charge, the expert. So even if the culture of your discipline or field is very casual, dress a bit more formally than the norm.
- Bring a water bottle, a pen and paper to take notes, and a watch/phone to keep track of time when you present.
- When you give your presentation, don't talk too quickly, and remember to breath!

- When you get to the question period:
    - Take time to listen to the questions – never interrupt! – and write notes, especially if the question is multi-level, or worse, buried in a long commentary.
    - Think before you answer (and breath), as this shows that you're taking the question seriously.
    - Give short answers: no more than 1-2 minutes. The jury (and audience) want to hear a dynamic exchange, not a monologue; and the other jury members also want to have time to ask their questions.
    - Don't say "mmm, that's complicated" – if it was easy the jury member wouldn't ask!
    - Don't thank jury members for their questions; just get on and answer them.
- Learn how to answer long rambling comments, which may or may not have a question embedded within them.
    - Take notes, and when you answer, reframe with the question(s) that you want to answer, that seem most related to your research. "As I understand your question, the issues are the following…" and then answer.
    - When you've finished answering, conclude on a strong affirmative note.
    - Never say "Did I answer your question?", because that will inevitably lead to another long and rambling commentary, thereby annoying the other jury members who are waiting to ask their questions.
- When you don't know the answer to a question, don't try to fake it.
    - If the question or issue raised is outside the context or scope of the research project, say so, and explain why you did not address what appears to be a reasonable line of inquiry.
    - If the question is nonetheless relevant, and something that you should probably have addressed but didn't (for whatever reason), accept this – but don't apologise. Instead, follow-up by answering as best you can, based on your research expertise, thereby showing the jury that you can think on your feet.
- Accept that you're the expert, the person who knows the content of the thesis better than anyone else in the room, because you're the one who spent 3-5 years or more researching and writing about the topic.
- Don't be arrogant, but also don't be overly modest. It's a defense, so take a position and defend it, and own your choices.
- Once all the questions are completed and you're invited to leave so that the jury can deliberate, know that the waiting will be stressful. With as much good grace as you can, accept the compliments from the public (if present), and try to put the defense behind you – you're almost done.
- When you're brought back in to receive the result, take the time to briefly thank your supervisor, the jury, and family and friends if present; but it's not an Oscar award ceremony, and no one wants to listen to 10 minutes of thankyous. Instead, accept the accolades, and recognise that you've crossed the finish line of the marathon that is the PhD.

Afterwards

If all has gone well, you're now a Dr, even if this title may only be official once you receive your diploma and/or participate at a graduation ceremony some months later. So go out and celebrate!

Like so many things in life, this exam is not an end in itself, but instead the end of the beginning. At the root of expertise is humility, the recognition that research progresses incrementally, and to quote Isaac Newton (among others), knowledge is generated "by standing on the shoulders of giants". But in passing the PhD defense, you'll also have achieved something that very few people ever accomplish, and you've demonstrated that you're an expert in your field of research. You deserve to pat yourself on the back, a little.

Important Rituals Done Badly

A rant about graduation ceremonies

Bryn Williams-Jones
Jul 4, 2023

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Photo by Joshua Hoehne on Unsplash

Summary

Graduation ceremonies are important for students and their families to mark notable accomplishments and key moments in life. When done badly – e.g., poor organization, with overly long speeches full of platitudes – these events are boring and simply a rite of passage to be endured. But when done well, they are uplifting and rewarding celebrations.

Suffering through my son's recent primary school graduation ceremony (yes, that's a thing), I inevitably was drawn to make comparisons with my own experiences with university graduation ceremonies, both as a student and a professor.

As is probably evident from my rant about the Coronation, I'm not particularly a fan of over-the-top rituals, full of ostentation and empty words. I do, nonetheless, see the pertinence of ceremonies as a means to mark important changes in life and to highlight accomplishments. I'll leave the analysis of the nuances of ritual and the importance for different cultures to my wife, the anthropologist.

Instead, here I reflect on graduation ceremonies and their importance for generations of students and their families to mark notable accomplishments and key moments in life. And specifically, how these ceremonies can and should be done well, but are often done badly.

There were so many similarities between my son's graduation and those I've experienced at the university. The speeches by various school dignitaries (principal, VP, school administrator) and students were all far too long (10-20min each), and filled with politically correct, vacuous platitudes about the importance of future studies and careers – the students are only 12, what can they possibly know about their future careers or life choices? When these speeches weren't rambling off in odd directions with no evident purpose – such as 10min on the career of tennis star Roger Federer, with far too much detail on his ranking, and his successes and failures – they were personal reflections about life experiences that were more navel-gazing than in any way the sharing of sage advice.

The worst, however, was the Land Acknowledgement followed by a modified Canadian national anthem, which demonstrated only the most superficial understanding of the complex history of Indigenous peoples in the Montreal area. This patronizing speech, full of empty words, by someone convinced of their moral superiority, sought to make us all feel guilty – and perversely, to feel good about feeling guilty – on a subject for which most had little understanding. Indigenous people where almost certainly not consulted about the content or pertinence of such an acknowledgement, further enshrining neocolonial attitudes in our institutions and broader civil society.

There was the predictable technical failure of the sound system so that we couldn't hear some of the speeches (a saving grace, I must admit), and which meant that the musical intervention at the end by a talented violinist – and a far less talented choir – were drowned out by the electronic drum kit. And not surprisingly, the planned 1-hour event dragged into 2 hours, due to every child shaking hands or hugging the 10 teachers on stage.

Now to be fair, my recent experiences with university graduation ceremonies are in a very different league. Over the years, the long, rambling 20-30min speeches have been reduced to 5min each, and while there are the similar platitudes, depending on the presenter, these are sometimes entertaining even if rarely inspiring – at least, that is, to an old, jaded prof like me. Ceremonies for my faculty usually last under 2 hours and are now efficiently organized, like a well-run military operation. The students walk across the stage, shake hands with a few dignitaries, have the obligatory photo op and are off in less than 1min. With hundreds receiving their diplomas in person (and many others not present), this must be done efficiently. The event is formal, but also fun, and the tone is congratulatory without being patronizing.

One of the things that particularly irked me at my son's graduation was the deployment of a ceremony that was not, in my view, age appropriate. The students, who are 12-year-olds, were dressed as if they were at a high school graduation with boys in suits and girls in gowns; and the event was then followed by a dinner and dance. My kid was one of the few rebels, in polo and shorts (nor was I dressed-up), and he did a silly dance up the stairs of the stage and raced across with the briefest of handshakes – no hugs!

For my son (and for me), the ceremony was too long, boring, and likely would have been more meaningful if replaced by a big party the last day of class. It was hard to take seriously a formal ceremony in a context where everyone graduates from primary school and goes on to high school, then to college (CEGEP in Quebec), and most likely also on to university. A big deal was made to recognize accomplishments that were minimal at best. A rite of passage where there was generally no need for one, or one that wasn't at all appropriate.

When I think back to my own university graduation ceremonies, I was initially refractory to the idea of participating, not seeing the pertinence and pre-emptively regretting the hours of boredom to be endured (I resemble my son at times). It was as a master's student, and later a professor, that I came to recognize the pertinence of these rituals to mark important life transitions. Getting a degree is a big deal; it marks the culmination of years of effort and investment by the student, often with the support of their family and friends. The ceremony is a moment to celebrate. But it also provides a formal validation and even a sense of closure, that a major life project that seemed to be so long at the start (years of study) had been successfully completed.

As a professor, I systematically attend our graduation ceremonies to cheer-on the graduating students and recognize their successes. I dress up in my very colourful, extravagant gown, which is in the colours of the University of British Colombia, where I did my PhD. I pose for photos with my students and colleagues and play along with the spectacle.

Victoria Doudenkova, BWJ, Nathalie Voarino

The pomp and circumstance of the event gives it weight, helping to make it both meaningful and memorable. At its extreme, a graduation ceremony can even be otherworldly, Harry Potteresque, as at Cambridge University where I did my postdoc. I attended for the cultural experience and to watch my first master's student graduate. The entire ceremony was conducted in Latin, with students going down on bended knee before the head of college, as they received the transmission of knowledge magically from the hands of the professor. It was surreal… and very entertaining!

Graduation ceremonies can be important moments in the lives of students and their families, and even professors. When done badly, these events are boring and simply a rite of passage to be endured. But when they're done well, they are uplifting and rewarding moments of celebration.

The Postdoc

Not another PhD nor a job, it's a stepping stone to a career

Bryn Williams-Jones
Jun 18, 2024

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Summary

The postdoc is an opportunity to explore research interests, network, build new skills and explore avenues for a future career. But it's also a time of great uncertainty because it's not a job but a transition to another position. Further, there is no "one size fits all" postdoc, nor will it be everything you need. So make the most of the experience and treat it as a means to an end, whatever that may be.

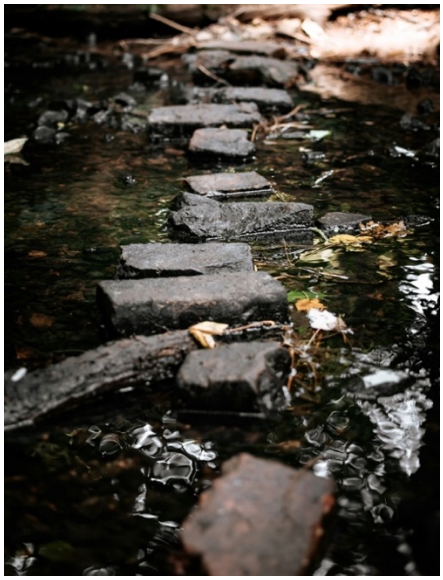

Photo by Matt Walsh on Unsplash

A postdoctoral experience or "postdoc" has become an obligatory passage point towards an academic career in many disciplines, especially in the fundamental and applied sciences, but also increasingly in the social sciences and the humanities. As the academic job market has become ever more competitive, this 2-3 year of protected, salaried research time has become an important means for researchers to build their autonomy and boost their productivity, and so be more competitive when applying for jobs, whether in academia or elsewhere.

But not all postdoc positions are created equal. For those of you finishing your PhD and looking for the next step, and even if you're already in a postdoc position, it's important to understand what is on offer, and whether it meets your individual needs and career goals.

On a recent trip to Munich to talk about AI ethics with the Clinical Data Science group at LMU Klinikum München, led by Michael Ingrisch, I had numerous stimulating conversations with a brilliant group of postdocs and PhD students. A shout-out to Kathi Jeblick (who organized the trip), Balthasar Schachtner and Andreas Mittermeier for being such wonderful hosts! During two days of team meetings followed by a full day of walking the beautiful city of Munich, we talked about their career aspirations, life as a postdoc or contract researcher in Germany, the opportunities for career progression, team dynamics and mentoring, and how to build healthy research environments, amongst other topics.

An underlying thread of our discussions – and a theme that I all too well remember from my own experience as a postdoc in the UK – was how to live with the uncertainty of what comes next and try to figure out the right career path post-PhD.

Different Types of Postdoc

There are different types of postdocs, and they of course vary in nature by country, discipline and even specific fields of research. Generalizing based on my own experience with practices in North America and having done a postdoc in the UK, I suggest that the following three categories cover some of the dominant forms, each with their respective strengths and limitations.

The Scholarship

- These postdocs are usually awarded via (annual) scholarship competitions run by government funding agencies (and occasionally by non-profit foundations).
- They are focused on your own research project and interests, which you explained in the application.
- It can't just be "PhD version 2" but instead should be an opportunity to build complementary skills and experience and expand your network of collaborators.

- It's important to choose a supervisor who will help you network and build your research autonomy and meet with you occasionally to collaborate (but not obligatory); they're not another PhD supervisor.
- You will work with a new team, very often at a different university than where you did your PhD; ideally at a leading research centre or department that will boost your opportunities and credibility as an autonomous researcher.
- As it's your funding, you have great freedom to do what you want, and with limited accountability – you just have to be productive during the 2-3 years of the postdoc.
- A postdoc scholarship is prestigious (looks great on a CV) and much sought after, so highly competitive and hard to obtain.

The Research Centre

- A postdoc funded by an academic centre or institute, most often but not exclusively in a research university, will commonly follow an annual call for applications.
- It can be fully funded or via matched funding between the centre and a research team leader to cover your salary for 1-2 years.
- Being based in a research centre, these postdocs may include an explicit focus on training and career development, and thus lots of opportunities for you to network and build research collaborations with other members of the centre, and to present your work at centre events.
- Your research activities will likely be expected to combine both your own interests and those of the team leader or research centre.
- There may be an expectation that you also contribute to the organization of centre activities.
- You will have to show that you're productive in research, publication, conference presentations, organizing scientific events, etc.
- Very discipline- or field-specific, so access to these postdocs is often based on existing contacts and recommendations from your PhD supervisor.

The Research Team

- The position is explicitly designed to respond to the needs of a team's research program; and it will be announced on university employment pages (and elsewhere) as a contract term-limited appointment.
- A position funded off a team's research grants, you will be responsible for contributing actively to advancing their research program and directly accountable to the team leader for your productivity.
- You must accept that the focus of your research will be determined by the team leader, but you may still have some latitude for personal interest-driven activities (as long as these contribute to the team's research program).
- Expect to lead research projects, supervise students and organise activities that contribute to the broader objectives of the team and promote their reputation.
- The continuity of your position is conditional on successful grant applications, so you'll likely be expected to take an active and even leadership role in writing grants to obtain funding for your continued salary and that of other team members – an excellent learning opportunity!
- Very discipline- or field-specific, so access to such positions will be based on existing contacts and recommendations from your PhD supervisor; but also accessible through general calls for applications.

A common element in these different types of postdocs is that while they can last a few years or more, they can also legitimately be interrupted at any moment if a good job arises. Leaving a postdoc to take up a more senior and ideally permanent position is not considered a failure but instead a success. Supporting this career progression is (or at least should be) a key responsibility of the team leader; and it reflects positively on a senior researcher when their postdocs move on to new positions.

My Experience

As I was finishing my PhD and thinking about next steps, I determined that I needed more exposure to social science research methods and approaches, as part of my empirical bioethics journey. So, as I was working up my scholarship application, I started with a broad list of potential postdoc supervisors, people who were working on genetics and ethics (my research focus at the time), and who were at prestigious universities. I then narrowed this down to a short list of contacts who my supervisor knew and who I started contacting, to explore their interest for my project.

I was fortunate to obtain a fully-funded 2-year postdoc scholarship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) to go to Cambridge University, where I worked with a group of social scientists led by Martin Richards at the Centre for Family Research. Along with being the ideal research environment, my choice of Cambridge was also strategic given its outstanding "brand recognition". Even though I'd been at the University of British Columbia, a top-tier Canadian university, my PhD was in Interdisciplinary Studies, because at the time there were no PhD bioethics programs in Canada. This inevitably led to raised eyebrows and questions like "You studied what?", so I would tell people that I did a PhD in bioethics – and on my CV, the PhD was followed by a postdoc at Cambridge University, so problem solved.

Interestingly, I didn't at all do what I'd proposed in my postdoc application (I would do it once I started my job as Assistant professor), because once I arrived at Cambridge and started networking, other much more interesting opportunities arose. I had the chance to travel widely across the UK to present at different research centres, I wrote numerous articles and commentaries about research ethics, drug development, and genetics and ethics, and I started thinking about conflicts of interest, which would later become a major focus of mine – I worked to establish myself as an independent scholar. But I only met with my supervisor occasionally (every few months), and we never actually wrote anything together or worked on collaborative research; instead, he did a great job introducing me to interesting people and including me in a dynamic and interdisciplinary research environment. And many great conversations were had at the local pub, this being Britain, or over formal college dinner...with black gowns and the full Harry Potteresk vibe of Cambridge.

One memorable such occasion was being invited by the Principal of Newnham College, Baroness Onora O'Neill, a renowned philosopher working on issues of justice and bioethics. As someone from "the colonies" – obvious from the moment I opened my mouth – I didn't fit into the formal class structures and so wasn't at all intimidated by this invitation, as were some of my British colleagues. With a group of postdocs, we had a wonderful evening of philosophical discussions over dinner, as between colleagues; this, for me, was one of many rich learning experiences on my route to eventually becoming a professor. While we may have different roles or social status at various points in our academic careers, at heart we're people who thrive on learning, talking and sharing our research interests.

Before arriving in Cambridge, I had also applied for a junior researcher fellowship at Homerton College, which anchored me within a college, the place where much of academic life occurs in the Oxbridge system, even if research is conducted in centres or departments. This second fellowship covered my board and lodging and enabled me to live comfortably on my Canadian stipend even with its much-reduced buying power (due to the 2-1 conversion rate from dollars to pounds). Being a fellow in a college gave me incredible opportunities to become involved in administration: I was invited to join different committees where I learned about academic governance, student recruitment, strategic planning, budgeting, etc. I built expertise that I put to good effect in my career as a professor.

During this time, I also got back into the martial arts, travelled regularly to Canada as member of a SSHRC strategic committee (I was the postdoc representative), and wrote 25 job applications. My postdoc in Cambridge was an amazing 2-year experience, one that set me up to get my first job as a research ethicist at Cardiff University, and ultimately my current position as professor at the Université de Montréal. I was incredibly fortunate, as not all postdocs have such an experience.

Some Concluding Thoughts

When you're doing a PhD, you know it's a multi-year project (e.g., 3 years in Germany vs 4-6 in Canada) with an end, the thesis defense, and then a move to something else. But the postdoc is different. It's not another PhD – it's more open-ended and project focused (doing studies, publishing, networking, etc.), and without the fixed objective of the thesis as the culminating activity. Liberating in no longer having the pressure to produce the thesis, and with funding for few years, the postdoc can also be anxiety generating, especially as the funding comes to an end and a more permanent position has not yet been confirmed.

A downside of the postdoc is that it can become a holding pattern, with some people (often in the applied sciences) doing two or three postdocs because they can't find an academic job. At some point, and sooner rather than later, you need to decide whether you have a reasonable hope of obtaining a stable appointment in academia. If not, you should be thinking about how to mobilize your expertise elsewhere, by for example building a career in the private sector, in government, or even within the university in senior administrative roles (e.g., in tech transfer offices).

In a context where, across disciplines, less than 20% of PhDs or postdocs go on to careers as university professors, it's important to see the PhD and postdoc as a transition to other rewarding knowledge careers. An interesting example of this in Quebec has been the creation, by the Quebec Research Fund (FRQ), of science advocacy, innovation, or policy-focused postdocs that aim to help transition PhD researchers into government or science agency roles (e.g., with UNESCO).

If you're considering a career in the public or private sector, you may want to orient some of your productivity during your postdoc towards writing reports and policy briefings, and doing consulting with industry or government, for example. As with an academic trajectory, networking is also important but would be more oriented towards industry or public sector actors and contexts. This is all complementary with academic deliverables such as articles or conference presentations, because they are part of your scientific expertise; but they'll often be not as important for employers as your other communication or project management skills and experiences.

The postdoc is certainly not a career, even if it's increasingly a common transition towards an academic or professional career. Treat it as an opportunity to have interesting professional (and life) experiences, to travel, to develop or refine your academic competencies, and to better identify what makes you happy and so set yourself up for a stimulating career.

There is no "one size fits all" postdoc, nor will it be everything you need for your future career. The good postdoc is the one that you can obtain, so make the most of it and see it as a means to an end, whatever that may be.

How to get an Academic Job

The Do's and Don'ts

Bryn Williams-Jones
May 9, 2023

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/how-to-get-an-academic-job-comment
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/28375

Photo by Clem Onojeghuo on Unsplash

Summary

Applying for highly competitive faculty positions is time consuming, stressful and depressing. Unfortunately, many candidates are not competitive because they've not been trained in how to apply or interview, and that's unfair. Drawing on my experience both applying for jobs and now sitting on selection committees, I've laid out some general Do and Don't principles to help candidates in their quest for the academic "holy grail", a faculty position.

Applying and interviewing for academic positions is highly stressful – even terrifying! – and sometimes depressing. It's a highly competitive process, with some studies estimating that only 20% (or less) of PhD and post-docs will obtain the much coveted position of assistant professor. Unfortunately, this process is one for which many junior scholars are not well prepared when they first get onto the job market. My intention here is thus to share some lessons learned from my own experience in becoming a university professor in Canada.

[I will put aside the important and ongoing critique of the fragilization of academic positions, and the destructive move in many universities towards hiring sessional lecturers or temporary faculty instead of recruiting permanent professors. Also, my focus will be on permanent faculty positions; I will leave aside the hiring of research or administrative staff.]

While I've sought to lay out general principles – Do's and Don'ts – these may not apply in other contexts or disciplines, or in non-academic professional settings. So, take these with a grain of salt and validate with your colleagues and mentors.

My Experience

Following my PhD in 2002, I submitted 25 job applications and had 5 interviews for researcher or assistant professor positions, and eventually in 2005 obtained my current position at the Université de Montréal. The interviews I did ranged between 30 minutes to 1 hour (a common format in the UK and Europe), to a half-day or full day process (more common in Canada), with the longest at a US university, lasting a gruelling 2.5 days, running from 7 am to 9 pm each day, breakfast and dinner included!

In recent years, I've gained experience on the other side of the table, interviewing candidates for different faculty positions. I've now been a member of 2 hiring committees, and as department Director have to date chaired 7 hiring committees.

The hiring process can be long and complicated. For each position, we've had between 30 and 65 candidates, numbers that are often very much higher in English-language universities, with some receiving more than 100 candidates for even a sessional position! In my department, we have a multi-stage review process with pre-screening based on dossier evaluation (to get down to 10-15 interesting applicants), followed by 30min pre-interviews on Zoom with 7 candidates (our long list), in order to arrive at a short-list of 2-3 candidates, each of whom we invite for a day-long interview. Informed by feedback from colleagues and students, the committee makes a recommendation to the Department Assembly who then votes on the proposed nominee. In all, this process takes 3-4 months.

So, how do you get to the coveted short-list interview and eventually attain the "holy grail" that is an academic job?

The Application

Preparing a competitive application takes time and energy. Yes, there are huge equity issues here, as not everyone has the same academic support network or personal resources. But as a candidate, accept that you're in an international competition, so leverage your network to help you put together the best possible application.

- ***Read the job description carefully.*** Apply for jobs where you meet the general and specific criteria. Selection committees quickly reject a large number of applications (to get to our long list) because the candidate doesn't have the required diploma, qualifications, or expertise.
- ***Carefully prepare your package.*** Along with describing your background, expertise, research and teaching program, also explain any gaps in your publication record or studies (in some disciplines, non-academic work experience is highly valued, in others it is the opposite).
    - Don't try to make people feel sorry for you.
    - Don't give too much personal information as, with the exception of parental leaves (and this should be in your CV), it's not pertinent and is considered a source of potential discrimination.
    - Don't explain that you're a superstar and that you will be a major asset to the department (this may be acceptable in the US, but not in Canada).
    - Show that you already know and have mastered the 4 professorial tasks (research, teaching, administration/service, outreach), and that you're ready to start.
    - If you're a foreigner and not familiar with the Canadian (or provincial) grant system, learn about it (NSERC, CIHR, SSHRC, FRQ in Quebec).
    - Tell us in which languages you're fluent or functional (in the letter and CV).
    - Show that your future research network will be in the province or territory where you are applying, not across the country (e.g., look at the profiles of people in the region who you could work with).
- ***Proof your application material.*** Spelling or formatting errors send a very bad signal – use spellcheck! And if you're submitting to a French-language (or other) institution, make the effort to at least submit your letter in that language – DeepL!
- ***Ask for advice from colleagues and mentors.*** Get feedback on the pertinence of the job related to your profile and life goals. Circulate drafts for critical feedback, especially for the cover letter, the CV, and the research statement. It's frustrating to read badly presented applications.
- ***Submit the required material.*** You'd be surprised how many people submit incomplete packages (missing pieces like research or teaching statements) or add content that is not asked for (articles, entire theses!). Adding some unasked-for content, e.g., a research plan, may be an acceptable risk, but you also don't want to annoy the committee by making it harder to evaluate your dossier.
- ***Submit 1 week or less before the deadline.*** Invariably, those applications submitted at the opening of the position do not make the cut. The competitive candidates are those who updated their CVs (adding the most recent paper, conference presentation, etc.) and proofed their letters, and submitted at the last possible moment.

The Interview

If you've made it to the interview – whether a pre-interview or short-list – you've already shown that you're an interesting candidate. Now you have to win-over the selection committee.

- ***Prepare before the interview.*** Do a mock presentation/interview with friends and colleagues who will be critical and tell you the truth, and then help you improve. Proofing your presentation, and practicing answering the tough questions, is essential to preparing for the big day. But avoid preparing ready-made answers.
- ***Ask questions prior to the interview.*** Not all hiring processes are equally well organized, so if you're not given a clear plan of the interview process, ask for clarification about expectations. What sort of presentation is required: a scientific talk, a job talk and/or a teaching lecture? How much time is there for the presentation? Will there be individual interviews, and with whom?
- ***Do your homework on the department/faculty/university.*** A recurring critique is candidates who demonstrate that they don't know much about the department or the colleagues or even the institution; this invariably annoys the selection committee and colleagues who will ultimately vote on the nomination. So go through the department website and build short bios on colleagues, so you can have informed discussions during the interview.

- ***Arrive at the interview 10min in advance***. Don't keep the selection committee waiting… and bring a bottle of water!
- ***The Presentation/Job Talk.*** Stay within the time limits! Yes, we want to hear what you have to say, but colleagues also want to ask questions.
    - Even if you're not asked to do a "job talk", do one anyway, telling us about who you are, what you do, and what you see doing if offered the position.
    - If you're applying to a Francophone university, make the effort to at least speak a little of the language, even if you're not fluent (not doing this is really annoying and doesn't show a willingness to learn).
- ***Smile and laugh.*** We're hiring a future colleague, someone with whom we'll work over the coming decades. Show that you're open, interested, and someone with whom we can get along. No one wants to hire someone with a frown on their face.
- ***Responding to questions.*** Whether during the question period after the presentation, or during interviews, be concise: try to keep answers between 30s and 1-2 minutes so we can follow with other questions; this is not the place for monologues. Don't say "thank you for your question" – we don't need your thanks, just your answer.
- ***Ask questions.*** Come prepared with questions that you have about the research and teaching environment, about life in the department, etc. Having a list of questions shows that you've done your homework, and that you're projecting yourself into this future role as a professor in the institution. And it also enables you to determine whether you actually want the position, if it's offered.
    - Ask about life in the city where the university is located if you're not familiar with it: the childcare system, schools, access to health services, housing prices.
    - Ask whether the university has a teachers' union (if it does, your salary will likely be negotiated under the collective agreement).
    - Ask about start-up research funds, moving expenses, grant writing support.
    - Ask about the selection and nomination process, timelines for results, etc.

After the Interview

When you get home, you'll be exhausted. But you'll also be nervous, wondering how you did and whether you'll get an offer. I've been there.

- ***Prepare for getting turned down.*** This will likely happen, so while it's normal to be disappointed, don't get angry with the selection committee or email the Director demanding to know how they could possibly have refused your outstanding dossier! Yes, I've had these sorts of emails. You don't know what the competition was like, what are the internal politics in the department, or why they chose to give the position to someone else. That's life, get over it.
- ***Prepare for an offer.*** If you get an offer, you want to have already thought about an answer. And this includes deciding that you don't want the position because you've either had a better offer, or you didn't like the department atmosphere (but don't say this!). If you will accept the offer, be ready to negotiate start dates, salary (not always possible in there's a union), moving expenses, etc. Show that you're enthused and ready to start!
- ***Follow-up.*** It's completely legitimate to email the head of the selection committee to ask for news if you haven't heard back in a few weeks (beyond when they told you a decision would be made). But don't email asking what you could do to improve: it's not the job of the person who refuses to tell you what to do.

The End

If you get an offer and accept, well done! Get ready to start a new, stimulating but very demanding academic career (see my other posts on how to survive in academia while finding work-life balance).

If you don't get an offer, accept this as part of the process, and learn from it. Please don't ask for personalized feedback. Yes, I regularly receive such requests, and I systemically decline because invariably they arrive while we're still in the hiring process. Also, it's not up to the selection committee to help you better perform, nor do we have the time for this. Instead, be reflexive and debrief with your colleagues and mentors, and learn how to do a better application or interview the next time, so that you can hopefully also find that "holy grail" of a faculty position.

Is There Life After the PhD?

The PhD is not just for academia

Bryn Williams-Jones
Sept 24, 2024

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Photo by Tim Mossholder on Unsplash

Summary

An academic career is obviously not for everyone. Given the incredible competition for faculty positions, PhD graduates need to have other opportunities in mind. A good starting point is to think about and make explicit the skills gained during graduate training that are useful outside academia, and the range of employment opportunities or careers that look for people with these advanced skills.

For those of us who succeeded in obtaining a much-coveted permanent position as a university professor, our careers are set: we get to build our research and teaching programs, apply for and (sometimes) obtain grants, do outreach and travel internationally. We can expect progression and promotion and, at least in universities that still have tenure, look forward to a 30+ year career in the same institution with a decent salary and benefits. Although not always the case – institutional loyalty needs to be earned – for professors with these working conditions, it's the good life!

But what about all those PhD graduates who cannot get an academic job, despite their best efforts?

The harsh reality is that even for those who truly desire an academic career and have the requisite skills and academic excellence, there are simply far fewer faculty positions than there are people applying. Universities have been incentivized to graduate PhDs, but the number of graduates is not correlated with the demand for professors. In the recent job hires in my department, we've had between 40 and 60 applicants for a single position – and 97 in my wife's department! – and that's because we're a francophone institution; at English-language universities in Canada and the US, there may be a 100 or more candidates! So it's not at all surprisingly that, by some estimates, less than one quarter of PhDs will actually obtain a permanent university position.

Does that mean these people have "wasted their time" (and money) doing a PhD?

Of course not! The problem is in thinking that a PhD = a faculty position. Instead – and this is where universities are still bad, although getting better – we need to be thinking of the PhD as a means to train highly qualified professionals with a myriad of skills that are pertinent to a variety of workplaces. Instead of pushing our students to compete for a limited number of academic positions, we should be helping them identify the skills that they're developing while doing the advanced research and knowledge translation that constitutes a PhD. Then we must get them thinking about multiple career paths and train them to be able to articulate their skills in terms that are amenable to and pertinent for employers both within and outside the university.

To that end, I want now to explore two aspects: the ***competencies*** (or skills) gained during a PhD that are pertinent outside academia, and the ***employment opportunities*** for people with these advance skills.

Competencies

PhDs are often criticized and caricatured by people outside academia as hyper-specialists disconnected from the reality of life. But this critique misunderstands and disvalues the advanced skills that are developed during years of graduate training. Thankfully, we're starting to see universities and other para-academic organizations valorise the valuable skills that are developed in PhD programs.

The following competencies are some that I've seen in our PhD students, and which are clearly useful in a wide variety of careers and leadership roles:

- ***Rigour and critical analysis:*** evaluate the quality of diverse data sources, compile relevant information and draw reasoned and substantiated conclusions; cut through rhetoric, and identify hidden premises or ideological orientations that bias an argument.

- ***Communication and knowledge translation:*** synthesize complex information, translate this into different formats (oral, written, multimedia), and adapt the presentation to specific audiences.
- ***Project management:*** work under pressure and to deadlines; identify and mobilize the tools/resources/personnel needed to achieve specific objectives; manage multiple projects or commitments with different deliverables; be accountable for success and failure in meeting planned objectives.
- ***Interpersonal skills:*** teamwork; mentoring of junior colleagues; provide constructive critique and problem solve; act with professionalism and confidence in interactions with senior managers or decision makers.
- ***Resilience:*** take critique, even when negative, and integrate into analysis of a situation or project; accept failure as a learning opportunity and transform into a success.
- ***Perseverance:*** take on challenging, long term (even multi-year) projects and move these to completion.

Now this is not to say that *all* PhDs develop *all* of these (or other) skills, but these are the sorts of skills that are developed during a PhD, even when they're not explicit. They are skills that are marketable and so need to be presented as such.

Employment Opportunities

Academia is not for everyone. In my experience, university professors are a particularly weird breed, with a tendency towards being hyper-focused, obsessive and even arrogant due to the years of dedication required to complete a PhD and the level of expertise developed during this multi-year endeavour. For many of my PhD students, they look at me and other professors and decide that academia is not the life for them. And while it saddens me to see a brilliant student turn their back on an academic career, it's also a completely legitimate decision and one that I respect.

I actively coach my students about life in academia, and I get them thinking about their career goals before embarking on a PhD; and then as they progress and their interests and skills evolve, I ask them where they want to go after graduating. If they're not going to try the academic track, are they interested in a contract position, a professional career in the civil service or the private sector, or independent work as a consultant?

In the University

- *Grant funded positions:* as research coordinator or researcher; limited term contracts based on a professor's grant funds; can be a relatively stable position in a successful research team, and means to stay active in research; salary can be self-funding through writing grants with the team leader.
- *Administrative personnel:* in research services providing expert support to university researchers; assistant director supporting senior managers (Deans, Vice-Presidents); leader of administrative units (communication, library, etc.).
- *Lecturer:* teaching courses, on a contractual basis; relatively poorly paid in comparison to the workload, and so very hard to make a living wage if this is one's only source of income.

Public or Private Sector: as research professional or senior manager, often but not always linked to the PhD's disciplinary background; involves leadership responsibilities and team/project management; stable salary with benefits.

Non-profit organizations: as a research professional; support the organization in analysis, policy development, knowledge translation; salary and stability often conditional on external funding.

Consulting: individually or as part of a small group/company; based on the research field/expertise of the PhD; paid via service contracts to the public or private sector, or as expert witness in lawsuits, for specific work/deliverables (analyses, expert reports).

Conclusion

Yes, we still need to train PhDs, but no, most will not become university professors.

Sometimes, despite doing everything right – getting good grades during graduate school, obtaining prizes and scholarships, developing advanced research skills and publishing like crazy, presenting at conferences and networking, completing the PhD in 4-5 years, and putting together an excellent job application package – there simply isn't a faculty position available in one's area of specialization. Graduates may also be constrained by family commitments and so unable and/or unwilling to move to another city, thus further limiting opportunities.

For those desiring an academic career, it's important to remember that it can take a few years after the PhD to become a professor; successful candidates often spend time as a postdoc or research associate to establish themselves as independent researchers. Rare will be the professor hired right after completing their PhD. Patience is required, as too is a strategic approach that emphasises the development or refinement of PhD experience and competencies, so that these will be of interest both to universities and other potential employers. It may well be the case that one of these "temporary jobs" outside academia (e.g., research associate, policy analyst, scientific advisor) leads to stable employment and a rewarding career!

It may also be possible to obtain an academic position after spending many years working as a professional, should that be desired. I have known a few colleagues who followed this path, and what enabled their return to academia was maintaining an active research program and publication record, even if at a much lower rate than if they'd been working full-time as a university professor. Their professional positions were research related – and a few had full-time teaching positions in colleges – and they managed to carve out time to continue doing research "on the side", most often by working evenings and weekends, but sometimes with the approval of their employer.

Desiring to keep a foot in the academic world, these colleagues also formalised their part-time academic activities through adjunct professor positions at nearby universities, enabling them to maintain an academic status and independence from their professional roles. In my department and faculty, we have many associate and clinical adjunct professors, and they are valuable contributors to teaching (for which they are remunerated) and supervision, and active collaborators in research and knowledge translation; and through their collaborations, they create important and mutually beneficial bridges between academia and the public and private sectors. So, while a move away from academia does not mean that a return is impossible, it will be difficult both in terms of personal (and family) commitment and the lost-opportunity costs of starting over in a new (academic) position – the cost of leaving a stable professional career may simply be too high.

A relatively small number of PhD graduates succeed in obtaining an academic position, but that is in no way a sign of failure but instead the reality of the academic job market. The vast majority of graduates will have productive and rewarding careers that do not involve being a university professor – and that's a good thing!

Hold on to your dream while recognizing that your dream can change over time.

You Like Being Director? Are You Crazy!

Academic management is not for everyone

Bryn Williams-Jones
Jun 27, 2023

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Photo by Hunters Race on Unsplash

Summary

Most “normal” professors don’t want to be director – they do it because someone has to manage the department. But some people enjoy academic management, which is surprising when you consider these are not skills for which we are trained. To be able to spend 3-4 days/week doing mediation, problem solving, counselling, and being cheerleader (all of which I love!), I had to consciously put aside most of my research and teaching obligations. I’m OK with that, because I’ve found another place where I can make a difference.

Most “normal” professors don’t want to be director or head of department – they do it because they have to, because it’s their turn, because someone has to manage the department. Very few seek it out. But some people enjoy and are even good at academic management, which is surprising when you consider that these are not skills for which we train during our PhDs or early careers as professors.

After being a normal professor for 15 years and having established myself academically in teaching, research, service and outreach, in December 2020 I accepted a request from my dean to take over as interim director. I knew this was going to be a lot of work, but it was only for a 6-month interim while a new director was identified. So, I imagined that I would do my part for the department and then go back to my normal responsibilities.

Much to my surprise, I found the challenge of learning how to lead and manage a large academic department incredibly stimulating. I quickly had to do three professor job hires, organize course planning for the Fall, plan regular department meetings, all the while building procedures and formalizing practices that had previously been informal.

Rather than being a chore, these challenging few months confirmed that I actually loved academic management, as bizarre as that might seem. After lots of reflection, I applied for and was nominated director of the department, a position that I’ve now held since June 2021, and in which I’ve continued to learn and discover new challenges and rewards.

More than just doing paperwork – although there is a lot of that! – being director is about ensuring that my fellow professors have an academic environment where everything works smoothly, and that if there are problems, they’ll be dealt with appropriately and in a timely fashion. A good director assures that all the boring admin gets dealt with efficiently, even behind the scenes, so that colleagues can concentrate on their jobs as educators and researchers.

The director is both mediator within the department, tasked with managing disagreements and finding places for consensus – here I put my training as a bioethicist to good effect. But the director is also a conduit to and broker with the faculty administration (the Dean and Vice-deans), sharing the successes while also defending the interests of the department.

Above all, being director means being a problem-solver, and this is what I love about the job. While there are recurring activities that become procedural because they are planned – regular meetings, course planning, hiring – not a day goes by where I’m not dealing with new situations or helping colleagues solve specific problems. Three years into this job and I’m not even close yet to being bored!

Particularly interesting to me, and unexpected, is that most of my time has been spent doing career counselling. I mentor junior colleagues in their career progression (renewal, promotion, selecting good opportunities, learning to say “No”), help mid-career colleagues identify promising avenues for growth (in leadership, teaching, admin) and support senior colleagues near the end of their careers who’re transitioning towards retirement. I also now meet annually with 30-40 adjunct professors (we have more than 60 in my department) as their mandates come up for renewal, to help them best integrate into our academic community, exploring with them opportunities to become involved in teaching, develop research collaborations, or participate in student supervision.

While I love doing this mentoring and networking, I also get a thrill working on strategic planning, presiding faculty committees, building policy and procedures, and otherwise supporting the good functioning of the department and the faculty.

But all this leaves very little time for my own professorial activities: with 3-4 days/week of administrative work, I had to make a conscious choice on where to invest my limited time and energy. I too want to flourish and not burn out, and despite all these responsibilities, I do not (or almost never) work evenings or weekends.

So where did I cut? I now do minimal teaching but still do lots of guest lecturing to stay in touch with our students. I continue to supervise graduate students who are (and have long been) my gateway to continuous learning and stimulating research projects. I still edit my journal (CJB/RCB), which I love doing because it keeps me abreast of cutting-edge bioethics.

What I stopped doing was writing grants and running big research projects… and I don’t miss this one bit. In taking on an academic managerial role, I realized that of all my professorial responsibilities, the one I liked the least was grant writing. I’m not fundamentally a researcher; writing articles and grants and going to conferences is not what gets me energized or enthused about work.

By contrast, I get a total rush out of supporting students and colleagues in their work, in helping them succeed and achieve their goals, and in promoting their successes. And I love organizing, building policies and procedures, and contributing to more efficient, inclusive and functional governance systems. Being department director allows me to do all of these things, and more.

For professors who love doing research, being director is a chore, a duty that they accept because someone has to do the job. Management is a distraction from their core academic passions, and so something to get through so they can get back to their regular professorial life. Even better if they can avoid the responsibility and get someone else to do the job! But to be fair, not every professor is cut out to be director.

So, when colleagues ask me if I like doing the job, I can honestly say “Yes, I love it!” I know I’m a bit crazy, but I’m fine with that…and so are my colleagues.

Being a Good Head of Department

Lessons for those considering a move to senior management

Bryn Williams-Jones
Oct 8, 2024

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Photo by Markus Spiske on Unsplash

Summary

For those who may be forced into or willingly take on leadership responsibilities, a shift in perspective is needed. Much of the work will be invisible to colleagues (boring administration for many) and involve managing personalities and frequent problem solving. The front end of the job involves championing the department, promoting successes and defending the interests of all members. More than just managerial, it is a space to mobilize colleagues and co-construct a shared vision of success.

Now four years into the job of being director of a large university department, which I'm still finding stimulating and so have expressed my desire to renew and take on another 4-year mandate, I've had time to reflect on my different roles and responsibilities and to identify those skills that I've mobilized to both survive and even thrive in this job.

Clearly a big part of being director is figuring out the rules of the game. I've learned lots about the institutional administrative culture and bureaucratic processes that are often invisible to and even the bane of most professors; and I now have a much better although far from complete understanding of the workings of the upper administration. This continued learning has come through seeking out new opportunities (working groups, committees, etc.), and by collaborating closely with our administrative personnel, precious colleagues with a wealth of knowledge and experience.

Having now organized numerous departmental meetings, produced strategic plans to grow the department, presided more than 10 hiring committees to recruit new professors, and supported colleagues' career progression through renewal, promotion and retirement, the importance of focusing on collective interests is evident. As too is the time commitment. For a big department like mine, this is a 3-4 day/week job. While there is still room for my individual projects, these invariably take a back seat, in terms of time and energy, to the needs of the department. In my experience, it's impossible to be a part-time director and do the job well.

Given my penchant for thinking about professional identity, career progression, and the legacies that we leave behind us when we retire, I turn here to some lessons for colleagues who may be forced into or willingly accept the leadership of an academic department.

Champion your department

As director you're not just a manager, you're a leader whose mandate is to support and promote the individual and collective interests of all the members of your department.

- Be the cheerleader for your professors, personnel and students, sharing their successes with the department, Faculty and University, via departmental email or recurring points at the beginning of departmental meetings. And talk about them where pertinent in your interactions with other departments or actors external to the university.
- You don't have to like all your colleagues, but you have to promote their excellence (e.g., in research, teaching, service, outreach) and support them in their career progression.
- Even though you're now "on the side" of the administration and so must take account of broader institutional orientations (and limits), your primary responsibility is to defend and advance the interests of your department.

Do the administrative work that most professors hate

Accept that a big part of the job involves administration, taking care of the things that others would prefer to not have to deal with.

- Meetings, whether statutory (departmental, faculty, university) or ad hoc (working groups) will be a big part of your day-to-day responsibilities and a major time commitment. Plan for these, with preparation time booked into your calendar; but also block meetings together where possible so you can free-up and protect time for other activities.
- Course planning in a large department with multiple specialities, like mine, is a huge amount of work and involves innumerable conversations and compromises between the potentially conflicting preferences of colleagues and institutional constraints. Surprisingly, no one wants to teach Friday afternoons.
- Build or update procedures to facilitate the organization of meetings, the job hiring process, scholarship evaluations, management of conflicts of interest, etc. Detailed standard operating procedures (SOPs) are a life saver because they ensure that you don't forget steps, which is easy to do when you're busy handling multiple projects.

Run the department assembly efficiently

Sometimes described as "herding cats", getting a large group of strong-willed experts (professors) to follow an agenda and do efficient decision-making necessitates attention to procedure, a heavy dose of diplomacy, a large amount of patience, and the courage to make hard choices.

- Your job is to preside the meeting, not impose your view. Learn the rules and regulations (e.g., quorum, voting rights) and implement best practices.
- Don't over-fill the agenda; pay close attention to the time needed for each item as you plan the meeting. Have important discussions on key issues before the meeting, so you know what needs to be presented, how, by whom, and how long it will take.
- Very few people appreciate 3-hour meetings where colleagues talk in circles, and nothing gets decided. I aim for no more than 2 hours and count it a success if we finish early. I focus on information sharing and decision-making (usually about nominations or renewals) and try to have in-depth discussions in other venues.
- Encourage discussion and civil debate, but don't let people ramble or repeat what others have already said. If conversations start becoming heated, intervene immediately (never easy!), correct the issue and then move on to the next item.
- If during the meeting an important point is taking more time than planned, either table it for a future discussion or continue and accept that other less priority items will have to be pushed to a subsequent meeting.

Lead by example

Being director is a bit lit being a teacher in front of a class: accept that you're always being watched and so act accordingly and "walk the talk".

- Model the expectations you have of your colleagues in terms of professionalism and collegiality, whether it's setting the tone in 1-on-1 interactions or when presiding meetings.
- Don't send or respond to emails during the evening or on weekends. Show that academic work can and should be done during normal work hours.
- Be diplomatic and pragmatic: you can complain about some things in the institution, but you also have to find solutions.

Be an empathetic listener and mentor

One of the things I love about the job but which I know other directors detest, is that a big part of the responsibility is being a human resources manager – it's a people job.

- Make yourself available for the professors, administrative personnel, and students, to listen to their issues or concerns and to help them find solutions. I have an open-door policy, and I'm always happy to meet with people whether in-person or by videoconference.

- Annually I meet with 30-40 adjunct or clinical professors each fall to talk through renewal of their affiliation (which are on a 3-5 year cycle), and these are rewarding exchanges that facilitate networking and a sense of involvement in the department for members who are not full-time professors. I'm also starting statutory meetings with our full-time professors this winter, to talk about their career progression.
- Guide the junior professors through renewal and promotion and support them in building successful careers. As colleagues become more senior, help them explore leadership opportunities, and for those nearing retirement, guide through the choices of how and when to end their academic careers.

Own your responsibility and make decisions

I jokingly say that academic leadership involves being an enlightened dictator, doing what is in your judgment best for the department; you cannot run a department by committee.

- Some decisions are your responsibility to make while others necessarily involve the input and approval of all members of the department. Determining which is which is part of the learning curve of leadership; but often those that are really important, such as hiring or promotion, will already be formalized by policy and procedure.
- Delegate some responsibilities, but not too many: include colleagues in event planning, solicit advice on strategic decision making, and where pertinent form working groups, and then follow up on deliverables.
- Have the moral courage to make the hard (even unpleasant) choices, to stand up for what you feel is right, to condemn that which is unacceptable, and to implement changes where needed.
- You don't have to explain everything that you do, because much of it is administrative and not of interest to most colleagues. But you have to be able to justify why you made a particular decision, when asked.
- Be decisive and don't dither; solicit advice, listen, analyze, and act. Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today, because tomorrow will have its own set of decisions to make.

Collaborate with the administration

While much of my work as director is focused inwards, working with members of my department, I also interact on a daily basis with the administrative personnel and senior leadership in the faculty.

- Having excellent working relationships with the administrative personnel is essential – they are indispensable colleagues and allies in everything you do as director. Not only are they involved in operationalizing your decisions, they're also critical to the efficient preparation and organization of the plethora of documents that ensure the good functioning of the department.
- Work closely with your administrative personnel to effectively share responsibilities and ensure the timely completion of objectives, and get them involved in critiquing, fine-tuning and implementing the SOPs.
- Working with the dean and vice-deans may be more or less frequent depending on the size of your faculty. In a large faculty, they may be very distant, but in a medium-size faculty like mine, we're in daily interaction by email and in bi-weekly meetings, and always working to support our individual and collective interests. Good working relations are thus crucial, and that means acknowledging the different interests and responsibilities of each.
- Build networks with the senior university administration as opportunities arise (vice-principals, service unit directors). These contacts will be much less frequent than with your dean or vice-deans, but are nonetheless important, especially when you have to defend your department in the context of budget cuts.

Take care of yourself

As director, it's easy to be so focused on the department (colleagues, administrative personnel, students, etc.) that you forget to focus on your own needs. You can't be a good director if you burn out because you didn't take care of your own physical and mental health.

- Collaborate with fellow department directors to brainstorm strategies, share experiences and engage in shared problem solving.
- Build your own external support network (e.g., spouse, friends) who're in no way involved with your department. You need someone with whom you can vent your frustrations, and who can be a sounding board for resolving challenges and imagining potential solutions.
- Protect "me-time" both for your research and supervision activities (I aim for at least 1 day/week), and your family and personal activities (e.g., hobbies).

Summary

At its core, I see my responsibility as director as being one of promoting a healthy workplace (mutual respect, collegiality, etc.) that creates space for colleagues and students to collaborate and to flourish in their respective research and learning projects. In practice, that means taking care of the day-to-day administrative work that supports the good functioning of a department, but which is invisible unless colleagues are directly involved. Being director also involves explicit leadership, making tough decisions and co-constructing a shared vision for how the department can continue to excel.

The Limits of Institutional Loyalty

Loyalty must be earned, not expected

Bryn Williams-Jones
Sept 3, 2024

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Summary

Loyalty to an employer or an institution should not be expected but earned. It should be anchored in a healthy work environment of mutual respect, and with opportunities for career progression and learning. When the interests of employees diverge from those of their institution, or worse yet, the environment becomes toxic, then it's legitimate and reasonable for the employee to leave.

Photo by Xiaochuan Xu on Unsplash

It used to be the case in many sectors, including in academia, that once you were "lucky enough" to get a permanent job you stayed there for life. You built your entire career (including promotions) within one company or organization and then retired after 30+ years of service. You were loyal to your employer, and in turn you were taken care of with the provision of good social benefits and a pension when you retired. This is arguably the model that is still common in Canadian universities: many professors and administrative staff are hired in their late 20s or early 30s with the expectation that they will spend their entire careers at the university. It is so much the norm, especially for professors, that when someone considers leaving this is met with incredulity: "Are you crazy? How can you risk throwing away a dream job, one that you worked so hard to obtain?"

There is here a problematic notion of institutional loyalty that needs to be questioned. Loyalty should not be expected, it must be earned and based on a reciprocal relationship and mutually beneficial interests; and when those interests diverge, it is legitimate for the employee to leave.

The model of permanent employment is obviously a bit of caricature and one that certainly did not apply to all sectors of the economy nor across all countries. In North America at least, this sort of institutional culture was common in many manual jobs, in service delivery and in managerial positions, and well into the 1970s. But with the rise of the gig-economy and precarious or part-time employment in the 2000s, and then the post-Covid context and aging populations, there is now widespread unmet need for employees in many sectors. As a result, we've seen greatly increased employee mobility; many people can now demand and choose their work conditions, and if at a certain point they are no longer satisfied, they can leave because they have other options to pursue.

Academia is no stranger to this fluid movement of employees, particularly among the administrative personnel. Yet, it remains one of the few sectors where being an employee-for-life is still the norm, not the exception.

Getting a job as a university professor is long and arduous. You spend more than a decade studying to obtain multiple diplomas, culminating with the PhD, often followed by a postdoc to show your autonomy as a researcher while you start applying for jobs. The competition is ferocious with sometimes upwards of a hundred candidates applying for a single position; and this includes 9-month limited-term teaching appointments common in Canada and the US – the gig-workers of academia.

Before being hired at the Université de Montréal, I applied to 25 positions at universities in the UK, Canada and the US; of these, I managed to get 5 interviews and one job, a 3-year limited-term position at Cardiff University which I left after 1 year to take-up my position in Montreal. This experience, which I found nerve-wracking, was nothing compared to that of some colleagues who had applied for literally hundreds of jobs. So, when I obtained the much-coveted tenure-track position of Assistant professor, I was grateful for the chance to pursue my chosen career, and in a city where I had grown up and had family; fortunate as I was, I could not imagine leaving.

In your first few years as an Assistant professor, you're focused on building your courses and launching your research program and working towards tenure and promotion. By contrast, for those colleagues in small undergraduate colleges or in sessional positions, which often have ridiculously heavy teaching loads of 6 (or more!) courses per year and no time for research, the desire for a position at a research-intensive university may keep them on the job market. To be competitive for research positions, alongside their evident teaching experience these colleagues also need to show a strong publication record and ability to obtain grants, activities for which they do not have protected time – so they invariably do their research during evenings and weekends. As one American colleague noted on being recruited into a tenure-track position, "the job offer was like making it onto the last helicopter out of Saigon".

Unlike many sectors, the mobility of university professors is relatively low, especially for tenure-track positions with stable salaries and good working conditions. Once promoted to Associate professor and granted tenure, there is even less incentive to leave. But that does not mean that this is not possible or even desirable, and it doesn't make a colleague who leaves disloyal.

Since becoming director in late 2020, I've recruited 1 to 3 new professors per year, almost all at the Assistant professor level, and supported 5 professors moving to retirement. But I've also worked with junior and senior colleagues – both professors and administrative personnel – who left to take up positions in other units or at different institutions. In each of these cases, I was struck by their initial reticence to say that they had been offered another job and were strongly considering accepting the offer; even knowing me well, they evidently feared institutional repercussions.

My response was the same for each: "You are not a galley slave chained to the oar and destined to pull until you die – follow your passion and seize this new opportunity!" I would then start asking questions about the job, what it offered in terms of resources or opportunities that were not available in their current position, and how it fit as part of their career objectives. I never tried to convince them to stay, accepting that their decision was well thought out and already made; instead, I focused on supporting them in their transition, making it clear that they would remain valued colleagues and collaborators.

For other colleagues who shared with me that they were considering moving to other positions, but had not yet made the decision, I would ask other questions: Why did they want to leave? Were they getting bored with their current position? Were there problematic working conditions? Had they considered the opportunity costs of starting over in a new position, of forgoing the expected progression and benefits of their current position? Did the new position offer improved benefits or opportunities for new learning and career progression? And most importantly, what could I (or the institution) do to better meet these needs and so incite them to stay?

I convinced some colleagues to stay – and I'm delighted they did! – by helping them ask the right questions but also by working with them to change their environment to one that was more rewarding. Other colleagues left to pursue their careers elsewhere, and I've remained in touch with a few, seeing their move as a normal part of a professional career but also a means to expand my (and their) network into different services within the university or at other institutions.

Since taking up my position in 2005, I have twice flirted with the idea of leaving when I came close to burnout, which also coincided with experiencing toxic relations with some colleagues. Both times, I pulled back from the edge because, with the support of my wife, I recognized that the desire to quit was not linked to a reasoned analysis of the situation or part of my career objectives. I instead worked on myself and re-organized my work conditions to once again find joy in my profession.

Now as a senior professor and administrator, I am increasingly solicited by "head-hunters" to take on leadership positions at other universities, but while flattered, I have never been seriously tempted. I am deeply invested in my career at the Université de Montréal, and it's an environment where I continue to have opportunities to learn, explore and progress in my career. If at some point these opportunities ceased or I felt no longer valued, then I would certainly consider leaving for another university, but it is not something that I foresee happening.

To the extent that an institution provides an environment where employees are treated with respect and given opportunities to progress in their careers, the institution is due the loyalty of its employees to work hard to advance the interests of the institution.

While your loyalty to your institution can be strong, it should also be conditional.

Chapter 2: Professional Identity

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The Path Less Travelled

Interdisciplinarity involves getting lost to find your direction

Bryn Williams-Jones
Feb 12, 2023

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Photo by Alan Carrillo on Unsplash

Summary

My reflections on how being open to taking different paths and seizing opportunities has allowed me to build my interdisciplinary bioethics identity.

The stories or narratives that we tell ourselves are a way of building our individual sense of identity, of who we are and how we got to where we are today. These different narratives are, I suggest, what lead people like me and the bioethics students I've helped train over the past 20 years to become interdisciplinarians. But acquiring and integrating multiple and divergent narratives is never easy; it takes a lot of patience, a big dose of humility, and the courage to accept uncertainty… and to trust in taking risks and to keep moving forward.

Here, I share some of the different paths that led me ultimately to become a professor of bioethics in 2005 at the Université de Montréal. In future posts I will share lessons learned during my career as a professor.

For me, a recurring theme or metaphor in my life has been one of getting lost and taking side-branches from the path that I had or was expected to follow. As a young person this was deeply destabilizing and a source at times of significant emotional distress. But as I grew older and accepted that this was part of my life, taking different paths became integral to my identity and even a resource for flourishing.

The Early Years

I'm dyslexic, and that changes everything. Despite being diagnosed as a young child and having the good fortune to be in a primary school with expert special educators able to support children with different needs, school was hard from a young age, and this contributed to low self-esteem that took decades to overcome.

I'll come back, in a future post, to my experience of being neurodiverse (aka weird) and how this affected my journey into academia and shaped my work as a bioethicist. But for now, being dyslexic meant that school was going to be difficult, not a straight path to university and a professional career.

As I was finishing high school, I was convinced that I would go into the sciences or engineering, but I was horrible at math! I come from an academic family: my father is a university professor (geology) and still teaching and doing research in his lab, my twin brother is also a university professor (volcanology), and my mother was a nurse (retired)…so the applied sciences seemed the natural path for me to follow.

At college (CEGEP in Quebec), I studied applied sciences but only did well in biology; the other sciences were a struggle. But I excelled in the humanities, politics, geography, etc., yet I didn't see where this could lead me. After many long (and emotional!) discussions about possible careers and directions to take, I ended up following a friend into philosophy at McGill University, and I loved it even though I found it incredibly difficult. This was where I started learning ethics and was forced to challenge my preconceived notions and values. In parallel, I volunteered in my mother's unit, talking with elderly people living in a long-term care setting. Discussions with my mother about the injustices she experienced and saw as a nurse, and my own learning about how healthcare worked as professional practice within a complex system, was what lit the flame in me for bioethics. I knew I wanted a career in this field, but the path was not at all clear… nor what I expected.

Higher Education

In my third year of undergraduate philosophy, I started applying to US graduate schools at the recommendation of my professors who all told me that this was "the best path to follow"; but I was refused from all because my grades weren't good enough for scholarships. In a panic that summer, and with no options left for the Fall, I managed to get a late acceptance into the Masters in Religious Studies, bioethics option, at McGill. For a non-religious person like me this was a big change – and a challenge! – but one that opened my eyes to a whole new world of peoples and beliefs. And it moved my ethical reflections from the conceptual (philosophical) to the concrete and live-experience (qualitative) of different people. The limits of theory in application were striking, and these two years ignited my interest in learning more about qualitative methods and working with social scientists.

You'd have thought that I would have learned my lesson by this point, but I guess I'm a slow learner. In the mid-1990s in Canada there were no PhD programs in bioethics, so I once again applied to philosophy (although only in Canada this time) and was again rejected by all, because what I wanted to do – genetics and ethics – was too interdisciplinary. Luckily, the professor I most wanted to work with, Michael Burgess at UBC, guided me to their Interdisciplinary Studies program, and that's where I was ultimately accepted and did my PhD. But I also had lots of side-opportunities, where I learned more about health law, research ethics, how to organize workshops and focus groups… all things that I would use later in my career.

I had a truly amazing five years in Vancouver as part of a team of graduate students and researchers from philosophy, education, anthropology, and sociology, among others. I was also the baby of the group, a young man surrounded by strong women with lots of life experience, so I matured in a context of critical feminism, science and technology studies, and enumerable discussions about different career goals and paths…

The Post-doc and After

I went on to do a two-year post-doctoral fellowship in the UK, at Cambridge University, again working with social scientists, but also meeting with philosophers, policy analysts, and exploring different ways of doing and imagining bioethics research. As this fellowship was winding up, and at the encouragement of my friend Oonagh Corrigan, I went out on a limb and applied for a job as a research ethics fellow at Cardiff University in Wales. I'd not even imagined this as a possibility because my professional identity was focused on genetics, ethics and health policy. But I'd learned more than I'd thought during my PhD while working on a Law Commission report for Michael McDonald, and so I was able to put this knowledge to good effect, and research ethics would later become a major focus in my career.

Ultimately, I took up a position in bioethics at the Université de Montréal, where I've been a professor since 2005. I started in ethics and health policy but have since migrated into doing research and teaching in professional ethics, research ethics, public health ethics, technology ethics, responsible conduct of research (aka scientific integrity), and more recently ethics and artificial intelligence.

Some Lessons Learned

My narrative is one of an ever-changing path, of setbacks that led to new doors opening because I was able to see these situations not as "failures" but as challenges and opportunities to be seized. Each branching path was a place for new experiences and skill development. This has been difficult and even scary at times. But it has also enabled me to build my "bioethics toolbox" of theories, concepts, and frameworks; to learn the disciplinary languages and so appreciate the expertise of many different areas; and ultimately to forge my own flavour of interdisciplinary bioethics.

So, my recommendation to others who may be just starting or who are already invested in a similar interdisciplinary journey (in bioethics or elsewhere) is to accept that it is and will continue to be a winding path. Take the risk of going down "false paths" and hitting dead-ends, because each will provide you with new and useful experiences and knowledge. See challenges not as something to be avoided, but as opportunities to be grasped. Above all, internalize this continually evolving story as part of an identity that is also always evolving… and in so doing, build the narratives that are meaningful for you.

Academics are Weird

On being neurodiverse or different

Bryn Williams-Jones
Feb 28, 2023

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Photo by Johnny Briggs on Unsplash

Summary

Academia is a strange environment, occupied by weird people. The following post is a reflection on being neurodiverse, on the "need" to label and put people into boxes, and on the possibility to "normalize", reject, or transform these labels. Instead of feeling outcast, I argue that we should embrace our weirdness and diversity.

I don't remember when I first heard the term "neurodiverse", but it struck a spark in me because of the idea that we can and should be inclusive of people, accepting their differences as part of who they are.

Some people may be perceived as being very different from "the norm" in how they think, learn and interact with others – attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), Asperger's, Autism. But labelling people with a diagnostic term can be disabling, treating them as "disordered", as "other". By contrast, talking about people as being neurodiverse, while also recognizing that some may need specialized help in order to overcome the more debilitating or disabling aspects of their condition, can be a way to acknowledge their differences as being legitimate.

But these terms still separate the world into the "norms" (us) and the "different or diverse" (them). And I had situated myself in the norms, despite my own history. Yet, I've come to think differently about difference. In my 30+ years in academia in Canada, and in the UK where I did my post-doc, I've met so many people who were different (aka weird) that I've come to wonder whether anyone is "neurotypical" or normal – maybe we're all diverse, whatever that means.

The use of these terms to normalize or demarcate difference also makes me question this need to label, to put people into boxes. People are complex, defined by and defining themselves through a multiplicity of terms, frames, cultures, narratives and identities. I've also been labelled, and in turn used those labels to construct my own identity. And I've then questioned the defining power of these labels and re-appropriated them to give a different meaning.

Growing up severely dyslexic, I had to battle to learn to read. In primary school, I was taken out of regular class every day for 5 years to receive special education support, metaphorically re-wiring my brain to be able to see words and letters the right way around and so be able to read. I was incredibly fortunate to be diagnosed early – to be labelled – and to be in a school with the necessary qualified special educators. But primary school was still horrible, because I faced social exclusion and bullying for being different. I was "disabled" by dyslexia, and that formed a core part of my identity for many years.

High school was better, although I was still an outsider. I had to work incredibly hard, as I was just overcoming my reading delays. I was also a budding nerd, becoming enthralled in books (largely science fiction and fantasy) and in politics, science, and history. I became a voracious reader, if a slow one; I was a thirsty man in a desert who finds an oasis and tastes fresh water. And I learned the power of talking (maybe too much!) and debate as a way of engaging critically with ideas. This was probably the start of my academic narrative, and one that took me in many different directions in subsequent years.

It was during my PhD and postdoc that I transformed my label of being dyslexic from one of "disability" into simply a different way of thinking and being. No longer a deficit, my dyslexia became a capacity, even a source of excellence, because I had developed my own strategies.

For me, pen and paper are a nightmare, because this medium is static – if I misspell or make a mistake, I have to start over. By contrast, the digital environment is a liberation, providing a fluid and dynamic space that, unlike paper, is not incompatible with a non-linear way of thinking or poor handwriting (mine is almost illegible). It's no surprise, then, that I'm a techie by nature, and that I love working on computer, tablet, phone; that I never take notes on paper; and that I prefer reading digital to hard copy.

I realized that my slow reading and inability to scan a text – I read every single word, line by line – meant that while I needed to plan more time to read a text, this also made me an excellent editor. The extra spaces between words, the spelling error, the typo, all literally jump out of the text into my visual space. This interaction with text is visceral; when I'm correcting a student manuscript or an article for my journal, I have to first fix the formatting before I can begin to read and understand the content. The medium comes before the message (to paraphrase Marshal McLuhan's "the medium is the message"). I learned the importance of page-setting (the medium) to make a text more accessible, to make the ideas (the message) more compelling. And this massaging of text gives me genuine pleasure – I love editing!

Following numerous discussions with my wife about how we think about and view the world, we realized that our cognitive processes were diametrically opposed. She is hyper-visual and synesthetic, so she visualizes the world in an incredible range of images that are intimately linked to sound, colour, and even odour. For her, the world is an ever-unfolding cascade of images and ideas, that are interrelated in an extremely complex manner. By contrast, for me, thinking is purely a matter of ideas – it's totally conceptual, abstract. When I close my eyes there is only darkness. I'm aphantasic, so I do not see images at all, and when asked to imagine something, I tell a story in my mind in words, but I do not "see" anything. I have to think "out loud" and work through an idea until I get to the end; my wife, when she listens to me, is already at the conclusion (but, having stopped telling me straight away because she knows how I work, she's waiting for me to get there myself), and so she's simultaneously drawing up a shopping list, thinking about her next article, weighing the pros and cons of choosing our son's summer camps, and pondering a host of other ideas.

Being both dyslexic and aphantasic meant that memorizing was never going to work for me – I have horrible short and long-term memory because I don't visualize. And I think by writing and talking (a lot!), which is likely why I've gravitated towards teaching, working with the media, and public speaking. The presentation, far from being a source of intimidation (which it was when I had to read a written text), is now a space for real-time creative thinking. "BrynStorming" with a group of graduate students – ideas flowing in every direction, everything on the table – is for me the apogee of intellectual stimulation, it's a total academic buzz! But I also know that other people find such unscripted discussions to be disturbing, because they appear chaotic – "it's all talk!".

These conversations helped my wife and I both realize that our presuppositions about how others think – "like me of course" – needed to be thrown out. And it led us both to reconsider how we teach, because if the two of us were so very different in how we thought and experienced our respective worlds, it stood to reason that many of our students (and colleagues) might also think very differently. There can never be "one" teaching method to reach a group; multiple methods and media are needed if we are to engage meaningfully with our different audiences, that is, adapting our communication to many different ways of learning.

It was while I was in Cambridge for my post-doc that I really started noticing how academia was a world apart, with many eccentric types who had found a safe space in which to live their passions for esoteric subjects, and where their intensity and focus was considered an asset, even a mark excellence, but never a deficit. I met students and professors who were ADHD, Asperger's, Autistic, or some other of the many different ways of being and thinking that in "the outside world" would be markers of unacceptable social difference, to be labelled, to be set apart. And looking back to my undergraduate and graduate studies, I can think of many fellow students and professors who were also very "different" but had nonetheless found their place.

I've come to conclude that in academia, we're all weird in some way or another, and that we think somewhat or even very differently from mainstream society, and from each other. So if that means we're "neurodiverse", that's OK. The labels that we give ourselves or which are given to us can be defining, but they do not have to be limiting… and we do not have to let them define us. These labels can be transformed or even put aside when they are no longer pertinent or meaningful.

So I would say to colleagues and students who sometimes (or even often) feel very different or like outsiders – "own your difference!"

Personal and Professional Identity

How we define ourselves is important, multifaceted and ever changing

Bryn Williams-Jones
Mar 26, 2024

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Photo by John Noonan on Unsplash

Summary

As part of an ongoing discussion with public health residents, we've been exploring how to construct one's professional identity, something made difficult by an uncertain and rapidly changing world. But if we accept this uncertainty, recognize that our personal histories can be sources of strength, and follow our passions, we can (re)create the identity that we need to fully live our professions, whatever they may be.

As part of a seminar series for public health residents aimed at supporting and promoting their health and well-being, which my colleague Dr. Yun Jen and I have been leading for two years, we've been exploring the evolving nature of professional identity. An underlying theme has been how future public health professionals can create their own identity and contribute to renewing that of their profession. Not surprisingly, this personal and professional reflexivity speaks directly to my own perennial reflection, which I've been exploring in this blog, about the evolution of personal and academic (professional) identities.

For disciplinarians like my wife the anthropologist and university professor, or for health professionals working in clinical services, this identity uncertainty may seem strange. How can one be a professional and yet still question one's identity? But in the context of interdisciplinary domains like public health or bioethics, this is very much an issue – these professionals are frequently working across disciplinary domains with many other experts, and including some who are doing similar work. What one's particular expertise is or contribution to resolving a problem may not be at all evident. This then raises questions about professional identity.

These public health residents, who will soon be working in the Quebec public health system, are entering a turbulent world: the provincial health system has undergone major reforms over the past decades (with another round beginning), changing both health service delivery and access to care, as well as the role of public health physicians in surveillance, prevention and health promotion, among other important responsibilities. The changes in how public health is practised, and by whom, was put under the spotlight by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, as too was the importance of public health for society, along with its many structural and practical challenges.

Public health is unfortunately still the poor cousin to the hospital-centric biomedicine that has come to dominate our health systems in Canada. The result is that public health physicians and other health professionals are invariably working with limited human and financial resources, and insufficient political capital, to make the changes that they know are needed to protect and promote public health.

Add to these issues additional and vastly more complex concerns about the public health implications of global warming, climate migration, rising social inequality, emerging zoonotic diseases, etc. For the public health residents in our seminar, many view their future profession as one that is on shifting sands, and thus a source of uncertainty and some anxiety. What *are* they doing as public health physicians, and what *should* they be doing? How do they differentiate themselves from other professionals doing similar work? What place is there for them to exercise their professional autonomy and assume leadership roles? And how can they develop a professional identity that is coherent with their core personal values and sense of self?

These questions are all too familiar to me, and so it's been a pleasure to think about them with the residents and explore possible answers. Many of the insights that I offer obviously come from my own professional journey.

For quite a while, now, I've been reflecting on what it means to be a bioethicist, and more generally an academic, and what a career trajectory looks like for someone like me – from graduate student, to postdoc, to professor, to administrator, and finally to post-academia retirement. Given the important place of this academic career in my life, it's become evident that for me, my personal and professional identities are closely intertwined. And they are never static, but continually evolving, and often taking me in unexpected directions.

I'm a husband, a father, a brother, a son; a practitioner of the martial arts, a fan of Celtic culture and science fiction; a bilingual Canadian, living in Montreal, with British and South African origins, married to a French woman (I now have a French passport); and I'm profoundly democratic and anti-monarchist. These social roles, personal interests and history have shaped how I think of myself, about my place in society (e.g., social privilege), about the importance of work-life balance (e.g., time with family), about the need to own my responsibilities (i.e., not those of others), and about how to imagine worlds or ways to do things differently (e.g., creativity, humility and continuous learning).

I've also been shaped by my learning disabilities. I used to define myself by my difficulty reading (dyslexia) and my inability to visualise clearly (aphantasia), things that made me a bit weird and different from my colleagues. But over time, I have taken ownership of these differences, not letting them limit or define me, but instead accepting them as part of who I am. They have opened me up to different ways of viewing and experiencing the world, and I hope, helped me become more compassionate, be a better teacher and mentor, a better colleague, friend, husband, and father.

All these aspects of my life contribute to my ethical positionality – where I stand and how I want to be and act in the world. They directly influence my research and professional practice, and the way I teach and carry out my leadership responsibilities. My identity as bioethicist-professor is not something purely intellectual; it is anchored in and informed by these other social and visceral facets of my lived experience.

What I have learned through this self-reflection, and which I've shared with the public health residents in our various discussions over the past two years, is that professional identity is fluid, ever evolving and multifaceted. It is individually and collectively constructed. And the personal and the professional are not polar opposites, but instead mutually inform one another.

In a context of ongoing social and political change, the practice of public health professionals – or in my case, the role of academics – will also have to evolve, as too then will our professional identities. And finding one's footing in such an uncertain world can be challenging, even destabilizing.

If, however, we accept this uncertainty, if we recognize and own our personal histories as sources of strength and inspiration, and if we follow our passions to find those places where we can make a difference in the world, we will be able to (re)create the identity that we need to fully live our professions, whatever they may be and wherever they may take us.

Taking Risks and Seizing Opportunities

You need to have the right frame of mind to see the possibilities

Bryn Williams-Jones
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Photo by Cristofer Maximilian on Unsplash

Summary

Building an interdisciplinary identity involves exploring new paths of learning, and this is extremely stimulating. But it can also be disconcerting and discouraging, especially when we lose sight of our destination and see only obstacles on the path ahead. It takes an openness of mind to see challenges as opportunities, and courage to seize risky opportunities. So embrace uncertainty as part of the learning process and trust in serendipity to take you not where you want to go but where you need to be.

One of my roles as professor and supervisor, and which I love, is to guide students, to help them find a focus or clear direction for their masters or PhD project, but also with regards to their future careers. This experience has led me to use the metaphor of getting lost in the forest. In order build a rich interdisciplinary identity and skill set, something that is essential for bioethicists, we need to explore new avenues of (disciplinary) learning. In so doing, we come out further enriched and able to find a new path and continue our professional journey.

Taking a winding path is also risky as one may become discouraged by all the lengthy detours; worse yet, it is possible to lose one's way and no longer be able to find the sought-after destination. Put more concretely, I have met students looking for a clear path to a career in bioethics, and to the question "Which courses or program should I take to get a job?" my answer is invariably "It depends…" on their professional background, their interests, their skills, etc. There isn't one straight path for an interdisciplinary domain like bioethics. And while rewarding, it will be intellectually and emotionally demanding and fraught with setbacks and different challenges (e.g., academic, financial, personal). Not surprisingly, my response can generate substantial anxiety, and even for those who knowingly embark on the journey, the uncertainty can be very destabilizing.

The way to deal with this, I suggest, is by embracing uncertainty as part of the learning process – in the words of my student Gabrielle Verreault, "trust in the process" of getting lost in order to find new opportunities.

My personal and professional journey, at least since the early days of university (if not earlier), has been one of perpetually changing direction and taking different and unexpected paths. This continual change, which is rarely planned and is often imposed by circumstances outside of my control, has been so dominant in my life that it has become a core narrative and part of my identity.

In my journey to becoming a bioethicist and an interdisciplinary scholar, I describe this sinuous path as a combination of personality and world view.

I have a short attention span and so get bored after a few years working in one area. I shift to a different research topic or professional activity because at some point I find that I've nothing substantive to contribute. But I also have a visceral need to learn and to be challenged and pushed outside my comfort zone. Bizarre as it sounds, I thrive when I move from being expert in my field to being once again a student (this also explains my long and winding relationship with the martial arts).

In parallel, I'm committed to the view that the complex nature of the problems with which bioethicists and other academics are engaged necessitate that we mobilize nuanced, interdisciplinary and systemic analytic approaches so we can then develop complex and multifaceted responses. This means, for me, having a rich and diverse theoretical and practical toolbox, and the ability to work with resources from different disciplines or domains, in close collaboration with experts in these fields. But developing the right toolbox and being open to collaboration requires a willingness to take important risks, both intellectually and in terms of personal and professional engagement.

Unfortunately, while universities and research funders may talk about the benefits of multi- or interdisciplinary collaborations and the importance of risk-taking for scientific innovation, the competitive funding environment pushes in the opposite direction. In Canada, funding success rates for student scholarships have sometimes been as low as 25-30%, and even worse for research grants, at 15% or less. In this context, researchers have every interest to be conservative and risk-averse, because taking a high-risk research path (in terms of question, method or interdisciplinary collaboration), while creating the opportunity for scientific innovation that will be positively rewarded with prestige and funding, also brings with it a significant likelihood of failure and the inability to publish or obtain research funds.

In a hyper-competitive, publish or perish environment, you have to show your colleagues that you're the expert in your field, that you have the experience and a demonstrated track record of success (you've the CV to prove it), and so merit being published or funded. It thus makes sense for researchers to focus on that which they know well and for which they have demonstrated success, because they can tell a coherent story of success – few evaluators are interested in research failures, and these are never on our CVs. In so doing, we incentivize conservatism and protectionism in research, instead of innovation and open science.

Yet, it should be evident that it is only when we are willing to take substantial risks and be open to opportunities that important innovations can occur.

In my years supervising Gabrielle, first during her masters and now in the context of her PhD, we've had numerous discussions about risk and opportunity, and the personality or character needed to embrace that which is uncomfortable. Will this path of research lead to a publishable result? Is the project sufficiently topical to obtain a scholarship, and if not, what then? Does the PhD have to be followed by an academic job, and if that's not our goal, what other post-PhD careers might be possible?

Like me, Gabrielle sees opportunities emerge that others would never see, in large part due to her openness to the new and her willingness to accept risk. As she noted in a recent conversation:

> *The path will create itself on time or find me when it comes! Everything has always seemed to set itself perfectly since I started in bioethics. It's like magic, meaning nothing is ever forced and comes naturally as I'm attuned to opportunities. Trust the process! I still have two good years before me. … It seems every idea, even the smallest, sparks another greater idea for you and you enhanced the thought to another level! It's like imagination but grounded in reality and possible future. You taught me to stay attentive to every idea and smallest prospect, as I can imagine how they can grow larger and evaluate how to make it happen.*

Clearly not everyone will be comfortable (or competent) with taking high-risk (inter)disciplinary paths. For people like Gabrielle and me, though, it's part of who we are. And her personal narrative, like mine, substantiates the efficacy of this process for us in building successful careers.

It takes an openness of mind to see challenges as opportunities, and courage to seize risky opportunities despite the associated uncertainties and substantial discomfort. With experience, we can learn to embrace this discomfort as an inherent part of a rich learning experience, to go forward into the unknown with the confidence that this is the right path, even if not the one we might have planned.

To quote Dirk Gently, Douglas Adams' character from The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul, try using the method of Zen navigation; rather than following conventional avenues, find someone who looks like they know where they're going and follow them – "it very rarely gets you where you wanted to go but always where you needed to be."

Trust the process and accept serendipity.

The Arrogant Professor

Don’t be confused with one of these unpleasant colleagues

Bryn Williams-Jones
Mar 19, 2024

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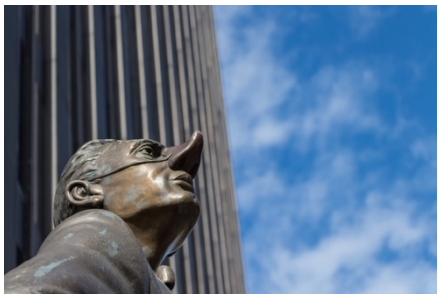

Photo by Artem Page on Unsplash

Summary

Academia tends to select for over-achievers and then demand that they continually self-promote to get published, obtain grants...to “be the best”. The problem is that academics can appear arrogant, even if this is unintentional. The challenge is learning how to act with confidence while also making space for others to shine.

The meritocratic nature of academia lends itself to being an environment full of people with strong personalities. In our hiring practices, we select “the best” and that means people who’re capable of “selling themselves”, of showing through their CVs and their communication that they are the best. A result is that academics can take up a lot of space and appear to be arrogant even when that is not their intention.

As I reflected on previously regarding the metaphors that we use to describe academics, some colleagues may be individualistic, and not team players; but in my experience, many if not most, while personally invested in their careers, do so in collaboration with their colleagues and students and not at the expense of those with whom they work. Unfortunately, some professors are arrogant, full of their own sense of superiority, and convinced of the evident correctness of their viewpoints. They can be obnoxious colleagues, and their self-righteousness and arrogance are suffocating – they take up an inordinate amount of space and leave little room for others to express themselves.

For those of us who are extroverts, but who also genuinely care about the well-being of our colleagues and students, it can be a hard line to trace between acting with conviction and appearing to be arrogant.

I know that I’m someone with a strong personality and who talks a lot. I have a slew of ideas bouncing around in my head, but because I’m aphantasic, these ideas only take concrete form when I talk or write. For me, communication is not just a means of exchanging information, it is a veritable psychological need and something that gives me enormous pleasure. This is almost certainly why I was horrible at silent meditation – not thinking or talking requires an act of will power that can feel like a form of personal violence!

It’s not surprising, then, that I found my place in academia, a world where developing and exchanging ideas, orally and in written form, makes up a large part of our daily activities and is a core aspect of our profession. As educators, as researchers, as managers, we are always communicating with others. And the way that we communicate is important.

Long conscious of the fact that I can take up a lot of space – because I have so many ideas, stories, etc., that I want to share, and I’m passionate about them! – I also understood that without both internal and external constraints, this verbosity could become insufferable and be perceived as egotistical or arrogant. During my undergraduate and graduate studies, I was introduced to clinical and social psychology, Zen Buddhism, and meditation techniques, all of which fuelled my interest in how my and other’s mind(s) worked, and this shaped my evolving self-awareness. My exploration of this literature taught me to be more reflexive and helped me to gain better control, but it was still insufficient – when I became excited about an idea that “I have to share because it’s so cool!”, I would lose awareness of those around me, that they might not share my passion for this idea, and so I could unintentionally dominate the conversation. Even if not my intention, I recognized that this behaviour was insufferable.

So, while a Masters student, I started asking – and authorizing – my friends to “Tell me to shut-up!” Many found it surprising that I was genuinely soliciting such interventions. But as I explained, this metaphorical slap in the face was an important complement to my own internal control mechanisms. Over the years, I’ve become much better at controlling and channelling my natural exuberance, but I still ask my colleagues to tell me to shut-up; my wife has no hesitation in doing so, and for that I’m grateful. This request to family and colleagues is anchored in my fear of being perceived as overbearing, arrogant or boring and to then have them stop listening.

The difference between the good colleague who is a bit too exuberant and one who is arrogant largely has to do with intention. With arrogant colleagues, they’re not fundamentally interested in helping others. Even if they support some of their students or junior colleagues in succeeding, it is usually only those who they judge to be the best and worthy of their attentions; and there is an instrumental aspect, because the successes are encouraged because they reflect positively on the colleague. In my experience, the arrogant colleague is fundamentally self-interested.

When I think of examples of such colleagues that I’ve known over the years, their arrogance often seemed to be a manifestation of a narcissistic personality and/or an inferiority complex: they cared only about themselves, were convinced of their own importance and that they merited (and needed) recognition in the form of adulation, promotions, awards, etc.

These are the colleagues who ask questions of conference presenters, or of students in a seminar or thesis defence, that are not questions but instead 10-minute-long rambling commentaries that leave the recipient scratching their head trying to find a question to answer. The purpose is simply to grand-stand. Frequently, they also build a coterie of students, their disciples, who are part of the select-few granted entrance to the inner sanctum; and these students are made to understand their privilege (which they will then lord over other students), and in exchange they hero-worship the guru. This may sound like a caricature from a bad film, but I’ve known colleagues who behaved in exactly this way. What’s more, some of them were convinced that they were unrecognised “geniuses” and therefore suffered from a lack of recognition; they had not received awards and were mortified.

Different but related are those whose arrogance is a way to compensate for an inferiority complex, a never-overcome imposter syndrome. These colleagues have an insatiable hunger for attention and appear to be trying to fill an emotional void. “My latest book was published with *Prestigious Publishing Press*” or “I just got this huge, highly competitive grant” or “My H-factor is huge!” or “I’ve made this unique discovery and I’m submitting the paper to *Nature*” or “I’ve been to various exotic countries and was invited to exclusive dinners” or “I just received another prize” or “I’ve been nominated to this high-level advisory committee”.

Each of these affirmations, if coming from an exuberant and well-intentioned colleague, would probably also be followed by a discussion about how to mobilize these experiences to help their colleagues or students, to share lessons learned, and to capitalize on opportunities for the benefit of others. But from arrogant colleagues, these statements simply manifest their need to have their egos stroked – they are never aimed at helping others.

Intentions are important, but so too are other behaviours that transparently demonstrate one’s underlying good intentions. The lesson I learned over the years is to assume my exuberance, because it is who I am, but to moderate my enthusiasm, to listen and to give space to others – in so doing, I show that I’m not arrogant.

The Martial Arts Help Keep Me Humble

Take on the role of student and life-long learner

Bryn Williams-Jones
Nov 14, 2023

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Photo by Thao LEE on Unsplash

Summary

Being an “expert” and authority figure comes with its own biases, including an arrogance founded in mastery of our specific domain. Finding spaces in our lives where we can be humbled, once again taking on the role of learner, can be incredibly rewarding because they help show us where we’re experts, and where we’re not. For me, I found this space in the martial arts.

Academia can be an all-encompassing profession, one where it’s difficult to turn off the academic brain because we are so passionate, and even obsessive at times, about our research interests. Hobbies and other pass times that force us to disconnect can be an important means of finding balance between our professional academic responsibilities, and our personal lives.

Here, however, I will reflect – albeit indirectly – on how to deal with the cognitive bias inherent in being “The Expert” and an authority figure, “The Professor”. Specifically, I make the case for finding spaces or activities that can keep us humble, that make us explicitly aware of our own limitations so that we avoid the trap of arrogance, of thinking that our expertise is generalizable outside our specific professional or research domains.

This is a reflection on my 30-year journey through the martial arts, and the lessons these experiences have taught me and which I have applied, often unconsciously, in my journey through academia.

My Martial Arts Journey

I started martial arts in my early 20s while in college (CEGEP), profiting from credited gym courses in Judo and Shotokan Karate. I got hooked on Judo, but not Karate, due in large part to the intense physical nature of Judo’s grappling and throwing, as well as the self-defence aspects of submissions (joint locks, chokes, holds). I also enjoyed learning about Japanese culture, dojo decorum, the terminology of the various techniques, etc. I was incredibly fortunate to learn from Sensei Ben Shimoda, a gifted educator who pushed his students to excel, to challenge their limits, but always with a laugh and a smile, especially when you were trying to choke him… which was impossible as he had a neck as tough as a tree trunk! I continued Judo for four years under his tutelage, getting to Green belt level.

During my Masters I stopped Judo because I was busy with my academic studies; in hindsight, I wish I’d continued, but I also recognize that I was not yet in an interdisciplinary mindset – I could invest in one activity or another, but not multiple simultaneously.

At the end of my PhD, I spent a year doing urban self-defence, learning a combination of Filipino and Indonesian stick and knife fighting; but while interested in the weapons systems, I found the approach overly combative – I had no intention to start carrying knives or be involved in bar fights! I briefly tried Wing Chung Kung Fu but didn’t connect with the style, and then did a year of Yang Style Tai Chi (form and sword) but was frustrated by the complete absence of martial application. I could see the potential in the forms, but the instructor was more focused on meditative aspect and wouldn’t explain the applications. And for me, without knowing the application I could not understand how and why to do the form.

When I moved to the United Kingdom in 2002 to do my post-doc at Cambridge University, I found a Tai Chi club – Practical Tai Chi Chuan – where the forms were taught along with their applications; the head of the style was an ex-Hong Kong police officer, Dan Docherty, who'd learned Tai Chi in China, and tested his techniques through years of study and practical application. I loved this style because of its fluidity, but also because it was intellectually and physically demanding. Trying to remember short and long form Tai Chi – each of the moves having very imaginative names like "Grasp the Bird's Tail" and "Embrace the Tiger and Return to Mountain" – and then apply them in sparring was both invigorating and demanding. And the style included some ground techniques, break-falls and grappling that was very similar to what I'd learned in Judo years before… and which I used in a competition in Ireland, doing a throw without thinking and winning my event, much to my surprise.

When I left the UK to come back to Montreal in 2005, I couldn't find a club with which to continue, so my martial arts experience was limited to Kung Fu movies, until my son started Karate at a local club in 2019. After watching my son for six months and seeing the atmosphere in the dojo, I joined the adult club and loved it! But four months later COVID hit, which put Karate on hold for two years. This was then followed by another year out due to an unrelated injury, time that I spent watching my son's classes and trying to absorb Karate vicariously. The upshot is that my son is now Green belt while I'm still a lowly White belt.

Our style, Yoshukan Karate, taught at the Académie Sportive de Montréal dojo, has very experienced and outstandingly competent Senseis (a shout out to Kyoshi Louise Provencher and Renshi Rob Kalinowicz), and offers courses for children and adults, as well as boxing and weapons (Kobudo). Founded and led by, Kancho Earl Robertson, the style is very applied: it includes forms (Kata), sparring (Kumite), applications (Bunkai), and some ground techniques (e.g., break-falls) and throws from Judo. Much like the Practical Tai Chi I'd done in the UK, this Karate style combines a traditional martial art with practical self-defence applications, and with the cultural components of Japanese terminology and dojo etiquette.

At over 50, I'm now invariably the oldest student in the class. I'm surrounded by youngsters (teenagers to early 20s) who're faster, more flexible, who seem to absorb and improve with every class while I'm still trying to remember what we just learned. My fellow students also recover quickly from intense classes for which it takes me three days or more to recuperate. One might think that I would become disillusioned by being the oldest and slowest of the class, but on the contrary, I love it!

Some Lessons for Experts

Placing myself once again in the role of student, instead of the expert that I am at the university, gives me enormous pleasure. I have the challenge of learning something that is extremely physically demanding, that forces me to work on my coordination, to memorize the sequences of moves in multiple kata and applications, all with the additional brain challenge of associating each move with the appropriate Japanese terminology. I am intimately and physically aware of how little I know, of how much I have to learn to progress, and that I will never be "The Best" nor the expert in the class because I'm too old… and that's OK.

As "The Professor", I've accumulated a wealth of experience and expertise that have made many things I do much less challenging – this was one of the reasons that I moved into management, becoming department director, because I needed new challenges in my career. As a university professor, I have the incredible privilege of working in an environment where continuous learning is our business. I'm surrounded by wonderful colleagues doing interesting research, and brilliant graduate students embarking on stimulating projects – both provide wonderful venues through which I continue to learn. But they don't in anyway challenge my role as "The Expert". If anything, they reinforce my social/professional status and the implicit bias that "I know (almost) everything", because I'm the senior and experienced colleague.

I would suggest, however, that there's something qualitatively different about placing oneself in the role of "The Student". The challenges are far greater, especially when one is older, as too are the energy and dedication required to progress. But the rewards are a lucid clarity about one's own limitations, and hopefully by extension, a humility regarding the limits of our own expertise.

My 30 years of experience with the martial arts have taught me to follow my interests, wherever they may lead, and to be open to opportunities. Had I continued uninterrupted with Judo or Karate when I was 20, I would certainly be a senior Black belt by now. I made other choices and had other experiences, I tried different styles, and I came back to Karate with a different view of and passion for the martial arts.

I may never attain a coveted Black belt in Karate – although I will certainly try! – but that doesn't matter. As the adage goes, what's important is journey, not the destination. In Karate, this philosophy is articulated by the idea that "The Black belt is the beginning"; it's a recognition that the student has attained a sufficient level of mastery to take the next important step on their journey of continuous learning. It is the end of the beginning, not the beginning of the end.

Finding spaces in our lives where we can be humbled, by once again taking on the role of learner instead of educator or expert, can be incredibly rewarding – and it helps show us where we're experts, and where we're not. I've found this space in the martial arts, and most recently in Karate, and while this experience is destabilizing and even sometimes rough on the ego, it has re-ignited my passion for being a life-long learner.

Why I Love Kilts

And why it took courage to wear one

Bryn Williams-Jones
May 30, 2023

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Photo by Divazus Fabric Store on Unsplash

Summary

Stepping outside the general theme of academic life, I reflect here on my internalization of social and cultural norms about acceptable dress, about the challenges of boundary crossing, and how what we wear can be a means of identity construction and (r)evolution. The case in point is how I've come to love wearing kilts, why I had to work up the courage to wear them in public, and why I'm still not yet ready to wear one to the office.

At the encouragement of my student PhD student Gabrielle Verreault (see her amazing work at Moral Compass), I'm going out on a limb here to share a bit about me outside my academic life, which has been the primary source of content for this blog.

I'm going to talk about why I like wearing kilts – and the challenge of transgressing gendered norms of dress.

Clearly, there's nothing profound in this personal preference. But it's something that took me years to work up the courage to try. So, I'll reflect on my internalization of social and cultural norms about acceptable dress, about the challenges of boundary crossing, and how what we wear can be a means of identity construction and (r)evolution.

A bit of context. My family origins are in the British Isles; my maternal and paternal ancestors come from Scotland, Wales and England. My first and last names are Welsh.

As a young man in my 20s, in the process of building my identity and sense of self, I made my first visit to the "old country", the United Kingdom, and while there for a summer, I took a trip to Wales to trace my paternal lineage. I would later return for a year as a research ethicist at Cardiff University, after my postdoc in Cambridge, which reinforced my connection to Wales but also confirmed the fact that my identity was firmly North American (Canadian).

While backpacking in Wales and Scotland I had my first real exposure to Celtic music and traditions, which I fell in love with, and which would subsequently become a core part of my musical and aesthetic preferences. The energy of jigs and reels (traditional, Celtic punk, etc.), the power of massed Scottish pipe bands at Highland Games, the complexity of Celtic knotwork, and the rugged virility of kilt-wearing athletes in Gaelic sports all connected with me in ways that other traditions had not.

Even if I have Scottish roots from my mother's side of the family, I didn't feel "legitimate" or comfortable wearing formal Scottish dress; this tradition wasn't part of my personal history, nor could I imagine occasions where it would be appropriate wear. For me, kilts were something formal, made of wool (and expensive), and worn by those who have meaningful Scottish roots, such as my friend Chris MacDonald who actually gave me the idea to buy a kilt (and also educated me in Highland Single Malt whiskeys).

The change, for me, was learning about "utility kilts". An American innovation, made of cotton or blends, these kilts can be worn informally and in the summer.

I'm someone with a personal thermostat set very high. At 15C I'm outside in T-shirt, shorts and sandals. At 25C I'm starting to overheat and at 30C I'm melting. I remember many hot Montreal summers looking enviously at women wearing skirts or loose dresses and listening to my wife talk about the wonderful experience of having a natural and refreshing breeze.

So, a few of years ago I plucked up the courage to buy my first kilt – yes, courage. I felt intimidated by the idea of going out in public “in a skirt”. I know, that’s pretty silly. But I was raised in a society where women’s and men’s clothing fashions have been pretty distinct, even if today there is much greater freedom to cross, blur or transgress these boundaries. A man “wearing a skirt” still turns heads, even in a city as open and cosmopolitan as Montreal. To date, the few comments I’ve received, invariably from women, have all been positive: “Nice kilt!”

I now have 3 kilts – 2 cotton utility kilts, beige and khaki, and am thinking about getting another in olive green – which are a bliss to wear in the summer and have largely replaced my shorts because they’re so comfortable. I also have a dressier tartan that is warmer (a poly blend, not wool), which I wear in the spring and fall.

While I’m comfortable wearing kilts for walks with my family, I haven’t yet worked up the courage to wear one to the office. My fear, which may be totally unfounded, is that this would be too much of a statement, perceived as “Look at me!” There is also my internalized sense of what is normal and expected dress for a man of my age and responsibility, i.e., business dress of jacket, shirt, pants.

As an administrator, I now pay more attention to the way I dress and the image that I project to students and colleagues, and so I think about how I want to be seen and how I think others will see me. I want to be seen as someone confident, professional, responsible, but also accessible. But where in all this is there place for my own individuality, my own difference?

In Gabrielle's post Obsessed by the good fight / Obsédée par le bon combat, and in part reacting to my post about neurodiversity, she recounts her experience of growing up "weird", and how she felt comfortable – but also critiqued – because of her difference,

> *Dressing exactly how I wanted … I could dress as a hardcore Gothic, in a medieval gown, in colourful clothes... As long as I liked it, I would wear it; fashion be damned!*

This quote highlights for me both the liberty of being different, and the constraint of social norms that impose certain visions and expectations that may conflict with our own personal style, and identity. I honestly did not experience the same sense of liberty as a young man, because I lacked the confidence to express my own personality and individuality in the way that Gabrielle did and still does.

Now in my early 50s, I've begun finding that confidence… encouraged by my wife who has excellent esthetic design sense and sage advice. I've integrated elements of the 1920s Peaky Blinders style to my outfits – caps, hats, and vests – as well military shirts, all of which fit my build. These all align well with the kilt and its formal and military tradition in the Scottish Regiments. This new style is fun, different, and an expression of my evolving sense of identity, both anchored in my personal narrative of Celtic ancestry, and reaching forward to a professional role in university administration… and my wife was fed up with my endless T-shirts and jeans!

So, maybe one day I'll go to the office in kilt… but I'm not quite there yet.

Channeling Our Obsessions

Or surfing the waves of our academic passions

Bryn Williams-Jones
Mar 21, 2023

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Photo by Jeremy Bishop on Unsplash

Summary

Academics are often passionate, even obsessive, about their work. This intensity and drive allow us to succeed in long-term research projects, and to inspire generations of students. But it can also be all-encompassing. I reflect here on the need to channel our energies outside of academia, surfing the big waves of our passions and staying on the board, while always looking ahead for the next wave.

As I discussed previously, academics are weird in many different ways: we are not a homogeneous group, even if popular media caricatures may portray us as the absent-minded scientist or the tweed-jacket wearing professor. We may be more or less intense, outgoing or self-effacing, energetic or calm. But I would say that being passionate or even obsessive is a general character trait.

Academia is a world where being focused to the point of distraction, of being able to block out “the rest of the world”, is a necessary competency, not a deficit. It’s what allows us to study for many years, to do research on esoteric subjects, and to keep going even when it’s difficult. And while this focus can be a force, enabling us to invest the time and energy needed for an in-depth multi-year project, it can also be problematic when we are unable to moderate our passions, to disconnect from our core academic (often research) activities and do something else. Without this disconnection, we can become insufferable to those around us… and especially to those who’re not academics!

I’m a high energy, enthusiastic and intense personality. When I’m invested in something, I don’t go in by half-measures – I pursue this interest until I’ve exhausted the possibilities. And I must share this passion with those around me because I’m passionate about it! After hearing the nth discussion regarding my latest passion, my wife tells me to shut up… she is very tolerant because she knows this is part of my thinking process; and she’s also an academic, so talks about her own passions! I take being told to shut up with good grace because I know I’m getting obsessive, and I’ve explicitly asked her (and friends) to provide just such external control.

Thinking about this more extreme aspect of my personality over the years, I’ve learned that it come in waves, and that I have to surf the wave to its end to see whether it’s just a little wavelet or a major swell (a nod to my surfing-philosopher friend Guillaume Durand).

An enduring passion has been the Canadian Journal of Bioethics/Revue Canadienne de Bioéthique, which I launched with a group of students in 2012 as a crazy open access project with no budget but a huge amount of energy and good will. Ten years later, its matured into a journal with a national reputation and an increasingly international audience, and we’ve succeeded in two rounds of grant funding.

Still almost entirely a volunteer initiative, I have invested countless hours over the years in editing, page-setting, in journal promotion… and I love it! Far more than simply an academic project, growing this journal has been a long and stimulating journey where I’ve been able to actualize my passion for supporting creative knowledge transfer and for capacity development. This has clearly been a big, long wave. The journal has and continues to be an important part of my life – admittedly still very academicy – and it has helped me stay grounded in bioethics while the rest of my time has become largely devoted to administration.

More recently, since February 2022 I’ve become obsessed with the situation in Ukraine. Every day I read news on Twitter and Daily Kos about the war, in the process learning a bit of the history and culture of this country and its people which I’d previously known very little about. But my primary focus has been on the military aspects, whether that be strategy, logistics, armaments, geopolitics, or technological innovation.

This recent obsession is based in childhood interests in military history and technology. But it is fundamentally anchored in the David vs. Goliath aspect of the conflict, and in rooting for the Ukrainian people as they fight an imperialist aggressor and assert their democratic right to define their own future. Most importantly, this war has been made personal through the accompaniment of my PhD student, Gabrielle Verreault.

Gab's innovative project is exploring the ethics of Ukrainian citizen engagement and the use of drones, memes (e.g., NAFO), open source intelligence (OSINT), and hacking, amongst others. She is documenting her fascinating story and research through a video-blog (Moral Compass), and I'm sharing this journey with her, if vicariously. We have projects to transform, into shared posts, our spontaneous, long-distance, 7-hour-time difference conversations about a host of topics at the interface of research, ethics and technology.

More than just an intellectual passion, I've also donated to Saint Javelin and United24, and had a NAFO Fella made (although I'm not active in bonking). I've subsequently worked with Gab and her partner Valentin (CEO of the very cool Grey-box.ca) to leverage our respective contacts and resources to support Ukrainians to rebuild their destroyed/pillaged universities. And I imagine other initiatives will emerge, knowing how creative are these two and as well as the people they're meeting in Ukraine. So, this may not yet be a big wave, but it has the makings of one.

What I've hoped to show with these examples is the potential for people (whether academics or not) to leverage the obsessive sides of our personalities into projects that go beyond our work. Yes, these examples are closely linked to my role as a bioethics professor, as is my blogging (both an old and a new passion), and they mobilize skills and resources that I developed in academia. But what makes them different is that they're not just about research or education – they're outward focused and seek to have real-world impact.

Finding balance in life as an academic is an ongoing journey, even a struggle. Luckily, there are lots of outlets for our passions, and many of these will be outside the walls of the university, such as hobbies, community groups, or social causes, to name a few. Catching a new wave and investing deeply, even passionately, is incredibly rewarding because it's a way to make a difference.

These and other opportunities help me find the balance to stay on the board, while always looking ahead for the next wave.

The Mystical and Exotic Other

People are people, just like us

Bryn Williams-Jones
Jan 21, 2025

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Photo by Prophsee Journals on Unsplash

Summary

Construction of personal identity can be enriched by journeying into the stories and experiences of other cultures (e.g., philosophical, spiritual, historical, etc.). The danger, however, is in looking for simple answers to complex problems, the exoticization of "the Other" as bearer of "the Truth", and the instrumentalization of other cultures for our own personal growth.

As young people strive to construct their personal identities and find out who they are and who they want to be, it's understandable that they may question the accepted values and norms put forward by their family, culture, or religion. If they find such core narratives inadequate or incomplete, or feel that these no longer resonate, then they may look to other sources for meaning or direction – and sometimes that involves an exploration of the traditions and literatures of different cultures or religions.

While such intellectual journeys can be a rich source of personal growth, and even enlightenment, they can also lead to a misplaced idealism about another culture or belief system. In a quest for meaning, one can fall into the trap of imagining that there is some universal, mystical truth to be found in texts or learned at the feet of sages. Instead of seeing other people for who they are – yes, as potential guides who may or may not help us along on our personal journeys, but who're also fallible – we treat them uncritically as the "Exotic Other".

I well remember my own identity building as a young man, which was in part linked to my search for my Welsh roots and my burgeoning interest in all things Celtic. Reading Hanes Cymru (A History of Wales) and the early Arthurian tales in The Mabinogian helped inform an emerging Welsh-Britannic-Canadian identity that was anchored in a mythical past from the "Old Country". This identity was transformed by visits to Wales (as well as England, Scotland, and Ireland) in the early 1990s and again in the 2000s, which confirmed that I was far more Canadian than Welsh.

My sense of who I was also connected to deep moral questioning engendered by an immersion into classic science fiction, notably Robert A. Heinlein, and more contemporary cyberpunk and the dystopian futures of William Gibson and Neal Stephenson, to name but a few. In building possible worlds where very different moral frameworks could exist, these authors forced me to reexamine my deeply held but unquestioned assumptions about right and wrong. This reflexivity overlapped with my studies in moral philosophy, which further pushed my boundaries and forced me to be able to justify my norms and values, or to reject them.

During my Masters in Bioethics, which I did as part of an interdisciplinary program and through the Faculty of Religious Studies, I read classics in Theravada Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, which complemented my own readings in Zen Buddhism (e.g., Alan Watts, Thomas Merton, Robert Pirsig) and my exploration of Chinese (Tai Chi Chuan) and Japanese (Judo, Karate) martial arts. These experiences pushed me to think about how I think, to again question my assumptions about the world (and ethics), and to further my reflexivity and self-awareness.

At times, I admit that I fell into an exoticisation of these Asian cultures and traditions, as I'd done with early Welsh history. Thankfully, I was saved by my short attention span. My passion (even obsession) for a particular topic or practice would wax and then wane, and I'd move on to another place for learning and continue with my interdisciplinary journey. Over the years, I became better able to see (and respect) the richness of different cultures or practices that interested me, all the while being very much aware that I was only briefly touching on their complexity – I was a dilettante, never a disciple. I'm very wary of disciples.

A troubling identity movement that I see in the Canadian context is a naive veneration of Indigenous "knowledge and culture" as something "other" and thus "better", as a source of profound, even mystical, truths.

Canadians who are not Indigenous need to learn about the histories and cultures of the First Peoples; only then can we better understand their lived realities, participate in real reconciliation, and build meaningful relations with our neighbours and fellow citizens. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is one example of such an important step in naming and owning historical injustices so that we can work towards repairing them and build a better world.

Frequently, though, attention to the experiences of Indigenous peoples is reduced to a series of rituals and precepts for public consumption that are nothing more than caricatures.

Two pet peeves of mine are 1) the now ubiquitous Land Acknowledgements at the start of academic association meetings, which are supposed to make people aware of the history of the land on which we stand, but do nothing of the sort because they're disconnected from any meaningful or nuanced discussion and so change nothing; and 2) the invitation of Indigenous elders to open scientific conferences with a few sage words of advice, to which people nod respectfully, and after the elder leaves, we forget about them and their words and get on to business.

These activities instrumentalize Indigenous peoples and their cultures, because we only bring them out "for show" to make us feel good about being inclusive but without having to do anything resembling real inclusion.

In such a context, it's no surprise to see that there is a veritable business with self-styled sages or shamans selling Indigenous traditional wisdom and healing to non-Indigenous Canadians (and tourists) looking for sacred truths. This is strongly reminiscent of the Beatniks and Hippies who, in the 1960s, followed Asian Indian gurus and practiced transcendental meditation as a means to find new and different sources of meaning.

My point here is not to belittle people who explore different myths and stories to learn more about their own or other cultures. Following various traditions can be an important way to find meaning in one's life or allow one to deal with serious problems (e.g., alcohol and drug addiction). Learning about different cultures, and in the process learning about oneself, can be a profound and life changing experience.

What I deplore is the quest for simple answers to complex problems, for "Ready-made thinking". In the process of looking outside for truth in the exotic or the mystical (instead of looking within ourselves), we reify the people we imagine hold these truths, both giving them power to manipulate us but also instrumentalizing them as tools for our own personal growth.

To quote Depeche Mode, "*People are people, so why should it be; You and I should get along so awfully?*" We get along badly, I suggest, because instead of treating people as people, we decontextualize, mythologize and exoticize them, and in so doing, we no longer see them for who they are – people, not so different from us.

I Don’t Want to Die in My Office

Retirement and life after academia

Bryn Williams-Jones
Dec 19, 2023

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Photo by Aron Visuals on Unsplash

Summary

Academics often define themselves as professors, as researchers, as educators. An all-encompassing career, this professional identity may be an intimate part of one’s personal identity, making it very difficult to imagine “life after academia”, i.e., retirement.

Growing up as an “academic brat”, the son of a university professor, I learned early on that academia can be a life-long journey.

More than a job, being a professor is a career that lasts 30, 40 or even 50 years. My father is almost 80 and still active in research and teaching, writing grant applications, supervising graduate students, travelling to conferences and doing fieldwork – and he’s loving it! He will stay a professor to the very end, because for him retirement is unimaginable.

For many colleagues, me included, academia becomes a core part of our personal identity. It’s not surprising, because we spend so long just getting there – studying, learning how to do research and teach, obtaining the PhD, getting that first academic position, and then building our careers. We define ourselves as professors, as researchers, as educators… as academics. Imagining something else may be impossible, or at least very difficult. So, the idea of retirement may be anathema, because it involves a renunciation of this core identity.

As department director, I have the great pleasure to recruit new professors, and to mentor junior and mid-career colleagues as they progress through their careers. More recently, I have been supporting senior colleagues as they retire, either directly or through a gradual transition. These colleagues often transition to an adjunct professor status so they can wrap-up ongoing projects, support their graduate students completing their theses, and continue with academic activities during their retirement. Some, like my father, will stay active professors (there is no obligatory retirement) because research or teaching is their passion, an important place for meaning, and a powerful reason to get up every morning.

While I am passionate and even obsessive about many things, with my wife, who is also a professor, we decided that retirement was not only desirable, it was also the next logical step. Obviously, the future is uncertain, but baring major health concerns, there’s every reason to expect another 20-30 years of retirement to watch our son follow his own journey as an adult, to take all the trips that my wife and I never had time to do while we were busy professors, and to explore other opportunities.

Hired in 2005, I will have spent more than 30 years as a professor when I reach the (current) retirement age of 65. At this point, still 14 years out, I don’t see myself continuing academia beyond that time. But this decision is in no way a renunciation of my chosen career – I truly love being a professor! – nor is it a critique of the choices of other colleagues (or my father) who continue in academia well into their 70s or even older.

I imagine that at some point I will no longer be as productive as I want or not making a difference in my chosen areas. Or I will have said all that I wanted to say, built those structures that I wanted to build, and made the changes that needed making. A clear sign that I need to retire will be when I’m no longer able to keep up with and supervise my graduate students in their innovative research, something I will greatly miss.

What becomes, then, of my academic identity that was so fundamental to who I am, over so many years?

An insight comes from my experience within academia. My work and roles have changed over the years, as too has my sense of who I am as a professor. I've moved from focusing on research and teaching to knowledge transfer and public outreach, and more recently, to administration. These changes have shown that my identity is always evolving, always being reconstructed – something that I foresee continuing after I leave the university.

I honestly have no idea what I'll do in retirement. Probably some consulting (policy, expert advice), volunteer to do career mentoring (something I've always loved), or anything else that catches my fancy. I'll cross that bridge as I get closer to the end of my academic journey.

What I know for certain is that I do not want to die in my office – and that there will be life after academia.

Academic Legacies

What do we want to leave behind us when we leave?

Bryn Williams-Jones
Jan 30, 2024

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Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/32540

Photo by Clarisse Meyer on Unsplash

Summary

In thinking about our careers, it's worth also reflecting on the memories or legacy that we wish to leave behind, when we retire. Is it our scientific productivity? The students we taught and colleagues we mentored? The institutional structures that we contributed to developing or improving? As with our professional identity, priorities may change over time... so occasionally asking these questions can help determine what is important, where we can make a difference, and where we should invest our time and energy.

Having previously talked about the development of academic professional identities, of my own evolving sense of "academic self" and my desire to retire at 65 and do other things, I started thinking about legacies.

As academics, we work in a world of facts and ideas that we get to study and to disseminate widely. First, we get to share our passion for research by collaborating with and teaching generations of students to learn, to think, and to question. Second, we have the incredible privilege to be able to do research on topics that interest us (most of the time), to build an area of expertise, and to then publish the results of our research. This work of knowledge production contributes to an ever-growing body of literature in university libraries that is (hopefully) used by future generations of colleagues and students.

Our publications (as a body of work) may subsequently lead to a national or even international reputation as an expert on a specific topic or area of research. And for those of us who work with the media or engage in other forms of knowledge transfer, we may be recognized as public experts and regularly solicited to engage in outreach and public knowledge dissemination.

At some point, however, many of us will decide to step away from the university to do other things, including to retire. And in so doing, we necessarily leave many things behind… hopefully more than a messy office and piles of old books and files for others to deal with!

There will be the memories of our former colleagues who think kindly of us (and hopefully not as the colleague who they were happy to see leave!), of the students we taught and challenged to learn and explore (and hopefully were not bored), and our graduate students who we helped in their own academic and professional journeys (and were hopefully not exploited or neglected).

Very few of us in academia can hope or even desire to become the academic "rock stars" who can leverage tens of millions of dollars in grants or endowments, create large research structures, and have halls or even buildings named after them. That sort of legacy is not for us common mortals, no matter how much we have contributed to our institution…

What if any memories do we want to leave behind? And does it even matter – after all, being a professor is just another job, isn't it?

To this second question, I would answer "No". Being a professor is more than a job for most of us. It is a career, one in which we are heavily invested, and it may become – at least for a while – a core part of our sense of self. So, to return to the first question: asking what we wish to be our legacy opens up a series of subsidiary questions/answers that will depend on how we have each built our respective academic identities.

Do we want to be remembered as (can be some or all):

- A researcher who conducted ground-breaking work that helped advance the field?
- A prolific author with hundreds of publications?
- An educator who inspired generations of students?
- A mentor of fellow colleagues and/or students?
- Someone who, through service, helped make the department, faculty or university a better place?
- An administrator who did the work that others did not want to do, and which enabled an institutional environment in which everyone could flourish?
- …

Asking these subsidiary questions helps us see that the "legacies we wish to leave behind" will vary greatly and, I would suggest, may change over time as our identities evolve (or not) during our time in academia.

Legacies from my former professors

Thinking back on more than 30 years in university (since my undergraduate studies), like most I had some mediocre or even bad professors (from my perspective); but I also had the good fortune to encounter professors with whom I connected and who graciously shared their wisdom. With some I had only a relatively fleeting exchange (during a course or two), while with others I worked closely over many years, during my Masters, PhD and post-doc. Whether they knew it or not, each had, in their own way, a long-lasting impact on my intellectual growth and life as an academic.

Collectively, they:

- Taught me to question my own preconceived ideas and values, and to justify my positions – even or especially when this was difficult – and so move from opinion to reasoned argument.
- Helped me develop my reflexivity and self-awareness; and to learn to shut up and listen.
- Reinforced my feminist ideals and made me aware of the implicit bias and privilege of being a white man in a world where patriarchy and racism are still far too present.
- Showed the importance of finding a work-life balance, and that meaningful experiences can and do happen outside academia. Finding this balance is an ongoing challenge but one that is crucial for mental health.
- Instilled in me the drive to do rigorous and innovative work, while recognizing that this takes time and patience.
- Challenged me to "think outside the box" and to experiment with different ways of communicating my ideas, and to different audiences.
- Demonstrated that "success" is invariably not individual but the result of genuine collaborations and sharing, and through supporting and being supported by colleagues and students.
- Introduced me to good wine, educated my palate, and massively expanded my culinary repertoire. In the great tradition of Ancient Greek philosophy, they helped me learn that the best intellectual experiences often occur in congenial settings with good friends, food and beverages of choice.

Those legacies that I wish to leave behind

In my years as a professor, I can honestly say that I've had an awesome experience (despite almost burning out twice) and I still love what I'm doing. I'm at least 15 years away from retirement and not at all yet ready to leave – I think I have a lot still to offer, and also many things yet to learn.

I'm someone who loves building. But I'm not an engineer or an architect, and my manual skills are modest. Instead, I think I have a talent for mobilizing people and building structures or systems, and also for supporting others to explore their own creativity and follow their dreams. This desire to create is what drove me to launch the CJB/RCB 10 years ago, and to establish in 2017 the first PhD in Bioethics in Canada that was not an option in another program. And it's what attracts me to students with innovative projects that are far outside the norm.

So, what do I want to be remembered for? I'd say it's for:

- Supporting students with crazy ideas and showing them that they can realise their dreams in our Bioethics program and go on to have rewarding careers.
- Establishing an open access journal that helped the Canadian (and international) bioethics community have a space to publish cutting-edge and innovative content that advanced the field of bioethics.
- Helping to create systems of governance in the university and other organizations that were more efficient and more ethical (e.g., transparent, responsible, equitable).
- Being a high energy person who genuinely cared for sharing with others and supporting them in their own individual flourishing.
- A good colleague and a passionate educator.

To my former professors, you made a big difference in my life and for that I'm deeply grateful. My hope is that when it is my turn to leave the university, that I too will have made a difference in the lives of those people with whom I have had the privilege to teach, to work and to learn.

For me, this would be a worthy legacy.

Chapter 3: University Life

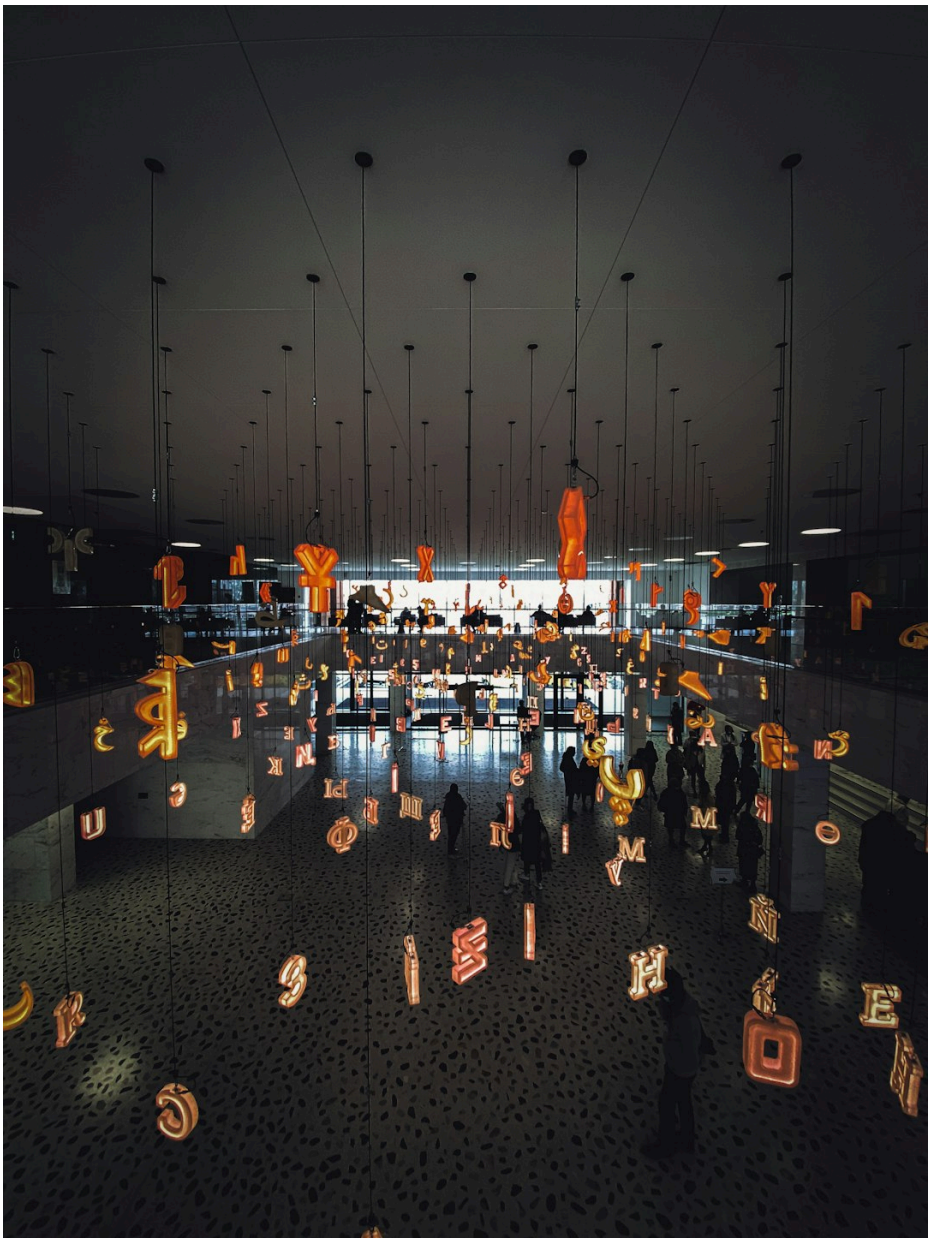

Photo by Alexander Popovkin on Unsplash

Be Nice to the Administrative Personnel

They're not just staff, they're colleagues and allies who merit our respect

Bryn Williams-Jones
Apr 23, 2024

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Photo by A A on Unsplash

Summary

Rarely in the limelight, when compared to professors or senior managers, the contributions of administrative personnel to the good functioning of large organizations are frequently under-valued. The front-line workers of our institutions, administrative personnel should be treated as valued colleagues with experience and expertise, and not just "staff" – and they deserve our thanks.

The title of this post may seem patronizing, that we, members of the institutional elite (professors, managers, etc.) should be "nice" to "the staff" because they are "below us" and in need of our good will. My intention is altogether different. Here, I reflect on the importance of administrative personnel, the diverse group of employees who are critically important, even essential, to the good functioning of any organization. These people merit being treated with respect, as valued colleagues, as allies, and as friends with whom we will work for many years. They should never be ignored, never disdained.

As a Masters student, one of the first lessons I learned was to make friends with the academic secretary. This person invariably had a wealth of experience and knowledge that was opaque to me, as a student, and even now as a professor. They were skilled in managing the intricacies of academic program regulations and navigating the byzantine complexities of financial services or human resources departments. They were people who could open doors and get things done, or close doors and make things difficult.

Seeing such personnel through an instrumental lens – i.e., how they could help me – quickly morphed into a respect for their knowledge of institutional culture, their deep familiarity with policy and regulations, their expertise at navigating complex bureaucracies, and their extensive networks of professional contacts in different administrative services at the institution. More than "just staff", I recognized these people as valued colleagues with whom I would collaborate.

I've had the privilege of working with administrative staff with 30 years or more of experience – they were literally the holders of the department's history and an embodiment of our institutional memory. With a quiet humility, these colleagues showed that they knew every tip and trick in the book to deal with a bureaucracy that was often frustratingly obtuse, and at times incoherent.

As professors, we often think that we need only focus on our research and teaching in order to succeed in our careers; but this ignores all our service responsibilities (e.g., running programs, working on department or faculty committees), and that even for research and teaching, we rely on the personnel to ensure that our grant funds are accessible, that students are registered in our courses, etc. Without them, none of these activities can occur.

But some professors, I've noticed, have a tendency to look down on administrative personnel, treating them as if they're "lowly" secretaries to do their photocopies or setup their online course platform, or as improvised IT support to help with their computer problems or video-conferencing installation. And they are the targets of critique by professors when administrative systems don't go our way. This arrogance is, in part, due to the elitist model of the university and the sense of self-importance regarding our role within the institution; it leads some professors to think primarily about their own interests instead of as being part of a team that is working collectively towards a shared objective.

More than a strategic partnership, building effective and trusting working relations with administrative personnel is also incredibly rewarding and reassuring. As a junior professor, these colleagues taught me how to navigate the administrative intricacies of our university and so helped me develop a more nuanced understanding of organizational functioning. For example, as director of our bioethics program, over 12 years I worked very closely with experienced administrative personnel who taught me the ins and outs of our pedagogical regulations, how to support students administratively in their progression through their studies, and how to negotiate successfully with the upper administration as I engaged in program reforms.

Now as director, I work closely with our administrative secretary in the day-to-day running of what is a very large department. I've had the privilege of working now with three very experienced people, each of whom shared with me different tips and tricks in human resources management, on how to build a more inclusive team environment, and how to develop efficient procedures to simplify and streamline our activities. From the senior administrators in our faculty, I learned about department and faculty financing, the intricacies of hiring policies and practices, equitable office allocation, and the effective management of personnel issues and conflict resolution, among others.

None of this essential knowledge is ever taught during our graduate studies, as university education is focused on the content of knowledge and not its operationalization within institutions. We start our jobs as professors missing important skills and knowledge. We thus need to put ourselves back in the role of student and learn from the administrative personnel about institutional functioning and culture. From this continuous learning should follow recognition of the expertise of these colleagues.

As professor and director, I don't give orders to the administrative personnel; I ask for their support in solving a particular problem or completing an administrative task. Because I trust them, I can delegate certain responsibilities knowing that they will be completed in a timely fashion, often with innovative solutions that I could never have imagined. I remain responsible for the final decision, but the process is collaborative. And it's much less stressful having a colleague to help identify possible solutions to problems (based on their own professional experience and expertise), and then who can "make things happen" as I move on to dealing with other administrative tasks, or my academic responsibilities in teaching, research and supervision.

One of my primary roles as director is creating a supportive and collegial work environment so the professors can flourish in their research and teaching. But I also pay special attention to our administrative team. The little gestures when meeting in the hallway, taking the time to say "hi" and to exchange pleasantries of no importance, to have conversations about social issues that affect us all, or to talk institutional politics. With my department secretary, we systematically organize a Christmas party as an informal opportunity to socialise, and I've noted that its invariably the administrative personnel who're present in large numbers, and not the professors. At the end of the year, I email all our administrative personnel to wish them a relaxing holiday and express my heartfelt thanks for their hard work. These are "low-cost / high-impact" ways of showing appreciation for valued members of the team.

Often invisible until we need them, administrative personnel are the front-line workers that keep the university and any large organization functioning. They bear the brunt of the work, especially in crisis contexts, but rarely reap the rewards of recognition that are common to professors. So, they should be recognized for their expertise and experience and given the respect which they are due.

Close colleagues with whom we will work for many years, it "pays to be nice" to them… and they well deserve our thanks.

Academic Couples

Office romances can be particularly complicated in the university environment

Bryn Williams-Jones
Mar 5, 2023

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Photo by Abi Schreider on Unsplash

Summary

Being in an academic couple can be wonderful experience, but it can also bring numerous complications, especially if the couple are in the same department. Romances can blossom or whither, relationships can be collegial or conflictual, and this can be very unpleasant for everyone involved. It's important that colleagues openly think through and discuss the benefits and risks associated with workplace relationships, and plan accordingly to mitigate potentially unpleasant situations.

Office romances are the subject of numerous films, comedy series, and human resource guides; and while vastly different in content and narrative, these media share a recognition of the inherent messiness of romantic relationships that emerge between coworkers. The awkward moments caused by a failed relationship, the risks of abuse of power when there are significant hierarchical differences in the couple, the potential conflicts of interest, etc., are all potential sources of concern. Yet, when people spend most of their waking hours in a work environment, it's normal that they develop friendships with their colleagues, and some of these might lead to romantic feelings, and this is not necessarily a bad thing.

Here I reflect on a specific type of workplace romance – the academic couple – and dig into the benefits and potential pitfalls of such relationships, both for the couple in question as well as for their colleagues and the institution more generally.

The Benefits

I met my wife at an academic social event called the "The Junior Profs", two years after coming back to Montreal in 2005 following my postdoc in the UK. This weekly social get-together had been started as a way to help professors new to Montreal meet fellow colleagues and socialize; after 8 years away, I had no social network in the city, so this group was incredibly welcome. Academia is a sufficiently different world from other sectors that many people do not understand what we do. Because we work long hours, often with odd schedules that are rarely "9-to-5", especially at the beginning of our careers, it can be very hard to develop friendships or have a social life outside the university. Weird as it may sound, in an environment where we have lots of colleagues, supervise numerous graduate students, and teach hundreds of students a year, being a professor can be very lonely.

A non-negligible motivator for the single that I was at the time that I joined the "Junior Profs" was the possibility of having a romantic relationship. As one of my mentors in Montreal said "This is a great dating scene – get off your couch and go meet people!" He was right. I became a regular at the Thursday evening events, felt much less isolated in having other professors to socialize with, and I made friends who understood my reality. I subsequently became one of the organizers, and like all the previous organizers, benefited from the opportunity to meet my future life-partner.

For me and my wife, being married to a fellow professor is incredibly beneficial. Even though we are from different disciplines (bioethics and anthropology), in departments in two different faculties, we share similar professional and intellectual universes. So we regularly support each other by talking through our analytic arguments or how to deal with certain structural or practical aspects of the projects on which we're working; we help each other evaluate opportunities and determine when to "say no"; we share procedures and approaches to political or administrative challenges; and because we understand each other's worlds, we're good listeners when we need to unload our frustrations from work.

Professionally, we have worked together on projects at the interface of ethics and Indigenous studies (my wife's expertise), and we support each other's graduate students with our respective knowledge in ethics and ethnology, in providing career advice, etc. And as a bilingual couple, we systematically correct each other's texts – it's wonderful having an editor and translator at one's disposal!

The Risks

One downside of being married to another academic is that it's all too easy to stay in work mode and never "disconnect", to continue "talking work" in the evening or on the weekend. So we each make a conscious effort to disconnect and be present for each other and our son, and to call each other out when we're slipping too much into work mode when we should instead be elsewhere. But this is really a very minor issue.

Much more problematic are the conflicts of interest that arise in situations where academic couples are in the same department or administrative service, something that is not our case, thankfully. In such situations, there is the very real danger of political blocks forming, with couples (systematically) voting as a pair in the Departmental Assembly, instead of each expressing their viewpoints independently, like any other colleague; and if there's a disagreement between the two in a meeting, one can only imagine what the conversations would be like once at home.

In a case I heard of while still a student, a small department had three professor-couples, something that made for often very tense departmental meetings because of real or apparent interest blocks. This sort of situation is exacerbated by policies promoting spousal hires, where if a professor is hired then there is strong pressure to find or create a position for their spouse, including in the same department.

Another potentially problematic aspect of workplace romances is when they fail; these colleagues will still have to look at each other across the table, something that could be very unpleasant if the breakup was particularly acrimonious. For administrative colleagues, it might be possible to change services or departments; but for professors, this is often impossible. Further, academia is sufficiently competitive that once a professor gets a position in a department or faculty, they have every interest in holding on to it because it can be very difficult to pick-up and move to another university.

Even where couples are not in the same department, there can still be rivalries or competition, likely exacerbated when working in the same field, e.g., over measures of productivity (publications, grants) or promotion and career progression (who gets promoted first or to a higher rank). My wife and I are both full professors, but she started at the university before I did, got her tenure and was promoted first, and so went on sabbatical while I was still anxiously waiting for my tenure – I had my turn a few years later. We are both very media present but in completely different areas; and we have completely different approaches to writing and publication. We have never had a sense of being in competition, one being in the shadow of the other.

While my wife loathes the idea of moving into administration – her passion is research and working with her graduate students – I'm loving being director. If, however, my wife was a professor in the department in which I'm director, this would be an untenable conflict of interest. Even if she were in a different department but still in my faculty, it is easy to imagine situations where my fellow directors (or other colleagues) might be put in very uncomfortable situations based on their relations with each of us, and vice versa. Thankfully, these are not concerns that I have… but they are experienced by some colleagues.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Being in an academic couple can be a wonderful experience, but it can also bring with it a load of complications, most especially if the couple are in the same department or administrative unit. Romances can blossom and then whither, relationships can be collegial and then become conflictual – and this can be very unpleasant for the couple, as well as for their colleagues. But that's life. What's important is that these colleagues openly think through and discuss with each other the benefits and risks associated with such relationships in the same workplace; and if their hearts are dragging them into dangerous terrain, they should seriously consider changing departments or workplaces (where possible) to mitigate the most unpleasant aspects of these situations.

Don’t Touch

Intimate relationships and power differentials don’t mix

Bryn Williams-Jones
Nov 12, 2024

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/dont-touch
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/33972

Photo by Albert Stoynov on Unsplash

Summary

Romantic relationships in academic or professional contexts are fraught with peril, especially when there are important power differentials (manager-staff, professor-student). The important conflicts of interest that arise damage reputations and trust in individuals and institutions. Highly problematic, these situations that cannot be educated away and so should be prohibited.

I recently got an email from my university administration to follow an obligatory training session on how to identify and mitigate the risks of sexual misconduct in the university context, specifically with regards to teaching or authority relationships. My initial thought was to hit “delete”, which is really not very professional on the part of an ethicist and head of department. But a great many of these institutional training sessions are a painful waste of time because they’re pitched at too low a level, and so hard to take seriously. You watch the obligatory video out of the corner of your eye (if you can’t fast-forward) and skip through the questions (which are often easy and multiple choice) to most quickly finish so you can get back to work. You don’t learn anything that you didn’t already know.

Out of a sense of professional obligation (“yeah, I better do this training”), but also with a bit of interest as an ethicist who’s spent much of his career thinking about the management of conflicts of interest (including on the part of professors), I followed the 20 minute online interactive video.

There was high quality video with subtle elevator music in the background; but to be fair, it was less annoying than most of what we suffer through when put on hold when calling a service provider. The questions were evident and took little or no thought to answer and were validated by a little positive reward “bing” when you got everything right. The video clips recounted personal stories that addressed very serious topics, but with a slightly paternalistic and “nicey-nice” tone that was frustrating, to say the least. Overall, the messages were blatantly obvious. Don’t flirt with students or colleagues and certainly don’t invite them out alone for a drink or a weekend at the cottage. Be aware of power dynamics and think how an overly friendly gesture or a slightly off-colour joke could be (mis)interpreted. Really, we have to tell people this?

Yes, I lost 20 minutes of my life, but on the upside, it inspired me to write this post.

No, I didn’t learn anything or encounter issues that I hadn’t thought about. But I’m clearly not the target audience. I’ve been in the academic world my entire life and have seen and heard of numerous very problematic cases involving inappropriate intimate or romantic relationships between university personnel, professors, and students. What’s frustrating is that I know that this sort of training is actually needed, because some people clearly don’t get it; worse yet, they’re unlikely to follow or will simply ignore such guidance.

In many situations, ethical challenges are complex and the competing interests or values difficult to reconcile; it’s the job of ethicists like me to mediate and find spaces for compromise, even consensus. But not when it comes to power dynamics and intimate relationships – this is where hard lines must be drawn, and certain behaviours or situations prohibited.

The response to such a hard-line view is invariably: “But they’re consenting adults! What they do on their own time is their own business”. My answer is: “No, not good enough. The damage caused by such relationships is substantial and involves not just the immediate circle of people, but also other members of the institution.”

There are of course the “easy cases” of sexual harassment and abuse of power. I saw some of this as a student, with a few “dirty old men” professors rumoured to be coercing young female students to exchange sexual favours for good grades. Such egregious behaviour is patently wrong, obviously an abuse of power, and to be dealt with as serious professional misconduct. From what I heard, these professors were quietly pushed into retirement – not justice but still a solution.

Much more complicated and ethically problematic are intimate relationships between consenting adults in the workplace. It’s understandable that people who work closely together over years (colleagues, or professors and graduate students) may sometimes come to have romantic feelings for each other. But even when there is little or no power differential (i.e., colleagues with similar professional roles), these relationships can still be problematic for a host of reasons, including how others perceive the couple, and the difficulties that inevitably arise for everyone if the relationship breaks down (especially if it’s an acrimonious breakup).

Romantic feelings may be unidirectional and not reciprocated, leading to emotional discomfort and even distress for the person on the receiving end of unwanted attention. And both people in positions of power (e.g., professors, managers) and those in less powerful positions (e.g., students, administrative personnel) can be responsible for and recipients of unwanted romantic advances towards others in similar or more or less powerful positions.

Embarrassing to say the least, when unwanted advances continue over time, this behaviour can slide into harassment and/or false accusations, poisoning professional relations, undermining trust in individuals and the institution (when there aren’t appropriate interventions). It can also lead people to leave to escape the situation, thereby losing out on opportunities (e.g., for their studies or career) and engendering costs that can be economic, social or psychological.

While it is understandable that a person may become infatuated with or emotionally invested in another, they still have to accept “No for an answer” and be attentive to implicit signs that their feelings are not reciprocated. Training thus becomes an important tool – with its obvious limitations – to ensuring an institutional culture where people interact in a respectful and professional manner. This does not mean that romantic relations are impossible, but that they should be anchored in explicit consent and mutual respect and not undermined by particular roles or responsibilities that could be in conflict.

When there are hierarchical relations or power dynamics at play – such as between student and professor, or administrative personnel and professor or senior manager – the risks are far greater and much harder to mitigate; and education will be a woefully inadequate response.

One of the most egregious cases I heard of involved a professor who, following his divorce, started having consensual romantic relationships with his female PhD students. As his career progressed, so too did his relationships; every few years he would “trade in” his current PhD student-lover for a new one. During the later part of his career, he must have had 5 or 6 such relationships; and when he retired, his last student was the age of his daughter from his first marriage. This practice was an open secret in the department, and at a time when many male colleagues still laughed off such situations, so it was never dealt with appropriately. But the consequences for this professor’s reputation, that of his female students, and that of other students and colleagues in the department were significant.

Academia is a small world, and one where rumours circulate. A colleague in the department recounted to me that he’d been on a flight back from a conference and started up a conversation with the person in the seat next to him. As it would happen, they worked in related areas and after a period talking about work, the person asked my colleague: “Don’t you have a professor in your department who sleeps with his students? That must be very unpleasant to deal with.” As you can imagine, this was an incredibly awkward moment for my colleague and spoke to the broader negative reputational impact.

The risks of such conflicts of interest include actual or perceived bias in decision making in favour of the more junior (i.e., less powerful) person in the relationship. A student, and more often a female student, may in fact be perceived by other students or professors to be receiving better grades than they deserve, or to have privileged access to opportunities (e.g., to attend conferences, receive scholarships, or be hired for a lecturer position) due to their intimate relationship with the professor.

There may be concerns that confidentiality will not be maintained in treating personnel dossiers (of students or colleagues) with regards to hiring, promotion, or discipline; that is, there is legitimate concern that “pillow talk” will inevitably lead to privacy breaches with someone who should not have access to such confidential information. Or it may be that the person in the less powerful position (e.g., student, administrative personnel) will be seen as succeeding in their career progression not based on their own talent (i.e., merit), but due to the patronage of the more powerful person (e.g., professor, senior manager) with whom they are in a relationship.

The interventions to manage conflict of interest situations should be proportionate to the risks involved. In the context of intimate or romantic relations between people with substantial differences in roles and power, the risks are very high and so the interventions must be more important. Many universities have, for example, implemented explicit policies prohibiting intimate relations between professors and undergraduate students (because of the significant power differential), or between managers and members of their team. I would argue that such prohibitions should be extended to professors and graduate students, because like these other cases, important risks remain that are very difficult if not impossible to mitigate.

It’s understandable that attraction, infatuation and even love can arise between colleagues of different status, or between professors and students; but these individuals (and frankly all members of the institution) must be aware that certain relationships are too risky to be permissible. If, despite policies to the contrary, a couple is committed to their romantic relationship, then they will have to change their professional relationship, e.g., with one person leaving the department or institution. The cost of continuing this relationship will be high, particularly (but not exclusively) for the person in the less powerful position, who will likely be the one to leave. Here again education about (in)appropriate relationships become essential for all members of the institution.

But even the best training, that is, one that’s ethically nuanced and contextualized, that treats the audience as having decent critical faculties – and importantly, does not use generic elevator music – will be insufficient to create a culture of mutual respect that is free of problematic behaviour. In human relations, conflicts of interest are inevitable, and some of these situations are so risky for individuals and institutions that they cannot be resolved by education or good judgment.

Romantic relationships that involve a power hierarchy fall into this category – they cannot be educated away and so must be prohibited.

Individualist or Team Player?

The metaphors we tell shape our academic environment

Bryn Williams-Jones
Jan 9, 2024

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Photos by Gary Bendig on Unsplash

Summary

The metaphor of the academic as hyper-individualist has in it grains of truth but is at best incomplete. We are also team players, collaborators and colleagues working in large institutions, and this means continually finding ways to get along and achieve collective goals.

A joke that I've told many times to non-academics as a way to explain the peculiarities of academic life is that running a department is like herding a group of cats. With a self-deprecating smile and a chuckle, I describe professors like me as being a bit weird, because we're a gang of hyper-individualists, each convinced of our own self-importance and correct analysis of any situation. Try to herd us much as you would like, we will each still try to go our own way. Another metaphor that I love is that of the university as a long canoe (a shout-out to Stephane Grenier for this wonderful image). Instead of paddling in time and following the lead of the person steering, each member is pulling in their own direction. As a result, the canoe goes nowhere, or at best, turns in circles.

Now don't get me wrong, I love being director. But administration can often feel like being the steersman of an ungainly canoe, trying to continually (and not always successfully) reconcile the different and divergent interests of a group of very smart, strong-willed individuals. Sometimes I think it would be easier to be the solitary peacock in the image above, just doing one's own thing, reliant on no one but oneself for survival and success, instead of the lead goose trying to cajole other members of the flock.

Even if amusing and anchored in grains of truth, these metaphors are at best partial and incomplete. They ignore other complex realities of what is involved in working with a diverse group of people in large institutions, in shifting social, economic and political contexts. The reality is that academics have to work together to advance both individual and collective interests, and we do this all the time. This collaboration is also embedded within and thus shaped by our departmental and institutional cultures, some of which are collegial and supportive, while others may be dysfunctional or even toxic.

In North America and Europe, universities have become increasingly managerial and neoliberal in their functioning, in the process undermining the hitherto relatively substantial autonomy of professors to "do their own thing". We have seen the growing imposition of client-focused models oriented towards service delivery such that professors are no longer primarily educators and researchers. They are instead viewed as providers of services to paying clients (students buying education and so expecting good grades because they've paid for them), a structural means to produce "useful" knowledge and innovation, and by extension, vehicles to leverage economic resources (student fees, industry contracts, government grants) that make up the institution's revenues.

In complement to this neoliberal vision of the university are ever-increasing demands, both within academic institutions and from governments, for economic accountability and prioritization. This is operationalized via cost-effectiveness analyses and "rationalization", i.e., cutting funding to or closing entire departments or fields, often in the humanities and social sciences, so that resources can be "better" oriented towards those areas that are revenue-positive and "socially valuable".

In response to what many academics see as the denaturing of the university's fundamental mission and social mandate, there has been push-back to re-centre the balance of power in university governance (Senate/Assembly), away from senior administrators and managers towards professors. Advanced is the view that "Professors are the University!" and that the academic world should revolve around our (individual/collective) interests in research and teaching, and not those pecuniary interests of managers (e.g., enrolment and associated government funding, or research grants).

As a professor, I share these concerns, and I look on with sadness at the disastrous state of affairs common at other institutions that have gone down the rabbit hole of managerial excess. I count myself fortunate that my institution has thus far resisted the most extreme forms of neoliberalism, even if there is still too much for my liking – we're insufficiently transparent about the different interests at stake, not democratic in our functioning, overly hierarchical and with a strong tendency to micromanage instead of delegating authority.

As director, I'm now "on the other side of the fence" and part of the management, so I also see the substantial pressures faced by my institution as it tries to sustain a functioning research and teaching environment. The university must reconcile a multitude of different interests and carry out its social mandate of education and knowledge production, all the while working within the significant constraints imposed by insufficient public funding for higher education.

To return to the metaphors of the individualistic lone wolf or the arrogant feline that refuses to cooperate, the danger is that if taken too seriously, these images can reinforce an already problematic cognitive bias of the social elite, i.e., that because we're PhDs, we "know" what's right, regardless of the situation or our particular area of expertise, and that it's our "right" to decide without having to consider the interests of others, or to compromise. Even worse is the image of the alpha wolf keeping down the rest of the pack, always afraid that their position of authority will be overthrown by one of the young wolves who's seeking the top position.

What is sad, though, is that these images of the individual fighting their way up the power hierarchy over the backs of their colleagues reflects certain behaviours and (neoliberal) institutional cultures, that while not unique to academia, are exacerbated by aspects of our particular work environment, our desire for excellence and sense of exceptionalism, and our hiring practices.

Academia is a merit-based system that rewards excellence, even if this may be measured in very different ways across domains, disciplines and institutions. But if we're cognizant of and thus pay attention to the potential biases inherent in such a system, we can work, in our hiring practices, to offset a natural tendency to hire lone wolves because they're the rising stars.

Yes, we want colleagues who're self-directed, productive, and good at getting grants. But we also want colleagues who are capable of working with others, of running teams, of translating their expertise in the classroom, able to work effectively on committees – i.e., to be a good colleague. My former head of Department, Christina Zarowsky, beautifully articulated this idea as the "No jerks, no divas" principle, and it's something I've held to in the hiring committees that I've presided.

In Canada, tenured professors are still incredibly privileged. We have the liberty of being the small businessperson, able to decide what we want to do and are subject to very little direction (as head of department, I manage day-to-day administration, but I have little power to tell my colleagues what to do). This professorial autonomy is complemented by the security of the civil servant, because we're on year-round hard money salaries (with good pensions) and not subject to the vagaries of contracts or business cycles. We have the best of both worlds.

But we also have to accept that we work within large institutions, and that means getting along with many different colleagues, including but not limited to professionals, administrators, staff, and students. That means accepting that our own interests also have to align with those of the group, and that this will, at times, require compromise.

To return to the question in the title "Individualist or team player?", I suggest the answer should be "neither" or "both". We're all in the boat together, and so we should try to pull in the same direction...even if we'll of course have vigorous discussions about our destination and how best to get there.

The Office: A Right or a Privilege?

Equitably attributing office space is a challenge

Bryn Williams-Jones
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Photo by Samet Kurtkus on Unsplash

Summary

The office is an important workspace, but one where the quality (individual & windowed vs shared with no window) is often associated with seniority or institutional hierarchy. In the post-COVID reality of work from home, use and access to the office needs to be re-calibrated. People (and teams) will have different needs and preferences that cannot all be accommodated. A rational and transparent process is needed to think through these different needs, explore options, and attribute office space most equitably.

Disclaimer: I'm talking here as a North American university professor in a context where individual offices are the norm rather than the exception. I fully acknowledge that others may not have the same luxury, having always been in shared offices, and with much less possibility for personalizing their space.

In the post-COVID return to work, many academic institutions (and others) have had to re-think their traditional norms about the efficient and equitable use of office space.

Work from home has, for many of us, changed how we think about "the office". Instead of going to work Monday to Friday, 9 to 5, we discovered the liberty and benefits of working at home. I save 90 minutes of travel time each day, am not interrupted by hallway discussions (apart from those with my wife), can take regular breaks to exercise (karate, calisthenics), and I can book into my day a dental appointment, a walk, etc., all of which greatly enhance my work-life balance.

But what is lost, when working from home, are the spontaneous discussions and in-person contacts with students and colleagues that help build collegiality and stimulate creative ideation. Recognizing this challenge, academic institutions are exploring ways to encourage people to return when it's so easy for many to work from home. And that means asking questions about our existing environments.

Are our current spaces sufficiently inviting and functional? Are they accessible for those with visual or mobility challenges? Do we have enough of the right spaces given the diversity of people we seek to accommodate (professors, administrative or research personnel, students, etc.) and their various and differing uses and requirements? Who can or should have an individual office? Who gets the coveted office with a window…and who is relegated to the dark windowless box? Should offices be shared, and if so how and when? According to what criteria?

These thoughts have been on my mind, in part due to my role as Director of a large department and my associated responsibility to equitably and efficiently allocate a limited number of offices to our professors. I'm also on a faculty space planning committee where we're thinking more broadly about how to optimize the use of all our space – offices, common areas, etc. – with a view to improving the quality of the experience and increasing the use of these different spaces. The aim is to make the School of Public Health a dynamic and healthy work environment in which people want to be present.

Here, though, I'm going to focus on the individual office commonly reserved for professors and administrative personnel.

Different personalities

For many colleagues – me included – their office is an extension of their personality. I've known people whose offices were virtually impassable (the caricature of the messy academic!), books and papers on every surface, stacked floor to ceiling, with only the narrowest path to the desk – which was also buried – and one chair for a visitor. These are the offices where the cleaning staff refuse to enter… and are possibly the source of recurrent mice infestations.

At the other extreme are minimalists like me who have a desk for their computer (I don't even have a chair, as I stand), a few photos, a partially filled bookcase, and some artwork. All the "empty" space is dedicated to chairs for visitors.

In between these two extremes – the hoarder and the minimalist – are those colleagues who need desk space and have lots of books, files, equipment (that doesn't fit in their lab), and other objects of their research and travels, without which they could not do their work effectively. They may connect all these objects together in a coherent design, with colourful carpets, easy chairs, decorations, etc., for a warm if very full office.

As different as are individual personalities, so too are people's offices and their uses.

Different uses

Since becoming a professor in 2005, I've had my own office with a window, although not always with a great view. Using this space regularly enabled me, at the beginning of my career, to get to know my colleagues and to build trusting relations and collaborations. It has been an important place to meet with students for rich and extended discussions, and to explore new opportunities. At its most prosaic, the office is a place to deposit my coat and boots between classes or meetings...

I realized early on that, for me at least, the office was not the optimal place for focused reading or writing because there were too many distractions; so, I started protecting 2 days a week at home. I'm firmly in the camp of those people who love working from home, and I have the luxury of a great setup (quiet, separate space), which I've refined with time. As my administrative responsibilities have expanded, I've moved to 2-3 days a week at the office, reserving my in-office days for face-to-face meetings.

In my department, many professors have two offices, one at the university (shared) and another at their research centre; they are often only at the office 1 to 2 days/week. Other colleagues, however, are in their offices 3, 4 or even 5 days a week. Going to the office is, for them, the ideal place to work and a means of separating work from personal life – what happens at the office, stays at the office!

An equitable attribution process

Given this diversity of uses of office space and the personalities of those who inhabit them, and in the inevitable case of limited resources (i.e., the windowed office), a strictly egalitarian or meritocratic attribution would be both inefficient and inequitable. Who then should get priority access to the individual office with a window, and based on what criteria?

Answering this question is not easy and is part of an ongoing reflection by our Space planning committee. Here, I share a proposition for how to establish an equitable attribution process. Note that I've given priority to salaried university employees, as having an office is often part of their contract and/or collective agreement, and they are the personnel likely to spend the most time at the office and thus are the most in need of optimal workspace.

What follows is a list of criteria to use in prioritizing access for the different members of the department.

Individual office, with window

- Salaried employees, i.e., professors and administrative personnel, who spend 3 or more days at the office.
- Employees who require space for focused work, private discussions, and/or use lots of resources (books, etc.).
- Use it or lose it, with an annual re-evaluation.

Shared office, with window

- Salaried employees who spend 2 or 3 days at work, require private office space, and can schedule alternate days with a colleague (i.e., no overlap).
- When an office is sufficiently large for 2 desks, and employees do not require regular private work.
- Use it or lose it, with an annual re-evaluation.

Individual office, without window

- All employees who are happy without a window (likely 2-3 days/week).
- Research personnel and students who spend 2-3 days/week at work.
- Use it or lose it, with an annual re-evaluation.

Shared office, without window

- Employees and students who spend less than 2 days/week at work.

Flexible options

In addition to the above, where possible it could be pertinent to consider:

- Individual offices without windows that can be reserved as needed (e.g., for visitors).
- Multi-user spaces, with or without windows, that can be setup for hot desks / unreserved workspace.

Summary

Professors, administrative and research personnel, and students each have different needs and preferences, and these likely cannot all be accommodated. A process is thus needed to think through these different needs, to explore various options, and to attribute office space most equitably.

When I became Director, I moved from an individual office with a window, to the “Executive” office with a wrap-around windows on two walls and a beautiful view of the neighbourhood, and space for a big desk and a table for meetings. But in thinking about my own needs (2-3 days/week at work), and testing them with the above process, I clearly do not warrant a large, windowed office.

Given the needs of our junior professors and administrative personnel who are at work 3+ days/week, many of whom currently don’t have individual offices with windows, my current office space would be better used in other ways, such as for a meeting room or as a shared office.

The office is an important space, but one that must be used. In the new reality of work from home, the individual office with window is a privilege, not a right. So, I will happily take an individual windowless office!

Working With Graduate Students

There are many different paths to successful student-supervisor collaborations

Bryn Williams-Jones
Aug 27, 2024

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Photo by John Schnobrich on Unsplash

Summary

Supervising graduate students is an intellectually stimulating and energizing experience; working with creative minds on a diversity of projects, professors are challenged to continually learn and examine new ways of doing research. But there is no “one-size-fits-all” or “standard” form of supervision – it may be individual, team-based or a hybrid. It’s thus important for both students and supervisors to be transparent about their respective needs and expectations in order to build a common vision (and if not, walk away) so that this multi-year collaboration is mutually rewarding.

One of my passions is teaching. It’s an incredible privilege to be able to share my knowledge and experiences in diverse contexts, whether with students in my courses, by giving guest lectures for colleagues in other domains, or in offering training seminars for professionals or community organizations. Alongside this formal teaching, another important venue for knowledge sharing is of course graduate student supervision.

Since I started supervising Masters and PhD students in 2005, I have loved the experience! Intellectually stimulating and energizing, I have the privilege of working with brilliant people (students) in a space (the university) the promotes exploration, sharing and a respectful debate about ideas. Whether as primary supervisor, co-supervisor or part of a research team, I am surrounded by creative minds working on a diversity of projects that keep challenging me to learn and examine new avenues or ways of doing bioethics.

Depending on my role and the context, how I work with these students will vary quite a bit. My focus, here, will thus be on the different ways to build successful student-supervisor collaborations, and some thoughts on what makes these rewarding experiences.

There are clearly different models for working with graduate students, and these vary greatly across academic disciplines, fields of study, and research methodologies. I have colleagues in bioethics and public health who build research teams with their students, each of whom works on a project that is part of a specific research theme and very often integrated into the supervisor’s funded projects and research program. In practice, this is the culture that dominates in many empirical research environments in the applied and health sciences: weekly team meetings, regular sharing of ideas, collaborative research and team writing of conference abstracts, articles and grant applications. With this model, it’s also more likely that students joining a team are paid off grants (as employees) to work on parts of a particular project and so contribute to the objectives of the research.

Alternatively, I have other colleagues who work with individual graduate students, each who have very different projects and little overlap with other students being supervised, beyond the general expertise of the supervisor. The student’s project is based on their own interest, and while negotiated with their supervisor, responds primarily to the student’s objectives. The student’s project may have no connection to the funded research of their supervisor, and so they will likely be self-supported through their own scholarships or via contractual work that may only be tangentially related to their specific research. The student and their supervisor work effectively together because they share common interests, analytic approaches, and methods – but the student is not part of a research team as such.

Over the years, I’ve oscillated between these two models.

As a Masters student, I was in a one-on-one relationship with my supervisor and not part of a team – I worked alone on my project. As a PhD student, I became part of a research group working on issues in genetics and ethics. While united by interest in a broad theme, the topics and approaches taken in each of our specific projects were very different, if complementary. For example, my colleagues were doing empirical bioethics research on the issues raised for people living with hereditary breast cancer, Alzheimer's disease or Huntington's disease; by contrast, my work was conceptual and policy oriented, focused on the implications of DNA patenting on health services provision. While forming a research group, we only occasionally worked together on papers or conference abstracts.

As a professor, I've tried on occasion to create a team setting with students doing their research as part of a bigger project, but it's not something that's ever really taken off. This is due in large part to the fact that I have a short attention span (I change research areas every 5-8 years) and my interests are eclectic, as are those of the students who I attract and supervise. At any given point, I have 8-10 Masters and PhD students under my supervision, each invariably working on vastly different topics: over the years, this has ranged across issues in conceptual bioethics, clinical ethics, health policy ethics, professional ethics, technology ethics, AI ethics, research ethics, responsible conduct of research, public health ethics, and data governance, to name but a few. These students have also used a wide range of methods and approaches, from the purely theoretical to the deeply empirical, and hybrid approaches in-between. More recently, I've also attracted students with a passion for knowledge transfer and the use of art and other creative means to engage with diverse groups and think differently about how we do applied (bio)ethics.

Earlier in my career, I frequently agreed to supervise students in areas where I had little experience, such as clinical ethics, because there was no one else to do the job. With only three full-time professors and a graduate program with more than 60 Masters and PhD students enrolled at any given time, each professor had to supervise a dozen students across a broad range of areas – we couldn't be picky. As we expanded the number of adjunct professors affiliated with the program, it became possible to better share supervision responsibilities and so be more selective of students who fit the respective interests and expertise of the professors.

I've learned that it's also important, although less critical for the Masters than for the PhD, that there be a good "fit" in terms of personal chemistry, in views on how to do research and what are expected objectives of collaboration. My students tend to be a bit different or even "weird" – I attract and thrive on students who think differently, who want to do very different types of research from the mainstream (either in terms of subject, approach or methodology) or who are not looking for a career in the academy. My response to students with crazy projects is invariably: "Wow, that's so cool! What do you think about X, Y or Z [insert crazy creative ideas]?" For me, supporting each of these students in their personal academic or professional journey is part of my role as a professor; less a teacher and more of a guide is how I see myself.

The result is that I almost never have students working specifically on "my projects". Instead, students approach me with an idea and together we explore scholarship opportunities, contracts or grant applications to write that can support "their projects" which then become "ours". In my role as department director, where much of my time is devoted to administration, staying connected to research through my students (and my journal), has proven essential. Yes, I love the thrill of teaching in a graduate seminar and giving a guest lecture, but even more stimulating are the one-on-one and small group discussions with students about their projects.

Because I work with individual students and not teams, our student-supervisor relationship is very close. I'm coach for their academic and professional careers, and I work actively to create opportunities for their professional growth. The needs and expectations of students obviously change over time as their studies and projects progress, but part of my contract with them is that they send me to read every abstract, scholarship application, grant proposal, article, and of course draft chapters of their Masters or doctoral theses. This can be a lot of work if the student is still learning how to write clearly, for example. And I invariably mobilize my dyslexic eye (I don't scan but read every word, easily catching double spaces or typos) and editor skills to reformat manuscripts or even an entire thesis, so that the manuscript is both aesthetically pleasing and presents a coherent, convincing and interesting argument. This is a time-consuming part of my role, but one that I enjoy.

This individualized approach to supervision is not for everyone, whether professor or student, nor does it likely lend itself to all domains; it's probably a much better fit with the humanities, for example, than the applied sciences. I thus make clear my approach when I first meet with students to discuss a possible supervision so that there are no misunderstandings regarding how we will work together, and the expectations for each of us. If they're looking for a more team-based environment, then I orient them towards other colleagues.

Supervision is, for me, a space for vicarious learning: as I talk with students and read their texts, as I give feedback and help orient their arguments, my students in turn share with me their reading and interpretation of the bioethics and other literatures that they find interesting. Given my substantial administrative responsibilities, I have little time to do my own research and no time to do any interest-driven reading. It is through my students – alongside my role as Editor-in-chief of the CJB/RCB – that I stay current with the contemporary bioethics scholarship, and for that I'm grateful. A never-ending source of new ideas, graduate students are the well to which I turn when I find myself running dry, losing interest in teaching and research. A few conversations with graduate students about their projects and I'm once again enthused by all the possibilities and opportunities raised and find myself energized and reinvigorated.

I have the incredible privilege of being in a place where my job surrounds me with smart people who, on a daily basis, are doing interesting things – and I can't imagine a better job! Even when I get fed up with some of the aspects of life as a professor (narrow-minded bureaucrats and arrogant individualists come to mind), these other aspects far outweigh the frustrations, which are passing. The thrill of working with students, however, is enduring.

The Comment that Kills

Constructive or devastating? It depends on how comments are given and received

Bryn Williams-Jones
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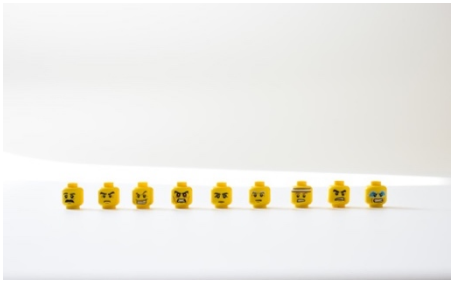

Photo by Nik on Unsplash

Summary

Evaluations are important for learning, but how they're done can make a big difference: they can be constructive and insightful or overly critical and demoralizing. We can never know how our comments will be received, so we should try to put ourselves "in their shoes" and adjust accordingly.

As I've been doing course grading recently – a necessary task but not one that I like doing – it got me thinking about my own experiences with and relation to end-of-term student evaluations, grading more generally, and how we give and receive comments and critique. As a professor, I am invariably the one evaluating students; but as an educator, I also receive feedback from students at the end of term through systematized teaching evaluations. In both cases, comments are important for learning and continuous improvement. But the way that they are made can also have a huge impact: comments can be constructive and insightful, and an important part of the learning process; or they can be overly critical and demoralizing, and thus counterproductive.

In 2005, newly back in Montreal after 8 years away – 5 years in Vancouver and 3 years in the UK – my French was very rusty. For the first time in my academic career, I would be teaching and working in French. My francophone colleagues were very welcoming and extremely supportive, as were most of my students. One of my first Masters students, Marcel Pennors, a retired French teacher, would regularly but politely correct my French and encourage me to improve. A few of my other graduate students even confided to me years later that when I was teaching they would do mental translation of my Frenglish!

But not all students were so accommodating or constructive. In my end-of-term course evaluations, I also received a few extremely negative comments (anonymous, of course) because my French was not perfect. Some even went so far as to point out the fact that there were minor grammatical errors in my PowerPoints (this was well before I discovered DeepL and Antidote), and one questioned why a French-language institution would hire someone, like myself, who did not speak the language perfectly: "Why is this Anglo with a bad accent teaching our course?"

It wasn't just my linguistic abilities that were the subject to critique: my course plans (insufficiently detailed), my extravagant oral teaching style (intimidating, taking up too much space), my written feedback on essays (overly direct, insensitive), were all fodder for very direct and even personal attack. I well remember the "student lawyer" who didn't like the way I graded him on a small mid-term assignment, so he conducted a class survey and "systematic consultation" to challenge my grading scheme. In a pique of frustration – because I'd clearly explained the expectations on three separate occasions (orally, and by email), and which most students had understood based on their excellent performance in what was a simple exercise – I told the student "The classroom is not a democracy. As the professor, I'm God, and your job is to please me!" This student didn't seem to understand that the university is a meritocracy: the person teaching is much better qualified, has a PhD or is in the process of obtaining one, and knows the materials and scientific literature, otherwise they would not be given responsibility for teaching the class. I discovered that his real motivation was not learning or understanding what he'd done wrong but simply obtaining an "A grade", which he was convinced he deserved, so he could be competitive for scholarships.

Clearly, the stakes in student evaluations are not the same for a professor like me – with a full-time job, salary, and tenure – and a contract lecturer with no guarantee of future employment. In my case, student feedback gives a snapshot of what a particular class thought but has little impact on my career as a professor. Yes, these evaluations are included in renewal and promotion dossiers, but unless they're catastrophically bad, they carry very little weight compared to other performance metrics (e.g., number of publications, grant funds). A mediocre or even bad evaluation still hurts, even when I try to rationalize the source or intent of the comments. It will make me question what went wrong and try to find ways to improve, but it does not pose an existential threat to my professional identity or career as a university professor.

The same cannot be said for contract lecturers being evaluated and critiqued by their students. There have been stories recently of an increase in personal and hateful comments addressed by students to lecturers, possibly because students know that a lecturer is more vulnerable to critique than a professor. If teaching evaluations are bad, these can be used by department or program directors to refuse to give a course to a certain lecturer; obviously we don't want weak educators teaching our students.

It's one thing to legitimately critique a lecturer's practices, and quite another to engage in hateful, personal attacks through sexist, racist or other demeaning comments. The institution has a responsibility to protect its employees, which at a minimum includes deleting hateful comments from evaluations before they are shared with the educator. But I would go further and argue that such cases should raise red flags that start formal investigations by the department director and other administrative instances (e.g., the Vice-dean or the university office responsible for preventing and responding to harassment). Hateful comments cross the boundary from critique to violence, and that cannot be tolerated.

Students, too, are vulnerable to insensitive or aggressive evaluations by their professors. Having completed my PhD now more than 20 years ago, it's been a very long time since I've been in the role of a student, aside from in karate where I recently passed my yellow belt exam, a measure of my progression and which was a stressful experience! But the cost to me of this evaluation was negligible, done as it was in the context of a hobby, a voluntary choice that has no impact on my career. By contrast, for students in a course (or employees in government or industry), the cost to them of an overly negative evaluation can be substantial, even destructive, to their self-esteem, to their academic or career progression, and to their competitiveness for awards or promotions.

As the person evaluating another's performance, we should be diplomatic; and we should never be vindictive or use evaluations as a counterweight in or response to situations where we ourselves are being evaluated. We should constructively critique in a manner that both clearly identifies areas in need of improvement and provide suggestions for how to make such corrections. Comments should be as factual or objective as possible – it should be "business, not personal" – and complemented with a space for dialogue, where fact-checking and clarification of intent are encouraged, and corrections possible where warranted.

A corollary to how a comment is given is how it should be received. Those on the receiving end should not (necessarily) read into critical comments a personal attack or a negativity that was not intended. Yes, the comments may be very direct and bring into question our work, something in which we have invested substantial time and energy. It is normal to take this personally. But as the recipient of critique, we should try to receive comments with humility – when they are constructive – seeing them as an opportunity for learning and improvement and recognize that it's not personal. The abrupt or insensitive comment might just be due to the fact that the evaluator was tired or rushed.

Even if it is not our intention to be hurtful, comments can still be perceived as personal attacks and thus be very distressing. This doesn't mean "pulling our punches" (to come back to my karate example) and not saying clearly what's wrong, or how we perceived/received the comments (e.g., emotionally); a less than rigorous evaluation is dishonest and does a disservice, because we cannot improve if we do not know what's wrong. So, while we cannot ever know exactly how another person will receive and interpret our comments, we can and should try to put ourselves "in their shoes", to think about how they would receive our critique, and adjust accordingly.

Positive Critique

The how and the why matter as much as the what

Bryn Williams-Jones
Feb 4, 2025

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Photo by AbsolutVision on Unsplash

Summary

Good critique should be a form of feedback that explicitly guides improvement. Overly nice comments that gloss over weaknesses can be just as damaging as overly severe critique – there is no learning. When given honestly and with positive intent, and focused on the object but not the person, even severe critique can be accepted (even if not nice to receive) because the goal is learning. Positive critique is objective and never personal.

"If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all" may be good advice for many social situations and a smart way to avoid conflict with family and friends, but in educational contexts it's totally counter-productive. You cannot learn if you don't know what you did wrong, and it's the responsibility of educators to help their students (learners) recognize this, even when the associated correction (critique) might be difficult to receive and unpleasant to give.

Excessive praise that is either not warranted ("You're outstanding", when you're not), or that doesn't identify specific weaknesses or areas in need of correction ("Good job – keep improving!", but doesn't say why or how), is common in many areas of contemporary education, and it's worse than useless. Out of a misplaced belief that critique is negative, by definition, because it's demoralizing and harmful to students, some educators refrain from telling the truth. They do a disservice to students who may come to believe that they're better at a particular subject than they in fact are or have mastery of skill when they do not.

Another approach used in professional contexts is called the "compliment sandwich", with feedback given by saying something positive, then negative, and then positive. The goal is to not focus on the negative but instead balance critique by highlighting positive aspects at the start and end of the feedback process. Yet, this approach has also been criticized as being a "shit sandwich" because it dilutes the critique (hiding it in the middle), can be manipulative or disingenuous (pretending that one is actually interested in the person and cares about their improvement), and is ultimately ineffective in helping people identify areas in need of change (because people tend to ignore the negative and focus on the positive).

In academia, forceful and sustained critique are fundamental to advancing knowledge. One of the core Mertonian norms is that science must be grounded in "organized skepticism", and researchers should assume that the argument or experiment is flawed until proven otherwise. As researchers, we must be objectively critical of our colleagues' work, testing it for coherence, rigour, and validity, etc., and in turn, we must be open to criticism of our own work. Collectively, we thus contribute to producing the best possible research – an argument or research finding is "good" because it succeeds in convincing the skeptics, and that advances knowledge.

Despite this culture of critique, the recipient of such critique may still take it personally. Research is supposed to involve the (relatively) neutral study of facts or ideas, and as researchers, we are trained to focus on deploying appropriate methods and conduct rigorous analysis to produce meaningful results. But to produce content that is worthy of critique requires substantial personal and professional investment in time, energy, creativity, as well as human and financial resources. A critique of something (e.g., study, manuscript, grant application) in which we've invested heavily can thus have a negative emotional impact, and even be taken as an unfair attack – "How can you not be convinced when I think it's excellent and am so proud of what I've produced?"

A lot thus depends on *how* critiques are made, and the *intention* of the person making the critique.

In a PhD seminar that I recently taught, on Contemporary Theories in Bioethics, students were exposed to a variety of theoretical approaches used in bioethics, the aim being to help them become comfortable with "doing theory" and using concepts or ethical frameworks to analyze the problems that are the focus of their respective PhD projects. The course is explicitly framed as a place for students to experiment with concepts or approaches with which they may not be expert, and an opportunity for them to write a first draft of a theoretical chapter or article for their thesis.

During the last 3 weeks of term, students each gave a 20-minute conference-style presentation, followed by 20-30 minutes of discussion, on the same topic as the one that they planned to develop for their end-of-term final essay (to be written in the form of an academic article). The oral presentation was the place to test a rough structure or plan for the paper, and to deploy a convincing argumentative strategy, and then receive critical feedback from the class and me. What was striking about these presentations – aside from the fact that they were overwhelmingly excellent, well thought out, and often very creative in form – was how they were received by the class.

Not content to simply question their colleagues about different factual elements or conceptual aspects of the presentation, the students sought to actively help by identify points in the presentation that required further nuance, or pointing out parts that needed greater clarification to improve the overall argument. They offered suggestions for the reordering or restructuring of the presentation to improve the flow of ideas, shared pertinent examples, and proposed relevant articles that could deepen or enhance the analysis. It was the perfect demonstration of positive feedback that mobilized rigorous and constructive critique and a genuine desire to help their fellow students improve both their presentation and the final essay.

I've been teaching masters and PhD seminars for 20 years and the small group format of our courses (8-15 students on average) lends itself to rich and stimulating discussions. But rarely have I had a group that was so cohesive (even if wildly different in age, professional background, and research area) and focused on collective growth through constructive critique, even in this PhD seminar which I've now taught on 6 occasions. While this positive atmosphere was in part due to my personable teaching style and the constructive learning environment that I sought to create, most of it was result of excellent chemistry between the students – exemplified by lots of jokes, mutual respect and support – and the fact that they were an exceptionally strong group.

The students' final essays were overwhelmingly excellent and had clearly benefited from the constructive critique received on their presentations.

In my evaluation and critique of their presentations, I commented on their presentation style and timing, the form and content of the PowerPoint, and the logical structure and coherence of their arguments. In their subsequent essays, I pointed to places that needed examples or further argumentative development and critiqued the ordering of ideas and arguments when they weren't optimal. My specific comments throughout – critiques of different parts of the text – were complemented by general comments that noted various strengths (positive) and weaknesses (negative) of the overall essay, with suggestions for how to improve. And for most of the students, I encouraged them to respond to my comments so that they could then submit their papers for publication (with suggestions of potential journals) – as I mentioned, they were a brilliant group!

Even when at times I was frustrated by aspects of an essay, such as when a line of argument took an unnecessary tangent, or the essay was missing necessary examples and references to support the arguments, I never made the critiques personal. They were always critiques of the text, never the author of the text, and pointed to strengths and weaknesses, and ways to improve.

A good operative modality for providing constructive critique, I suggest, is to make it clear that "It's business, not personal". In my experience, this is operationalized by 1) the way that we give critique, that is, the types of comments that we make and the standards of excellence that we expect; 2) creating learning environments where constructive critique is the explicit norm and expectation; and 3) ensuring that constructive critique is a collective responsibility of all students or learners, and not just an evaluation by the educator.

Good critique, whether it is of the work of a student/learner or the peer-review of a research colleague, is/should be a form of feedback that aims to help the author of a work improve. Sometimes the critique is severe, even devastating, and involves telling the student/learner/researcher to go back to the drawing board and start over. At other times, it involves suggestions to fine-tune an argument or analysis to push the work from “good enough” to “outstanding”.

In all cases, the intent must be well-meaning, and the form explicit, objective, and rigorous…but never personal. This is positive, constructive critique.

When Students Abandon Their Studies

Instead of viewing this as a failure, accept the reasons and think about the lessons learned

Bryn Williams-Jones
Feb 27, 2024

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Photo by Gwendal Cottin on Unsplash

Summary

Students abandon their studies for all sorts of reasons; the problem is framing this as a “failure”. We should instead accept this as part of an ongoing journey, that the project was simply not the right one for the student at that time. Life is too short to be weighed down with regrets, so let them go and focus on the lessons learned.

I was doing a CV update recently to add the names of new PhD students who I will be supervising in the coming year, and it got me looking back on all those students who I’d had the pleasure of supervising since 2005, which to date number 12 PhD and 37 Masters students graduated. But it also got me thinking about all those who abandoned their studies with me, or who didn’t pass important stages of their work and so did not graduate with the sought-after Masters or PhD degree.

Not being able to complete a major life project such as a Masters or PhD, for whatever reason, will inevitably be demoralizing for the students concerned; but it can also affect their supervisor. A graduate diploma is a collaboration, a shared project, so the successes and the failures are also shared. The problem, I suggest, is framing the situation as one of “failure”, with all the personal connotations involved. Instead, I argue that we should accept this as part of an ongoing life journey, and recognize that this project (e.g., Masters, PhD) was simply not the right one for the student at that time in their life. But it does not mean that “they” are a failure.

In my experience, students most frequently abandoned their studies not because they didn’t have the intellectual abilities to succeed, but because of life constraints, such as work commitments or family responsibilities. Many of our Masters and PhD students in bioethics have careers and family responsibilities prior to starting their studies. So, despite our conversations prior to or at the start of their academic journey (as well as at key moments during their studies), the real time commitments and personal/professional sacrifices required are not always fully appreciated. They needed to ask themselves the tough questions; and at some point, a change in direction proved necessary because the Masters or PhD was simply not feasible.

Directly related to the challenges of personal and professional commitments are issues of financing. As supervisor, I do my best to create opportunities for my students by involving them in funded research projects (when I have them), or by proposing paid positions as research coordinators (e.g., in networks in which I’m involved). We work hard together to boost their productivity (e.g., writing articles, submitting conference abstracts, doing creative knowledge transfer projects) to help them develop the skills and CV required to be competitive for major scholarship competitions. But this is not always enough.

Some students, despite their and my best efforts, were unsuccessful in these competitions, and so had to drop out to work and pay their living expenses. This financial pressure can be even harder for students with families, mortgages, etc., as compared to singles; although given the increased cost of living in recent years, and the fact that scholarship amounts have not kept track with inflation, it’s harder financially for all students to dedicate the 2-5 or more years of full-time studies required to complete a Masters or PhD.

Other students, especially those who started their studies with already established careers or had professional diplomas (e.g., nursing, medicine, law), realised that they didn’t actually need the Masters or PhD to do what they wanted. With a course-based certificate or diploma, these students were able to take on new responsibilities, put their bioethics expertise to good effect, and so progress successfully in their careers. Dropping out of the Masters or PhD was less painful because it was the smart thing to do, professionally.

In a few cases, the student was just in the wrong program – they didn't have the right background, mindset or skills for bioethics, and so had major difficulties in their Masters or PhD coursework, or even failed their PhD comprehensive exam. Luckily, we have Masters-level certificates and graduate diplomas, so in these cases it was possible to formally recognize the students' years of contribution to their studies (i.e., their very real accomplishments); even if this did not include the sought after diploma, they did not walk away "empty handed".

A sense of being a failure is nonetheless inevitable. Obviously, the pain of failure will be acute for the student who has invested so much time and energy into their studies; but as the supervisor, I share some of this pain. I have frequently questioned myself on whether I could have done more (e.g., closer supervision, worked harder to find other funding sources) or supported the student differently so that they might have succeeded. Yet, while a Masters or PhD is a close collaboration between a student and their supervisor, it is ultimately the student's project; it is their responsibility to put in the months and years of work required to succeed in their coursework, to do the research, to write the articles and to compile a thesis that meets expected standards of academic excellence. I cannot write their thesis for them.

When students consider abandoning their studies, for whatever reason – financial, professional, familial, health related – as their supervisor I systematically talk through the issues so we can explore possible alternatives that they may not have considered. For example, in a few cases, the answer was for the student to officially withdraw from the program for a few years so they could focus on their other responsibilities, while continuing to work on the PhD "on the side". I would occasionally check-in on them to see if they were still progressing (even if slowly), and review thesis chapters and manuscripts when ready; and when the thesis was finally completed, I would support the student in re-applying for admission to submit their thesis for evaluation. But the reality is that most students simply abandoned their studies…and that's OK.

The message I would give to these former students – and to all others who experience similar situations – is that "you're not a failure; life just took you in another direction". The important thing for them, and for their supervisors, is to recognise all the lessons learned, the skills that were developed, the knowledge that was produced, and the friendships created. While it's easy to dwell on the negative and experience an acute sense of failure at not accomplishing a major life project, I suggest that it's better to be pragmatic, to accept that this was not the right path, or simply not the right moment.

Life is too short to be weighed down with regrets, so let them go. Focus instead on all the positives of the experience and move forward with a lighter step.

Where's the Ethics in EDI?

Bureaucratic approaches are undermining ethical aims and principles

Bryn Williams-Jones
Jan 23, 2023

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Photo by Miles Peacock on Unsplash

Summary

Policies promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) are widespread in the workplace and in academia. Anchored in important ethical principles, the problem is how these policies are deployed institutionally. Too often, they're superficial, misdirected, impractical or unenforceable, and so ignored – they have been bureaucratized to death. Instead, EDI policies should be dynamic tools that drive positive change in institutional culture and move us towards more just and inclusive societies.

As an academic who does both teaching and research on governance and professional ethics, and someone who's fundamentally interested in issues of social justice, I've found myself over the years concerned with questions of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). As an ethicist, EDI speaks to me because it's anchored in core ethical principles that can and should be driving positive change towards more just and inclusive societies; but I'm also extremely worried about how it's being rolled out institutionally. This post explores some of these concerns and proposes some modest examples of how things can be done differently.

Context and Messiness

It should be evident from my previous posts that I'm someone who is very self-reflexive and aware of my privileged status as a White man. I early on internalized feminist principles and at university was indoctrinated by strong and confident women who were expert in critical social theory and feminist ethics. This rich learning experience made me intimately aware of how my opportunities, and even my very identity, were shaped by a context of social privilege not shared by much of the rest of the Canadian (or world's) population. But it also helped me recognize that even if I was different – in part due to my dyslexia, as well as the way I think conceptually (often out loud) because I don't visualize (aphantasia) – that this "invisible" difference, while not defining me, was still part of who I am.

My feminist ethics training forced me to pay attention to power relations within and between institutions and got me thinking about how we (and also who this "we" is) develop ethical policies and governance structures. And it highlighted the reality that many individual experiences of inequity are the result of rational policy choices made by institutions and governments, i.e., the feminist slogan that "the personal is political". In hindsight, this training also laid the foundations for my interest in "systems theory" approaches to understanding complex power dynamics, a term I've only recently learned but which perfectly articulates the need for "messy thinking" about complex situations (a shout out to Antoine Boudreau LeBlanc for introducing me to ecosystem approaches, and to Andrew Tanner and his awesome blog applying systems theory to geopolitics).

So, when I think about EDI I think about both its ethical principles or foundations and its real-world operationalization… and while I fully ascribe to the former (with all the necessary caveats), I deplore how the latter is being done.

Bureaucratizing Ethics to Death

The EDI implementation that I've seen in the last few years imposed by the Canadian federal government and operationalized – badly, it must be said – by universities and other institutions in their hiring and governance structures makes me want to scream "No! That's not EDI!"

In policies and guidelines about “how to be inclusive”, we often get saccharine, vacuous statements full of good intentions but long on nuanced applications. Developed to tick-off organizational compliance requirements, such policies often lack procedures or real implementation that changes culture; at best, they’re something pretty to hang on the wall alongside the generic mission or value statements. This “only on paper” EDI undermines the credibility of the organization, because it’s legitimately seen as vapid window-dressing. And so nothing changes in the institutional culture; the existing inequities and systems of power remain the same.

Equally bad – or maybe even worse – is the ideologically-driven implementation of EDI policies by institutional bureaucracies (whether well-intentioned or because imposed by higher authorities) in a manner that does not think fully through the practical consequences, costs or implications of specific policy choices. To be blunt, the bureaucratic EDI requirements in Canada (and elsewhere, I would imagine) are even more destructive than what’s happened with the bureaucratization of research ethics that seems to be rolling back decades of investment in building a robust institutional culture of ethical research.

In the current culture of bureaucratically imposed EDI, we get, for example, the obligation in hiring committees to explicitly select certain visible criteria of difference (but what about those differences that are invisible?) as part of affirmative action policies that ostensibly seek to build greater diversity. We get obligatory sections in funding applications where we have to explain our EDI practices, how our teams will be diverse and inclusive (but we can’t say how they currently are because that would be discriminatory!), and how we take EDI into consideration in our specific research, regardless of whether it’s actually pertinent. [Don’t even get my father started, a professor of geology who has to explain in his grant applications how he integrates EDI into his analysis of his rocks.] And we get obligatory self-declarations, such as the one below, which I recently had to complete for two grant applications.

Note: if you answered “Yes” to question 4a (i.e., you are an Indigenous person), select “Population group not listed above” for this question. You can also select from the list any other population group that applies to you.

6. Select the population groups you identify with (required)

- ☐ Arab
- ☐ Black
- ☐ Chinese
- ☐ Filipino
- ☐ Japanese
- ☐ Korean
- ☐ Latin American
- ☐ South Asian (e.g., East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, etc.)
- ☐ Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Thai, etc.)
- ☐ West Asian (e.g., Iranian, Afghan, etc.)
- ☐ White
- ☐ Population group not listed above
- ☑ I prefer not to answer

The Accessible Canada Act defines disability as “any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment—or a functional limitation—whether permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, or evident or not, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person’s full and equal participation in society.”

7a. Do you identify as a person with a disability as described in the Act? (required)

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ◉ I prefer not to answer

8a. What languages did you first learn at home in childhood and still understand? (Select all that apply) (required)

- ☑ English
- ☑ French
- ☐ Another language
- ☐ I prefer not to answer

8b. What language(s) do you speak most often at home? (Select all that apply) (required)

- ☑ English
- ☑ French
- ☐ Another language
- ☐ I prefer not to answer

The justification, in my specific case, is ostensibly demographic, that is, to understand who is applying; supposedly it’s not part of the review process – but then why bother? In the name of inclusion and promoting diversity, I’m asked to categorize myself according to what are very American “racial” categories, which I’ve noticed in recent years have also become increasingly specific and detailed in Canada. As a side note, can we accept that there’s no biological basis for different “races”? There’s only one human race. The phenotypic differences that we see (skin colour, hair, stature, etc.), the cultural diversity of our respective origins, and our personal or political histories may all be determinant of who we are and how we identify, but they do not make us that different.

So, to the above “only demographic” questionnaire (which also asked me about my gender identity and sexual orientation), I systematically refused to answer; thankfully there was the option to “Prefer not to answer”, and this allowed me to make a statement, even if I know it will likely have no impact nor probably even be looked at by a human being. I have insufficient trust in the objectivity of how such review systems work to want to be categorized, either by a machine or a bureaucrat reviewing my application. Yes, I’m part of the privileged class of White males, but this and other personal characteristics are my own; they are, or should be, irrelevant.

What this badly implemented bureaucratic EDI does is get everyone angry (me included!) and then gets people thinking about how to work around what are evidently meaningless requirements. So, researchers write “boilerplate” EDI statements that sound good (even if they’re impossible to implement in practice) and then are tested with the bureaucracies to see if they pass muster. When these generic paragraphs or sections succeed, they’re recycled for subsequent applications and maybe shared with colleagues. Similarly, in hiring committees, the members follow the 1-hour obligatory EDI and bias training and then go about business as usual, continuing with existing systems that may be less than inclusive; and to avoid overt discrimination, we’re not allowed to ask about the characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability) that we are supposed to be working to be more inclusive of within our institutions… so we use our imperfect and potentially biased judgment.

Looking at this situation with a systems perspective helps us understand these responses as part of complex power dynamics between different actors trying to impose/resist changes to institutional culture. But because the relations are forceful and not collaborative, and there isn’t dialogue or real awareness of the diverse interests at stake, resistance will quickly build regardless of the underlying good intent of EDI or the ethical principles that may be shared by many in the institution.

Instead of tearing down walls between groups to increase inclusion, EDI as currently implemented contributes to building new walls that reinforce existing stereotypes, prejudices and power dynamics: “You only got this [job, promotion, grant, award] because you’re the [X category] that they were looking for this year; you didn’t get it based on merit.”

Changing Culture… the Hard Way

The bureaucratic implementation of EDI cuts the legs out from under what is an ethically critical process to change our institutional functioning, to dismantle the “Old Boys Club” culture, and to create organizations that are inclusive and representative of the diversity of our populations, where all are welcome.

A different and more organic approach, I suggest, can be seen in the following examples.

I’m president of the EDI and Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) committee at the Institute of Nutrition and Functional Foods (INAF) at the Université Laval. Our approach, from the start, has been one of raising awareness among members of the INAF by organizing activities that build sensitivity in ways that are non-confrontational. We conducted surveys to solicit feedback on concerns and best practices. We began compiling case studies that showcase EDI as a way to think about challenges experienced in teams (e.g., recruiting practices, work-life balance, negotiating competing interests), and to imagine appropriate, pragmatic solutions that are anchored in dialogue, active listening, and compromise. In November 2023, we organized a dynamic training session where I guided discussions with 40+ participants about work-life balance, institutional culture, cognitive biases, EDI, and power dynamics. These were interwoven as part of a spectrum of interconnected micro-, meso- and macro-level issues, which I talked about in a systems context that got us thinking pragmatically about the levels at, and means by which, we can intervene to work for positive change.

For example, one way to change team culture is to organise regular meetings (a micro-level intervention) to discuss ongoing projects and also explore potentially sensitive issues before they become problematic (e.g., hiring personnel or recruiting students based primarily on explicit EDI criteria instead of competencies or fit with the needs of the team). But to be effective, these meetings require that all members be willing to listen, to speak, and to do so in an interested but non-confrontational manner. And that means creating an environment where there is trust that all points of view will be heard, something that may be no easy feat in units that have a history of being very top-down, or where junior members (students, professionals) are dependent on the lead researcher for their continued salary support (and so may not feel free to express concerns).

Another tool is mobilizing allies (e.g., junior and senior colleagues, administrators) to lobby for and implement policy or institutional change (a meso-level intervention) regarding work-life balance, so that the institutional environment becomes more inclusive of and responsive to the particular needs of parents (e.g., to accommodate daycare or school schedules and holidays), or caregivers (e.g., availability for family members with health issues or disabilities), or people with mobility limitations (e.g., work-from-home). Such changes can start micro, e.g., with parents of young children declining to participate in meetings or teach outside 9-to-5 work hours, then translate into informal or formal policies that set explicit limits on working hours. Done well, such policies would create universal norms around work-life balance so that everyone benefits; and it would ensure that it's not only the single employees without caregiving responsibilities who have to pick-up the slack when other members are absent. So EDI also means taking into consideration the different interests of members, respecting their choices and commitments, and equitably sharing workplace responsibilities.

Obviously, we also need to have policies that outline clear expectations regarding appropriate behaviour on the part of members of our organizations that promote EDI; and in complement, discrimination, racism, sexism, etc., are unacceptable and such behaviour must be strongly condemned and the perpetrators disciplined. We need to implement procedures and training that support best practices in RCR and EDI that help members become cognizant of their implicit biases so that they can prevent or mitigate the associated negative consequences. The problem, however, is that much EDI training is superficial at best; often in the form of obligatory online courses, it may provide little practical guidance, not address the difficult issues that need addressing, or worse yet, assume that people are ignorant or even against EDI. Not surprisingly, people will run through such training as quickly as possible to be able to "tick the box" and get on to what that actually have to do.

So, we must be extremely wary of the naive bureaucratic implementation of EDI (and RCR) policies that ignore the meso- and macro-level systemic problems that are both the root cause of discrimination and the levers for positive change. Specifically, many such policies (and practices) assume that the problems with EDI can be dealt with locally, at the unit or department level (micro), when in fact the causes are macro-level. If we really want our institutions to be inclusive and reflect the diversity of our population, we need to do our EDI work elsewhere. This works should start by reforming (funding, improving) our public school system (primary and secondary) so that children of all stripes receive quality education and can succeed in their aspirations, including for some, going to university and pursing professional or academic careers.

What we currently have in Canada, instead, is a bureaucratic culture that incentivises institutions to impose quotas, to count how many people/teams/grants include members from categories X, Y, and Z. The problem with this is that the people with these categories are likely not in the institution nor even in the workforce in sufficient numbers to meet current demand. So, the few there are will then be subject to "head-hunting" by other departments or institutions to fill EDI quotas. When hired, these people are invariably instrumentalized as the EDI-category service person to sit on numerous committees, instead of just doing the job for which they were supposedly hired – placed in a box and limited to being the representative of a visible category, they cannot simply be "a good colleague".

Summary

If we want to promote EDI as something meaningful and not just bureaucratic requirements to which we give lip service, then education and awareness raising are key, starting with real dialogue that involves all stakeholders, at all levels of society and across institutions and organizations. It means focusing on what's important for individuals and groups by recognizing and accepting as legitimate their diverse (and potentially conflicting) interests. It means promoting and rewarding institutional environments that demonstrate through practice, and not only words, that they are welcoming to a diversity of people with different competencies, and that these are mobilized in ways that are productive, respectful and mutually beneficial.

Our institutions must recognize and address past wrongs that have marginalized or excluded certain groups. But we have to get out of a zero sum game mindset where if someone benefits it means that someone else necessarily loses, where our systems promote equity and inclusion but at the expense of others. This means doing the hard work of building structures that are actually inclusive, that listen to and accept many different voices in active dialogue and debate, so that diversity becomes a value-added and not simply an imposition. And it means addressing issues of EDI at the right level, not expecting micro-level responses to what are in fact meso- or macro-level problems.

Change is hard and takes time. But it can be done if we have the will and the patience to imagine and then co-create cultures in our institutions – and societies – that are more inclusive, more diverse, and more just.

I'm Offended!

Because an issue is sensitive doesn't mean it shouldn't be discussed

Bryn Williams-Jones, Gabrielle Joni Verreault, Valentin Kravtchenko
Apr 9, 2024

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Photo by David Birozy on Unsplash

Summary

Sensitive topics discussed in the media or the university classroom are now frequently preceded by trigger warnings. While this can be an appropriate starting point for a discussion of disturbing topics (e.g., the causes and consequences of abuse, systemic discrimination, or war), it should not lead to a glossing over of the issue to avoid affronting sensibilities. The horrific nature of such situations is something we should actively witness; we should be disturbed and outraged by injustice, and hopefully this will move us to action.

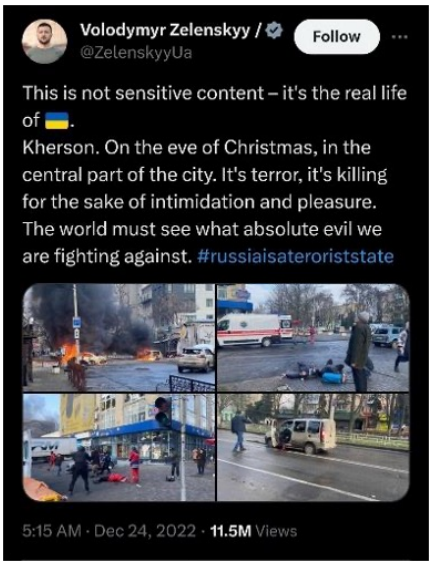
It is now common in the mainstream media to precede news reports (TV, radio, Internet) of war, abuse, or discrimination with "trigger warnings" about the "sensitive" nature of the content to be presented. Similarly, we're also increasingly hearing about university professors feeling that they have to use trigger warnings in their classrooms to prepare students to address a particular topic that might make some feel uncomfortable, or even be considered offensive.

Histories of sexism or racism or homophobia, details on the causes and consequences of wars, the systematized discrimination against visible minorities or Indigenous peoples, or the factors that contributed to organized policies of ethnic cleansing and genocide are all topics that destabilize. So too are questions about the responsibility (whose?) to acknowledge (how?) and redress these and other historical injustices (which? in what form?).

It's understandable that these and other topics may make people feel uncomfortable or destabilize their world views. And for those who have lived through the experience being discussed, to be confronted with a news story or to learn in a classroom the details of a tragic situation, analysed from an academic perspective, when it's also intimately personal, could open old wounds and be (re)traumatizing. A professor can give a course on rape because it's necessary, even if she or he has never experienced rape, but it's rarely the professor who's uncomfortable with the subject that they're talking about – the subject is not sensitive for them but may be for some of their students.

But this does not mean that everyone will be similarly affected, nor that the discussion of these topics or situations should be "watered down" or avoided to prevent offence. There's a learning method called the "pedagogy of discomfort" where it's not just the students who feel uncomfortable, but also the professor who, for example, may share personal lived experiences of injustice to help students empathise and break down biases about "the other". Instead of a focus on "safe spaces", the intention is to co-create "learning spaces" that push students outside their comfort zones and, in the process, empower them with tools for critical engagement and action.

Life is not fair. Discrimination, violence, abuse, war, famine, etc., are all part of the human experience. The horrible and unjust nature of such situations is something that we should actively witness, something that should disturb and outrage us because their very nature is so horrible.



On Christmas Eve 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who is very active on X/Twitter, shared the blurred pictures of bloodied corpses of citizens of Kherson, victims of a massive attack by the Russian Federation. He made a point to mention the nature of the violent images in his comment: “this is not sensitive content, it’s the real life of Ukraine.” For President Zelenskyy, making people uncomfortable and confronting them with the violent daily life of Ukrainians is critical.

In our digital and interconnected world, staying relevant is an algorithmic fight. From a political perspective, this and many other social media posts by President Zelenskyy have been an important and humbling reminder of how in North America we have forgotten the horrors of war because we have not experienced it on our territories. And unlike Europeans, and frankly the rest of the world for that matter, North Americans do not live with the daily risk and fear of terrorist attacks. To go even further, in Canada we feel isolated from these and other global problems (our refugee crises are minor compared to that of the US or Europe).

Active conflict or human tragedies caused by economic or natural disasters have become something that happens “over there”, in other countries, and so is “not our problem” – there is too much an “out of sight, out of mind” discourse in our media and public space.

A brilliant communicator with a phenomenal media team, President Zelenskyy has been especially adept at showing the world the visceral reality of what is going on in his country. He systematically reminds us that Ukraine has been subject to an illegal invasion by a neighbouring country, one that has led to the deaths of tens of thousands of soldiers and civilians, and the destruction of cities and the displacement of millions of people. And there have been numerous well-document war crimes committed on Ukrainian soil, part of a strategic campaign by a country with imperialist ambitions to terrorize into submission the population of a sovereign nation.

The goal of President Zelenskyy’s frank media engagement, and his sharing of both Ukrainian successes as well as the disturbing and all too frequent stories of civilians being killed in missile strikes, is to convince the global community to continue to care about Ukraine, and to be outraged by the heinous acts being committed by Russia. In so doing, the hope is that an emotional reaction will mobilize citizens (and decision-makers) of other nations to lobby their governments to provide sustained military and humanitarian aid, to apply every means necessary to enable Ukraine to free itself from the invader.

Emotion is an important driver for learning, engagement, and civil and political action. But emotion – such as a visceral reaction to atrocities or injustices – can also be a source of bias that leads to a simplistic view of a complex situation, if is not complemented but critical analysis.

In both the media and the university, sensitive topics and their associated language must be carefully named, studied, critiqued, contextualized and put into relation with other ideas. Students and the general public need to be educated and empowered to tackle difficult topics, to understand that life is not fair, and that situations are rarely “black or white” with “Good guys and Bad guys”. This acceptance of the complexity or “messiness” of life is essential to understanding; only then can the old adage that “knowledge is power” manifest itself in collective action and social change.

Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

When the media dances around difficult topics, does not treat them in-depth, or presents one-sided perspectives because they do not want to offend a certain group or because they are advancing a particular ideology or political agenda, it does our societies a disservice – the media fails in its mission to inform, to challenge and to empower. To be active members of democracies instead of passive bystanders, people must know about the often-harsh realities of the world in which they live, and they must be supported in finding ways to respond to these realities.

Similarly, when the university is no longer a space that encourages and protects critical research and rational and even forceful debate about sensitive topics, whatever they may be, then it fails in its social mandate of knowledge production (a public good). It also fails in its mission to educate the population and promote a citizenry with the knowledge and critical skills needed to challenge established norms or the arguments of those in power who have vested interests in not addressing injustices.

If sensitive topics are avoided or worse yet prohibited from discussion and analysis because they offend certain sensibilities, then we run the risk of forgetting or minimizing the underlying causal factors that lead to horrible acts and situations.

If we hide from the dark truths of humanity, then we ignore the lived realities of those who are victims of conflict or systemic discrimination, or other injustices.

If we lack the necessary understanding of the complex causes (social, political, economic, cultural) of heinous acts, we will be unable to identify and militate for the implementation of possible solutions, and we will be more likely to repeat instead of avoid the mistakes of the past.

If we pretend that bad things do not exist, if we do not want to hear about their details because they make us feel uncomfortable, how can we fight them? Our outrage becomes a toothless tiger, and we are dis-empowered.

In a hyperconnected and globalized world, we are seeing, on the one hand, people demanding to be shielded from everything that may disturb, and on the other, an equally unreasonable group that takes pleasure in pushing issues to the extreme to provoke strong reactions, actions often defended in the name of freedom of speech. Not to mention that most of us, drowned in images of violence and injustice since birth, may be substantially desensitised to what we see unless we are directly involved. So while we must, as individuals and communities, be strong enough to endure the world's rigours (i.e., not be thin-skinned), we must also be empathetic towards others, and to the measure possible, ensure that our actions and words do no harm. But that does not mean that we should self-censor or avoid addressing potentially offensive topics. We do no one a service by refusing to confront that which is unpleasant or unjust.

Growth often comes with the discomfort of challenging conversations. Just as in medicine, where the principle of non-maleficence allows for temporary discomfort in the service of healing, so too must our dialogues embrace discomfort when it pushes us to do and to be better. A society that never questions, that is never discomforted, risks the greatest discomfort of all: losing touch with the very fabric of what makes us human and brings us together in community.

Sensitive topics must be treated by the media and academia with the care that they are due, recognizing that the presentation of these issues can and will destabilize. A trigger warning might be an appropriate starting point to such a discussion, but it should not lead to a glossing over of issues to avoid affronting certain sensibilities. Instead, it must be followed with nuanced information and critical engagement with the topic that empowers the audience to be actors for change, and not simply passive but angry bystanders to injustice.

Spaces to Think Differently

Universities must be places for experimentation, not conformity

Bryn Williams-Jones, Gabrielle Joni Verreault, Valentin Kravtchenko
Jun 11, 2024

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Photo by Azzedine Rouichi on Unsplash

Summary

The university should be a bastion for socially important conversations about issues that affect us all. But this cannot be done by enclosing discussions into ever-smaller identity groups, each providing a “safe space” but one that is isolated. For the university to function, it must be an open and able to promote critical analysis and the respectful (even forceful) exchange of ideas – we need to take down the fences and liberate the knowledge commons.

The university is an incredibly stimulating environment, full of smart people interested in sharing ideas and having them challenged, and in doing rigorous research that is tested through individual reflections and collective critique. Educators get to share their research and experience, and in turn, students share their interests and preoccupations, part of a dynamic cycle of learning and knowledge production.

As educators, we have the incredible privilege, but also the responsibility, to help our students question their preconceived notions about facts and values, about right and wrong, and the why and how of each. We get to experiment, to push, and to challenge our students so that they acquire knowledge, methodological skills and critical analytic abilities. In so doing, we train students to contribute to, amongst other things, research that advances knowledge and which can then be translated into the public space. In the process, we (hopefully) enable our students to become engaged citizens, ready to take on their civic responsibility to work towards making the world a better place.

But this space for a critical and dynamic exchange of ideas is in danger.

As previously discussed regarding the management of sensitive topics in the classroom, and bureaucratized initiatives that seek to promote equity, diversity and inclusion or research ethics, we’re seeing universities in North America and Europe bowing before pressures (whether internal or external) to modify and censure certain forms of discourse that may be considered politically incorrect or even offensive to some. In parallel, we are seeing self-censorship on the part of professors who no longer feel safe teaching certain topics because they may reasonably fear offending a vocal (and militant) minority, which can then lead to personal attacks and harassment, or even reprimands by the institution following allegations of misconduct.

As individuals, we navigate a complex digital landscape, and we find ourselves in echo chambers, isolated within walls that grow ever thicker with time. These spaces – whether physical or virtual – were initially meant to be havens for those who are like-minded to be able to think and share a love for a subject or cause, and also to be free from discrimination. However, these spaces frequently unite people around what they hate instead of what they love, excluding those who think differently, thus further magnifying divisions while obscuring any place for common ground.

Instead of creating equity by recognizing and accommodating individual difference, and supporting that difference so that each can flourish, we’re creating spaces that reinforce inequity, and replace diversity and inclusion with isolation and intolerance. In the name of making people feel safe, we’re creating environments where no one is safe for fear that a colleague or fellow student will take offence. And when everyone is in their corner, in their safe space, then there is no longer any dialogue, there is no community, there is no university.

In a world increasingly dominated by identity politics and polarized language, it’s critical that universities continue to assume their responsibility of being institutions of higher learning, bastions for critical reflection, and a bulwark against populism and intolerance – the university must be a space to think dangerous thoughts.

It is thus very disturbing to see that some students (and fellow citizens) have very thin skins, that they cannot accept criticism in the context of animated but respectful debate. Even worse is where students become offended by concepts, ideas, or words, and then with self-righteous indignation declaim their right “not to be offended” and to “cancel” opposing views. These students do not want to have their worldview destabilized, to be pushed out of their protective bubble, and many will mobilize politically to have this bubble protected, at all costs.

In a must-read compilation of articles, the Harvard Business Review dedicated an article to the topic of outrage and how it should be managed. The author, Karthik Ramanna, notes three main causes of outrage: “(1) Many people feel unhopeful about the future; (2) many feel, rightly or wrongly, that the game has been rigged against them; and (3) many are being drawn toward ideologies that legitimize an us-versus-them approach”. The response, Ramanna argues, comes from 1) Turning down the temperature, 2) Analyzing the outrage, and 3) Shaping and bounding responses.

The goal of any learning environment should be to push students outside their comfort zone or bubble. To be meaningfully addressed, sensitive topics should be grappled with, questioned, and owned – only then can they lead to knowledge and a possibility for action (e.g., social or political change). Nonetheless, when the topic is sensitive and likely to make some people very uncomfortable – because of their personal lived experiences, for example – the accompanying precautions will need to be proportionately greater and adapted to different audiences in order to mitigate risks of harm.

Much like laboratories provide safe and regulated environments to recreate dangerous parameters and experiment with hazardous reactions, sensitive topics and divergent opinions can and must be discussed within the walls of the university. With their different tools, protocols and infrastructure to ensure safety, universities can provide the necessary guidance and promote critical thinking skills among all their members (i.e., students, staff, professors) so that together the university community can respectfully engage with and share their perspectives on diverse topics of social or political importance.

Ideally, students and professors will find common ground to think together, but they should also be able to respectfully agree to disagree. In either case, there should be space for everyone involved in the discussion to grow, accepting that it’s more important to understand each other than to “be right”. And much like in a lab, equipment and security protocols are only part of solutions to keep everyone safe. Each member of the institution also has a personal responsibility for their own safety (i.e., to be reflexive about their own triggers, and to manage them), but also to contribute to a safe environment for their colleagues (i.e., being open and willing to listen to the differences and experiences of others). Safety cannot be relegated to authority figures or policy.

Academic institutions pride themselves on being places of knowledge production and learning, where liberty of expression goes hand-in-hand with critical debate. The university must continue to aspire to providing an intellectual space where students from wildly different backgrounds and worldviews can be exposed to diverse thoughts and perspectives. Of course, tools to guide such conversations must be adapted for each class, level of learning, and expected educational outcomes. And it is important to tread carefully, since we cannot expect all educators to be appropriately equipped to navigate all topics with a new group of students, who they may not know well, especially if the topics are sensitive in nature (whether for some or many).

Despite all precautions, discussions about sensitive issues or topics cannot and should not be easy. Nor should they be framed as one where there is a “right” or “wrong”, a winner or loser; the causes, consequences and responsibilities of the stakeholders involved are invariably complex and multifaceted. The university is and should remain a “safe space” to have socially important conversations and debates; but this space must not be segregated or sectarian – it must be open and inclusive, and continually recreate an environment that welcomes and promotes critical analysis, and thus knowledge production.

The Globe-Trotting Academic

A privilege that shouldn't be taken for granted

Bryn Williams-Jones
Sept 10, 2024

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Summary

It's easy to take for granted the facility with which academics can travel. Conferences, workshops, committees, and fieldwork all provide opportunities (very often with expenses paid) to network and build our careers, with the added benefit of combining work and pleasure (tourism, visiting family and friends). Yet, the costs in terms of time, energy and environmental impact are not negligible. And professional relationships and friendships, once begun, require investment to maintain. Recognize the privilege of academic travel and use it responsibly.

Photo by Timo Stern on Unsplash

As professors, travelling is frequently part of the job. Whether it's to attend academic conferences, do fieldwork, or participate in meetings of scientific or policy committees, these professional activities can take us to different cities or even to different parts of the world. While we're travelling, we also have the chance to socialize with colleagues, to explore new cities and so do a little tourism. And this travel will most often be paid off our grants or be covered by the host of the event to which we've been invited.

It's easy to take such travel for granted and not recognize that we're incredibly privileged. Most people don't travel nearly as frequently, and they certainly cannot expect to have their expenses covered. So it's important to think about how and why we travel, and what this means for the colleagues we meet, for our own careers and also for the environment, given the significant carbon footprint of flying.

This privilege of academic travel reality hit me while I was a PhD student in Vancouver in the late 1990s. I had been chatting about my work and life experiences with the owner of the café where I wrote most of my thesis, and I'd mentioned that I'd recently been to a meeting in Ottawa and was then off again to a conference in Winnipeg. By contrast, he'd rarely left Vancouver and was surprised at all the travelling I was able to do, especially as I was still a student.

I've been travelling internationally since I was very young due to my father being a university professor and having sabbaticals every 6 years. As a young child, I had the chance to visit Europe and parts of Africa and Latin America, and then as a teenager spent a year travelling through Asia and Australasia. At 79, my father continues to travel extensively every year for his research and to present at conferences, both nationally and internationally.

For academics with family and friends in another city/country, a professional trip can be an effective means to combine work and pleasure. Participating at an academic event is the focus, but one that also allows some offsetting of the costs of a vacation for oneself and any accompanying family members. However, I've also heard of numerous cases where conference participation was simply an excuse for academic tourism and a way to justify the use of research funds for non-professional activities. The venue was chosen because it allowed the person to visit a nice city or spend time with family or friends – their conference participation was limited to giving a single presentation, and they were otherwise absent. This is clearly an inappropriate use of research funds and constitutes academic misconduct. Unfortunately, it's also likely one of the reasons that university financial services have become so demanding (and overtly mistrustful) about the reimbursement of travel expenses, even when most often these are completely legitimate.

While I'm not nearly such an active academic traveller as my father, in the past 25 years, conferences, workshops or meetings have taken me to most of the major cities in Canada, as well as to the US, the UK, Belgium, Ireland, France, South Korea, and China. In the process, I built a national and international reputation, something that clearly had a direct impact on my career progression – the benefits of academic travel are also reputational, building visibility, creating new opportunities and augmenting one's professional status.

I'm not someone who enjoys travelling because I can never sleep on the plane and deal badly with jet lag, nor as a senior professor do I still need these opportunities for career progression. Where possible, I help my students obtain the necessary travel funds to attend national and international workshops and conferences, because these opportunities will be directly beneficial for their academic progress and professional careers. I also don't like being a solo-tourist, so I never add on vacation time to a professional trip; but I still appreciate the chance to explore new parts of the world, to join my hosts in visiting their cities and, in the process, learn a bit about their culture and history.

This past year, in February I went to Munich, Germany, for three days of meetings with Michael Ingrisch's data science group, to talk about AI ethics and data governance; two of the group's postdocs (Kathi Jeblick and Balthasar Schachtner) and a PhD student (Johanna Topalis) later visited Montreal, and it was a pleasure to in turn be the host, taking them to nice restaurants, facilitating introductions to interesting colleagues and helping identify areas for research collaborations. Visits like this are about exchanging ideas, making contacts and exploring opportunities – and frequently they allow us to build lasting friendships.

In early June, I spent 10 days in beautiful Florianopolis, Brazil, working with my friend and colleague Fernando Hellmann on a range of projects in research ethics and scientific integrity. I was introduced to some amazing Brazilian colleagues working in bioethics and public health (a shout-out to Marta Verdi and Mirelle Finkler of the Núcleo de Pesquisa e Extensão em Bioética e Saúde Coletiva). We talked about the similarities and differences between bioethics education, research and practice in Canada and Brazil, and we explored the potential for student exchanges. We also talked about publication opportunities, notably through the CJB/RCB, as our journal is keen to further internationalize our contributors and audience; we're planning a joint special issue with a Brazilian bioethics journal to showcase Latin American approaches to research ethics.

During my stay in Brazil, I had the pleasure of giving two formal talks, presenting and answering questions in English with the aid of a translator provided by my hosts. I surprised myself (and my hosts) by not needing translation to understand the audience questions – I was able to identify the key points in each question and respond appropriately. I'd lived in Brazil for two years as a young child and had been fluent in Portuguese, although I'd largely forgotten it; later, I'd learned a bit of Spanish and I'm fluent in French. This background in the Romance languages helped me enormously in navigating a vastly different linguistic context from that which I'm used to, even if I still relied heavily on my hosts for support.

On these two trips, I didn't experience language as an insurmountable barrier because my hosts spoke English, even if at times it was a challenge when I was trying to order dinner in German (thankfully I'd learned a bit of the language as a teenager) or participating in dinner conversations in Brazil in a mix of Italian, Spanish and Portuguese; DeepL, with its excellent text and image translation abilities, was my saviour!

I found being a linguistic minority and incompetent in the dominant language to be an incredibly humbling and stimulating experience, as it once again put me in the role of student instead of expert. Being able to share a few words in my hosts' native tongue, even if only to be polite, was also a means of showing an interest for their culture and a way to step outside the all-too-dominant Anglo-American worldview, to recognize that colleagues in different countries may live and think very differently. Further, this helped me to understand the lived realities of colleagues with working conditions, priorities, and challenges that were very different from my own.

These recent experiences highlighted for me the importance of not taking hospitality for granted. As a senior professor who is now frequently invited to travel (and so my expenses are covered by others), it's all too easy to fall into the trap of over-estimating my own importance and so acting the arrogant professor, expecting the hosts to be at my beck and call. It's fair to say that the hosts of academic visitors are invariably generous and attentive to our needs and are focused on ensuring that we have a rewarding stay. It's thus important that we reciprocate, that the benefits of the visit be mutual.

During my visits to Germany and Brazil, I had the opportunity and privilege to mentor junior and senior colleagues, to share my experiences in academia (including many of the lessons I've shared in this blog), and to coach them in asking and answering the questions that were meaningful for them. For the German postdocs – Kathi, Balthasar and Andreas – these discussions turned around issues of scientific publication (how to be innovative and productive), project management (evaluating multiple opportunities) and career progression (including potential non-academic careers). With my Brazilian colleague Fernando, I leveraged my knowledge of Canadian research ethics governance structures, as well as my experience in knowledge transfer and working with decision makers, to help him prepare for an important meeting with the Brazilian government where he proposed an innovative research ethics governance framework for the country.

In both cases, spending time with my hosts and their teams, sharing my experiences, and helping them with their respective projects was a way to reciprocate their incredible generosity and hospitality.

An important benefit and pleasure of academic travel – whether for lengthy research visits or fieldwork, or to attend week-long academic conferences – is renewing with old friends and making new ones. Whether it was walking and talking with my German and Brazilian colleagues, or socializing over food and drink, we had stimulating conversations that flowed freely across a wide range of topics, with shared interests emerging and new opportunities identified that I'm certain will lay the groundwork for future collaborations. This in-person experience of spending time together is what builds lasting friendships, something that can be complemented but not replaced by virtual exchanges.

Nonetheless, it takes time and energy to maintain relationships with distant colleagues who we may only see every few years. Travel is costly in terms of both money (often drawn from limited research funds) and time away from work and family, so the cost-benefit of any travel must be carefully evaluated. In addition, sensitivity to the environmental impact of air travel – and the facility of videoconferencing – has led many academics to more carefully choose when and where they travel (and to purchase carbon offsetting, now a legitimate travel expense), focusing on fewer but more rewarding in-person visits.

Academic travel is a privilege because it allows us to visit and explore different parts of the world, to identify opportunities and establish an international reputation, and to build professional relationships that are anchored in lasting friendships. And it also allows us to reciprocate the hospitality we are offered when travelling, and to in turn host colleagues when they visit us – I'm desirous to again welcome my German and Brazilian colleagues to Montreal!

Recognize the privilege that is academic travel and use it responsibly.

Accommodating Student Difference

Students (and their professors) need support to help overcome their challenges

Bryn Williams-Jones
Jan 28, 2025

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Photo by Mulyadi on Unsplash

Summary

Supporting students with difficulties that may impede their learning is critical to equity, and thankfully normal in universities. The problem is that demands for accommodation far outstrip the availability of services. Professors are left to deal with a volume and diversity of requests that surpasses their abilities. We need to rethink what support to offer, to who and by whom.

In the 1990s, when I was doing my undergraduate and then graduate degrees, support services for students with various physical or learning disabilities were few, and even when they existed, they were under-resourced and poorly advertised. Thankfully those days are in the past. In our schools, colleges, and universities, we now have specialized services to accommodate students' various learning difficulties to ensure more equitable access to education. And with the normalisation of individual differences, those students with a learning difficulty or visible handicap are much less likely to face social exclusion or intimidation from fellow students, or derision from educators – both of which I experienced when I was young.

The intervening decades have led to enormous improvements that have undoubtedly contributed to making our schools and universities more inclusive and supportive learning environments. For example, students with mobility challenges or visual impairments can reasonably expect, even if they are a very small minority of the student body, that their needs will be addressed by institutions through changes to infrastructure so that learning environments become more inclusive. In my faculty, the washrooms in our building were recently made fully accessible (e.g., for wheelchair or baby stroller) through the installation of automatic doors. But this was only after many years of battling with the upper administration and the building owner, as we're in long-term rental space. While such structural changes to promote inclusion benefit everyone, their implementation may still be impeded by budget considerations or disagreements about who should pay.

Despite significant progress, support services are not always sufficient to meet a demand for support that seems to be growing exponentially, in the case of learning difficulties. Nor do these services always work in the way that they're intended. Specifically, there is a problem with what services or accommodations we provide and to whom, whether these are or can be adapted to particular teaching contexts, and who is responsible for ensuring their provision (most often the professor).

As someone who was severely dyslexic and hyperactive, but without the attention deficit aspects of ADHD, as well as aphantasic (I don't visualize), my schooling and then university studies were an incredibly challenging. I would have loved to have benefited from an extra 30-45 minutes to complete multiple choice exams (I was and still am slow at reading and evaluating different possible choices), or be allowed to use a computer to write my essays instead of being forced to write by hand (my handwriting is almost illegible, and for me, the static nature of pen and paper impedes my thinking).

I never even thought to ask my professors for accommodations; if such options were permitted, I was unaware. University was also supposed to be tough, intellectually demanding, and stressful, so I assumed that I had to figure out my own coping strategies and do the best I could, under the circumstances.

On one occasion, in a first-year undergraduate class, I remember doing an open book exam where we had to give a long-form answer to a question that we'd been given in advance, and we could use the support material of our choosing. I'd asked the professor if I could submit a printed essay instead as my handwriting was very poor, but he refused. So, I typed-up my essay in advance, printed it out, and during the exam recopied it by hand. A literal pain (in the wrist), this was both a huge waste of time for me and the professor, not to mention a pedagogical failure.

Thankfully, most of my subsequent courses did not have exams, which I detest because I also have horrible short and long-term memory, but instead involved written essays, thus allowing me to use my computer to think and write. It's not surprising that I gravitated towards the humanities and social sciences as their teaching and evaluation methods were better adapted to my way of thinking, as well as my coping strategies to deal with my dyslexia and aphantasia.

Students with "classic" learning difficulties or disabilities, such as dyslexia or dyspraxia, are more common in our university courses, likely because they're being identified while in primary or high school where they've received some support (but likely insufficient) to develop necessary coping strategies to succeed. To these difficulties are added an increasingly wide range of issues, often with different labels but which fit under the global category of "anxiety". We're seeing students who are stressed at the very idea of sitting an exam or submitting an essay, to the point that they have panic attacks and are unable to function; others can't cope with deadlines or work under pressure.

Our educational institutions have responded by providing different training and teaching tools to enable their teaching personnel to adapt pedagogical approaches to different audiences, who're frequently now viewed as "clients". In complement, student services have expanded and now support students in identifying their specific learning difficulties to facilitate accommodations, including access to adapted teaching and evaluation strategies.

There is now widespread awareness that students come with different ways of learning and lived experiences, each which bring their particular strengths and challenges. But in a context where it sometimes seems that every student has "special needs" and requires an accommodation, the resources will necessarily be insufficient and inequitably distributed, due in part to how institutional support services are structured.

For example, while there may be services to support professors in making their evaluations more inclusive or adapted to diverse audiences – e.g., training modules, example exams or other evaluations – these will frequently be buried somewhere on an institutional website. The onus is thus on professors to search for these resources, which given other priorities, will likely lead many to fall back on their existing and less than optimally-inclusive pedagogical strategies.

Further, at least at my university, student services are primarily focused on supporting students – they don't support professors to actually implement functional (and reasonable) changes to teaching approaches or evaluation modalities. Not being familiar with a professor's course, learning objectives, or other responsibilities (e.g., research, service), this can lead to student services telling students to ask for what are in practice unreasonable accommodations. Some examples I've heard of include requesting an extension until Dec. 23rd to submit a final essay (professors obviously don't need vacations), being asked to provide course notes and PowerPoint slides a week in advance of each course (which assumes that these notes and PPT exist or are easily ready in advance), or organizing a separate exam that is different from the rest of the class, and done alone in a different room, with a tutor to supervise (all in addition to the professor's existing responsibilities for the rest of the class).

The problem is that these accommodations were often decided upon without meaningful consultation with the professors concerned to see what was feasible; the assumption was that if the student requested an accommodation, and that they had a doctor's note and diagnosis (regardless of the nature), that the professor would necessarily adapt. To refuse was unthinkable.

During our 20+ years as university professors, my wife and I have each had numerous students, whether undergraduate or graduate, who lived with a wide range of serious learning difficulties or health challenges. These included sometimes debilitating pain due to migraines, autoimmune disorders, endometriosis, or chronic arthritis, or being on the autism spectrum or severely dyslexic, to name a few. For many of these students, their challenges were made all the more difficult by going undiagnosed for many years, and then having to wait through lengthy assessment processes before obtaining a diagnosis (a label) and then hopefully start receiving adapted care or support (see Mark's personal journey with ADHD, at The Curious Detour).

Remarkably, in our experience, these students either only requested minor accommodations (e.g., a short extension on a deadline) or categorically refused any special treatment. They not only “coped”, but they also managed to meet deadlines, do rigorous work, succeed in their courses and get good grades, obtain scholarships, publish, graduate and go on to rewarding professional or academic careers. That doesn’t mean that these students, or even others with less serious difficulties, should not be supported by the institution or sometimes provided accommodations to mitigate the challenges they face. The problem is that we seem to have normalized the expectation that any difficulty, regardless of its nature or severity, should be responded to via accommodations.

The frustration of professors, like my wife and I, is not with students who show that they’re making the effort, despite their life challenges – we’ll happily make whatever accommodations we can, because it’s only fair. We’ve been there, we know what it’s like to have to struggle without help, and so we help where we can. Where we have problems is 1) with students who do not seem to be willing to put in the hard work that is required to learn and instead demand accommodations because they’re anxious or stressed, and 2) with institutions that have normalized all difficulties or challenges (treating them as equal) and largely downloaded responsibility for accommodations to professors.

Life is hard, and it’s good to be stressed to a certain degree. It can help students learn to prioritize and get better at time management, and they might even “learn how to cope with stress to become less anxious”, and so develop the skills needed to better face life’s challenges. We also, however, need to ask why students are so stressed. What is it about contemporary society that leads them to not be able to cope with life’s challenges? Not all of these issues can be addressed by student services or professors, nor should they. Further, when everyone is in need of accommodations, then inevitably some who need it more than others will not receive what they need… and that’s also unfair.

What I’ve described here is a concordance of overlapping individual (student, professor) and institutional (organizational) problems, and competing interests. The response, I suggest, is to start by taking a step back and reflecting on what services and accommodations can and should be offered, to who and by whom.

What to do with the Obnoxious Colleague?

Managing interpersonal conflicts often requires diverse strategies

Bryn Williams-Jones
Feb 20, 2024

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Photo by Anne Nygård on Unsplash

Summary

In a professional context, we don't have to like our colleagues to be able to work together in a respectful manner. Sometimes, however, this collegiality is lacking and can lead to conflict. It's then important to actively manage the situation and not just hope it will go away – and there is no shame in asking for help.

Like many other large organizations, university departments and faculties bring together a diversity of people with different roles and responsibilities, each with their own histories, their particular (even peculiar) personalities, their preferences, etc. Obviously, not all of these people will get along with each other. In a professional context, we don't have to like our colleagues, nor do they have to be our friends; collegiality requires only that we work together in a respectful manner to achieve collective goals, with each carrying out their respective responsibilities. But sometimes this collegiality is lacking and can lead to smouldering dislikes or outright conflict. What, then, can you do when you have a colleague you dislike or even detest?

The types of interpersonal conflicts that arise, and their possible resolution strategies, will depend on your employment status and that of the person with whom you have a problematic relationship. If the two parties are at the same level and there is not a major power differential, it may be possible to have a direct and honest conversation; on the other hand, it may be more effective to simply ignore or avoid the person as much as possible. But when there is an important power differential, e.g., between a senior manager and administrative personnel, or between a professor and a lecturer or secretary, the approaches will necessarily be different, with the person in the less powerful position likely much less able to openly express their concerns due to fear of reprisal. They may find themselves having to significantly change their work practices to avoid interacting with the person who is making their life difficult, something that can take a toll on their enjoyment of work, and even on their mental health.

I would suggest that there are two general types of strategies that can be used: *personal* and *administrative*; the latter are often more costly for both individuals and the work environment, and so to be used after all reasonable personal approaches have been exhausted. Note that I'm excluding from consideration the more egregious cases that include harassment or other forms of overt abuse or violence that necessitate formal disciplinary measures (although these can obviously arise from unmanaged lower-level conflicts). Instead, here I focus on situations where there is interpersonal animosity that is not yet abusive, but which can still be very unpleasant to deal with and which can undermine one's workplace satisfaction and threaten the collegiality that is fundamental for having a respectful work environment.

Personal

In my career as a professor, I've had to work with colleagues – whether fellow professors or administrative personnel – who I disliked, and a few who I detested; and in other instances, I witnessed behaviour that spoke to a lack of professionalism that I naively did not expect in an institution of higher learning. And while I "could live with" these people because I had no choice, they were experiences that had an emotional impact, affecting my self-confidence and sometimes keeping me awake at night.

Professors are extremely independent and autonomous, and they work in a meritocratic environment that valorizes excellence; I discussed these individualistic tendencies in my post on the metaphors used to describe the professoriate. While a positive force for promoting knowledge production, this independence and focus on academic excellence can lead to a sense of entitlement and arrogance that undermines collegiality and cooperation. Similarly, I've encountered administrative staff who were arrogant, incompetent, lazy, or self-centred and not focused on helping create a respectful and high-quality work environment.

As a junior professor, I did not feel equipped or empowered to respond directly to these people and situations; I internalized my dislike and tried to avoid outright confrontation, but I recognize now that in many cases this was not the best approach. To help figure out how best to proceed when faced with a disagreeable colleague, I suggest asking the following questions:

- Have you tried different communication strategies, e.g., open questioning of the issue at stake or identification of the disagreement that is a source of tension (but in a neutral manner, and not personal), expressing your concerns and emotional response (what you feel, but without laying blame)?
- Could the tension be due to miscommunication or misinterpretation of the other's intentions? The person may act like a jerk, but this could be their personality (due to a lack of emotional intelligence) and not because of any personal dislike directed at you.
- Do you have to work closely with this person, or can you avoid them without it negatively affecting your own performance?
- Is there a work-around where you can accomplish your task and obtain the other person's input, but have this mediated by a third party so you don't have to interact with them directly?
- Are there colleagues who seem to be able to work effectively with this person, and to whom you can ask advice and solicit strategies on how best to manage relations?
- If you have to work with the person on a project, committee, etc., are there other colleagues always present so as to reduce the tension or risk of conflict?
- If the person is a bully, they will often only back down if you stand up and show that you don't accept their behaviour:
    - Are you at the same status level and so able to have a direct confrontation without a significant risk of reprisal?
    - Do you have allies, including more senior colleagues, who can intervene and help control the bully's behaviour?
- If you witness unprofessional behaviour addressed towards another colleague (at your level, or in a subordinate role), what strategies do you have to intervene? E.g., mediation, de-escalation, clarifying roles and responsibilities, pointing to expected norms of professional dialogue.
- Are you confident (and equipped) to stand up and politely but forcefully disagree? When needed, are you able to call out the other person for overstepping the bounds of decorum and expected collegial behaviour?
- Given the personality of the person you dislike (open to rational discourse or obstinate and inflexible) and the context of the situation (private or public), what are the costs and benefits of different personal strategies to you, to colleagues, to the team and the workplace?

Administrative

In industry or the public service where there is a clear hierarchy in a department or team, where there is a boss, managers and employees at different levels, the response to a personality conflict may be more evident. You can talk with your immediate superior to try and find a solution, e.g., through mediation, team discussions, or eventually changing the composition of a team to separate two colleagues who cannot work together.

A major difference, however, between the public or private sectors and a university department is the relatively flat hierarchy. As director, I am not "The Boss" of my fellow professors, even if some might jokingly refer to me as such. I never tell my colleagues what they should research, nor how to teach their courses nor which students to supervise; my power is limited to organizing course planning and attributing teaching responsibilities, and even this is negotiated. Like them, I too am a professor; I continue to teach, to conduct research, to publish and do outreach, even if most of my time is now invested in the administrative work that is my managerial responsibility. Similarly, the administrative personnel with whom I collaborate are not under my direct authority, even if I may ask them to accomplish certain tasks.

Nonetheless, as director, I'm someone to whom both academic and non-academic personnel can reach out for help in responding to an unpleasant situation, such as personality differences or difficulties with colleagues. Thankfully, I don't have to do this very often, but when I do, I leverage tools from mediation, conflict resolution, and procedure development that I learned as an ethicist, and which have served well to respond to most situations.

So, after you've exhausted your personal strategies for dealing with the obnoxious colleague, the next step is to talk with colleagues you trust, and eventually your director, to seek help. Very often, just having someone who knows all the parties involved listen to your grievance can be a positive intervention; and they might see the situation differently or have advice on how best to proceed, that can reduce tensions. And when needed, these colleagues can be called on to intervene and mediate, or even to mobilize additional resources from the institution (e.g., more senior managers, conflict resolution personnel).

Taking the issue to your director for mediation can, however, raise an interpersonal conflict to a level of formality which, even if kept confidential, can be seen as an escalation and so further inflame or entrench animosities. But sometimes that may be the cost to pay to be able to continue to work in the environment without being always on edge. In a healthy workplace, people should not have to self-censor nor avoid colleagues for fear of receiving negative comments, or worse, be subject to disrespectful behaviour that over time crosses the line into harassment.

Looking back on my own history, I wish I'd reached out for advice earlier to the many colleagues who I trusted, instead of trying to "tough it out" and resolve the situations by myself. In my experience, most colleagues are easy to get along with, as each is doing their best and contributing to a healthy and collegial workplace. But for those few colleagues where this is not possible, it's important to actively work to manage the situation.

There is no shame in asking for help to deal with someone you dislike.

Dealing with a Toxic Workplace

Whether it's a toxic colleague or environment, the responsibility is institutional

Bryn Williams-Jones
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Photo by Nikoli Afina on Unsplash

Summary

A toxic colleague or workplace is damaging to individuals and destructive to collegiality. It cannot be the responsibility of individual colleagues to address, instead requiring intervention by senior management. When this support is absent, leaving may be the only option. It takes courage to leave and to send a strong message that the environment has become unacceptably toxic.

In a workplace that has become toxic, it is reasonable to ask, as *The Clash* put so eloquently, Should I Stay or Should I Go? The answer to this question is clearly not easy – it requires deciding when the situation has transitioned from being unpleasant to unacceptable, along with a calculus of whether the costs of staying (e.g., to your mental health) outweigh the costs of leaving (e.g., to your career).

While we have seen much discussion of toxic work environments in the public and private sectors, it is also becoming a subject of discussion for those of us working in academia. A meritocratic environment, academia can encourage individualistic and even arrogant behaviour – especially but not exclusively on the part of professors – towards colleagues, students and administrative personnel. At its worse and over time, this can create a toxic workplace.

To be clear, we're talking here about workplace environments and professional relations that go far beyond the occasional obnoxious behaviour of a few colleagues (e.g., cynical or overly critical comments, gossip). While unpleasant, different types of intervention can be used to correct these behaviours or deescalate a conflict. It is thus possible to accept, for a time, such disrespectful and unprofessional behaviour, but only when it's sporadic and there's the reasonable expectation that it will not last and/or the situation will be remedied. The person or situation is disagreeable but not yet destructive and intolerable.

By contrast, a toxic workplace involves systematic and lasting misbehaviour on the part of colleagues and senior management that make the environment damaging to individuals and destructive to group cohesion, collegiality and good functioning. Such contexts can, for example, be marked by regular interpersonal conflict, aggressive leadership, micromanagement, excessive gossip, and a lack of professional or institutional support. Individuals will likely feel silenced and fearful of expressing their concerns to their superiors because these concerns will not be taken seriously, or the individuals reasonably fear reprisal. Instead of being corrected, in toxic environments, unprofessional behaviour is tolerated by senior management, not taken seriously or even encouraged.

A nuance that I would add is the distinction between a toxic *individual* in an environment that is relatively healthy – and where there's hope for the situation to be corrected – and a toxic *environment* that is generally dehumanizing and destructive to those who work there. I've experienced both the former and the latter on a few occasions during my academic career.

That I know of, I've not been the victim of sexism or racism or other forms of overt discrimination, but I have been the victim of harassment.

I vividly remember a period at the beginning of my career when, for about 6 months, I had a knot in my stomach every day at the idea of going to the office for fear of seeing a certain colleague with whom relations had completely degenerated. This person had impugned my integrity, circulated vicious rumours about me and other colleagues, and went from being a friend to an enemy; it got to the point that I was genuinely worried about our confrontations degenerating into physical violence.

With two other colleagues, the situation was more a slow burn of frustration at being on the receiving end of constant and systematic critique. No matter the subject or the situation, whenever I (or certain other colleagues) expressed a point of view or advanced a proposition, however minor, it was the subject of overt or thinly-veiled derision, as if the proposition was necessarily idiotic. Working with these colleagues was a constant struggle and every exchange a conflict.

In the first case, I went to my senior manager when the situation escalated to psychological harassment towards me and another colleague. The Human Resources (HR) department was mobilized and an investigation conducted, and the offending colleague was moved to another building to reduce the risk of confrontation, and he eventually left the university, thus ending the conflict.

In a second case, the systematic harassment lasted for many years until I finally lost my cool and confronted one of these colleagues. A bully, it took forcefully refusing to accept her unprofessional behaviour for her to back down. But I was far from the only victim of harassment by this person – she was systematically disrespectful and aggressive to all those around her (whether by email or in person), especially if the recipient of her aggression was viewed as being below her in the academic hierarchy. Unfortunately, her aggressive behaviour was tolerated by senior managers for many years, allowing enormous harm to be done to many colleagues, and to the institutional culture and reputation.

In a third case, the toxic colleague was a senior manager and thus immune to any intervention on my part or that of the HR department; these avenues were thus not even attempted, and the colleague's aggression continued until he retired. While the situation was resolved by "waiting him out", the result was that I was left with a long-lasting bitterness as well as distrust of other colleagues who viewed this person positively. How was it that they did not see the egregious behaviour towards me and others?

My experiences are not unique nor the most extreme – and thankfully, they've been relatively infrequent and sporadic, and they did not threaten my passion for and desire to continue in my chosen career in academia. If anything, these experiences were a motivator for my work to help build good governance mechanisms and to promote institutional cultures of ethics. Promoting a healthy and collegial environment (and preventing obnoxious or even toxic behaviour) is something that I consciously strive for in my department and faculty. And as director, I frequently re-evaluate situations (e.g., forceful discussions in our departmental meetings) to ask myself what I could have done differently or better to ensure respectful and collegial debate.

Unfortunately, I have heard many examples from colleagues in other departments and institutions where collegiality was absent and toxicity the norm.

In some cases, this involved workplaces where, for example, there was an enduring culture of open conflict. New colleagues were hired into competing camps separated along personal or ideological lines, some of which had lost their meaning ("Why don't like you like them?" – "I don't know, it's just the way it is"). These divisions were deeply seated and immutable, and they affected everyone in the department: professors, staff and students. Even if a newly hired colleague were able to stay neutral and above the fray, they were nonetheless forced to work in a context marked by continual infighting, mean-spirited gossip, and with an underlying tension that was emotionally and psychologically exhausting.

Left unchecked, toxic colleagues will poison the workplace for everyone. The fact that they are not dealt with appropriately by senior managers contributes to the legitimate perception that the workplace is toxic and one to avoid. This has a ripple effect, justifying in the minds of some colleagues (and students) the acceptability of unprofessional behaviour, thereby making the workplace tense, conflictual and demoralizing. And it destroys the reputation of the department, making it hard to recruit and retain personnel.

In such situations, fault lies not only with the aggressor, but also the senior managers who turn a blind eye to misbehaviour and/or lack the moral courage to confront an aggressor and implement appropriate sanctions and remediation measures. These managers are thus complicit in perpetuating toxic behaviour and encouraging a breakdown in collegiality. In more extreme cases, senior managers are themselves toxic (e.g., arrogant, micro-managerial, narcissistic), actively promoting negative behaviours, and so are directly responsible.

In my case, these situations have thankfully been the rare exception rather than the rule. I have also seen many examples of positive responses to problematic colleagues, with sustained and effective measures to transform what had become a toxic environment back into a professional and respectful workplace. But unlike dealing with an obnoxious colleague, where it may be possible to personally resolve the situation (although administrative support may also be needed), toxic individuals and workplaces require the direct and timely intervention of senior managers and HR departments.

Changing the culture of a workplace is hard: it takes time, energy, courage, and senior managers who are willing to use their authority and take hard decisions, and to mobilize their political capital to make needed but difficult changes to the institutional culture. Disciplinary measures will need to be taken against the more toxic colleagues, and some will have to be removed (or quietly pushed out). New leadership may be needed to do a “reset” that breaks a polarized environment in order to start rebuilding trust and collegiality.

These changes are predicated on there being a generally healthy and functional institutional culture, with appropriate mechanisms or structures present to help correct misbehaviour. Even more important, however, is the ability of senior managers to recognize when a behaviour is out of line or that a situation is becoming problematic, and to have the moral courage to take the appropriate measures to correct the situation.

To come back to the question at the start, staying or leaving are both reasonable options, depending on the gravity of the situation.

Standing up to denounce a toxic colleague or environment takes courage, because the personal and professional costs can be substantial. If there are senior managers willing to support you, then it makes sense to use these channels. Lacking such support, you can try to wait out the situation until the toxic person or senior managers leave (e.g., managers may have 4- or 5-year mandates), distancing yourself from the offending colleagues to protect your mental health. This is a reasonable strategy when there is still hope for a change in the institutional culture. At some point, however, waiting may become untenable.

Institutional leadership is required to correct a toxic situation, but that is not your responsibility. Walking away from an institution after all reasonable measures have been exhausted is a demonstration of professionalism – it takes courage to leave, and it sends a strong message to colleagues and senior management (and the broader academic community) that the environment has become unacceptably toxic.

There is no shame in leaving a sinking ship.

When Students and Professors Misbehave

Managing misconduct requires implementing good procedures

Bryn Williams-Jones
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Photo by Nik on Unsplash

Summary

Academic misconduct by students or professors occurs for a variety of personal and structural reasons. It's thus important to both understand the causes, so we can implement preventative measures, and to hold people accountable when they violate norms of integrity or research ethics. For justice to be served, management of misconduct requires individual, collective, and systemic efforts, and processes that are impartial. Where these processes still fail, however, is that justice is often not "seen" to be served, which can undermine trust in the process.

As an applied ethicist and a perennial optimist, though one who likes to think he's a realist and a pragmatist, much of my academic career has been involved with building policies and procedures, and in providing education and training to promote ethical behaviour and prevent misconduct. I firmly believe that people, by and large, will do good if given the opportunity. In my role as an ethicist and university professor, I am committed to encouraging, educating and supporting people in choosing to do what is ethical – and that means analysing situations and justifying why certain behaviours are acceptable or not.

But I'm not naive – I also know that some people will behave unethically, despite our best efforts to the contrary, and these people must be held responsible for their actions.

Misconduct by students or professors can occur for a variety of reasons, including self-interest and a blatant disregard for ethical norms or the interests of others. More frequently, I would suggest, this will be due to broader contextual factors or pressures (academic, social, political, financial, cultural, etc.) that lead people to make choices that they would not otherwise make. Such contributing factors do not excuse unethical behaviour, but their identification and evaluation can help us understand why this occurs so that we can then explore effective means for prevention or mitigation.

At the interface between the promotion of good behaviour and the prevention of misconduct, a particular focus of mine has been the identification and management of conflicts of interest. Whether it is helping people understand that conflicts of interest are endemic in academia and not misconduct unless they're ignored or mismanaged, or highlighting the importance of recognizing the problems for decision-making caused by implicit biases, a key message has been that if they're not treated as serious and addressed appropriately, conflicts of interest will be profoundly destructive, biasing decisions and thereby undermining trust in both individuals and institutions.

In my experience, many but not all of the situations that become cases of misconduct are linked to conflicts of interest of one form or another (e.g., personal, financial, institution). But I also fully acknowledge that this may be an "interest bias" on my part due to an over-attention and focus on conflicts of interest as opposed to other motivators, such as hubris, arrogance, or a sense of self-entitlement, amongst others.

Further, despite my conviction (bias?) in the power of education to inform and empower people to act ethically, I also recognize their limits. Not all people are amenable to or willing to be educated to behave according to professional or institutional regulations, or to follow broadly accepted academic norms of responsible conduct of research.

When people contravene these norms or regulations, disciplinary measures must be deployed to both punish the behaviour and to send a message to the individual and the community that such conduct is unacceptable. Individuals accused of misconduct must, however, benefit from a presumption of innocence; and the investigation and adjudication processes must (and be shown to) be independent and impartial, with utmost attention given to ensuring confidentiality.

Two structural examples of how misconduct can be addressed within academic (and other) institutions take the form of standing disciplinary committees when there is a sufficient volume of cases, and ad hoc committees to deal with individual and less frequent cases.

Standing Disciplinary Committees

My first experience with the institutional management of misconduct was early in my academic career, as a member of my faculty's plagiarism committee. By that point, I already had some experience with detecting plagiarism in my own courses, and via this committee, I learned about the procedural aspects of dealing with an allegation of misconduct. It also led me to participate in university-level initiatives to explore broader prevention strategies in the context of an updating of the graduate student regulations.

In the plagiarism committee, we often saw students who were either genuinely ignorant or at the very least good at faking it, or who were intentionally cheating and bad at hiding this. The blatant cases of plagiarism are, in my experience, easy to spot because they're committed by the weakest students and the cheating jumps out to the eye: change in font size, incoherent sentence or paragraph structure and a disjointed flow of ideas, or the embedded hyperlink from the Wikipedia page from which the text was copied, to name but a few.

As university professors, most of us are not experienced psychologists able to read with confidence a person's intentions. Nor are we criminal investigators trained to identify different types of circumstantial evidence that can lead to a convincing criminal case. What we can do, however, in a plagiarism committee is to clearly document situations of plagiarism or cheating with the close help of the professors who first detected the situation and submitted it for review. Our task was to focus on the facts but not to try to prove intention – the facts of the case, if sufficiently robust, justified a finding of misconduct for cheating.

To ensure natural justice and to avoid placing the educator in an untenable conflict of interest (e.g., being both judge and jury, and having to punish a student who might later take another course with them), the person who suspects plagiarism or cheating is only involved in documenting the case; they are not involved with its subsequent evaluation or any eventual punishments. That is, the educator limits their role to identifying the copied material and explaining the context of the evaluation (e.g., an individual essay, group assignment, written exam, thesis, manuscript), and then submits this for independent review by another instance, in our case, the plagiarism committee.

The other argument in favour of such a separation of responsibilities is pragmatic: if the bar for documenting cases of misconduct is set too high, the person responsible for submitting an accusation will not do so because it's simply too much work. This is especially true if they don't have the necessary detection tools (unfortunately the case at my university and many others), and a situation that has been made exponentially worse with the emergence of ChatGPT. I have had many colleagues tell me that they've given up on trying to detect plagiarism because of this innovation.

Another advantage of having a formal committee is that the experience of the members can be mobilized to support prevention activities. In our case, we saw repeated instances of students who were actually ignorant of the norms of academic writing. We thus developed a series of training modules to educate our students about best practices in scientific communication, including how to appropriately cite academic resources and how to best present ones' own ideas. This had the dual benefit of being both an accessible and positive prevention mechanism and a justification for the punishment of those who were likely ill-intentioned, because they could not plead ignorance.

Ad Hoc Disciplinary Committees

Allegations of misconduct regarding professors, research personnel or students in the context of breaches of research ethics or responsible conduct of research are often investigated by ad hoc committees. An initial evaluation will be done by other services (e.g., offices of responsible conduct of research, Vice-dean, VP human resources) to determine whether the allegation has merit and is receivable, that is, the allegation is credible, with supporting evidence. At this stage, an ad hoc committee is then formed.

Like with standing committees, there is strict attention to natural justice, to ensuring impartiality of the process and conducting a fair review of all the available evidence. Composed of 3 or 4 professors, these committees will have at least one member who is external to the institution to ensure the impartiality of the process. The committee will also be supported by senior administrators, to enable access to relevant documentation (e.g., reports, emails, contracts), and to receive the committee's report. Obviously, the process and all associated information is treated with utmost confidentiality.

To date, I've now participated in more than half a dozen such committees, both at my university as an internal member and as the external at other institutions. Most of these cases had to do with conflicts of interest (often but not exclusively financial), but with a few focused on issues of authorship (conflicts between profs and students). One in particular was memorable because it involved misconduct in research ethics (participant recruitment and lack of informed consent), abuse of power between a professor and student, personal and financial conflicts of interest related to a start-up company, unethical authorship, etc. It was literally the perfect storm of misconduct.

Our role as an ad hoc committee is to analyse the facts of the case, describe the nature of the alleged misconduct and to make a finding of whether the allegation is founded. Over a period of a few months, the committee meets to review the documentation supporting the allegation, followed by meetings with the different stakeholders involved, e.g., the people making the allegation, the person accused of misconduct, and other stakeholders who could clarify aspects of the situation. The committee also makes recommendations regarding pertinent sanctions or remedial measures for the individuals involved, but sometimes these are also systemic in nature, for the institution to implement to prevent other such instances from occurring. However, ad hoc committees are in no way empowered to carry out the application of any sanctions – that power belongs to the institution.

These experiences were all extremely interesting for me as an ethicist who is interested in responsible conduct of research and in the procedures used to address misconduct. In all of these cases, I have been impressed by the rigour of the ad hoc committees, the quality of the reviews we conducted, and the seriousness with which the process was handled by the university administrations.

But while I am convinced that the reports we produced where give all due attention by the administration, a weakness with this process is that we – the committee members, but also members of the institution – rarely learn what if any sanctions are applied to those who commit misconduct. Justice may be done, but it's rarely seen to be done, for reasons of protecting confidentiality.

In a few cases, I learned indirectly that part of the sanction was obligatory training because I was subsequently invited to give a session on the issue at stake – e.g., conflicts of interest – and saw the person found guilty of misconduct in the class; but what other measures may have been applied remain confidential. While this confidentiality is important in terms of ensuring that individuals are not disproportionately punished through public humiliation or destroying their reputation, something that can have a lasting impact, it does not necessarily inspire trust by the victims of misconduct or those who had the courage to denounce these acts.

Unfortunately, I've also on a few occasions been consulted by and supported people in denouncing misconduct which I then learned were stonewalled or marginalised by upper administrations – including up to the level of provincial and federal funding agencies – because the person alleged of engaging in misconduct was too important, that is, a star researcher, and thus untouchable. And to return to the "perfect storm" case I mentioned above, the person our committee found guilty of multiple and severe instances of misconduct – and who I esteemed should have been fired – was still an employee at the university. A few years after the case, I saw the person on TV talking about their important research; they were one of those people who were, unfortunately, untouchable.

These failures of the misconduct management system to treat all equally, and to ensure that justice is served and is shown to be served, undermine confidence in what I esteem to otherwise be a relatively well-functioning system of internal control.

Conclusion

People can and must be held responsible for their actions. To quote a friend from my PhD days, people have to “own their own shit” and be responsible for that for which they are responsible. This includes not only dealing with their own personal issues (and not expecting others to solve them for them), but also accepting the consequences of their actions, including when they step outside the bounds of acceptable personal or professional behaviour.

In learning environments such as universities, and for that matter, any system that seeks to reform and not simply punish, we should also include remediation measures for those individuals who misbehave (often in the form of obligatory training) to help them learn why and how they must behave in a way that meets expected norms. I would add, however, that in light of the contextual or structural factors that encourage misbehaviour, a systemic reflection is required by institutions and the broader academic community to clearly identify the structural factors that permit or even encourage misconduct, and the possible solutions to prevent such behaviour in the future.

Dealing with cases of misconduct and implementing prevention measures will always be an ongoing process, as institutions are organizations in continual change both due to the influx/out flow of their members, as well as changing social and political contexts. There will thus be an ongoing need for ethicists like me, as well as many other like-minded colleagues, who seek to promote a responsible academic culture within our institutions, so that collectively we can identify problematic situations and propose and implement practical solutions.

Misconduct can and must be addressed, and this requires an individual, collective, and systemic response.

Unfounded Accusations

The cost to relationships, careers and mental health can be substantial

Bryn Williams-Jones
Oct 22, 2024

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Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/33933

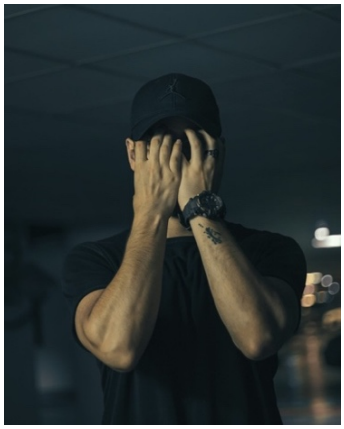

Photo by Mahdi Bafande on Unsplash

Summary

In any organization, disagreements can lead to conflict and even accusations of misconduct. These claims must be treated with due diligence, protecting confidentiality of all those involved. False claims, if spread, can severely damage reputations, careers, and mental health, as well as contributing to toxic environments. Personal and collective courage, supported by good policies and robust procedures, are needed to fairly address complaints and ensure that accusations are treated appropriately.

How as a member of an organization (e.g., student, professor or member of the administrative personnel) and as an institution should we deal with credible but unfounded complaints or accusations?

I'm thinking here of major differences of opinion or disagreements that can lead to accusations of professional negligence or even misconduct. These may have to do, for example, with expectations of the level of supervision and support provided in the writing or correction of a thesis or the drafting and submission of articles for publication (and the eventual ordering of authors); the timeliness with which certain activities will be conducted, and thus their (appropriate) priority; or the use of funds to pay for particular services or travel. These situations often, although not exclusively, turn on real or apparent conflicts of interest. And if they're not quickly addressed, they can be destructive to trust, collegiality and individual and institutional reputations.

But I'm also thinking of more extreme cases where allegations of harassment or misconduct are fabricated to discredit a person, whether student, professor or member of the administrative staff.

These situations clearly go well beyond the negative comments received in student evaluations, peer-reviews or annual performance evaluations because they may themselves constitute intimidation or harassment. The cases that I've witnessed, and those I've read in academic magazines like University Affairs, are disturbing for their nature, severity and impact… and because they were unfounded.

As a PhD student, one of my professors had been falsely accused of sexual harassment while working at a previous university, something that was both psychologically exhausting and demoralizing. Even though he was exonerated, a lingering stigma continued to pervade his department and faculty; he ultimately left for a position at another university where he could be free from this very unpleasant history.

In my discussions with this professor, and subsequently with my parents – I come from an academic family – I learned that as a young male professor I had to be very aware of the risk of accusations of sexual harassment from my students.

At the beginning of my career, I was often not much older than the graduate students in our program and under my supervision. Given our close working relationships, which ranged from 2 years for a masters to 5 years for a PhD, it's understandable that sometimes the borders between the professional and the personal might become blurry, that the friendly gesture could be misinterpreted as something more. To be clear, I've always had a very strong view about romantic relationships between professors and students: they're totally unacceptable. The conflicts of interest are unmanageable, the risk of abuse evident, and the harms to all those involved – in particular the student but also the professor, other students and the department/faculty – are far too grave.

So no, I've never been tempted by an "office romance". But I've also learned to take precautions to avoid misunderstandings or false accusations. Despite having a voice that carries, I would systematically hold individual student meetings with my door open. Once I married and had a child, I made sure to have family photos visible in my office. And I while regularly talked about my wife and son in conversations with my students, to share stories about life in academia and work-life balance, I was also intentional through implicit messaging that my openness and friendly nature had its limits, that these would never extend to romantic feelings for anyone but my wife. I sought to prevent possible misunderstandings and to mitigate the risk of false accusations.

When accusations are made regarding any form of misbehaviour, they must be treated with all due diligence and managed by the appropriate institutional process. Universities, like other large institutions, have human resources departments that can be mobilized to deal with severe conflicts when senior managers are unable to resolve matters. And they also have specific disciplinary committees to deal with issues such as plagiarism, harassment and misconduct.

Critical to the good functioning of these structures is a neutral investigatory process, the protection of confidentiality, and attention to natural justice; all parties involved should be heard, evidence presented and evaluated, and both the accuser and the accused treated fairly and have their rights respected. Other structures, such as an Ombudsman office or Complaints Commission can provide important means for members of an institution to have their complaints addressed, particularly when there are significant power differentials that might otherwise lead to institutional bias favouring some members, i.e., those in positions of authority.

For these structures to be trusted, they have to be rigorous and impartial and when accusations are determined to be founded, the institution must hold the accused accountable and implement appropriate disciplinary measures and not just pay lip service. If accusations are determined to be unfounded, the case is closed and the accused person exonerated. And the institution must be careful to ensure that confidentiality is maintained. If an accuser (or others) publicly spreads false rumours or insinuates that a person has behaved inappropriately, these acts should be treated as misconduct and be subject to disciplinary action.

In my experience, many accusations do not reach this level of disciplinary action. They're more low-level and thus can be more pernicious and difficult because not addressed within a formal administrative system with checks and balances.

As a professor, I had the disagreeable experience of being unfairly accused of lacking in integrity. These accusations on the part of toxic colleagues had a particularly nasty bite, like a bunch in the gut, because ethics and integrity are both part of my research expertise, as well as my personal and professional identities. Aside from defending myself and then avoiding these colleagues, there was not much I could do without provoking a serious escalation. I was also in a context where I lacked trustworthy senior managers to whom I could turn to for support. So, I protected myself and waited out these colleagues, who eventually left the faculty.

As director, I have been the point of contact for people coming to accuse certain professors, students or administrative staff of misconduct. Fortunately, I was able to resolve most of these situations at my level, without having to appeal to a formal disciplinary committee; but others I forwarded to the appropriate disciplinary mechanism within the university. Recourse to a formal disciplinary process brings with it substantial emotional and temporal costs for all involved. The response thus has to be proportionate to the severity of the accusation.

In the cases in which I was involved as director, the complaints invariably turned on misperceptions of different responsibilities (e.g., authorship) or misunderstanding of the reasons behind certain decisions (e.g., grading, hiring). These situations were managed through investigation and listening to the different perspectives, mediation, and on a few occasions, a pragmatic recommendation to abandon the collaboration and cut one's losses.

When a disagreement escalates to accusations of misconduct, it has to be quickly addressed. While unpleasant to deal with, ignoring the situation only makes things worse. Accusations have lasting negative consequences for all those involved. Not taking them seriously or not treating them with due process can undermine collegiality and trust and even contribute to the creation of toxic work environments.

It takes personal and collective courage, supported by good policies and robust procedures, to fairly address complaints and ensure that accusations are treated appropriately. Interpersonal conflict is likely an inevitable part of human relations. So we have to accept that these situations will occur and plan accordingly for their management.

You Stink!

Dealing with problematic personal behaviours

Bryn Williams-Jones
Jan 7, 2025

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Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/40424

Summary

Dealing with unpleasant aspects of certain colleagues (body odour, eating habits, behaviour in meetings, etc.) is never easy and so something that we often avoid. But when their habits or behaviour cross the line and start negatively affecting our well-being (and that of others), the person has to be confronted, diplomatically.

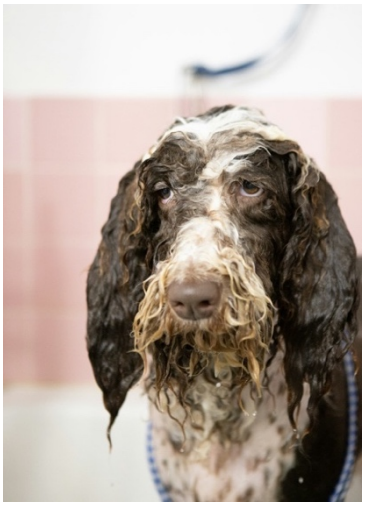

Photo by benjamin lehman on Unsplash

When I was a PhD student at the University of British Columbia, I had the privilege of sharing an office at the W. Maurice Young Centre for Applied Ethics, in Vancouver, on the Point Grey campus. Ideally situated, I was a 5-minute walk from the coast with spectacular views of the North Shore mountains and the Georgia Straight. The majestic trees, the smell of the sea air from the Pacific Ocean, and the ever-present wildlife made for an idyllic environment and an incredibly stimulating sensory experience.

In dramatic contrast to this was the olfactory assault to which I was regularly confronted when going to my office, which was in a building shared with some other research groups. Just down the hall was an office occupied by a colleague, who I didn't know, who would bike to work every day. Innocuous in itself, the problem was that he had pungent body odour, made all the worse by the fact that he would arrive dripping with sweat and then proceed to hang his wet bike shirt over his door to dry. There were no showers in our building, so we all got to profit from the smell of stale sweat drifting down the halls. "Smelly Guy", as my office-mate and I named him, was otherwise quiet and inoffensive.

This amusing anecdote – in hindsight, that is, because at the time it was really unpleasant – is an entrée to exploring the challenging personal behaviours that can (often unintentionally) impinge upon the comfort or personal space of others.

These issues are of course very different from more egregious behaviours by obnoxious colleagues who don't care about others, or worse yet, those who are actively toxic and destructive. Then there are those colleagues with barely-controlled addictions or mental health problems that can slide into crises. I've heard stories of colleagues who regularly showed up to the office drunk with vomit stains on their clothing; and I once had to deal with a colleague in crisis, who was clearly out of control in the classroom and screaming at the students. These are situations that clearly necessitate formal interventions on the part of administrative services and the deployment of mechanisms designed to manage conflict or misconduct.

By contrast, there can be numerous "minor" unpleasant behaviours on the part of colleagues that are far below the threshold of abusive behaviour, but which nonetheless can still have a negative impact on collegiality and the work environment.

- **The smoker:** when they come back from a break (thankfully the years of indoor smoking are long behind us!), they carry with them a lasting odour of stale cigarette smoke on their breath and clothing.
- **The loudmouth:** has a voice that carries down the hallway and sometimes through closed doors (me); they either aren't aware or forget that they're loud.
- **The slob:** leaves abandoned food residue on the lunchroom counter or in the fridge and never cleans up after themself.
- **The toxic cloud:** wears so much perfume or cologne that you have the impression that they bathed in it; don't recognize that they may be causing allergy attacks.

- **The compulsive hoarder:** their office is an impenetrable maze with piles of books and papers threatening to collapse at any moment; and their mess has a tendency to spread to common spaces.
- **The hermit:** rarely acknowledges colleagues, never shares polite pleasantries, and their office door is always closed; they're the invisible colleague.
- **The sexist joker:** systematically uses locker-room humour even though they know they shouldn't, and if you complain you're "not fun".
- **The patronizer:** the senior colleague who thinks they know all the rules and insists on sharing; systematically asks for a vote (by secret ballot) for even the most inconsequential issues.
- **The grump:** always looks like they're angry, even when they aren't; terrifies the students and administrative personnel.
- **The preacher:** assumes that they're always right and that everyone else is mistaken, and has to tell everyone; if you disagree, you're leaning towards an extreme position without knowing.
- **The tell-it-all:** has to share their life and very personal stories, even when not important or inappropriate (too much information!).
- **The paranoiac:** convinced that the upper administration is conspiring to intentionally make everyone's lives more complicated; and by definition, all administrators are incompetent.
- **The cynic:** believes that everything will fail, regardless of the situation, so there's simply no point in trying.
- **The emotive:** takes everything personally; has tears in their eyes anytime a vaguely sensitive topic is raised in the course of discussions.
- **The revolted:** see everything as horrible, an unacceptable injustice; and the only solution is revolution.
- **The victim:** always hurt and hard done by, and like the paranoiac, believes the world (and colleagues, the administration) is out to get them… it's never fair.

Over the years, I've had colleagues like many of the above – and they're not easy to deal with.

When I was a young PhD student, I didn't know what to do about "Smelly Guy" nor did I have the courage to confront him. Add to this an Anglo-Canadian cultural habit of not talking about certain sensitive issues (e.g., bad breath, body odours), nor being comfortable confronting people who step out of line. This is in marked contrast to my experience in France and other parts of Europe, and even in Quebec (although to a much lesser extent), where people are ready to critique a fellow citizen (or colleague) when their behaviour crosses the line and impinges on others – "your liberty ends where mine begins."

In collective settings, such as the workplace, "live and let live" only goes so far. That doesn't necessarily mean mobilizing administrative mechanisms, which most often would be disproportionate. But it does sometimes mean having to confront a colleague to address their behaviour. Diplomatically, in a non-confrontational manner, but that also makes clear that their behaviour is noxious or deleterious to the workplace. Such conversations will be unpleasant, to say the least, but they often cannot be avoided.

Fantastic Colleagues

Those colleagues who make a big difference deserve our thanks

Bryn Williams-Jones
Dec 17, 2024

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Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/40380

Photo by Viviana Rishe on Unsplash

Summary

It's important for managers (and colleagues), to explicitly acknowledge the contributions of our colleagues, especially those who excel but don't "blow their own horn". Even a simple "Thanks" or "Good job!" can promote a healthy institutional culture; and it's the least we can do for colleagues who we value and who contribute to a positive work environment.

It might seem that much of the challenge of being a professional or director is having to manage egos and deal with the complex personalities of our colleagues. There is certainly some of this in any organization, and these difficult colleagues – who may be arrogant, individualist, or self-centred – certainly take up a lot of space and mental energy. But in my experience, these people are actually a small, although very vocal, minority. It's thus important not to let them outshine, with their negativity, all the positive work of the majority of great colleagues in the department.

In a healthy work environment, it's fair to say that most people are collaborative, doing their jobs and meeting expectations – they're good colleagues. But there are also those who are exceptional, who're always willing to help and seek to advance collective interests, even at the expense of their own interests. These people frequently do not "blow their own horns", so it's important to actively recognize them for their contributions. And in doing so, we help spread a vision of what constitutes a positive and healthy departmental culture and work environment.

Thinking about my own department, and the institution more generally, the following behaviours of exceptional colleagues come to mind.

- When they arrive at work, they take the time to say hello to colleagues and inquire as to how they're doing; being a good colleague, for them, involves caring about others.
- An empathetic listener, they take the time to support colleagues who may be experiencing difficulties in their professional or personal lives.
- Always smiling, with a joke or fun anecdote when we meet them in the hallway; and they are often the person who brings chocolates or other food to share.
- A positive personality, the presence of these colleagues at the office is an important driver to go to the office instead of working from home.
- Collaborative, they actively share opportunities that they think might benefit their colleagues or the department; they see collective success as part of individual success.
- A mentor, they support junior colleagues by sharing their experiences and lessons learned, helping them to avoid high-cost and low impact engagements, and to see opportunities for professional (and personal) growth.
- Keen to engage in debate, they defend their ideas and positions, respectfully, without letting discussions become heated or personal.
- Have the courage to say out loud what many think but are hesitant to express, naming problems so that they can be addressed; not an easy role, but one that is critical for healthy collaboration.
- Responsible, they do not accept unfair treatment or inappropriate behaviour by colleagues; they call out the wrong while also proposing remedies to make things right.
- Accept leadership roles when asked, such as running committees or programs, because these are in the collective interest and part of the job.
- Willing to take on less rewarding tasks, such as teaching introductory courses or representing the department on often boring administrative committees, because someone has to do it.

- Show initiative and volunteer to take on responsibilities, but also able to set reasonable limits; when they say “Yes” to a particular project or role, they deliver on time and exceed expectations.
- Recognize their own strengths and weaknesses but also challenge themself to move outside their comfort zone, to stretch and take on new tasks where they can learn and contribute.
- Engaged in team or departmental meetings; not a passive observer or worse yet, a “free rider” who lets others take decisions, they are actively present.

To be clear, this list of excellent behaviours is not meant as a grid for evaluation, nor are they all manifest by any one individual. Instead, they are the sorts of behaviours that are shared by many people, and which are hugely important in the life of a department, and they should be recognized as such.

This excellent collegiality will be noted, by their colleagues and directors, when these people go forward for renewal or promotions, or are nominated for a prize or other recognition. While important, this is insufficient. Often quiet members of the group, they do not seek recognition. So as their colleagues, we should more frequently acknowledge their fantastic work, even if it’s only in day-to-day discussions, with a “Great job!” But we can also share our recognition of their excellence by talking with our other colleagues about these people, highlighting the remarkable contributions that they make to the collective good.

To these colleagues, I say “Thank you!”

Chapter 4: Productivity and Creativity

Photo by Jon Tyson on Unsplash

Walking and Talking

Change physical space to change mental space

Bryn Williams-Jones
May 28, 2024

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/walking-talking
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/33330

Photo by Bruno Nascimento on Unsplash

Summary

Bridging the “classic divide” between the mental and the physical, walking and talking can be an incredibly liberating means for creative thinking. The combination of physical movement and exercise, and of seeing, listing, smelling and experiencing our environment, all contribute to connecting mind and body and removing boundaries. So if you need to think creatively, go for a walk.

My wife and I are big walkers, and to disconnect our son from his video games (and limit his inclination to become a couch potato), we systematically drag him along on our 2-3 hour (8-12 km) weekend walks around the neighbourhood, or along the shorelines at one of the growing number of linear parks around the island of Montreal. Not surprisingly for an academic family, when we walk, we talk about “life, the universe and everything”, to quote the late Douglas Adams, author of the hilarious Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy.

There is something particularly liberating about the long, unstructured conversations that walking engenders and which can go on for hours and range across a diversity of topics, without plan or objective; this liberty is complemented by the pleasure of conversing with people who also enjoy a good discussion. Many of my blog topics were generated in such situations, so this got me thinking about finding spaces for intellectual creativity and for learning, outside the more traditional ones that are the office or the classroom.

Peripatetic teaching – i.e., teaching while walking – is an approach to deep learning that goes back to the ancient Greeks, if not earlier, and has been studied as a way, among others, to rejuvenate medical education and improve student learning and satisfaction. My colleague Thomas Druetz has used this approach in his global health PhD seminar and with his research team; when possible – i.e., taking into consideration any mobility limitations of his students, or the weather, which can make walking a challenge in Quebec winters – he would regularly teach outside the classroom, walking and talking with his students. This change in learning environment was very positively received by students, but it was also an effective way to stimulate different ways of thinking, and to identify any challenges that particular students might have (e.g., problems with concentration) so that he could intervene and adapt support for their specific learning needs.

While more structured than informal ambulatory conversations with family and friends, peripatetic teaching is also anchored in a clear understanding of the intimate connection between mind and body, between the intellectual and the physical. For anyone who has struggled to keep the attention of a group of students when teaching complex material, it is evident that what and how we teach (content, style, teaching methods) and where we teach (type of learning environment) can have a huge impact, positive or negative.

I have a vivid memory of taking a course in ancient Greek philosophy as an undergraduate student and spending the entire term trying to stay awake, not because the material or the professor was boring (although I don’t recall the class being particularly stimulating), but because the course was taught in a basement classroom with no windows, poor ventilation, and limited space. The only time I remember learning anything was when the professor took us all outside and taught the class sitting under a tree.

As with such learning experiences, I’ve consistently found that creativity was also intimately connected to both space and movement.

While I was a PhD student at the University of British Columbia, I would go for 2-3 hour solitary walks around Point Grey, English Bay, and Stanley Park, profiting from the spectacular scenery of Vancouver and the West Coast mountains. A way to explore the city, but also a way to pass time and exercise, these long walks were good for me physically and mentally. But in retrospect, they had limited efficacy in terms of idea generation because I had no external outlet, no one to talk with.

In my previous reflections about being neurodiverse and someone who talks a lot, I explained that I need to write or talk to generate ideas. During the PhD, it was often on long walks in the countryside with my supervisor Mike Burgess, and his llamas, that we had deep philosophical discussions; and with fellow graduate students, we would continue vibrant ethical debates at the local pub, following our PhD seminar. These discussions were incredibly rich and stimulating, not only because of the depth of argument, but also because they went in numerous different directions, opening new avenues of thought, and they occurred outside the classroom. I cannot remember conversations that led to specific written content, but I know that these laid the groundwork for or stimulated ways of thinking that would later contribute to my research.

When I was writing-up the thesis in the last year of my PhD, I also learned that changing my physical working space was hugely important for my creativity and productivity, because it allowed me to change my mental space. I would start with a few hours early morning writing in my basement apartment, and when I felt that I was “losing creative steam” or hitting an intellectual wall, I would go down the street to a cozy coffee shop, The Well Cafe on Dunbar (which I was delighted to learn was still open 20 years later, although at different location), and spend another few hours writing or reading articles.

I don’t know how many hours I worked in that cafe, nor how much money I spent on coffee and lunches, but it was money well spent. As a regular, I got to know the owner and staff; they had created a comfortable and welcoming space that helped me finish my thesis, for which I was very grateful, and I thanked them in my Acknowledgements. The change of physical space of working at the cafe also helped break the isolation of writing the thesis, which can be an extremely solitary process.

Interestingly, I never wrote articles or thesis content at the university, where I had an office at the W. Maurice Young Centre for Applied Ethics; it was a place for other research work and discussions, but not for efficient writing. More than 20 years later, this habit has continued. My creative and academic writing is invariably best done in my home office, or as for this post, at a coffee shop while my wife and son were visiting a museum or art exposition; I have a very limited attention span for such activities so prefer to let them enjoy the experience without me, while I engage in the pleasure of writing.

As a dyslexic, I detest pen and paper, finding that medium overly constraining because of its linear and static nature. My ideas find their primary outlet through the act of free form writing on my computer, whether in a Word document or on the Substack website (which I love!). When I write, I never have a plan; the ideas, the text and the narrative take form as part of the act of writing.

The generation of ideas, however, most often occurs away from the computer, in a space that is conducive to creativity, that is, when out walking and talking with family and friends.

Drowning in Email

How to stay afloat in a sea of messages

Bryn Williams-Jones
Apr 11, 2023

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/drowning-in-email-se-noyer-dans-les
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/28371

Photo by Hannes Johnson on Unsplash

Summary

Many of us dread opening up our email program and complain – legitimately – about the unceasing and ever-increasing flow of messages that takes up so much of our time. Dealing with emails requires a good strategy (to whom, when and to what we respond), but also the managing of expectations of our colleagues and students, about when responses can be expected, and on what topics. Here I share some tips and tricks – and traps – with which I've experimented, in my own quest to control the flow of email.

Having been first introduced to computers in the early 1980s, as a young adolescent I remember well "life before email", and the enthusiasm associated with new possibilities to communicate freely with people. Friendships could be formed based on shared interests without concern for borders or time zones.

Decades later, we now live in a sea of information. Simple, rapid and ubiquitous communication in the form of email, chat or text is the norm, and for many of us it has become overwhelming. We have difficulty staying afloat because we are drowning in the incessant flow of messages, and always late in our responses.

As a university professor, and now department head, my email volume has continued to grow year after year: from colleagues, staff, students, upper administration, journalists, civil society, etc. Every morning, I have 15-20 new messages in my Inbox, and during the day this regular flow continues – if I'm away from my computer for a 2-3 hour meeting, when I check back-in I will often have 20-30 new emails!

Some of these will be "academic spam" messages inviting me to present at fake conferences – "Yes, of course I want to preside a panel at your prestigious Biochemistry conference on a topic about which I know nothing!" – or to submit articles to predatory journals. These are easy to deal with.

But the vast majority are legitimate work-related messages that requires some thought, more or less detailed responses, and sometimes further work (reading attachments, composing written responses). I get so much email that it's often hard to know where to start. And if all I did was respond to email, this would eat up most of my workday and I'd get nothing else done.

Nonetheless, I still prefer email to instant messaging, which I use with relatively few people (a few friends, students and colleagues). And I've never been a fan of the telephone – students and colleagues quickly learn that if they want to get in touch with me, the best way is to drop me an email and I'll respond quickly.

Clearly, each of us will have different ways of managing email and other communication platforms. Your methods may vary. So, the following suggestions are a list of strategies that I've either implemented myself, or which colleagues have shared, and which may help you stay afloat in a sea of messages.

Daily Strategies

- An early morning person who's awake at 5am, after breakfast I do 1-2 hours of email while drinking my coffee (but I know few people who do this!), before getting down to work at 9am.
- Start by reviewing the Inbox (most recent to oldest), quickly scan and then delete newsletters, forward information messages (e.g., to colleagues, students), and delegate messages to others.
- Clear the regular or academic spam that got past the filter – and flag this content to continually improve the spam filter.
- Monday morning, I systematically protect a few hours in my calendar to catch-up on those emails that I didn't have time to deal with the previous week.

- Some people set specific times to answer student emails, for example on Thursdays from 8-10.30am. For emails from colleagues, it's right away; for emails from the administration, it's once a week.
- Prioritize urgent emails, whether in the morning or during the day – but how you define this is sometimes a challenge.
- Jump from responding to most recent emails, to those that have been waiting at the bottom of the page because they were lower priority.
- If the email is a long message with multiple questions, or has multiple attachments, it will often get downgraded in priority.
- For detailed or lengthy emails, tell the sender to call or book a meeting – this is often much more efficient and less time consuming than a written response.
- Use breaks between meetings when there isn't enough time for thoughtful work (for me, less than 2 hours), to catch-up on emails.
- It's too easy to be distracted by email (or chats), so turnoff completely when you have to concentrate on something.

Clarifying expectations

- Don't respond to email in the evenings or on the weekend. Set a good example to students and colleagues that it's really possible (and healthy!) to disconnect.
- Use "Send Later" for the few emails done after work hours, to go out the next morning or Monday after a weekend.
- In course syllabi – especially for large groups – add explicit norms for email communication:
    - no more than 3 emails per week per student
    - no more than 10 lines (otherwise too long) – get to the point
    - no response if email is from personal account with pseudonym
    - no response to questions where the information is in the course plan
    - no responses outside normal work hours (M-F, 9-5), etc.
- Educate colleagues or administrators who are too demanding with email – set your expectations for efficient and reasonable communication.
- When on vacation, set an away message and don't respond until you've returned. State that all emails received while you were away will be destroyed, and so to recontact you after your return if still pertinent.

Building healthy email (and communication) management habits takes time. Done right, it can help you both reduce the volume of messages and make those that arrive more likely to be important, or at least easier to deal with. Above all, email (and other communication platforms) should be at our service, not the other way around.

Publish or Perish

How to play the academic publishing game

Bryn Williams-Jones
Dec 5, 2023

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/publish-or-perish
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/32141

Publication (nz097) by Nick D Kim

Summary

To publish without perishing, to be productive without working 80-hour weeks, requires knowing the implicit rules of the academic game. It takes a dose of creativity, a willingness to take risks and to "think outside the box", and being open to opportunities. Most importantly, it means having fun with your writing.

Growing up an "academic brat" – I come from an academic family: my father is a professor, as is my twin brother, and I married a professor – I then spent my professional career in academia, moving from being a highly stressed junior professor plagued by imposter syndrome, to getting tenure (and almost burning out in the process, and still feeling an imposter), to then becoming full-professor and finally moving into administration (now feeling a bit less the imposter).

Academia is incredibly demanding and competitive, and it's certainly not a level playing field. I was privileged to have the opportunity to learn early on – from my father, and from my professor-mentors – how to successfully "play the academic game". People I trusted took the time to share their experiences and to explain the implicit rules of academia, many of which I, and my fellow students, were ignorant. Knowing the rules enabled me to become competitive and get into my chosen graduate programs, to obtain scholarships to fund my studies, and eventually to unlock a coveted academic position at a leading Canadian research university.

Of the many skills I learned, an important one was how to translate my ideas into measurable deliverables, i.e., publications. The two key metrics of success in academia are peer-reviewed publications (articles, books, chapters) and money (grants, scholarships), with the first leading to the second, so the pressure to publish has become enormous at all levels of the academic career ladder, from student to professor.

There is clearly a big problem with the current "publish or perish" model that incentivizes quantity over quality, because it's generating ever more productivity but not with a comparable increase in knowledge or innovation. Fraud and fabrication, predatory journals, salami publications, etc., are all results of an ever-increasing pressure to publish. These and other aspects of the (ir)responsible conduct of research will be the subject of a future post.

Instead, I continue here with an ongoing thread of this blog, the necessity to make explicit the implicit rules of the game so that all who wish to play can have the chance to do so. You want to know how to publish without perishing, how to be productive without working 80-hour weeks? Read on.

Generating ideas

A perennial question is: "What do I write about? How do I find something interesting to say/write that hasn't already been done?" The answers to these questions vary widely by discipline, field or methodology. It may be easier in a field like my own, bioethics, that studies contemporary issues of science and society and where there is no shortage of issues to explore. But even in data-intensive fields that are focused on empirical research and discovery, I suggest that many of the following strategies can apply.

- Start with your intuition, go with your gut reaction: you're interested in a topic or question, but why? What makes it interesting, and why should we (the audience) care?
- Has someone else already recently published on this topic or question? Did you love their article (if so, where does the idea lead next, after their Conclusion), or did you hate it (Why? There's an opportunity!).
- What makes you angry? Wanting to fight an injustice, right a social wrong, dispel misconceptions, etc., can all be powerful motivators to identify an area that could benefit from your rational and detailed analysis. Your paper won't change the world, but it can be a small way to make a difference. "Get mad, then get rational."

- Write about what you know, and not just your academic speciality. Your field, your practice, your academic experience are all fertile terrain for ideas. So too are your personal interests or obsessions, which can be sources of creativity, of examples, of analogies, and of questions in need of answers.
- You may be an expert, but you can publish on topics that are not your (hyper)specialty, but which need to be more clearly articulated or nuanced for different audiences.
- Brainstorm with colleagues and team members, and with your students; you'll quickly see that there are no shortage of topics or projects on which to work – what's lacking is time and the will to push all these interesting ideas to completion.

Strategies

Clearly, your methods may vary depending on the norms of your field or area of speciality. But don't let these norms constrain you if they are no longer aligned with current metrics of productivity, and more importantly, with how you want to express yourself and where and with whom you want to share your ideas.

- First and foremost, make time to write. Protect blocks of time in your week and mark them in your calendar – it's your "me time" when you're unavailable for Doodles; and if you can't avoid a meeting, your writing goes somewhere else that week. Be consistent and write every week, even just a little so it becomes routine.
- Publish with your students, including the best ones in the courses you teach – offer to help them publish their essay, and you are co-author, adding substantive content, editing, and showing them the publication process. This may not be common in some areas of the humanities, for example, but is very common and even the norm in the health sciences, fundamental and applied sciences where research is team based.
    - The result is that teams can publish at much greater volume, and doing this, researchers/professors are rewarded (e.g., in grant or promotion review) because they're investing in helping their students publish.
    - I systematically co-author because I don't have the time to lead papers myself (which is why I write this blog); it's incredibly intellectually stimulating to write with my students, and a pleasure to help them learn authorship and analytic skills and share their ideas.
- Collaborate with people you trust and avoid big writing teams because often they are much less efficient (and less fun!). Instead, work with 1-3 students or colleagues who're all willing to invest the time and energy required to move a paper from idea to publication.
- Say no to invitations for special issues or edited book contributions unless:
    - You already have a manuscript in development and are looking for a venue in which to publish.
    - You needed the incentive to write a paper on that topic, it's a priority and you have the time.
    - You know a great student to whom you can delegate the lead of the paper (and they have the time).
- Write short non-peer-reviewed commentaries – or start a Substack! – to get your ideas out there. You'll find that the process of pushing an idea into the public space enables you to externalize it, to test it and get feedback from colleagues, etc. When the time is right, it will transform into a full-length research paper.
- Mine your computer for unpublished content:
    - I systematically tell students to go back through their course essays, and if they got an A/A+ that's the start of a publication (e.g., article, case study, commentary, letter to the editor).
    - For PhD students: your comprehensive exam may be a great opportunity to write paper(s), or parts of the thesis, that you know you need to write. [Our Bioethics PhD comprehensive exam is designed with such productivity in mind]
    - Periodically review manuscripts that never got accepted and re-evaluate:
        - Can it be submitted to another journal with a different audience?
        - Is there a new case study, example, analysis that can be added, and that makes the argument more convincing?
        - Which colleague or student could be invited to collaborate to help push the paper to the next level? They should be someone you want to work with and who brings a different style or could contribute a more innovative analytic angle, a new case or interpretation.
- Look at grant applications, both successful and unsuccessful, because there's already tons of great content written – a grant is a well-articulated but unpublished idea, and it shouldn't be neglected, so recycle it!

- Publish tacit knowledge: it's crazy how little we share in writing about how we "do research". Talking about the nitty-gritty of methods, technique, recruitment, etc., is crucial so that students and other researchers learn how a particular study is conducted, in practice.
- Publish the negative case study: the analysis that didn't work, the method that failed, the field experience that got blocked by a community partner, the challenges of working through research ethics review. This is important information to share and benefits the scientific community. Without publishing negative studies that share lessons learned, others will repeat the same mistakes, thus impeding scientific progress.
- When you accept to give a research seminar or conference presentation or guest lecture, think of it as the start of a future publication; and a publication should then get translated into a presentation… and social media post, and a guest lecture in a course, etc. Every activity should have 2-3 spinoff deliverables.
- Choose your target journal wisely:
    - Yes, it's got to be the right audience, but is this audience necessarily "the usual suspects" of specialists in your field? What about a different research or professional community who would benefit from some disciplinary boundary crossing? Interdisciplinary writing is hard but immensely rewarding, because you share ideas and solutions where they're needed and welcomed.
    - Avoid the super competitive, high-impact journals in which it's extremely hard to get accepted. They may be prestigious, but is it really worth the time and effort given high rejection rates, requests for multiple revisions, and long publication delays?
    - Strongly consider open access journals (but be wary of predatory journals, or those with significant author publication charges), because even if they may be less high-profile, they are often much more accessible and tend to publish more quickly.
- Write manuscripts of different lengths: some ideas work as a short publication, while others are sufficiently complex to require much more space (and thus time) to develop. Do both.
- Remember that your writing is part of a research program: not every text has to be the magnum opus. You can write lots of papers, on related themes, over the space of years.
- Work on multiple writing projects in parallel: if you have 5 projects on the go, when one or two gets blocked because you don't have the right argument or you're missing some key data, the 3-4 others will still be progressing. Work on papers when you're in the right mindset for those projects, and switch regularly.
- Be wary of invitations to write book chapters – unless they're from friends/colleagues who you know will deliver the book on time – because these can take years to get published.
- Don't write books. When you're a junior researcher, books are a time sync. They take way too long to write, can be painful to produce (e.g., publisher requirements, revisions, delays, costs), and while you're working on the book you're not publishing anything else. "What were you doing that year?" "Writing my book." "Ah…" Wait until you're an established professor, after tenure, when you have the time to think and nothing to lose and then write the book that needs to be written.

Conclusion

Sharing the results of our research with colleagues and the broader scientific community is a fundamental part of academia, it is how we produce and advance knowledge. But we can also share ideas with the broader public, doing knowledge translation through written commentaries or posting to social media, or working with journalists. Even if these activities may still be considered less important than peer-reviewed publications, they're also invaluable ways to demonstrate your expertise, as well as being very personally rewarding because they enable a much broader impact than is possible within the halls of the Ivory Tower.

Publishing without perishing requires a large dose of creativity, and a willingness to take risks – "think outside the box" and be open to opportunities. Most importantly, if you're having fun with your writing, then you'll be productive and so more likely to flourish than to perish.

The CV of Failures

Learn from what didn't work

Bryn Williams-Jones
Sept 12, 2023

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/cv-of-failures
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/28725

Photo by Michael Dziedzic on Unsplash

Summary

A CV is a marketing tool to convince others that you merit a scholarship, a grant, a job. But it doesn't show what didn't work, nor help one reflect on why. If you accept that failure is an often-necessary prerequisite to success, then a "CV of failures" can be an important tool for honest and constructive self-critique.

An academic CV – which, in North America, tends to be a maximally comprehensive of all relevant activities (as compared to shorter, more succinct CVs in other parts of the world) – is a means to document your successes. The explicit aim is to showcase the quantity and quality of your accomplishments and support your attempts to convince others that you merit that for which you're applying: a prize, a scholarship, a grant, a job.

I've spent more than three decades refining my academic CV, and I've found creative ways to document my successes and show myself in the best possible light to grant juries and hiring or promotion committees. Based on this experience, I've given training sessions to students on how to develop a good CV; and I regularly share my model with students and colleagues to help them refine their own CVs and progress in their professional or academic journeys.

In a future post I'll share tips on how to present a good academic CV. Here, I instead want to reflect on something different – that is, all those things that don't appear in the CV because they were failures, and the lessons that can be learned from these "negative" experiences.

For those of us who make their careers in academia, early on in our training we learn that learning is hard. It takes time, concentration, and practice. And while there will obviously be successes along the way, there will be many more failures. Seeking success is only natural, but very often the lessons that are most informative and meaningful are those where we did not succeed. The failures stand out in our minds, because of their emotional impact, and they can helpfully point to areas where we need to do more work, or to do things differently.

Trial and error experimentation followed by analysis of why something did not work is the basis of the scientific method and broadly applicable across all fields of research and knowledge production. It can be tough when an experiment fails, when an angle of inquiry hits a dead-end. But with the right mentoring and supportive colleagues, this should be seen as reason to try again – just because it didn't work the first (or second, or third) time doesn't necessarily mean that it's the wrong path, or that you're a failure.

It is hard on the ego when projects in which we've invested substantial time and energy, and about which we are passionate, don't succeed. The paper that was never accepted for publication (after multiple attempts with different journals), the scholarship or grant application that was not funded (after repeated submissions), the research project that failed to achieve its objectives (despite our best efforts). It's difficult not to take such failures personally, to blame oneself or to feel like the victim of discrimination or structural injustices.

For obvious reasons, these failures are exactly the things that we do not list in our academic CVs. Why would we, when, in a hyper-competitive market, the aim is to show that we are better than others, that we are meritorious?

It's normal to want to sell ourselves, to be seen in a positive light – I'm not bringing that into question. Instead, I wonder if this emphasis on success in academia means that we develop a type of performance bias and so don't take sufficient stock of our failures. Worse, we may believe the positive hype of the CV regarding our own excellence and imagine that every (or almost every) project that we initiate will succeed. If this is the case, then we're probably not asking ourselves the tough questions that we need and should be asking. Why did the paper not get published? Why was the scholarship or grant not funded? Why did the research project not attain the planned objectives? What could have been done differently? These are all opportunities for learning, but ones that require a great deal of humility and self-honesty.

An idea that piqued my curiosity is the CV of failures. For personal use, the aim is to develop a tool for critical self-reflection. Alongside the regular CV of successes, the CV of failures documents all the grants that were rejected, the papers that weren't published, the students supervised but who dropped out, the research projects that were never completed, the presentations that were poorly received, etc. But as my colleague Ryoa Chung shared so eloquently, it could also be a way of sharing with our colleagues and students, and the broader academic community, that things can and should be done differently.

Looking at oneself in the mirror and seeing things that one does not like can be very unpleasant. Likewise, a CV of failures can be demotivating or even depressing. I've known students and colleagues who left academia because they found the repeated rejections (of papers or scholarship or grant applications) to be too emotionally costly. But if you can accept that failure is the often-necessary prerequisite to success in academia, then a CV of failures can be used intentionally as a space to think about why something didn't work, and in turn why other projects did. It can be an important tool for reflexivity, and for honest and constructive self-critique.

Full disclosure: I have not implemented a CV of failures alongside my CV of successes. Instead, I have a folder on my computer of all my grant applications, including those that were not funded; and alongside my reprints, I keep all the manuscripts that were not published. I see these failures not as "garbage" to be jettisoned, but as projects that were not yet ready, either because the time was not right (wrong audience) or because they were insufficiently articulated (not yet complete). As such, these "failures" constitute a resource for future projects.

In practice, I have an informal list in my mind of those projects that I tried, and which failed; and on numerous occasions over the years, I have revived these failed projects and transformed them into successes. Of course, some never see the light of day, and that's OK. Because even if the project never gets reused, I still learned something about operationalizing research methods, or about an intellectual process, or about how to build a productive team, or simply about how I think and work most efficiently. But these lessons that we learn may remain implicit unless we take the time to reflect.

It is a truism to state that there is no need for research if we already have the answer. Not surprisingly then, it's also inevitable that the path to success will be littered with ideas or projects that failed. We can and should learn from these mistakes or failures, but that requires humility and reflexivity.

Consider a CV of failures – you may find it helpful in reaching your future successes.

Your Message is Academic Spam

Don’t mass-email professors if you hope for a response

Bryn Williams-Jones
Feb 6, 2024

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/academic-spam
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/32692

Photo by the blowup on Unsplash

Summary

Badly formulated or generic solicitation emails are an annoying form of academic spam. Many are clearly from people genuinely looking for a chance to pursue their studies. But too often, the approach is wrong-headed and wastes everyone’s time. It’s important that emails to professors be focused, concise, and personalized… otherwise these will go directly to the junk folder.

In a previous post I talked about my email management strategy – every morning, while drinking my coffee, I spend an hour or so going through email and start by clearly my Inbox of the spam that got past my institutional filter, and deleting other academic junk mail, e.g., irrelevant newsletters, fake journal or conference invitations, event announcements for which I’m not interested.

One specific type of academic spam that drives me crazy is the “Dear Honorable Professor, I wish to work in your distinguished laboratory” solicitations from students or researchers in developing world countries looking for a supervisor or post-doc position (paid of course), or even a job as research associate. Note that this mention of the source of inquiries is intentional but not meant to be racist or discriminatory. I never receive such emails from students in North America or Europe or Australasia because they have passed through academic systems that are similar to mine and so have learned the norms for access to higher education, and how to communicate effectively with professors like me. Clearly not everyone has had professors or colleagues instruct them in appropriate netiquette when emailing potential supervisors or employers… and this does these people a disservice.

I’ve been receiving such solicitation messages since I was a PhD student; at the time I found it amusing since I clearly didn’t have a lab or a budget to hire people, as I was a student just like them! But as the years have gone by and I became a professor, the number of solicitations has only increased, while my tolerance for them has been inversely proportional. These emails are particularly frequent in the winter and fall, around the time of admissions to graduate programs, and just happen to coincide with the massive increase in my daily volume of email, with the result that my patience is limited at best.

So, the following recommendations are generally applicable to all people looking for supervisors or seeking employment opportunities in academia.

Recommendations

- If you want to work with a particular professor because they have an expertise directly relevant to your studies or career, first do your homework on the individual in question to ensure that they’re actually in your discipline and area of specialization. You’d be surprised at the number of clinical researchers, epidemiologists, and biochemists who want to work with me, the bioethicist who doesn’t even have a lab.
- Read-up on the university, faculty, and department to know what different professors are doing, and if you’re a student, look at the different graduate programs, entrance criteria, costs, and funding opportunities (check their international student services, scholarship pages, etc.). Don’t expect the professor you contact to have all this information at their fingertips or even to be patient enough to provide it to you. It’s your job to find this information, not theirs.
- If you’re looking for a job in someone’s lab or research team, that job will almost certainly be announced on the university website employment page, and/or posted on LinkedIn and other jobs pages. If there’s no job announcement, it’s incredibly unlikely that your “cold call” email will generate a positive response – “Oh wow, this person is amazing, let’s give them a scholarship because we have so much in unspent grant funds!”

- When writing to a professor, make sure you have the right person, e.g., you've cross-checked their university website and email address with the author of the academic publications that piqued your interest.
- It's fine to include in your email a CV and a short description of your interests and skills, but these must be directly related to the expertise and research interests of the professor you're contacting.
- Don't share your life story or try to make the professor feel sorry for you – get to the point in the first few lines and be professional or the message will be deleted.
- Be specific about your research project in a paragraph or two; we don't need a 5-page research plan because we won't read it.
- If you're looking for a supervisor, show them that you have a well thought out research plan – don't expect the professor to provide you with a topic or project on which to work; even if they do have such a project, showing that you have your own ideas makes you more interesting.
- If an email exchange begins, ask specific questions about the professor's current research program and whether they would be interested in your work, which you have already described clearly and succinctly. This way you show that you've done your homework and know them a bit – you aren't wasting their time.
- You don't need to stroke the professor's ego. They have a PhD and an academic position, and they know they're good; some stranger telling them this is not flattering, it's actually a bit sad because it shows that the person is desperate and trying to ingratiate themself.
- Above all, don't waste your time sending the same generic message (mass email) to multiple professors expecting a response – you won't get one because the message will be treated for what it is, academic spam.

Conclusion

I would really love it if people would share with students and colleagues that uninformed and misdirected solicitation messages will go directly into the spam folder because they clearly don't merit consideration. Many of these messages come from people who are earnestly looking for a chance to pursue their studies or have a stimulating career in academia. But an impersonal mass-mail approach is completely wrong-headed – it wastes everyone's time, both theirs and ours.

Letters of Reference are a Waste of Time

Let's eliminate this unnecessary and inequitable requirement

Bryn Williams-Jones
Jan 16, 2024

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/letters-of-reference
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/32387

Photo by Florencia Viadana on Unsplash

Summary

Letters of reference are standard for scholarship, job and grant applications, and to be done well, require substantial time and effort. But the "best" letters are of little use in selection processes (they're all full of superlatives), and not everyone can leverage such support (an inequitable process). Let's just get rid of this unnecessary paperwork and focus on supporting candidates to produce strong applications.

I have a love/hate relationship with letters of reference.

As a professor, I spend a lot of time in the Fall writing letters of reference for current students applying for scholarships, and for former students applying for academic jobs. It takes me at least 1.5 hours to write a new letter for a student (but only 15-30min for an update), and more than 2 hours for a job letter. Now as department director, I also write letters for the nomination and promotion of my colleagues, and these are in the 1.5 to 2 hour range in terms of work.

It's a pleasure to be able to help bring out the excellence in a candidate, to help them shine in the best possible light. I know that I write great letters of reference, because I invest the time needed to write them, to make them personal and convincing. I also regularly receive extremely positive feedback from candidates, to whom I always submit a draft for their correction and validation; I'm transparent, never saying something in a letter that I do not feel comfortable sharing. And if I know I cannot write a strong letter, e.g., because I do not know the candidate well enough or because I think their dossier is weak, I tell them this (kindly) and guide them on how to improve their chances in the future.

But writing these letters is also a huge time commitment, usually occurring when I'm busy with other activities. And it can also be a little depressing – although clearly more so for candidates! – to invest this energy while knowing that, due to the very competitive nature of contemporary academia, many candidates will not get the scholarship or job for which they're applying.

In this competitive context, there is also a veritable arms-race in the writing of letters – they have to be ever more flowery, and are getting longer for many scholarships, often broken into 3 or more sections where we're asked to write pretty much the same thing… but differently. The letters have to be full of extremely detailed information, highly positive, even effusive, if they are to be effective in helping the candidate get that highly competitive scholarship, job, or promotion.

This also raises important issues of equity. Those students (or colleagues) who have managed to build strong relations with 3 or more professors who then accept to write strong letters of reference are at a massive competitive advantage over those who, for a variety of reasons, cannot solicit strong letters. Due to their gender, ethnicity, or personality, some candidates may receive a "No" when requesting a letter of reference. Or they may simply be in a program/domain with a limited number of professors with whom they are able to build meaningful relationships and so solicit letters. Yet, these candidates may be just as good or even better academically – and so meritorious of the scholarship or job in question – compared to those who are able to provide strong letters in their applications. This is fundamentally unfair.

In North America, my experience is that letters, to be useful, need to be at least 1-2 pages for a student scholarship, and 2-3 pages for a job support letter. Some scholarship programs that I've seen have started reducing the length, e.g., to half a page or even only a few lines, in part due to push-back from colleagues who're asked to write these letters, and those who volunteer to participate in evaluations and read what are already long dossiers. While shorter letter requirements might in principle reduce the work required, I have to ask: What of interest can I say in 300 words or less? With so little space, why even bother with a reference?

In the job hiring process in my department, we now only ask for letters from those 3 candidates who make it to the short list because it is a waste of time for candidates, and for their referees, to submit letters for job competitions for which they're not competitive and never get to the short list. Equally unhelpful are grant applications or recruitment processes for senior scholars or professionals (especially in government) that require letters of support. These colleagues are already well established and have proven track records. Surely the CV and cover letter/proposal are sufficient?

When I read job applications (or scholarships), I never read the letters because they add nothing to my analysis. All the information I need is in the CV and cover letter (or research proposal), in order for me to do a first filter and judge the general merits of the dossier. The rest of the information I need to make an informed judgment about the candidate for a job comes out in the Zoom pre-interview or the final short-list in-person interviews. For scholarships, this complementary information is in the grades and any other supporting material.

Rarely if ever does the letter add something useful to my analysis. One exception, I would say, is if the candidate in question looks great on paper but is problematic for other reasons; I know of stories of letters of reference saying "do not hire this person/give them a scholarship – they're a fraud!". Such letters obviously have to be taken with a heavy dose of skepticism, but they can still be useful. In the few cases I've seen, these letters helped point to a problem with the dossier that was implicit and then enabled me to dig and see more clearly significant weaknesses with the candidate.

The other exception is the student applying for a scholarship who has a weak transcript but is brilliant; their excellence may not be shown in their grades, for example, because of a poor start to their studies, even if they are showing positive progression. But even here, a better mechanism than a letter by a professor would be to add space for the candidate to explain any relevant conditions/factors that might have impeded their academic progression. This information can then be taken into consideration by evaluators and so ensure that the candidate is treated equitably.

If I had my way, we'd get rid of letters from all scholarship competitions, grants and job hires and instead look as objectively as possible at the dossier: give the student/candidate the space (a few pages) to shine in their proposal, and a space to explain any extenuating factors, supported by a synthetic but rich CV. Clearly, to be competitive they also need training in how to present a competitive dossier; but that is something that can be managed in graduate programs and even shared (as I did in my post on how to get an academic job) to create a more level playing field. Evaluating dossiers this way would be much more efficient, more equitable, and much less work for reviewers and for candidates.

I know I can write amazing letters that help my students and colleagues shine, and I will continue to invest the time and energy to help them succeed… but I wish this wasn't necessary.

To Err is Human, To Really Foul up Takes a Computer

You can never be too paranoid with information security

Bryn Williams-Jones
Jul 11, 2023

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/to-err-is-human
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/28384


Photo by Markus Spiske on Unsplash

Summary

You can never be too paranoid when it comes to protecting your information systems. Now integral to our daily lives, these systems unfortunately still require individual responsibility, which is a major risk. To mitigate the risks from human error, we need systems that remove the responsibility from individuals: and good start is to demand and implement best practices to secure our information environment.

Disclaimer: I am a university professor and bioethicist, not a computer security expert. But I'm a techie and interested in information systems and have been using computers since the early 1980s. In my family, I'm the one responsible for computer updates and security. So, my analysis here is based on personal experience, and my recommendations are those of an informed user, not an expert.

Academics, like anyone else, need to have healthy information security habits… but this is often not the case.

Given that many of us spend our days in front of computers using various computer-based systems (email, research databases, institutional administrative platforms), and sometimes accessing confidential information, the importance of good security should be evident. But as the number and diversity of systems expand, so too do the risks for mistakes, and for data loss and security breaches with far reaching consequences… and many (even most) of these will likely be due to human error.

To err is human

Like anyone else, academics can be lazy and take risky shortcuts with information systems. The most blatant, of course, is the all-too-common use of the same password, or the storing of data on only one computer, or worse yet, on a USB key. A password breach or corrupted file can have a ripple effect across all our personal and professional accounts, and then on to those people with whom we interact. One failure and all can be lost, and with dramatic consequences.

These risks are somewhat mitigated by institutional requirements forcing regular password changes, and automatic data back-ups to cloud storage. But such measures will still be insufficient if our at-work practices are not replicated also with our personal accounts, and if our home information infrastructure does not have similar protections as those offered by our employer, when at the office.

Bad practices are understandable – we are human, after all. Beyond a certain level of complexity, our brains become saturated. Many of us are overwhelmed by the diversity of technologies and systems that we have to use and thus cannot not fully master. More generally, we can be un(under)informed about security measures and so unable to manage all the different requirements for ensuring information security.

There are so many passwords required for all the different websites and software that we use daily that it's impossible to manage them without using shortcuts, such as using the same password – a better approach would be to use password managers (in our browsers, or separate software). Similarly for data storage, our files may be stored on multiple platforms with different processes and security requirements, and on cloud services, some of which will be outside our home country. Keeping track of all this data, remembering where it is, and ensuring that it's up to date (and protected appropriately) may be extremely difficult.

Thus, it's not in fact surprising that many students and colleagues still use problematic information practices. While many security risks are due to human limitations or errors, these risks cannot be managed effectively by asking individuals to remember to do something, or to implement additional complex practices.

To mitigate the security risks that result from human behaviour, we need to implement systems that remove the responsibility from individuals. Our security infrastructure – institutional and personal – needs to become invisible, running in the background to protect us, and something for which we need only be minimally involved.

In the not-too-distant future, we should (hopefully) no longer need to worry about passwords and 2-factor-authentication or even individual antivirus protection, because these will have been replaced by much more secure, system-based security measures (software talking to software) that removes individual users from the equation. In the meantime, however, we can each – individually and collectively (through our institutions) – demand and implement best practices (i.e., processes) that mitigate the risk for human error and so maximize the resilience of our information environment.

Securing your system

I have had software and computers infected by viruses, have clicked on links that took me to fraudulent websites, and known people who had been subjected to ransomware attacks and lost their personal and research data. These and other experiences have led me to be relatively paranoid about securing all my and my family's information systems, both at home and at the office.

Updates

One of the simplest but often ignored protections is to ensure that your computer, phone, tablet, etc., are always up to date. Aside from additional features, many of these updates will be security related.

- Ensure that your phone is set to do weekly or automatic app updates; I check and force updates every few days.
- Set your computer/tablet operating system, and all software, to automatically update.
- When you get an update notification, don't delay – do it right away.

Antivirus

Initially designed to protect software, good antivirus systems also offer comprehensive protection for our various online activities.

- Install an up-to-date antivirus system (I use Bitdefender) on all your information platforms – computer, tablet, phone.
- Many of these systems feature additional options, including VPN, protection from ransomware attacks, etc.
- Set the antivirus to systematically verify all emails, downloads, and websites, and to do regular scans.

Privacy

Basic privacy protection should be done at the level of individual platforms. Password protect your computer, phone, table. Set your computer hard drive to be encrypted and set additional encryption on any particularly sensitive folders. Turn on your computer firewall.

For additional privacy protection, install a virtual private network (VPN; I use NordVPN) to route all internet traffic through a different (and changing) IP address; this makes it extremely difficult to backtrack and identify an individual user.

- Install on your computer, tablet and phone, and use systematically whenever connecting to public Wi-Fi (e.g., library, airport, park) as these are notoriously insecure.
- Use at home to protect your privacy by preventing your service provider from tracking your online activities.
- Consider installing a VPN in the Wi-Fi router to protect your entire home (instead of a client on each computer, phone, etc.). As we move to smart homes that are Internet-connected (e.g., alarm system, thermostat), we increase our online exposure and thus need for protection.

Emails

Beware of phishing scams and ransomware attacks (and other spam) that can be used to gain access to your personal information (e.g., passwords) and files.

- Never click on links in emails nor open attachments if the email looks even remotely suspicious.
- Systematically flag spam and report scams, through your email client.
- Make sure that your antivirus is scanning your email.
- Don't send confidential information as attachments unless you're using encrypted email or a website.

Passwords

One of the more common forms of security breach, that is, the risk caused by passwords, can be mitigated by using Password managers, either based in the web browser or as standalone software (I use LastPass).

- Use one complex password (a phrase) that you can remember and then generate complex alphanumeric passwords (20+ characters) for all websites and accounts.
- Set an automatic reminder to change (update) passwords on all websites, at least annually.

Backups

As an academic, one of my greatest fears has been losing a document on which I've spent days or more working, due to a bug. My father told me the story of a fellow PhD student who, in the days before computers, lost the single printed copy of his thesis on a plane and so had to start all over from hand-written notes. Many decades later, I came close to having a similar experience. In the last year of my PhD, I had my thesis backed-up on 2 computers and 3 CD-ROMs – the document became corrupted and spread to 4 out of 5 copies. Thankfully, the one uncorrupted copy was only a few days old. Such experiences can and will still occur if we're not careful.

Secondary storage

- Backup your computer in real-time by having your desktop and all working files synchronized with cloud storage (e.g., Dropbox, Google Drive, Microsoft OneDrive).
- Set MS Office (Word, PowerPoint, etc.) or equivalent to save every 5 minutes.
- Add an external hard drive that does daily backups of your entire computer, both at home and at the office.

Uninterrupted Power Supply (UPS) Batteries

Power failures are very problematic, both due to the loss of work and the damage they can cause to electronics. In my neighbourhood, power outages are sufficiently frequent that we've installed multiple backup batteries at home. Plugging the computer and modem/router into a UPS battery will ensure that a power surge or failure does not fry your electronics and gives you between a few minutes to even a few hours to finish what you're doing. My setup is the following:

- Desktop computer UPS (lasts 3+ hrs): APC UPS Back-UPS Pro (BX1500M)
- Modem/router UPS (because not near our computers) so internet doesn't drop: 600VA APC Back-UPS (BE600M1)

I've lost power in the middle of a Zoom meeting and only noticed because the lights went out!

After a major power outage in Montreal in April 2023, I ordered an additional portable battery (which can also work as a UPS) to charge cellphones, tablets, laptops (BLUETTI Portable Power Station EB3A) so that we have connectivity for 5-8 hours.

Conclusions

You can never be too paranoid when it comes to security and protecting your information systems. Now an integral part of our daily lives, these systems unfortunately still require an undue amount of individual responsibility to ensure their security, and that is a major source of risk. Nonetheless, knowing that these requirements can become unmanageable if treated individually, we can implement good practices – i.e., systems or processes that do not require much attention – that make them more secure. In so doing, we use information systems to mitigate rather than augment the risk of human error.

Tips and Tricks for Working with the Media

Understand the medium and adjust the message

Bryn Williams-Jones
Sept 19, 2023

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Photo by Jason Rosewell on Unsplash

Summary

A free and vibrant media is fundamental to a healthy democracy, and as academics, we can help by sharing our expertise with journalists, who translate these ideas into the public space. But we need to accept that journalists are not academics, and they work with different objectives and time constraints. Acknowledge this, and you will have a rewarding media experience.

I first started working with journalists as a PhD student in the late 1990s – my supervisor had forwarded me interview requests he thought I could handle, and for which he didn't have time. I was doing research on the ethics of direct-to-consumer genetic testing, and the policy implications of the commercialization of health services for the Canadian health care system, and for equitable access to care. Passionate about my research, and convinced of its public importance, I seized on these opportunities to share my work with a broader audience by doing media interviews… but with much trepidation!

My first print, radio, and TV interviews were an eye-opening experience, to say the least. What I learned quickly and confirmed over the years was that there are vastly different perspectives between journalists and academics about how to effectively engage with a topic, the time frames in which to respond to an issue or question, and the locus of control and responsibility for the final product. It's thus important to recognize these differences and to adjust our behaviour and expectations.

The following is a reflection on my experience working with the mainstream media; I will talk about social media and other formats of knowledge transfer in a subsequent post.

Broadcast: Television / Radio

- You will often first meet with a researcher (sometimes the journalist), and it's with them that you'll have the most interesting conversation! The subsequent interview may even seem anticlimactic, the questions less interesting.
- The pre-interview is your chance to help the journalist better understand the context of the issue. Tell them what questions they should ask, what are the important issues to explore; help (re)frame the subsequent interview to be more interesting.
- Whether its pre-recorded or live, get to the point; use short punchy statements (30s-1min answers). Start with strong statements or conclusions, then build to nuance or context.
- Circle back at the end of the interview to reiterate key take-home messages.
- Give the journalist room to ask lots of questions. If you slide into monotone, 3min monologues, you'll never get invited back.
- Don't be boring! Be animated, laugh, use anecdotes, be engaging, personable.
- Avoid prepared "stock phrases" – you don't want to sound like a politician.
- Answer the questions the journalist didn't ask that are important.
- You can refuse to do things, such as the silly "walk down the hallway" or "hold this book and look serious" clip for TV.
- Remember that you're translating for a general audience. Simplify concepts or facts and use lots of examples. Ask yourself: how would I explain this to my family or non-academic friends?

- The 8min morning radio show / drive home or 30min lunch call-in is easy and stress-free – you can do interviews while still in your pyjamas! But there's no re-take because it's almost always live, so go with the flow.
- TV can have a much bigger reach than radio because there's a massive audience, but sometimes it will only be a few minutes (or less!) after editing. Often, it's pre-recorded.
- For the TV panel of "talking heads", be confident and engaging, react to the comments of other panelists, but don't get into an academic debate. Your goal is to help inform the audience, not score points.
- If you accept to do the cross-country radio show blitz – same theme, similar questions, similar shows in different time zones – you can reach a national audience.
- Going to the studio for an onsite interview can be effective but is hugely time consuming, requires tons of makeup (even heavier for women). It's usually required for documentaries or investigative news.
- For short interviews, I systematically do these by videoconference, which is increasingly the norm. So, it's key to have good home office/work equipment and bandwidth, and to test beforehand – I've had horrible interviews because of problems with my internet connection.
- There's a big difference between working with an investigative journalist (they're researchers!) on an in-depth documentary (e.g., hour long interviews, advanced preparation; 15-20min of you in the final story) vs. 3min on the evening news. Different audiences, different formats, different objectives.

Print

- Accept that you have very little or no control over the final product. Journalists will rarely if ever provide a text for you to review before publication. They are the author, not you; and the final story is their responsibility.
- You will give a 30-45min interview, and it may result in only 1-3 quotes from you, which may seem a big investment for little impact.
- A short news story is different from in-depth investigative news or magazine story.
- Prepare good "sound bites" or "quotable" comments that summarize your key ideas or message.
- Sometimes the final story looks like "academic plagiarism", copying all your ideas and arguments but with only 1-2 quotes. This is normal – accept that you've helped the journalist tell a good story, and to reach a large audience.
- The content can stay online for years, so it can have a lasting impact.
- Mistakes (your name, title, affiliation) can be corrected for online content if spotted at publication, so contact the journalist right away for a correction (be nice!).
- The interview is also about educating journalists, helping them get access to academic research, so they can do better knowledge transfer to the public. Mission accomplished!

The Bad Experiences

Over my many years and hundreds of interviews, the bad experiences have been few in number; overwhelmingly my work with journalists has been incredibly positive! But one or two bad experiences are sufficient for me to blacklist a journalist or organization unless they apologize and change their behaviour. And I share these negative experiences with colleagues and never work again with the journalist or their organization.

For example:

- In a print story, recounts all your ideas from a 45min interview but doesn't cite you once.
- Or they distort the meaning of your words or flow of the interview, going in the opposite direction of what you were trying to explain.
- Invites you to participate in a discussion (TV or radio) with another expert and then tries to force you into a Yes/No, For/Against debate when the reality is nuanced.
- Badly manages a panel discussion (TV or radio) and doesn't give all the panelists equal time to speak, something that is especially frequent for women experts who're still given far less place than their male counterparts.

Concluding Advice

When you're contacted by a journalist, understand that they likely need an interview by the end of the day, for the evening show or for a print story published the following morning. So, if you're interested, respond quickly.

I regularly respond to invitations when the story is in my broad area of expertise – as many journalists have told me in the past, they don't need the hyper-specialist, they need someone who can make complex issues accessible to their audience. But if you're not free or not comfortable with the topic, refer the journalist to colleagues or students (with their email addresses) who might be interested, who are competent and who you know would do a good interview.

I consider it a professional duty to work with the media, to help move knowledge from academia into the public space. My goal, as an ethicist, is to help my fellow citizens be better equipped to think about challenging social issues, and to ask important questions of decision-makers and hold them accountable for the decisions that affect us as citizens. A free and vibrant media is fundamental to a healthy democracy, and as academics, we can participate in this democratic process by sharing our expertise with journalists, who then translate these ideas into the public space.

But I'm also an extrovert, someone who is comfortable thinking on his feet, and who gets a thrill working with different publics. I know many colleagues and students who are not comfortable being "on show" … and that's OK. What's important is that some – not all – academics take on this role of being a bridge between the university and the public. The downside, however, is that this public engagement can lead to post-interview hate mail (email, social media), something that is especially pernicious for women experts.

If you're not yet experienced but are interested in working with journalists, take a media training course offered by your institution (e.g., avoid turning on your chair if it has castors, do not cross your arms). Then follow your own intuition, find your own style, and be yourself.

Most importantly, recognize that journalists are not academics. They are consummate communicators who're excellent at their profession, and with whom it's a pleasure to work. They can be important allies, but you have to accept their objectives and work within their constraints. Acknowledge this, and you will have a rewarding media experience.

Experimenting with Knowledge Transfer

Means recognizing the strengths and limitations of different media

Bryn Williams-Jones
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Photo by Nejc Soklič on Unsplash

Summary

Academics wanting to reach non-academic publics or to engage differently with students and colleagues should explore various approaches to knowledge transfer. Choose those platforms with which you're comfortable, for which you have the energy and talent – and have fun sharing your ideas!

My early experiences working with the mainstream media piqued my interest in knowledge transfer and a desire to experiment with various ways to translate my bioethics research to connect with different audiences.

Collaborating with journalists is an extremely effective and rewarding means of sharing research findings with the general public. But one of the major downsides is that we lack control – as academics, we are the expert consulted, we provide the intellectual content, but the journalist is the author and in control of the final product. And as people used to being authors of and responsible for our communication, it can take a conscious effort to let go and give this control to another.

This desire to have more control over my public engagement led me to a explore other media and formats where I could dictate both the content and the form of the product and adjust to different audiences. In exploring these different media, I learned that "the medium is the message", that the form is as important as the content.

Here, I explore some formats I've used extensively – and I think effectively – over the years: public presentations to community groups or professional audiences, webinars, commentaries and letters to the editor, blogs like this one, and social media.

Public / professional presentations

Public lectures are, in a sense, much easier than media interviews because you're in control of the presentation. But the audience – whether a general interested public or a group of professionals – and the venue can prove to be very challenging if you're not prepared in advance.

- The form is closer to the academic presentation style used in courses or conferences.
- You often have more time than a 15-20min conference presentation, but you rarely have 1-3 hours like you would in a classroom. Often, it's a 30-45 minute presentation and then 15-30min questions, but highly variable.
- Like with journalists, you're most likely talking to non-expert audiences, so they need a very engaging format to understand the message.
- Be careful to avoid "Death by PowerPoint" with lots of text that will bore the audience – instead, use images and metaphors, real-world examples, personal anecdotes, diagrams, etc.
- Is visual support (PowerPoint) necessary or would it be better, for this audience, to do a "stand-up" presentation without media support? Are you comfortable talking without notes or slides?
- If possible, visit the venue at which you'll presenting so you can adjust your presentation style.
    - Can you move about among the audience or are you at the front of the hall?
    - Will people be able to see your slides from the back of the hall?
    - Will you be using a microphone – hand-held, lapel?
- Arrive early and bring a bottle of water!

Webinars

The advent of low-cost or free video-conferencing platforms has massively increased accessibility to different audiences. We can now, in principle, reach literally anyone with an Internet connection. But you also have to work harder to be engaging, because the screen is a barrier to reading and connecting with the audience… so adjust accordingly.

- Is the format an individual presentation (see above recommendations), a dialogue with a host, a panel discussion or debate with other colleagues?
- Is the platform one with which you're familiar (e.g., Zoom, Teams) or a specialized product, and is there tech support?
- If you're using a PowerPoint, test the Share function in advance – a frequent source of problems, and stress!
- Will the presentation be recorded and disseminated at a later point? If so, can you link to or reuse the content for your own purposes?
- Can you see the audience (and is there a chat feature) or are you just talking to the screen, to the moderator or to other panelists?
- How will questions be presented: by the moderator or via a chat?
- As with working from home, it's essential to have a good setup (high-speed Internet, camera, mic, lighting) and to test in advance.

Commentaries / Letters to the Editor

A commentary or letter to the editor is a means to share research findings, highlight an important issue, point to a problem, clarify a concept, etc. But it's not the same as writing the Introduction or summary to an academic article.

- You need to have a very clear story line and message, develop only 1 major argument or idea, and be very topical otherwise the text will be rejected by the editors.
- Letters or editorials can be harder to get published, because there's often limited place in comparison with journalistic content, so you're competing for space.
- You have to be extremely concise: letters will be 250-500 words, commentaries 800-1000 words. A too long text will be rejected or massively cut. You need to ruthlessly edit as there's no room for blather.
- Venues such as The Conversation, Policy Options, Impact Ethics, etc., are great places to publish research summaries, syntheses on specific issues, and commentaries aimed at general or specialized publics. And you'll often be helped editing your text by trained journalists.
- Some venues publish under Creative Commons licenses, so the content also often gets reprinted by other platforms, including in the mainstream media, thus substantially increasing the reach.

Blogs

Text, audio (podcast) or video blogs are an easy and fun means to create content and share ideas, are a relatively low-cost investment, and are totally under your control.

- Choose a platform with which you're comfortable, many of which are free (such as Substack or Blogger) or host on your own website (more work).
- Blogs require a coherent story line or theme to interest readers, so you need to have a good idea of who your audience is, and what you can offer of interest.
- Work to develop a dynamic writing style that's accessible and engaging. Experiment with images, format, links to other resources.
- Need regular contributions, every few days or weekly (like this blog), which can be very demanding to produce – it requires a constant flow of ideas and significant time investment.
- Reach can be limited if you don't have lots of followers… and it can be hard and slow to grow an audience (years, not months). Think about how to expand your network, sharing your posts by email and social media.

Social Media

As someone who started blogging back in the 1990s, when there were few means to reach wider audiences, the development of social media seemed to me the next logical step. Social media each have different forms and functions, and a public reach and engagement that can be destabilizing if you're not prepared.

- Choose your media carefully because each – Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Mastodon, etc. – have evolved different cultures and formats. You can use one or many but adjust accordingly.
- The advantage of social media is that it's so easy – you can contribute to almost anything. But your content can also get diverted, lead to negative comments, trolling, and be a dissatisfying experience.
- Social media posts tend to be relatively short, so concision becomes critical – readers disconnect from posts that are too long.
- Sometimes a couple of short sentences in reaction to a news story or someone else's post are all that's needed to contribute to a discussion, to add some nuance to an issue.
- A longer idea or argument can be articulated in a series of short posts (e.g., a Twitter thread), or in a series of longer Facebook or LinkedIn posts.
- You can use these platforms effectively to share other content of interest to you – news, events, your blog, and this can help build an audience of followers.
- As for blogs, building an audience requires regular (even daily) engagement so think strategically about how, where, when and how much (time, content) you can invest in social media.
- Managing multiple accounts on different platforms requires a clear plan (what goes where), and software to manage and plan posts (I use Buffer).
    - I run different accounts for 3 major "personalities" – Bryn Williams-Jones (the Professor), Programmes de bioéthique (the academic program), and BioéthiqueOnline (the journal) – across Facebook, LinkedIn, and Mastodon.
    - These different personalities each have different but also overlapping content, as they reach different audiences. And I intentionally cross-post the same content across platforms (Bluesky, FB, LinkedIn).
- Be careful about setting boundaries between your personal presence on social media, and your professional identity – if you mix the two, you're inviting a potentially global audience into your private life. You may want to use separate accounts or platforms, with "work" on one and personal content (friends, family) on another.
- Accept that individual social media posts are transient, not lasting content as for a blog or commentary. It is the flow of posts that makes the difference, over time, and your reach to an audience interested by your ideas.

Take home message

There are of course many other classic formats of knowledge transfer – aside from academic articles and presentations – such as briefing notes or reports to decision makers in the public or private sectors. Other, more creative approaches, include using video-clips (YouTube), cartoons or graphic novels to reach publics less interested in text...

For those who wish to reach non-academic publics – or to engage differently with students or academic colleagues – I encourage you to explore and experiment with these and other approaches to knowledge transfer. But be realistic. Not all of us are prolific writers, innovative cartoonists, or producers of viral video clips!

Find those platforms for knowledge transfer with which you're comfortable, and for which you have the time, energy and talent – and have fun sharing your ideas!

Social Media Sucks

You have to look elsewhere for good content

Bryn Williams-Jones
Nov 19, 2024

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Summary

As much as algorithms helped in the early days of social media to share personalized content and stories that we never otherwise would have encountered, today they seem to be killing most of what made these platforms interesting. Instead of spaces for creativity and innovation, much of social media has become at best boring and at worst a dumpster fire of hate. One holdout is Substack, where there is a burgeoning and vibrant community of writers to explore.

Photo by Kyle Glenn on Unsplash

I'm old enough to remember the birth of the Internet and the first early online communities in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These was the heyday of dynamic exchange between strangers, the bridging of worlds that had hitherto been impossible, the creation of communities based not on religion, culture or proximity, but on shared interests. I started my first blog in 1993 and really enjoyed the freedom and creativity of social media in the early 2000s (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn), as it provided access to an ever-expanding global community of people sharing their thoughts – that is, before the Internet got fully monetized and we all became "content creators".

For a news junky like me, social media provided a perfect complement to the mainstream media outlets, delivering an immediacy and context-specific content often not found in traditional venues; and this only accelerated with the collapse of regional news and the merging of national media.

The algorithms used in social media – trained as they are on hundreds of millions of users – have reached an impressive level of sophistication and ability to fine-tune content delivery to meet diverse and very particular interests. This is great, for example, when Spotify presents me with both the music that I know and love, and other musicians in related categories or styles that I don't know and may enjoy, which is very often the case. My musical interests continue to expand, and often in unpredictable directions (for me at least).

But algorithms are not so great for written content or the sharing of personal opinions. Instead of facilitating the open exchange of ideas, they've led to the creation of echo chambers that reinforce polarization and group think. And they've become even worse with inflammatory content increasingly prioritized, as is the current norm on X (former Twitter).

Even a year ago, I was still keen on using various social media, both for content consumption and also as an effective venue for knowledge transfer. At the time, I was managing 10 different accounts on Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook to promote my bioethics journal and my own work as a university professor – and I enjoyed it! But over the last few months, like many others, I've noticed that much of the content that I'm presented has become boring. There's less diversity and creativity; everything seems generic or simply slightly altered copies of things that I've already seen multiple times.

When Elon Musk bought Twitter and transformed it into X, the platform rapidly went downhill because there was no longer any control or oversight of the most hateful parts of the Internet community; but I nonetheless held on as this was my means to access current news from Ukraine. My interest in the country started in 2022 following the latest Russian invasion in February of that year, and my PhD student Gabrielle's trips to Ukraine and her research on the ethics of citizen engagement, which she recounts in her Moral Compass blog. To understand more about what she was experiencing, I followed multiple local accounts, OSINT experts and policy analysts, and thus was able to stay informed and share with Gabrielle what I was learning, in reaction to and as a complement for her on the ground experience. But then even those reliable accounts started being buried by the X algorithms, and the news became more sporadic. I finally gave up and deleted my account.

Facebook, which had been a good source of news and entertainment, has followed a similar path. As I wasn't following lots of different people outside academia, I'd managed to avoid the most extreme or hateful content that many people had started complaining about. So my feed has now basically become cat videos and humour, which I enjoy but don't want all the time. I'm no longer getting anything intellectually interesting, so while I haven't yet deleted my account as I still share my blog there (although it's getting less and less readers via this platform), I now never look at my Facebook feed.

The hold out for a functional social media seemed to be LinkedIn, where I could follow lots of different people and would get access to relevant events, bioethics job postings (which I'd share), and interesting new stories and academic content. But like Facebook, that seems to have changed in recent months, and my feed is now largely composed of self-congratulatory posts about people presenting at conferences (why should I care?), getting new jobs (congratulations, I suppose), etc. It still seems to be a functional professional network (although not sure what it provides in terms of actual benefits), but the algorithm is not what it used to be – so I push content (my blog, job announcements) but rarely read posts. Sigh.

I'm still a regular consumer of YouTube content, where I get some news about Ukraine (e.g., Reporting from Ukraine, Wes O'Donnell) and also follow a dozen channels on the martial arts and self-defence. I'm less influenced by and at the mercy of the algorithms because I follow a stable group of reliable content producers who're providing interesting material on a regular basis. But when I look at the general feed, I'm not discovering new content that I've not already seen before, in other forms.

The exception seems to be Substack, where I publish my blog, due to its focus on writers and quality. Yes, there is still some content that is clearly AI / ChatGPT generated (e.g., generic personal introductions on Notes), but there's also a plethora of incredibly interesting writers! I get my Ukraine news and analysis fix by reading Andrew Tanner's Rogue Systems Recon, Wes O'Donnell's Eyes Only (a complement to his YouTube), and Timothy Garton Ash's History of the Present, to name a few. I started reading Black Cloud Six: Unscripted, a retired Canadian army officer's perspectives on local and international affairs (and he includes regular cat photos!), The Fry Corner by the brilliant and hilarious actor/author Stephen Fry, for his quirky takes on this and that, and Brian Klass' The Garden of Forking Paths, which gives a smart and accessible synthesis of complex topics.

As a fan of the Internet from its early days, I've been disappointed to see its potential evaporate as it was transformed from a wild and creative space into generic Vanilla Internet, and as algorithms were trained to reinforce group think instead of creating spaces to allow us to expand our horizons. Some of those creative spaces still exist, just not on mainstream social media – so look elsewhere, in venues such as Substack.

Being a Public Academic

We can and must contribute to informed public debate

Bryn Williams-Jones
Oct 24, 2023

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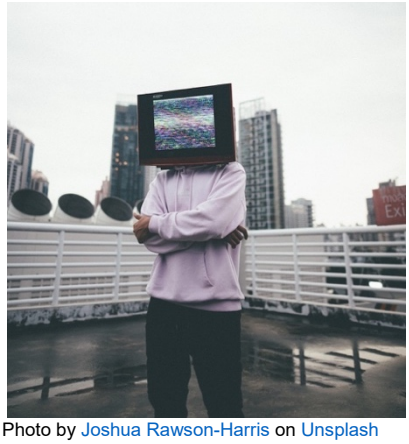

Photo by Joshua Rawson-Harris on Unsplash

Summary

Academia can be an important force to counter intolerance, misinformation, and injustice by sharing publicly the best research, conducted with intellectual rigour, and articulated with strong and transparent arguments. So why be a public academic? Because we can, and so we must.

In previous posts I've talked about how to work effectively with the media, how to do knowledge transfer, and my experiences being a public academic. But I haven't talked about the more profound issue: ***Why be a public academic?*** It's not enough just to say that I think it's my professional responsibility, which I truly believe, or explore ***How*** to do this effectively – we need to talk more about ***Why***.

During my bioethics PhD and post-doc, I remember at times – and with much chagrin – turning a condescending gaze on senior colleagues who were becoming "academic media stars". In my naivete, I thought that these colleagues were not doing "real" work as academics, that is, rigorous research published in the leading journals. As if engaging with the public was "less serious" work and something easy to do. How little did I know!

Coming to terms with my own outgoing personality (aka a loudmouth), I started appreciating the work and dedication of colleagues who were very consciously putting themselves out in the public space as an integral part of their work as professors.
I had not recognized the rigour involved in doing good knowledge transfer – there can be no transfer if there is no knowledge; and synthesizing a complex idea or concept into something that is accessible to a general public (or even a university class) requires detailed reflection and substantial effort.

Nor had I been aware of the personal courage required to leave the safe halls of the Ivory Tower to move into the uncertainty of the public space, nor the risk to person and career of becoming a public academic. To these colleagues, my sincere and humble *mea culpa*!

As I started becoming more comfortable working with the media as a junior professor, I was inspired by two colleagues who I saw as models for working effectively in the public space:

- Tim Caulfield, professor of health law at the University of Alberta, who has done incredible work fighting pseudoscience and misinformation promulgated by celebrities, through a phenomenal number of print and TV interviews, posts on X/Twitter, in popular books (e.g., Is Gwyneth Paltrow Wrong About Everything?), and even through TV series such as A User's Guide to Cheating Death.

- Peter Singer, bioethicist and professor of medicine at the University of Toronto (not to be confused with the Australian utilitarian philosopher), a pillar of Canadian bioethics media engagement, former director of the Joint Center for Bioethics, who championed the development of public health ethics and global health research, and went on to lead Grand Challenges Canada and then become Special Advisor to the Director General of the WHO.

These and other public bioethics colleagues showed, to me, a multitude of ways that academics could be publicly and meaningfully engaged outside the walls of the university, with the media, in policy making, in raising public awareness, all in the name of trying to make the world a better place.

As I found my stride in working with the media and started to articulate my own "voice" in doing knowledge transfer – and began encouraging colleagues to do the same! – I also become conscious of the very different experience of my female colleagues.

Unlike their male-counterparts, women academics are disproportionately the subject of hate mail and social media trolling, things that many male academics, me included, never or only rarely experience. It takes a special sort of courage on the part of my colleagues Vardit Ravitsky and Roxane Borgès Da Silva to continue to put themselves out in the public space, knowing that they will be attacked on social media, because they believe that this work is important, that as public academics they can and must make a difference.

In his little book, Profession éthicien, Daniel Weinstock presents a manifest for philosophical ethicists – and I would argue bioethicists in general – to engage publicly in important social debates that affect our fellow citizens, and the world. In bioethics, we are expert at working with sensitive topics of life and death, in deconstructing simplistic affirmations or world views to show their real complexity, of helping give voice to or making place for vulnerable or marginalized groups to participate in public debate, and in proposing practical and pragmatic solutions that can be implemented by professionals and decision-makers.

In doing this work in the public space, academic bioethicists (and academics in general) can and must defend what they believe is right. But we cannot afford to be partisan or pontificate on topics beyond our expertise, over-simplifying and not providing the necessary nuance to complex issues. Those who take partisan roles not only contribute to inflaming already polarized issues, but they also do a disservice to their field, and to academia in general.

The media and public space are all too full of conflictual, angry, and hateful opinions and stories that contribute not to dialogue and civil debate, but to isolation and intolerance. Academia can and should be a counter to intolerance, to misinformation, to injustice. Through good public engagement, we can contribute to sharing with a broad public knowledge that is based in the best research, conducted with intellectual rigour, and articulated with strong and transparent arguments.

So, to come back to my question at the start, *Why be a public academic?*

Because we can, and so we must.

What is a “Good” CV?

A means to showcase experience, skills and excellence

Bryn Williams-Jones
Oct 3, 2023

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/what-is-a-good-cv
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Summary

An academic CV – whether a PDF or in online platforms – is an important means to showcase yourself as an expert in the field, or as an emerging expert if still a student. It must document your successes and showcase your productivity, and it should be easy to read, engaging... and pretty!

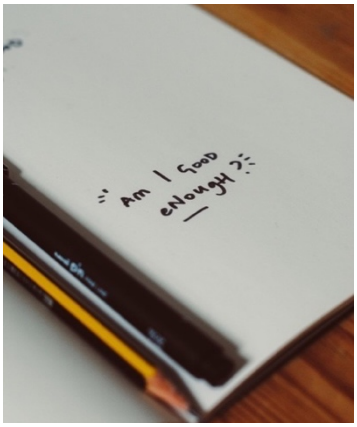


Photo by Nik on Unsplash

Throughout my academic career, starting as a graduate student, I’ve experimented with different formats for my CVs. Importantly, I learned from my supervisors and colleagues that a good presentation was critical for success in applications for scholarships and jobs – “if it’s ugly or hard to read, your audience won’t get past the first page.” Regardless of how much interesting work you’ve done – whether this be publications, conferences, prizes or scholarships, research or teaching experience, etc. – it won’t be recognized if you can’t present it in a manner that’s accessible, and visually engaging. The format is just as important as the content.

I frequently rant to colleagues and students about ugly CVs that are badly formatted or organized, because they’re mixing categories that should be distinct (e.g., peer-reviewed with non-reviewed publications; submitted mixed with in-press manuscripts; conferences presentations with guest lectures in courses), or that the items are not numbered (when more than 4-5 in a list), or are too detailed and so lose the flow and sense of what’s important. When a CV is badly formatted, I get frustrated and start to have an implicit bias against the candidate… “they can’t be good if they can’t clearly present their work in a CV!”

Obviously the CV will depend on one’s stage of academic career, that is, whether one is a graduate student or newly completed PhD, or a more established professor, and there are numerous model templates online for each. But the categories will invariably be the same, starting obviously with contact info, and maybe a summary statement (1 paragraph bio), then followed by education, employment history, prizes and scholarships, publications, presentations, teaching experience, professional affiliations, etc.

Unlike professional CVs, which tend to be relatively short (e.g., 4-5 pages) and focused on the essentials related to the position, for academic CVs, at least in North America, we’re looking for completeness. As a PhD student my CV was 9 pages; now as a senior professor, it’s over 70 pages. And because I work in a French-language institution, I keep my CV up-to-date in both French and English, which was incredibly important when applying for promotion and seeking letters of support from both French and non-French speaking colleagues.

The CV documents every activity that is remotely related to the academic career: research, teaching, administration, service and outreach. It’s the master list that you will use for submitting scholarship or grant applications, either having to provide a concise PDF version (e.g., last 5 years) or to fill-in on an online platform. So, it’s also critical that you regularly update your CV, whether it be when you accept to give an upcoming presentation, or a publication changes categories from “submitted” to “accepted”. Trust me, you do not want to try to remember what you did 6 months ago so you can update your CV for an important opportunity on a very short deadline.

When applying for academic jobs and some grant or scholarship competitions, you will be asked to submit the complete CV. But accept that no one will likely read it in detail; they’ll read it diagonally, looking for fit with key selection criteria, e.g., discipline, research productivity, teaching experience. It’s thus critical that you make this reading easy with summaries, e.g., n=X publications, or a table of grant funding amounts. Reviewers or members of selection committees will closely read the cover letter, which provides the qualitative summary of the quantitative information in the CV and tells a narrative of who you are and what you do; but they’ll cross-check with the CV to dig into the quantitative aspects.

What we really don't need to know is that you're a competitive soccer player or accomplished musician; it's simply not relevant, and at least in academia, it looks amateurish and shows that you don't know the rules of the game or what's important. We also don't want to see your photo (which is often the norm in Europe, Africa and Asia) or know your age, your marital status, or whether you have children (with the exception of parental leave). These are all personal details that are irrelevant to your academic standing, and more importantly, are seen – rightly, in my view – as potential sources of discrimination and so should be excluded from the CV.

The academic CV is not, however, limited to a PDF document (never send as MSWord documents!) – you can and should translate it onto online CV platforms to facilitate academic networking. This can help enormously in job applications and career progression, and gives a more personal tone, because you can add a photo (but not age or family information), show your academic interests, etc. I highly recommend LinkedIn as an excellent free professional jobs platform, and ORCID, which is an amazing open access resource with a unique identifier, and easily tracks your academic productivity (I stopped using Academia.edu and ResearchGate when they started focusing on the monetization of academic work). A good addition to document your publications is to create a Google Scholar page, and for those of us in the humanities or philosophy oriented fields, to share your works on sites like PhilPapers. These websites complement your institutional CV or research centre pages (usually a short bio), and are often more accessible because better indexed.

The academic CV is an important means to showcase yourself as an expert in your field, or as an emerging expert if you're still a student. It must document all your successes and showcase your productivity, and it should be pretty!

How to Write a Bad Cover Letter

To be taken seriously, avoid these mistakes

Bryn Williams-Jones
Nov 5, 2024

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/cover-letter
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/33952

Photo by Mihai Moisa on Unsplash

Summary

A good cover letter is a key entry point for evaluating job applications, as it's often read first. But all too often people get it wrong, for example, by trying to be too creative, talking too much about their past and not what they can contribute in the future, being too personal or even coming across as desperate. Avoid these mistakes and present yourself at your best and so maximize your chances of being retained for the next step in the hiring process.

We're in the hiring process again in my department, with three different professor positions to be filled. While a lot of work – because there will be dozens of dossiers for each position – it's also a stimulating experience reading through the different proposals of candidates for our positions. The interesting dossiers rise quickly to the surface, while those that belong at the bottom are also evident. A bit like reading student essays, I can usually tell within the first page whether it's a keeper or destined for the reject pile.

Academic hiring is an incredibly competitive process, so candidates need to know how to put together a convincing application package, and this starts with a good cover letter. After being on more than a dozen hiring committees, I've seen some truly horrible letters.

The following formats are ones that I most strongly discourage, because they will definitely not help convince the selection committee that your dossier is serious, competitive, and merits being retained for the long list, and is maybe even worth going forward to the short list.

The usual caveats apply: I'm talking here about applications to academic positions at a North American university, so I fully accept that the norms for cover letters may vary across countries or other professional contexts. But I think the general principles of these recommendations are still broadly applicable.

- **Be overly creative:** it can be fun to write a letter in the form of poetry or prose, and it will certainly set your application apart from that of other candidates, but doing so is a huge risk. Instead of intriguing the committee, you're most likely to give the impression that you're not a serious candidate, or that you're trying to distract from weaknesses with your dossier. A more classic if less creative approach is a safer bet.
- **Talk too much about your PhD:** for an Assistant professor position, it's relevant to talk about your recent PhD work and expertise, but if you spend more than a paragraph or two on this instead of projecting yourself into the future, you'll be seen as not yet ready. You want to make it very clear that you've moved beyond your student days. So emphasize the competencies and experience developed during your PhD and postdoc (if you did one), and then articulate a clear plan that shows that you're an autonomous researcher and educator, able to hit the ground running.
- **Build too slowly:** don't give us a detailed biographical narrative or wait until the end of the second page to show that you have the necessary skills and experience for the job. Introduce yourself and then take the reader through an overview of your research area and focus, your teaching experience, involvement in service and outreach, etc. Very often you'll have other documents (e.g., a research plan or teaching statement) where you can expand on these aspects in more detail.
- **Be too concise:** a letter of less than a page in length shows that you don't know how to play the academic game and apply for a professor position (I recommend 1.5-2 pages). This is not an application for an unskilled entry level job, so you should have a lot to say. Also, remember that this is the first document that selection committee members will read, so it's your best chance to generate interest and encourage them to read the rest of your application package.

- **Share too much personal information:** we don't need to know that you want the job because you have family living in the city, nor do we need to hear about your hobbies, or your family or childcare responsibilities. These are all irrelevant to the position and their inclusion gives the impression that you can't separate the personal from the professional. The personal can come into discussions if you get to the short list, where you legitimately ask questions about life in the city, childcare resources, etc., and this also shows your enthusiasm for the position, and that you're personable.
- **Be desperate:** you may be in a horrible dead-end job or working with toxic colleagues and thus see the position as a way to escape; or you may have been unable to get an academic position and so see this position as your last chance to get into academia. Even if this is the case, don't say or even imply that you're desperate. Doing so gives the impression that you're instrumentalizing the position and aren't likely to contribute meaningfully. The selection committee's job is to propose the best candidate, and that will be someone who shows that they are ready to flourish in the position.
- **Come across as arrogant:** if you tell us that you will be a major asset to our department or will revolutionize one of our areas of research or teaching, you're guaranteed to alienate members of the selection committee. You're also almost certainly wrong and it shows that you don't know much about the department. If you do have a super star dossier, be modest but confident in presenting your accomplishments. When a very strong candidate appears arrogant in their letter, the committee will reasonably think that this person will not be a team player or good colleague, and that the job will just be a stepping stone to another university in a few years.
- **Cold and factual:** don't just list your productivity, without a few niceties at the start or end of the letter, or personal anecdotes or examples about what you do, how and why. The letter should be the qualitative complement to the detailed quantitative information in your CV, providing an accessible narrative that explains your experience and expertise. This is also the place to show that you're a colleague with whom we'd like to work.
- **Me, me, me:** while it's critical to present yourself, if your cover letter is only about you and your accomplishments and never talks about research collaborations and networks, your supervision or work with students, or your experience on committees, it will send a strong message that you're a loner and not a team player. Instead, give examples that show that you're someone with whom colleagues will be able to collaborate effectively in research, teaching, or service.

A good letter tells a story about who you are, where you're from, and where you see yourself going in this new position. It gives examples of your skills and expertise and provides a window into your personality. And it's the first thing that people will read, so you must make the right impression from the start; if the reader gets bored or turned off, they'll stop reading and move on to the next candidate's dossier.

Pay attention to formatting, because this sends an implicit message about professionalism. The letter should be fully justified (not left aligned, which looks like you're writing an email or submitting a manuscript), single spaced, and with your current institutional header, contact details and signature at the end.

If you're a francophone and applying to a French-language institution, write the cover letter in French; your CV can be in English if you've been at English-language institutions (but you'll need to translate if hired). If you're not a francophone but have some mastery of the language, it's also good to translate the letter into French (use DeepL); but make sure to have it proofed by a native French speaker as grammatical errors will send the wrong message. Definitely do not pretend that you have an advanced level of fluency if you can barely speak or understand the language, as this will be tested during the selection process.

Take your time to work up a strong letter, then test it with your friends, family and colleagues – in so doing, you'll present yourself at your best and maximize your chances of being retained for the next step in the selection process.

(Don’t) Pay to Publish

Diamond open access is the solution

Bryn Williams-Jones
Dec 3, 2024

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/pay-to-publish
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/40346

Summary

Open access publishing of academic journals is critical to promoting open science and the free circulation of information. It’s a direct challenge to the monopolistic and closed-science models of the Big 5 publishers who’ve come to control academic publishing. The challenge for OA journals is building a funding model that enables them to remain viable, and to even thrive. But forcing authors to pay isn’t the way.

Photo by Elijah Mears on Unsplash

As Editor-in-Chief of the Canadian Journal of Bioethics/Revue canadienne de bioéthique (CJB/RCB), a bilingual (English/French) diamond open access (OA) journal – that is, one with no author publication fees or user access charges – I was recently invited to the launch of the Réseau Circé, a network funded by the Fonds de recherche du Québec to support French-language journals in transitioning towards diamond OA. Note that this model is an explicit step away from traditional subscription funded journals with access restricted to subscribers (individuals or institutions), or “gold” OA journals that charge author publication fees to fund their activities, while making access to content freely available.

Our journal is a “high-performer” according to many of the colleagues I talked with at the event. We’re already diamond OA and completely online, have long established institutional collaborations with the Université de Montréal Libraries (who host our website and provide invaluable technical and strategic support) and the non-profit consortium Érudit (who publish and promote the dissemination of our issues). We’re well indexed nationally and internationally and so are visible to our target audiences; and we have up-to-date editorial policies and procedures. Yes, I’m blowing our own horn! After 12 years of navigating the world or OA publishing, we’ve implemented editorial best practices and become an established actor in the Canadian bioethics community.

Not surprisingly, many of the concerns raised by editors of traditional paper and subscription-based journals were not relevant for me and the other editors of diamond OA journals – we didn’t need support with transitioning to OA or implementing best practices, because we were already there. However, a common concern for all the editors, regardless of their journal format, was the incredible challenge posed by the woefully inadequate funding of non-profit academic journals in Quebec, and Canada more generally. We were thus keen to learn about ways to reduce costs (e.g., by sharing expertise, mutualizing services that were too costly to assume individually) and of course find additional sources of revenue.

We were all fighting “the good fight”, trying to stay afloat in an ever more competitive environment where French-language publications are a minuscule minority. Five major commercial publishers (Elsevier, Springer Nature, Wiley-Blackwell, Taylor & Francis, SAGE) dominate the international journal ecosystem, making billions of dollars in annual profits by charging libraries costly subscription fees and pushing the “pay to publish” model, notably for subscription-based journals in the health and applied sciences, as well as for their OA journals.

By contrast, independent or professional/academic society-run journals, including those who had been relying on membership fees or individual subscriptions before moving to diamond OA, do incredible work with shoe-string budgets and rely on the dedication of passionate volunteers to function. The CJB/RCB is a good example.

Founded in 2012, as a diamond OA journal, the CJB/RCB is financed entirely from public grants, notably the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and Érudit (via the Canadian Research Knowledge Network and POA). These funds allow us to pay our Scientific Director 1 day/week (although she works 3 days or more) and to cover some of our production costs; but the editorial review, manuscript processing, page setting and all the other tasks are done by our volunteer editors.

To further increase the journal's operating budget and eventually fully remunerate our Scientific Director, as well as to start paying our section editors and outsource our page setting and linguistic verification, we're always exploring additional funding sources. We now accept personal donations, recently applied for an FRQ Aid to scholarly journals grant, and were selected as one of 8 journals (the only bilingual and only Canadian journal) to benefit from an initial 3-year round of fundraising support from Lyrasis, a US non-profit that solicits institutions (e.g., libraries, research centres) through their Open Access Community Investment Program to support OA journals like ours.

As one can imagine, looking for money is a major time commitment for the editors of non-profit journals, and a lack of sufficient funds is a perpetual source of risk and obstacle to continued growth and long-term stability. Despite a commitment by editorial boards to providing spaces for the professional and academic communities to publish their research findings and access knowledge, there's a limit to what they can accomplish when relying primarily on volunteers.

Now well established as a mechanism to fund OA publications, the pay-to-publish model of author publication charges creates a significant financial barrier for the global research community, especially when the prices at some journals are over $3000USD per manuscript! These sorts of fees are outrageous, especially when one considers that university libraries are also paying high journals subscription fees, that the research that is published is invariably funded by government grants (i.e., public funds), and that all the editorial and peer-review work is done for free by members of the academic community. The public pays all the costs while the commercial publishers recoup the financial benefits.

For non-profit OA journals who levy publication charges to cover their expenses, the benefits do not necessarily outweigh the costs. First, there is the negative perception of being asked to pay to publish, especially in fields such as the humanities and social sciences). It also raises obvious conflicts of interest, because journal editors and publishers have a direct financial interest in accepting as many manuscripts as they can reasonably manage, and thus may not be overly discerning in their review and selection processes. And by extension, this raises the very real problem of distinguishing between credible journals with rigorous review processes and high publication standards, and the ever-increasing number of predatory journals that will publish anything, if you pay.

Governments have reasonably encouraged (even required) researchers to publish in OA journals to ensure that the results of publicly funded research circulate, and they have allowed researchers to pay publication fees off their grants. The problem is that the situation remains fundamentally inequitable – researchers with big grants can afford such costs, as too can a small number of graduate students who're affiliated with research centres that have scholarship competitions to cover publication charges. But most students and researchers will not have such funds, so those like me with limited grant funds will choose to pay student salaries, instead of OA charges, and so continue to submit to non-OA journals. Once again, this plays directly into the hands of the big commercial publishers.

The solution, as was clearly presented at the Reseau Circé event, is for government to invest substantially in the financing of non-profit diamond OA journals. I would argue that research funding agencies should require that researchers submit a significant percentage (even all?) of their publications to diamond OA journals, as well as archiving in university OA repositories. Further, the research community must collectively change its publication practices. First, we need to reject the frenetic publish or perish model of academic performance that has led to a massive increase in the volume but not the quality of publications and contributed to an explosion in the number of journals who're all fighting for limited resources. Second, we must systematically refuse to pay to publish and prioritize diamond OA journals as our publication venues instead of the commercial journals of the Big 5 publishers.

With such conditions, non-profit OA journals such as the CJB/RCB would have the resources needed to continue serving the academic community, now and into the future.

An Edit Too Far

When editors overstep the bounds

Bryn Williams-Jones
Dec 10, 2024

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/editing
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/40345

Photo by Kelly Sikkema on Unsplash

Summary

Journal editors, in editing manuscripts, help authors to clearly articulate their ideas and so contribute to making quality research accessible to diverse audiences. But sometimes editors overreach, going beyond correction to impose their own words or ideas, infringing upon the intellectual liberty of authors. The words and ideas in a manuscript belong to the author, and this must be respected.

As journal editor of the CJB/RCB, a volunteer-run open access journal, one of the roles that I enjoy is editing manuscripts that have been accepted and are almost ready for publication. I mobilize my dyslexic eye to visually proof the text (correcting double spaces, typos, and formatting issues), and then read the manuscript to do a final verification of content and make necessary linguistic corrections. For me, this is fun and gives me a real sense of accomplishment… I know, I'm weird.

From the earliest days of the journal, and based on a few negative personal experiences with my own submissions to various journals, our editorial policy has been to collaborate with authors from the beginning of the submission process. We're not elitist, only publishing a slim percentage of texts from the "leading scholars"; instead, we pride ourselves in accompanying authors and providing constructive critical feedback to support them in publishing quality manuscripts. Yes, we reject texts that do not meet our standards of excellence, but we only do so when we see no hope of them being publishable.

For the final edits, I systematically do these in Track Changes in Word (never in PDF!) and then return the edited manuscript to the authors for their approval and any last modifications, before sending to production (i.e., generating the PDF that will be published). The authors see exactly what corrections were made at this final stage, which they are asked to accept or reject. While it is our journal that is publishing the author's manuscript and we are thus responsible for the quality of the final text, the words and style are those of the authors, so we respect their choice and do not impose a "journal writing style". Further, the text (and ideas, arguments, data) remain the author's intellectual property, not the journal's, as we publish under a Creative Commons License.

But clearly our practices are not shared by every journal editorial board.

My PhD student, Josianne Barrette-Moran, shared with me her significant frustrations with a few journal editors who seriously overstepped the bounds of what she and I view to be acceptable relations between authors and editors. Particularly egregious were some recent experiences where editors had modified her texts in important ways and then published without her validation and approval. For example, she had references in a text modified erroneously (the wrong dates), and even more shocking, had entire sentences added by the editor that were both grammatically incorrect and distorted the line of argument and broader objective of the text. Josianne points clearly to the transgression of the editor imposing ideas that were not the author's:

> *It's like reverse plagiarism, words that I've never used, that I don't mean, that people will associate with my name.*

The harm of such editorial over-reach is that when readers note problems with a manuscript (e.g., poor grammar, logical errors or incoherencies), their likely immediate assumption is that it is the fault of the author, not the editor.

> *For the moment, my writing in both languages is my business card, everything that's attached to my name online. So it's depressing when publishers change things without your consent, without any real consultation, or even constructively...*

Even at major journals with serious publishers who should have rigorous editorial procedures, I too have had to spend hours going through proofs to correct spelling and other typographical errors that were not in my original draft. This was painful, because I was invariably forced to work off the pre-print PDF and so make line by line notes explaining the required corrections, fixing mistakes and reinserting words that should not have been deleted.

But at least at the review stage it's still possible to catch mistakes before the text goes to publication. Much more distressing were experiences, like Josianne's, where the published version had changed in important ways from the final text submitted by the author. And at this stage, the options may be limited. As Josianne notes,

> *The choices available to me are always either to write long requests for corrections, erratum, etc., or to let it drop, because every moment spent writing such requests is a moment when I'm not writing about what matters!*

As a senior professor, I have the power and status to be able to challenge a journal editor and demand that they make a correction, and that they present their excuses for this unacceptable over-reach; but this would obviously be much harder and more intimidating for students, due to their inferior status in the academic social hierarchy. And even for a professor, there's no guarantee that the response would be an apology and corrections.

Post-publication revisions shouldn't be necessary – the solution to the problem is simple, as it comes down to good editorial procedures, founded in transparency and humility.

Yes, as editors we can make mistakes, and bugs can slip through even the best proofing system. I've corrected published manuscript PDFs at my journal, usually the same day that we published, when informed by authors of an error. Thankfully, this has happened on only a handful of occasions, but it was always unpleasant and embarrassing. These experiences pushed me to revise certain steps in our publication process, and to be more diligent in my own reviews, and in particular, to stop proofing when I'm becoming tired.

Running an open access journal is a lot of work, but it's also a great privilege. Through my work as editor, I contribute to making knowledge accessible to academic and professional communities, and support authors in sharing their work. A side benefit is that in reading 50-70 manuscripts per year, I'm forced to stay current with the breadth of topics and research in contemporary bioethics, something that I could not otherwise "justify" given my director responsibilities.

The least that I and other journal editors can do is to ensure that when we send a manuscript for final publication, that it's been rigorously proofed by both the journal editors and the authors. The goal of editing is (or should be) to help an author clearly articulate their ideas. Editors should not impose their own words but instead collaborate with authors to publish the highest quality manuscript possible. After all, the words and ideas are those of the author, and this must be respected.

A Glass Half Full or Half Empty?

Optimist, pessimist or pragmatist

Bryn Williams-Jones
Jul 18, 2023

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/glass-half-full
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/28421

Photo by Raul Angel on Unsplash

Summary

The optimist sees the glass as half full, the pessimist the glass half empty, while the pragmatist is having a drink... and the cynic sees the glass as broken. In a world that seems to be ever more on the edge of disaster, bioethicists and other academics can push for change by telling critical and even negative stories. But we also need to tell positive stories that are uplifting and inspirational, that enable us to dream and find places where we can make a difference. Let's tell more positive stories.

Whether the glass is half full or half empty is obviously a question of perspective. What's important is what you do with the glass. Do you drink? Do you offer it to a friend? Do you look through the glass and see a world transformed?

I'm an indefatigable optimist who sees the best in people and believes that both people and the organizations in which they work can change, and for the better. But I'm also a realist and understand that changing individual, collective or organizational behaviour can be very hard, and that any change will take lots of time and energy, and not always be possible.

Nonetheless, telling critical and even negative stories is important in bioethics. Part of our role as bioethicists – and our strength, I would argue – is to clearly name the ethical problems that we see in our society (*identification*), with precision and nuance, in order to better understand their scope and nature and clarify the implications for patients, health professionals, decision makers, etc. (*evaluation*). Only once we've named a problem can we then propose remedies or avenues for improvement (*management*).

And at the most extreme, bioethicists have the professional obligation – because we have the capacity – to call out injustices and lay blame where warranted, raising awareness and pushing for broader social change.

Like other very public bioethicists and academics, I've done my share of critique (often in the media) regarding health technologies, health systems management, conflicts of interest, or the recent COVID pandemic, amongst others. But the negativity of critique can also weigh us down, especially if we spend too long tilting at windmills or "fighting the good fight" but not seeing any real change.

Despite being an optimist, I also have a tendency to slide into cynical critique about systems and structures that do not change, because they've been the subject of much of my academic work. But I recognize that this negativity often occurs when I'm tired, overburdened, and in need of rest. It was at its worst when I was close to burnout, which is not surprising… there are few possibilities visible when one is feeling overwhelmed.

In a world that seems to be ever more on the edge of disaster – whether it's climate change, local or global conflicts, urban violence – it's easy to see things as hopeless. But this "glass half empty" view leads to defeatism and disengagement, and to a civic disempowerment that only serves the interests of those in power.

We also need to tell positive stories, to see the "glass half full", if we are to have the energy and will to work for real change. We can share in the successes of our students and colleagues, we can marvel at incredible social or technological innovations, and we can valorize the small and the big initiatives that are making the world a better place. In finding – and sharing – examples of kindness, solidarity, and altruism that "make a difference", no matter how big or small, we show that there is hope for humanity and society, even (or especially) when things seem bleak.

But we must also be wary of naive optimism because that too can lead to passivity – “someone else we solve the problem, without me”. The big challenges facing our world, and which have been the subject of bioethics and other academic study for decades, are complex and multifaceted and so don’t lend themselves to simple or quick solutions.

As the joke goes, the optimist sees the glass as half full, the pessimist sees the glass half empty, while the pragmatist is having a drink. And to this I would add: the cynic sees the glass as broken due to a wide-ranging neoliberal conspiracy by big industry to undermine the foundations of democracy.

I prefer to be optimistically pragmatic or pragmatically optimistic. The glass can be refilled, and we can and should experiment with different contents and uses. Not all experiments will taste good or be useful, but some may be unexpectedly enjoyable and rewarding.

Positive stories can be uplifting and inspirational, enabling us to dream and giving us ideas of places where we can act to make a difference. Let’s tell more positive stories.

Conditions for Creative Writing

Finding ways to drop the traditional academic barriers

Bryn Williams-Jones
Jun 25, 2024

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/creative-writing
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/33490

Summary

Finding your “voice” and identifying the optimal conditions (whether physical or mental) for creative writing can be a challenge, especially when trying to move beyond the constraints of traditional scientific formats (articles, books, grants). And it takes courage to share one’s ideas in ways that are still not valorized in academia. Finally, creative writing requires an audience with whom to interact and experiment to produce content that is both accessible and meaningful.

Photo by Toa Heftiba on Unsplash

Some of my best and most creative writing, before getting back into blogging in 2023, was done at 3 am when the mental academic filters were down. This insomnia-fuelled work was productive, if clearly not healthy. It got me thinking, however, about the optimal conditions for writing, and how and where to find inspiration to do things differently, namely reaching outside the habitual academic forums.

I’m a morning person, so I schedule my workday to start with emails right after breakfast (6:30am) and then get to work at around 8 am. My peak academic writing has historically been in the morning, in my home office. By early afternoon the creative juices are exhausted and I move to email, administrative work, or editing for my journal (the CJB/RCB), none of which require the same sort of mental focus to produce my own text.

For a few years I suffered from recurring insomnia, and instead of getting frustrated by not sleeping and looking at the ceiling for hours, I would get up and write short commentary texts – but I would never send emails for fear of sharing something I’d later regret! While the addition of these extra hours to my day allowed me to be more productive, it was also a sign of problematic overwork and an accumulation of stress – which I subsequent dealt with, changing my priorities and work schedule, and something that I’ve blogged about at length. Not surprisingly, with these changes and a better work-life balance, my insomnia disappeared.

Coming from a family of academics, I’ve spent most of my life doing one form or another of scholarly writing. In school and later at university – as an undergraduate in philosophy and then during by graduate studies in bioethics – I learned how to structure sentences and paragraphs, and how to use facts, principles, and arguments to build a convincing analytic narrative. And as a professor, I practised different forms of writing, ranging from conference abstracts and short commentaries to lengthy articles or grant applications, each with their own norms and constraints.

This continual learning about and experimentation with writing has been a core part of my journey as an academic, and something that I greatly enjoy.

The exception is grant applications, which I detest due to their rigid and cumbersome structure and ever-growing length, and the fact that the audience is so limited; only a handful of people will ever read the grant application, after which the text is shelved. This text provides no lasting contribution to academic discourse or knowledge production unless you re-work it (with a lot of effort) into a manuscript for publication. Of course, some would argue that it’s not the intention of a grant application to advance knowledge; the primary purpose is as a means to convince the reviewers that your research should be funded. But the extremely low success rate of 15-25% in Canada – and even much lower in other countries (i.e., the US) – means that most grant applications are “wasted” text.

Writing is an important, even essential, means for me to externalize ideas which otherwise remain unformed and unstructured in my head. Unlike my wife, who writes her academic articles in her head over the space of months – and who has also developed novels in her head but never written them down – I have to talk and write for ideas to emerge because I don’t have an active inner voice. For me, writing is a visceral act of creation.

As a core part of my job as a professor, academic writing has thus been an important place for creativity, but one with a range of constraints regarding style, language, argumentative structure, references to the academic literature, etc. Within these boundaries, I've nonetheless found space to play with different writing styles (e.g., factual arguments, case-based narratives, problematization of issues, principled approaches) that were inspired by what I found to be the most innovative articles in literature.

If one moves too far outside these broad academic norms, the text will be considered "unscientific" or "not credible or serious" by many colleagues. Yet, for academics like me who wish to engage in knowledge transfer activities that reach outside the walls of the Ivory Tower, a more engaging or even personal writing style is often needed, but for which we've often never been trained.

In college, I had dabbled with writing poetry, but it was horribly pretentious stuff. I tried but failed with this medium and its different forms, probably because I don't visualise and so couldn't translate my ideas into coherent imagery. And while I'm a voracious reader of fiction (primarily Sci-Fi and fantasy) and readily see it's pertinence for both entertainment and academic reflection (see the Art, Culture & Creative Work section of the CJB/RCB), I've never felt tempted to write fiction myself.

It was through starting this blog in 2023 that I found my "voice", that is, a personal narrative writing style focused on sharing my experiences and reflections on bioethics and academia in general. The motivations were both my need for a creative outlet and a genuine desire to help others learn the implicit rules of the academic game, and in so doing, contribute to building a more level playing field. Interestingly, though, recognizing the right conditions for writing proved to be much more complex than expected and often hard to predict.

I've noticed that ideas come to me in diverse contexts, such as when out for a walk with my family, or when watching the morning news while drinking my coffee. Others occur during discussions with students and colleagues, or with my wife, about issues related to life in academia. But these texts may remain embryonic for weeks or months, only at the idea stage with a few notes. I've learned to accept this, acknowledging that the idea will turn into a complete text when the time and conditions are right. As an aside, one of things that I love about Substack as a blogging platform is the ease with which I can create drafts (that save automatically) and continually add ideas as they arise, but with no pressure to publish.

Sometimes, when there's an emotional reaction to an issue like my posts about the Coronation of King Charles or bad graduation ceremonies, the text develops very quickly, in a matter of a few hours. Unlike academic writing, where I have to be calm and rational, even if I initiate an idea out a sense of needing to respond to an injustice, I find that my creative blog writing is freer because less constrained by academic norms and a self-imposed rational or neutral voice.

The "creative juices" get flowing frequently on the weekend, when I'm feeling relaxed and energized – a text will seem to write itself. At other times, it's the opposite; the creativity happens when I'm sufficiently tired at the end of the workday, or while I'm on a long trip for a work event (such as my post on EDI, written on the train from Quebec City, with a glass of wine in hand). In these situations, like with my initial example of insomnia, it's fatigue that helps the filters drop.

One last element is crucial to creativity, in my experience. Like an actor on a stage, a writer also requires an audience. Obviously, it's possible to do personal journaling for an audience of one, or even to write grants for a few reviewers. But in general, writing is about communicating ideas and sharing with others. A good text is written with a specific audience in mind, otherwise it will miss the mark. So, a crucial part of the creative enterprise is learning to identify your audience and writing in a manner that is accessible and meaningful for them.

For academics writing outside the habitual forms or well-trodden paths of articles, books and grants, it takes a willingness to experiment to find a new voice or writing style, and also the courage to share one's ideas in ways that are still not valorized in academia.

In this blog, I've found my audience, one that is diverse even if largely composed of academics and professionals – and I'm very grateful because it gives me a long sought-after venue in which to be creative.

Chapter 5: Multiple Responsibilities & Mental Health

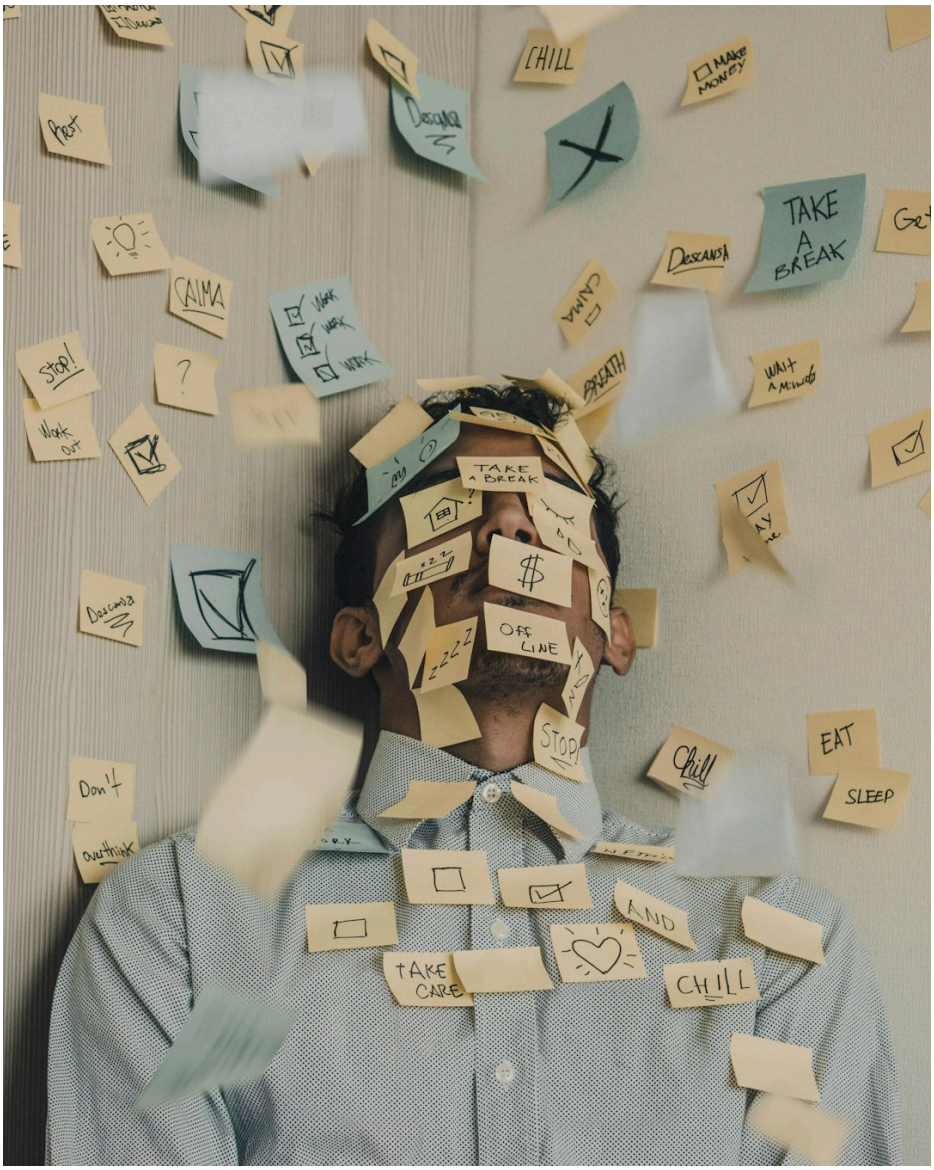


Photo by Luis Villasmil on Unsplash

I Almost Burned Out

How to avoid doing the same

Bryn Williams-Jones
Jun 20, 2023

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/i-almost-burned-out
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/28381

Photo by nikko macaspac on Unsplash

Summary

The university is an incredibly demanding environment, with a never-ending race for grants and publications, more teaching and committees, etc. It will take all the time and energy we give it, to our own detriment. So it's not surprising that burnout has reached a crisis point in universities. But the problem is not one of individuals who can't cope, who aren't strong enough – it's systemic and thus requires collective action and culture change to move back towards a healthier academy.

I love being a professor. It's an incredible privilege to have a job where I get paid to think with other people who are very different from me (even weird), but who're equally passionate about thinking, learning, and teaching. Being a professor is a core part of my identity: it's what energizes me and is the focus of what I do almost every day…

But twice in my career I came to the point of burn out, of asking myself "Why the #$%* am I doing this? Why don't I quit and go into consulting?"

My aim in sharing this story is twofold:

1. To help students and colleagues pay attention to this issue and recognize that it's not an individual problem – it requires collective action and culture change.
2. Point to ways that we can change our individual and collective behaviours so that we can move back towards a healthier academy.

The university is an incredibly demanding environment, and it will take all the time and energy we are able to give it, to our own detriment. So it's not surprising that burnout has reached a crisis point, something that was made all the more evident and acute by the COVID pandemic.

Academics are caught between multiple pressures and unrealistic expectations: increasing competition for limited research funds, the culture of "publish or perish", reduced administrative support, ever more demanding classes, students with a wide range of special needs, a never-ending flow of emails… As a result, professors and other academic personnel – we should not forget our "front line" administrative staff – are having to do ever more but with less and less (time, support, energy…).

I too was caught-up in this culture of hyper-productivity, and with the inevitable consequences. Normally an indefatigable optimist and a high energy personality, I reached the point where I was mentally exhausted, often angry, and living with a very short fuse… even the smallest disappointments would set me off. As my wife can attest, I was not an easy person with whom to be around.

I was better at hiding my exhaustion at work, even if I was likely more critical and pessimistic than my normal self. Too many colleagues were in the same mode, always running to catch-up but inevitably falling behind a workload that never seemed to end. When everyone is already overloaded, it's easy to see a colleague's change in personality as a "normal" stress-response instead of the beginning of a mental health problem… until it's too late.

The first time I came close to burnout was just before promotion to Associate professor in 2010 and tenure (permanence). I was working 60-80h weeks, living the imposter syndrome and convinced that I wasn't doing enough – grants, publishing, administration – that I would not get to the next step. The second time, not surprisingly, was prior to promotion to Full professor in 2016: same concerns, same anxiety, same problems.

I recognized that something had to change, in large part because my wife is also a professor, she had come close to burn-out two or three times, and she forced me to see that I was not my normal self. Thankfully, she wasn't experiencing burnout at the same time – she was on a different schedule but had lived through the same challenges during her career, at different moments.

My wife and I made the "radical" decision to focus first on the health of our family, instead of prioritizing our careers. We have a son with whom we want to be present, and to have meaningful relations throughout our lives. And we are a couple who want to grow old together, in good health, and to retire and explore other opportunities.

What did we do, specifically?

- We stopped working evenings and weekends.
- We started walking again, and we took up hobbies that gave us pleasure and allowed us to disconnect our "academic brains".
- We say "No" – and support each other in doing so – to work that doesn't fit into our schedules. Q: "What do you think about this opportunity?" A: "Does it fit with what you're already doing? Do you have a collaborator to help? Do you have time? What can you put aside if you accept this?"
- We better manage expectations from students and colleagues, being clear about where and when we can invest, and where someone else would be better.
- We don't let email overwhelm our work or private lives.
- We take regular and extended vacations every winter and summer.
- And we do this all guilt-free (or almost).

Burnout, I suggest, is the result of a collective action problem. We are each doing our best, individually, to stay afloat in the frenetic environment that is academia. But as a result, we don't see that we're part of the problem. The solution is collective action, and that means changing individual behaviours, but doing this together.

It means:

- Moving from Fast to Slow Science, investing in quality instead of quantity.
- Fighting for structural change within our institutions and research communities.
- Saying "No" to ever-increasing demands and reduced time frames.
- Modelling healthy work habits, both for our colleagues and our students.

In so doing, we can show to our colleagues, and to the next generation, that it is possible to "have it all" and be a successful academic while also being a healthy person with a fulfilling personal life.

I'm in a School of Public Health that has integrated as part of its strategic plan to be a "Healthy School", which includes creating a healthy learning and work environment for all our members. In this context, as department director, I see it as my responsibility to support students and colleagues (professors and administrative staff) in finding balance, in not burning out.

It’s OK to say “No”

Learn to manage commitments

Bryn Williams-Jones
Jun 13, 2023

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/say-no
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/28380

Photo by Jon Tyson on Unsplash

Summary

One of the hardest lessons in academia is learning to say “No” to invitations to collaborate in research (grants, publications) or take on administrative or leadership responsibilities. Some are easy to refuse, but others are difficult to decline because they’re exciting and rewarding opportunities. Saying “Yes” when already busy leads to overload and disappointment. Learning to say “No” provides the means to say “Yes” when one is able to fulfill commitments and make the most of an experience. Those who say “No” when fully committed are reliable colleagues, because when they say “Yes”, we know they will deliver on their promises.

When starting your academic career, it’s incredibly easy to get sucked into a mountain of additional work without realizing it, because you’ve been asked nicely (and it’s flattering!), and because you may underestimate what’s actually involved. As a new professor, you’re busy figuring out your academic environment (acronyms, administration, departmental politics, etc.), preparing your courses, submitting grant applications, and working on writing projects. You do not have free time… And you may not know how or when to say “No”.

One of the hardest lessons I’ve found as an academic – and it’s an ongoing challenge! – is learning how to decline invitations to collaborate in research or to take on other responsibilities.

It’s easy to refuse some invitations when they’re not interesting to you, are outside your area of expertise, or are evidently far too demanding in terms of time and energy. For these, I kindly decline and systematically refer to colleagues or students who would be better placed than me to contribute and who might be interested.

Much harder are the interesting invitations to, for example:

- write a book chapter or article for a special issue
- join a research team and be named on major grant applications
- participate in grant or scholarship review committees, to learn how it’s done “from the inside”
- sit on academic committees…because your head of department asked so nicely!

Of course, we have to say “Yes” to some of these invitations; they’re part of our academic responsibilities. And many will be intellectually and professionally very rewarding! But if you accept too many requests, very soon you’re working 80-hour weeks and spending an inordinate amount of time doing things that you don’t enjoy, and which may actually be detrimental to both your career and to your mental health.

I know of professors who had their tenure or promotion refused because they were too invested in one area and neglected others – their academic performance in all the areas expected of a professor (i.e., teaching, research, service, outreach) was considered deficient. A devastating result, these situations were likely not solely the fault of the individual professor…colleagues may have been complicit in making unreasonable demands or not supporting the person in making the right choices.

Colleagues and department heads must actively help their junior (and senior) colleagues learn to say “No” where appropriate. The success of each is a shared responsibility and this is why, for example, many departments and faculties are systematically implementing mentoring committees for all new hires. We invest substantial time and energy in recruiting colleagues, so to then not help them flourish and succeed in their careers is wasteful, and it is contemptible.

Unfortunately, not everyone benefits from collegiality and mentoring. So, it's important to also look out for yourself, recognizing that saying "No" is not only acceptable, but makes you a good colleague.

One way to help decide when to say "No" when presented with interesting opportunities is to ask the following questions:

- Is it within your area of expertise, and if not, will it enable you to build new skills or knowledge that are pertinent for your career?
- Is it likely to lead to rewarding collaborations or expand your networks?
- Does it provide access to information or resources that may be beneficial for your students or colleagues?
- Will it provide you with opportunities to explore different responsibilities or career paths (e.g., leadership roles)?

And most importantly:

- Do you have the time to take on this new responsibility, and if not, can you free-up time by delegating work or getting out of existing commitments?

Those colleagues who say "Yes" to everything – and we've probably all met these people – invariable do not deliver because they're over-committed. Not only do they risk burnout, but they also disappoint themselves and others by not doing that which they'd promised, with the result that others have to pick up after them. These colleagues then develop a reputation for being unreliable, with the evident negative implications in terms of future opportunities and collaborations.

By contrast, those colleagues who learn to say "No" when they're already fully committed are valued because they're honest and reliable. We know that they only say "Yes" when they either have the time to do the work or are willing and able to make this space by stepping back from other commitments. When they say "No", we know they're doing so with reason, and when they say "Yes", we know that they'll deliver on their promises.

To conclude, saying "No" to a grant application (i.e., the deadline is too close), a writing project (i.e., already behind with existing writing), or administrative responsibilities (i.e., the work is too demanding) doesn't mean that you're missing out on important opportunities, not doing your part, or being a bad colleague. There will always be other interesting opportunities and places to invest and to support the department…

Learning to say "No" provides the means to say "Yes" when appropriate, that is, when you have the time and energy to fulfill your commitments and make the most of the experience. In doing so, you show that you are a good and reliable colleague.

Say No to Fall Commitments

Fall is always busy, so don't make it worse

Bryn Williams-Jones
Apr 18, 2023

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/say-no-to-fall-commitments-dites
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/28372

Photo by Jeremy Thomas on Unsplash

Summary

The Fall academic term is always incredibly busy, and there will invariably be unexpected work that you cannot refuse. So as the spring term is ending, and time is finally opening up for our own projects (and vacation plans!), be very wary of accepting additional commitments for the Fall, which seems too far away. The Fall term will fill-up all by itself.

In the spring, as the teaching term ends and we're all thinking about summer, for many professors this is the time that we finally have to write that article that's been waiting (and is probably way overdue!), to go to a fun conference and see our academic friends, and even to take some holidays and spend time with family, relaxing and recharging. At this point, the Fall term seems a long way off.

It is easy, in this moment of optimism and with free time opening before us, to accept requests from colleagues or senior managers for additional work in the Fall: to write an article or book chapter, to give guest lectures, to sit on an important committee, to participate in reviewing grant or scholarship competitions…

And it's also normal to say to yourself: "Ah, that's 6 months away, I can handle it!"

No, you can't.

Every year, I find the Fall term to be incredibly busy… and getting more so each year. It's the beginning of the academic year so there are many more meetings and committees than in the Winter term. There are letters of reference to write for students and colleagues, our regular teaching commitments, new funding opportunities (grant competitions seem to be year-round now in Canada!), and then there are more committees.

As the Fall term starts, there's also always an unexpected but necessary commitment that we can't legitimately refuse (a grant opportunity, an important committee, a new student project), and which pushes us over the edge from "busy" to "overloaded". After all these years as a professor, and having come close to burn-out twice, you would think that I'd have figured this out. But I still have to systematically remind myself every spring not to accept new Fall commitments. The Fall will take care of itself without adding more work.

So, in the spring, look at your Fall term and remind yourself of all the things you already have to do or will likely need to do. Mark down these commitments in your calendar or To Do list and add some "buffer space" in order to absorb the unanticipated but inevitable additional work of the Fall.

Don't let this stress you. Instead, look forward to summer knowing that Fall is already taken care of, that even though you know you'll be busy, you've planned for it and are ready. Then go and enjoy your summer – you deserve it!

Having a Child Made Us More Efficient

When your time is not your own, you have to use it wisely

Bryn Williams-Jones
Oct 1, 2024

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/child-efficient
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/33826

Photo by Markus Spiske on Unsplash

Summary

Having children inevitably changes your focus and priorities, and the time for professional and personal activities. You have to find a balance between work and family life, and to determine what is important and what isn't. You find ways to do things more efficiently and to set limits, and you look at work time differently – and in so doing, find new time for children and family.

After the birth of our son – who's now an adolescent! – my wife and I radically changed the way we lived and worked, because we had no choice.

In choosing to be parents, something that wasn't necessarily the case for previous generations, we also wanted to watch our child grow up and to play an active part in their life and not find out who they were when they finally had the right to vote. Having a child reminds us that we are indispensable to them, but not at work; the earth doesn't stop turning because we refused a committee or left early to pick up our child from school.

A child inevitably changes your focus and priorities, and the time available to carry out professional and daily tasks. This is evident to all parents. In the first years, its diapers, sleepless nights, the back and forth to daycare – of course your life changes! Later its making school lunches, planning transport, and managing homework and after school activities, and trying to carve out time to be with your spouse. And then it's the transition to high school, college or university, helping your child identify their path in life and guiding them to make the best choices possible, all the while creating space for them to make mistakes and learn important lessons, and so continue building their autonomy and independence.

Being a parent involves perpetual change and learning complemented by a huge dose of uncertainty and the stress that goes with this, because children don't come with instruction manuals. You have to figure out how your kid works and try your best.

Before having a child, my wife and I were incredibly busy professors, often working 60-80 hour weeks, something that was clearly unsustainable. During the early years of our young family, we were even more busy because our family responsibilities overlapped with the establishment of our respective academic careers and the acceptance of leadership responsibilities. Free time was thus a rare luxury. But in looking back, what is striking is how the enforced change of having a child led us to became more efficient with the time we had, and also to change the time we spent at work and prioritize that which was dedicated to the family.

We had no choice but to find a new balance between work and family life, and in the process, we rediscovered the passion of being professors – we focused on what was important in our careers and cut that which wasn't.

First, we learned that office time was not elastic.

There could be no 8:30am teaching because daycare or primary school started at 9am; and when 4pm rolled around and we were still in a meeting, we got up and left – guilt free – to pick up our child at the end of the school day. Interestingly, when enough professors with young families started doing this, meetings got shifted to earlier in the day. Being a parent forced on us a 9-to-5ish schedule (although mine is more 6:30am to 4pm), where we systematically disconnected from work in the evenings and weekends to be present for our son and for each other. Even though our son is now an adolescent, this schedule has stayed, and it's been an incredibly important means for us to keep these limits on our very busy academic careers, because our jobs can easily slide into 60 to 80 hours a week if allowed.

The second major lesson was about cost-effectiveness and time management.

We became more efficient and more focused. We learned to better judge how much time could be reasonably dedicated to a particular activity. For example, writing a conference abstract, which had previously taken 2 hours, was worth only a 30-45min investment – more time was simply not available nor justified. After the designated time expired, the product was "good enough" or the task had to be shifted to a later date (with the associated impact on other tasks), and we moved on to the next. Similarly, email responses became shorter, and we started training our students (and colleagues!) to be less verbose and more to the point in their communications, because we simply didn't have time to read long treatises.

We learned to build research projects with competent and dedicated coordinators, and to wisely choose collaborators who would deliver on time and do their part. And when we didn't have time for a particular research activity, or we didn't have the right team to share the work, if the project couldn't be delegated then we declined. In the process, we got better at and felt more comfortable with saying "No" to colleagues and refusing interesting opportunities.

The almost sacred rule, which was and is still rarely infringed upon, is no working evenings or weekends, because that is protected family time, and its precious.

In his 1974 folk-rock song, Cat's in the Cradle, Harry Chapin recounts the sad story of a father who was too busy with work to spend time with his son, and then as the son grows older, he reciprocates by being too busy to spend time with his aging father. I've always found this song depressing, all the more so since I became a parent. The song is a cautionary tale. The father is not intentionally neglectful, it's just that he lets the pressures of his work life take an inordinate amount of space, to the detriment of his relationship with his son. The lesson is that letting oneself get "too busy" with work to be present for one's child passes a strong message that work is more important than family. The time that is lost when not present in the day-to-day life of one's child or family is not something that can ever be recovered – it's gone for good.

For those without children, the message is the same. Do you want to spend more of your time at work, or do you also want to have time for meaningful relationships with friends and family, and rewarding activities outside of work?

We have only one child, and as parents that has kept us very busy. For those with more than one child or who are single parents, the organizational challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities increases exponentially. These parents will experiment with different approaches, will seek help from family and friends, and they will do the best they can. They likely have to commit their time differently than we do; but I would hazard that that they too will find ways to be more efficient with the time and responsibilities they have to juggle.

Figuring out the right work-life balance is an ongoing challenge for parents but one increasingly facilitated by collective agreements that pay attention to parental needs. Parents of young children can and should be active participants in changing institutional culture, showing through their actions what should be workplace norms, something that benefits everyone. But it can be intimidating for people at the beginning of their careers to stand-up for their rights, so it behoves those of us who're more established to remember what it was like to have young children and to advocate for the changes needed to make the workplace fully inclusive.

Time is finite, and lost opportunities cannot be recovered, so it's important to find ways to do things more efficiently, to learn to judge what activity merits what time investment, and to say "No" to those things that are not important. When being fully present for our children and family, we force ourselves to look at our work time differently, and to invest in activities that are worth it – and in so doing, we find new time for children and family.

Committee Work

Know which to accept, when and for how long

Bryn Williams-Jones
Sept 26, 2023

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/committee-work
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/31889

Photo by Builee Com on Unsplash

Summary

Committee work is often seen as a necessary evil, something through which we have to suffer before getting back to what's important. But committees can actually be rewarding learning opportunities and means to contribute to our organizations: the challenge is figuring out which to accept to make this a positive experience...or at least not too painful.

Sometimes I think being a university professor is more about sitting on committees than it is about teaching or doing research. As director of a large department in a mid-sized faculty, I'm regularly in lots of meetings and sit on or preside numerous committees. This is a big part of my job and not in conflict with my other responsibilities because I accepted from the start of this position that administration would be the bulk of my work – and I truly enjoy this work, bizarre as that may seem to many of my colleagues.

Depending on the institution, committee meetings may be shorter (e.g., 1h) or longer (3h+), a few times a year or monthly, more or less productive, and interesting or as boring as watching paint dry. I have little patience for long meetings, so I ensure that those I preside are planned for no more 1.5-2 hours, and ideally an hour. In our regular department meetings, for example, I do brief information sharing, have some points of discussion, and otherwise focus on decision making. I work from the premise that most colleagues would rather be elsewhere than in a meeting.

While often treated as a "necessary evil" through which we have to suffer, committees can actually be rewarding opportunities to learn and contribute to the institution. The challenge is determining which to accept (when, why and for how long) so that this service responsibility is a positive experience...or at least not too painful.

Institutional culture

Whether in the department, faculty, research centre, university or scientific community, there seems to be a never-ending list of committees for which we are solicited or expected to participate: program committees, department meetings, faculty council, scholarship or grant review juries, scientific advisory boards, research team/centre meetings, etc.

When I talk to colleagues, one of the common refrains is a hate for time consuming administrative commitments. Service is a core part of a professor's responsibilities, but rarely one that is valued for promotion or other recognition. And while universities and other large organizations clearly need their members to participate in various committees, this work can be frustrating and even demoralizing, especially when overly demanding and insufficiently resourced.

Universities seem to be generating more and more bureaucracy (and more and more administrators!) that impedes rather than facilitates the smooth functioning of the institution. This growing volume of paperwork is complemented by numerous meetings where we are informed or discuss things that could have been dealt with more efficiently in a one-on-one conversation, a short email, or through a summary document.

In an apparent desire for more collegial engagement and deliberation (in institutions that are increasingly top-down and managerial in their functioning), we have statutory meetings averaging 2-3 hours where everyone feels that they must talk (and have to be heard!), even when they're just rephrasing what the person next to them has already said. Meeting for the sake of meeting reinforces an institutional lethargy and – if one is feeling cynical – is done to give the impression of consultation when the decisions have already been made behind closed doors.

To be clear, I think meetings are an important, necessary activity and can be – when well organized, with a focused agenda, good time management, and administrative support – an efficient means to bring together colleagues and stakeholders to brainstorm and deliberate, and to make and formalize decisions that shape the institutions in which we work or study.

Learning opportunities

In my experience, many committees can be incredibly stimulating learning opportunities. During my post-doc in Cambridge, I had the chance to participate in a governance committee at Homerton College, where I was a fellow. I was introduced to organizational planning, large scale budgeting, and all the formal paperwork, rules and procedures needed to keep an institution working smoothly. As a PhD student and then post-doc representative on an advisory committee of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, who had financed my studies, I participated in strategic planning to deal with the integration of new funding (and resulting equity concerns regarding whether to add more scholarships or increase award amounts) and respond to competing interests of different stakeholders about where the Council should focus to best support the Canadian academic community. These two experiences, amongst others, also helped me learn about committee dynamics, how different people contributed (or not), and how a good committee is presided in order to meet deadlines and respond to the committee's mandate.

Committees can also be very rewarding when they give us the opportunity to help others in their academic or career progression. For example, in scholarship or grant committees, we get to read numerous outstanding (and also less impressive) proposals and have the privilege of supporting excellent students and researchers in obtaining competitive and much needed funding to pursue their research. The same goes for hiring committees, of which I've presided two so far this year, to recruit new colleagues into my department – I'm always amazed and energized by the creativity, the innovation, and the excellence of the selected candidates in these competitions, and it's a real pleasure to be part of the ongoing renewal of the department.

In such committees, we both learn and contribute meaningfully to the good functioning of institutional and academic communities. But how should we determine which committees to accept and which to avoid?

Choose wisely

Some committees are obligatory, such as departmental meetings (ours are every 6 weeks) or faculty program committees (monthly) for members who direct academic programs. But many others are optional and vary enormously in terms of workload…and interest.

When advising junior or more senior colleagues on where they can contribute in terms of service, I explore with them issues of time commitment, the competencies needed, and the experience that can be developed through work on different committees. I also make it clear that they should feel free to say "No" if they're already fully committed with other service responsibilities. But doing some service is necessary for their promotion and career progression.

Taking on too many committees (and for too long) – whether as a member, or as president – especially if they are heavier than expected, can be a significant source of stress because of the time devoted to these meetings, time which is then not available for other work or personal responsibilities.

Heavy committees

As a rule, I suggest to colleagues that they not be a member of or preside more than one heavy committee per year. These include, for example:

- ***Scholarship or grant review committees for national funding bodies***: may run over many months, with members having to read dozens or more dossiers; make difficult choices on who best meets the selection criteria in extremely competitive competitions.
- ***University Assembly / Faculty Council:*** monthly, 2-3 hours, usually with an hour or more of preparatory reading; participate in institutional governance.
- ***Research ethics boards:*** monthly, 3+ hours, numerous research dossiers to read for each meeting, and delegated reviews in between meetings; participate in promoting the conduct of ethical research.
- ***Faculty committees (e.g., program committee):*** monthly, 1-2 hours, modest preparatory work; contribute to general academic functioning and policy making.

Light committees

Committees that are less frequent and shorter in duration often also have much less preparation required. Participating in 2-3 such committees is usually feasible, as too is presiding one such committee.

- ***Program committee:*** monthly or less, 1-3 hours; contribute to shaping the evolution of the learning environment and supporting students.
- ***Policy committees / working groups:*** ad hoc meetings (1-2h) spread over many months or a year; draft new policies, provide guidance on specific topics for the department or faculty.
- ***Departmental / program scholarship committee:*** a few meetings (1-2h) to review scholarship applications; support students in obtaining funding.

Summary

As a professor, service is an important if still under-valued professional responsibility. We each have to do our part, including participating in the heavy committees… but I would recommend never more than one at a time!

At the beginning of your academic career, committees that enable you to learn about the functioning of the department or teaching programs can be particularly valuable. Later, such as when approaching or following tenure, committees that allow you to take on leadership roles by presiding program or policy committees can be rewarding. Choosing which committees to accept (as member or president) will obviously depend on your stage of career, the experiences or competencies you wish develop, and the other committees on which you've already served. Some may be great later in one's career but far too demanding earlier on, a distraction from other priorities, and thus a source of stress.

So, when your department director (or other colleagues) asks you to participate in a committee, before saying "Yes" always ask them the following questions:

- How long is each meeting, and what is their frequency?
- How long is the mandate – a few months, 1 year, 3 years?
- Who is presiding the committee?
- Will you be there primarily to share expertise, or will you be expected to produce content?
- What administrative support is provided, i.e., if there are minutes or reports to produce, who will do the writing?
- What competencies will you be able to develop?

Being clear on expectations for committee involvement – i.e., who presides, how the committee works, who does what, and what work is involved – can enable you to make an informed choice that takes into consideration your stage of career and time available. Not all committees are boring or a waste of time. So, choose wisely and you will find rewarding opportunities where you can both learn and grow as a professor and contribute meaningfully to the academic life of your institution.

Volunteer Work

We do lots of free work in academia, and sometimes it's too much

Bryn Williams-Jones
Nov 7, 2023

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/volunteer-work
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/32065

Photo by ray sangga kusuma on Unsplash

Summary

Volunteer work that goes above and beyond our professional responsibilities can be important and meaningful; but it can also be an additional source of stress. So, we need to ask ourselves: Do I have the time, energy and skills for this volunteer work, given all those other things for which I'm already responsible?

I was having a discussion with a junior colleague about all her different commitments besides teaching and research, notably the many academic committees, journal editorial boards, and professional associations in which she was involved. She told me that she was still working evenings and weekends trying to catch-up on all her different responsibilities and struggled with learning to say "No" to different invitations because so many were so interesting! A classic case of "not having enough hours in the day" and so in desperate need of better time management.

Quite naturally, like many professors at the beginning of their careers, my colleague feared that she was not doing enough, that she might not succeed with her renewal or promotion. She was well aware that her research and teaching were going very well (outstanding, in fact!), but she also felt that she had to do lots of service for her discipline, as well as for the department and institution. While commendable, this additional investment was problematic in my view – it crossed the line from being "reasonable" to being "supererogatory", a term used in ethics to denote actions that are morally praiseworthy but not obligatory. Said another way, my colleague was doing more than her fair share (an issue of equity), and this additional investment had transitioned into "volunteer" work that was becoming detrimental to her personal and academic well-being.

My experience has shown that it's invariably colleagues who're high performing and so have no need to worry about their career progression (from the perspective of more senior colleagues, that is), who are the most worried about their productivity. So, I made it clear to my colleague that there was no need to worry, and that she was already doing more than enough – even too much! We then sat down to systematically review her various commitments, identifying those to keep and those that should be cut, specifically targeting upcoming committee membership renewals that, for various reasons, warranted not being renewed.

I've talked elsewhere about committees, their importance for organizational governance, and the membership in which are pertinent (and important) at different stages of career. What I will reflect on, here, is something more general, that is, the difficulty in drawing a line between doing "enough" to be a good and successful colleague, and doing "too much", especially in those areas that unfortunately are still not well rewarded in terms of academic recognition and career progression, such as service and outreach.

At my university, like many (most?), the expectation is that professors be active in teaching and supervision, research, service/administration (e.g., various institutional or scientific committees), and outreach (e.g., public presentations, media interviews). While priority in terms of career progression is inevitably given to research and teaching, contributions to administration (service) and outreach are also still important, although less so. Yet, these "less important activities" can slide from being "what we're paid to do" and what is reasonably expected of a colleague at their stage of career (and so recognized by colleagues during promotion reviews), to being additional "volunteer" work that goes over and above what is reasonable (but is often not recognized as such).

As was the case with my colleague, it is very easy to say “Yes” to activities when one should probably be saying “No”. The problem, though, is that what is reasonable service to the academic community (or to society) is not easily defined or delimited. There is no simple checklist of when to say yes or no and to what, or when an activity goes from being a reasonable academic responsibility, and so generally expected, and transitions into volunteer work (nice but not required) that is over and above what can be reasonably expected… and which may at times conflict with other responsibilities.

A helpful starting point to think about these issues can be to draw inspiration from institutional guidelines addressing conflicts of commitment, a type of conflict of interest (a subject I’ve worked on for decades, as an ethicist). This particular conflict highlights the importance of thinking about the time and energy we have to carry out all the activities for which we are responsible, i.e., our professional duties. Briefly, a problematic conflict arises when we spend too much time/energy on one activity/responsibility (e.g., research) to the detriment of other important activities/responsibilities (e.g., teaching, supervision, committee work), and thus do not fulfil all our professional obligations. That is, there is a bias towards one interest (responsibility) at the expense of others. Further, people in such conflicts do not “carry their weight”, leaving their colleagues to pick-up these other important and necessary activities; their conflict of commitment and bias towards one activity can thus contribute to a sense of inequity that undermines collegiality.

At the other extreme from such selfish individuals are people like my colleague who are doing everything expected of them, and more. The challenge in their case is the opposite, to learn how to moderate their enthusiasm and energy so that they do not burn out and can thus continue to be a good colleague (and role model for others) for years to come. To be a successful academic (and progress in one’s career) and a good colleague who does “their fair share”, I suggest taking a process-oriented approach, anchored in the types of questions I previously talked about when learning to say no to different requests, or finding balance regarding different administrative obligations.

At its base, however, is the following general question: ***Do I have the time, energy and skills to do the work required, given all those other things for which I’m already responsible?*** And these responsibilities also include those that are not explicitly work-related, such as being a good partner, parent, or caregiver, amongst others.

One of the increasingly demanding types of work that we are asked to do, as academics, is the peer-review of grant applications and publications (e.g., articles, books). This work is important for advancing the production and publication of quality research but is also notoriously time-consuming and under-valorized – and it’s invariably done for free. Scholarship and grant applications have become longer, more complicated, and more demanding to write; this then engenders far more time by colleagues to do evaluations (i.e., many hours per dossier, with dozens or more to review), often compounded with very short deadlines or during especially busy times of the academic year. Similarly, journals frequently ask for reviews with a 3-to-4-week deadline.

In an age of an ever-growing number of journals, publications and requests for peer-review of articles, and increasing competition for research funds, there is now a veritable crisis in publishing and research review systems, with many colleagues refusing to do peer-review of articles or grants because this volunteer work is simply too demanding and not-rewarded.

Here I’ll set aside the debate about the disconnect between all the unpaid labour done by researchers to review manuscripts (or grants) that support a few major publishers who own most of the leading journals to generate obscenely large profits. As a further aside, one interesting response to this problem involves paying for peer-review, but while that might work with subscription journals and for-profit publishers (although this would cut into their profits), it would certainly not function with not-for-profit journals like my own, the CJB/RCB, which operate with extremely limited budgets and are largely volunteer driven.

In my case, I now systematically refuse to do peer-review because as Editor-in-chief of the CJB/RCB, I do final proofing of all manuscripts published in our journal and so read and proof more than 60 manuscripts a year. I make an exception when there's enough lead-time, when the work involved is reasonable, and the topic of the grant/paper is interesting and something I would want to read anyway. The benefit is both personal in getting information, and altruistic in helping colleagues through peer-review. Nonetheless, when I decline invitations to do journal peer-reviews I respond by referring colleagues or PhD students who could be potential reviewers. Yes, peer-review is volunteer work, and yes, it's important and can be valorized on CVs, but you can only do so many before this becomes too time consuming. I decline knowing that I'm doing my part elsewhere by running an open access journal and providing a space for colleagues to publish their research.

At different points in our personal lives and our academic careers (the two of which are often inextricably linked), we will have varying amounts of time and energy to contribute to different activities that are meaningful to us, and which are part of our professional (or personal) responsibilities. Some activities we will contribute to even if they're not well rewarded by our institutions or help to advance our careers, because we find them to be places where we can make a difference, and because they are personally rewarding.

Finding meaning in volunteer work that "goes above and beyond" what is expected can itself be an important motivator when other parts of our jobs lose their appeal. The challenge, as always, is integrating these activities into our professional (and personal) lives so that they contribute to who we are and what we do as academics, but not to the detriment of our other professional (and personal) responsibilities.

These various contributions can and should be negotiated.

Start by asking the right questions, including "Do I have the time or can I make the time for this work?", "Can I make a difference?" and "Will this work be meaningful for me?" And then, as my colleague did with me, seek the advice of others to get critical and honest feedback to help determine whether the activity in question is worth the effort or constitutes unreasonable volunteer work that one should decline, guilt-free.

Time Management

It's a limited resource, so use your time wisely

Bryn Williams-Jones
Sept 5, 2023

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/time-management
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/28636

Photo by Kevin Ku on Unsplash

Summary

Time is a limited resource that must be shared between work and personal responsibilities. Think about both time and projects, and how much of the former is actually needed for the latter, and then plan when the latter can best be done. Experimentation can help identify the solution that works for you and supports finding balance between work and personal life.

Time is a limited resource. There are only so many hours in a day/week/month/year, and they have to be shared between our work and personal responsibilities…and sleep, and downtime (weekends, vacation).

As a PhD student and then a junior professor, I was in a mode where my work-time was relatively elastic – if I needed more time for projects, I extended into personal time, during evenings and weekends. 60h/weeks were the norm, and 80h/weeks not uncommon. I worked much longer days/weeks than I do now (I average about 50h/week), but with arguably much less to show for it, because even if I was spending more time working, these additional hours weren't more productive.

One of the problems, I realized, was that I was thinking about time and project management as independent, when in fact they're intimately connected. To manage lots of projects and get them done on time, I needed to learn how much time was actually required for me to do each (I often vastly underestimated the time required!) and then figure out how best to align these with my own ability (focus, energy, being a slow reader) to carry out the work.

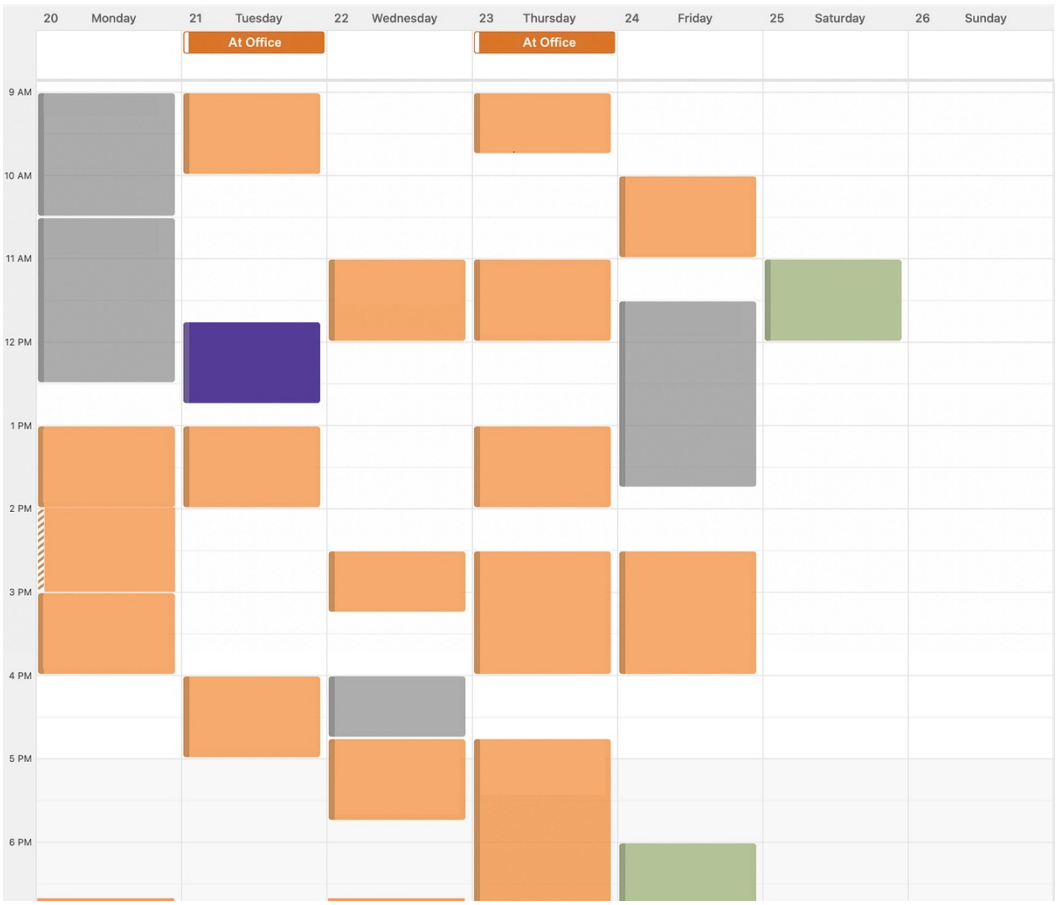
I've experimented with different strategies for time and project management over the years.

Initially, I used To Do lists, with deadlines and reminders, and this also had a positive feedback/reward mechanism – the gratification of ticking an item off the list, "Yeah, it's done!". Yet, like clearing the email Inbox, there were always more items being added to the list. Instead of being rewarding, I found the list becoming demoralizing as planned items were delayed because I didn't have time.

While I still use To Do lists, they are now only a secondary tool to track longer-term projects. I've also dabbled with Planner and more sophisticated software but found the learning curve too high…but I'm certainly open to suggestions!

The thing that works, for me, and which I didn't understand why until relatively recently, is the Calendar. As I explained in an earlier post, I'm both dyslexic and aphantasic – I don't visualize. My ideas are nebulous in my head, and only clearly take form as I talk or write. It's one of the reasons that I love writing this blog, because it gives me a creative outlet for all the ideas bouncing around.

To organize my thoughts and to manage my time and my commitments, I need to externalize them. To do something substantive, I make a list (paper or digital), estimate the time involved, prioritize (when is it due?), and then book it into my calendar so it gets done on time.



Example of a busy week with lots of meetings

I've colour-coded my calendar to better visualize different types of activities. Orange are meetings (in-person or Zoom), grey are blocks for preparatory work (e.g., reading, writing), purple are presentations or teaching, and green are personal activities (e.g., hobbies). The above calendar was a particularly busy week, and with very little time free for preparation or working on my own projects.

For this calendar approach to work, I had to implement some guiding principles and rules for my planning: any activity or associated preparation time/work has to go into the calendar, and if it doesn't fit into the week, it gets moved to the next week. If any activity (a meeting, working on a manuscript) runs over time, then other planned activities have to move. In so doing, I'm also better able to say "Yes" or "No" to requests because I can see if and where they fit in the calendar in the coming weeks or months.

At one point, I had built in a time block for dealing with email but found that it wasn't necessary. I still try to keep my Monday mornings free for email and small project catch-up from the previous week; and I also regularly do email early in the morning and then between meetings but disconnect by about 5pm. And if I'm doing preparation (grey block), I don't look at my email.

During regular weeks, I protect entire days at home (often Monday and Friday) for "me time", to do my own academic work, such as editing my journal or proofing student manuscripts. I also make sure that when there is a meeting or teaching activity, the accompanying preparation time is planned in advance.

Similarly, when I accept to read a report, write a reference letter for a student or colleague, or do grading, these all get booked into the calendar where appropriate, with a realistic estimate of the time required. Ideally, the preparation is before a meeting, or if it's a lengthier block (e.g., writing a reference letter, reading a thesis chapter), then it's at least a week before the deadline as I hate doing things last minute.

To organize my time most efficiently, I consolidate my meetings on specific days, or at the end of the day after a morning focused on reflexive work. I use work from home for both thinking time, but also for Zoom meetings (end of the day); I try to use time at the office for in-person meetings with students and colleagues, alongside statutory committee meetings.

This model works, for me, because I've constrained myself to a 50h-week, I've a good sense now of the actual time required for specific types of work, and so I plan accordingly. I'm disciplined but also adapt as needed to deal with urgent work and my own functionality – if I'm not "in the zone" for a planned activity (e.g., writing or working on a particular project), I move it to another free block later in the calendar.

As with so many things, your method of time and project management may vary. Experiment and find what works for you so that you're able to use your time wisely and efficiently.

Work From Home

Love it or hate it, it's the new way of working

Bryn Williams-Jones
Apr 25, 2023

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/work-from-home-teletravail
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/28373

Photo by Roberto Nickson on Unsplash

Summary

The COVID isolation and enforced work-from-home (WFH) was extremely challenging, and it has changed how many of us now imagine what is a meaningful work experience. Differences in personality and life story mean that some (like me!) will love WFH, while others will hate it. But it is increasingly the new reality. Having a constructive WFH experience requires paying attention to both internal (personal) and external (social, environmental, technological) factors, and then implementing good practices.

I love working from home! Being able to work in casual clothing, to exercise when I want, to have my music playing, to avoid public transit, etc., are all huge benefits for me. It's so easy to simply book a Zoom or Teams from home, that I actually have to force myself to go to the office a few days a week to see students and colleagues.

But I also recognize that while working remotely is increasingly popular and a practice shared by many in academia and other "white collar" jobs in the public or private sectors, not everyone has the same experience or opportunities. There have been innumerable news stories and studies on the changes in (and challenges related to) social and work habits forced on contemporary knowledge societies by the pandemic – I will not repeat these here.

Instead, I will share what I think are the positive lessons learned from COVID-enforced isolation and work-from-home, and the best practices that can be implemented, regardless of whether we prefer to work at the office or from home.

The COVID Experience

Unlike many students or colleagues, my wife and I did not find the lock-down to be an isolating experience. When our university along with most workplaces closed in March 2020, we quickly transitioned to work from home, with little difficulty. But we were also incredibly privileged to have a home with separate offices, on different floors, which is important because I'm loud!

We would meet to brainstorm research ideas or online teaching strategies, have lunch together with our son, take breaks between meetings and teaching, and go for daily 2-to-3-hour walks in the neighbourhood to get away from our respective screens. Despite the lock-down, my family and I had regular social interaction and were in great shape by the end of the summer.

Our son, however, found the at-home schooling experience painful, due in large part to the isolation from his friends (only partially attenuated by online collaborative gaming), but also because of the less-than-optimal online learning environment at his primary school. He was very eager to get back to school.

Similarly, many of our university students were struggling. They were alone or were sharing small living spaces with roommates or young children – and pets, who were welcome participants in online teaching! Or they were living at home with their parents, isolated from all those wonderful experiences of life at university. Their world was fused into both home and classroom, with little means of separation.

It's not at all surprising that so many young people, whether children like my son, or students in our university courses, found the lock-down hard to live through, and that their mental health suffered greatly. As a professor and bioethicist, I found both striking and disturbing the social inequalities highlighted by COVID, whether in broader society or amongst our students in virtual classrooms.

Equally interesting to me have been the differences in personality and life story that led some students and colleagues to love working from home, and others to hate it. The following observations are derived from my own home environment, that of our students whose personal lives we entered through their screens during online teaching, and discussions with colleagues.

Prefer Working from Home

- Have room for a separate office or quiet space that doesn't impinge on other personal (e.g., bedroom) or shared spaces.
- Have a stable high-speed Internet connection, a good computer, etc.
- Are able to mentally and temporally separate (or at least balance) work and personal life.
- Find the office "too social" and thus distracting for focused work, so less efficient.
- Work in an ugly 1960s building with bad ventilation, peeling beige paint, no air conditioning, worn-out linoleum floors, neon lights, and poor soundproofing, that is, most social science and public health buildings!
- Have lots of one-on-one or large group meetings, which are more efficient (often shorter!) by videoconference.
- Have a lengthy commute from home to office, time that could be saved for other activities, whether work or personal.
- Have children still living at home, so responsible for school and after-school related travel.
- Are living themselves with – or caring for a loved-one with – a handicap or reduced mobility.

Prefer the Office

- Enjoy the social interaction with colleagues at work, as these are important social networks.
- Use the change of physical space from home to office to demarcate and separate work from personal life.
- Don't have (or want) a space for a home office.
- Like in-person teaching (or meetings) and the energy of the classroom (or meeting room).
- Do lots of small group meetings, which they find more effective in person.
- Have an office in a modern building with natural lighting, good ventilation, a quality cafeteria, a lounge, high-speed Internet, etc.
- Experience videoconferencing as a barrier between meaningful connection with colleagues or students.
- Have a manageable (or acceptable) commute from home to work.
- Don't have young children at home – or have adolescents and need space apart!
- Are in a field that requires in-person work, e.g., laboratory-based research.

This comparison is clearly a gross generalization, and I would say that many people – me included – fall at different times into either of these categories. And some people may be ambivalent, with no preference for one of the other. But thinking about these considerations can, I suggest, help to think about how to make work from home (or office) a more positive experience.

My Office Setup

At the beginning of the lock-down, I quickly realised that I was not well setup to spend entire days online. I found out the hard way that it's far too easy to do 7 hours of back-to-back Zoom meetings and then be completely wiped at the end of the day. Setting up a good work environment and habits was essential for both my physical and mental health.

I invested in an additional camera (over my screen) and microphone to improve videoconferencing and online teaching. I also experimented with different lighting, which turns out to be incredibly important, so you don't look exhausted when you're online!

I strongly recommend installing a digital timer like Time Out – it reminds me to regularly look away from the screen to reduce eye-strain (1 min every 20min), and then to take 5min exercise breaks to recharge (every 30min). Also, I learned to spread out meetings and try to schedule them for 45min instead of 1h in order to have breaks between, equivalent to walking from our office to another venue.

You'll notice that there's no office chair. I installed a standing desk converter and do all my work standing. Not only did this save space, but it turned out to be excellent exercise and more comfortable for a fidgety person like me… and in the process, I eliminated a series of nagging pains (hip, back, neck) that were due to sitting all day! I've become such a fan of standing desks – which I've recommend to many people – that I replicated this setup at work, once the lock-down was lifted.

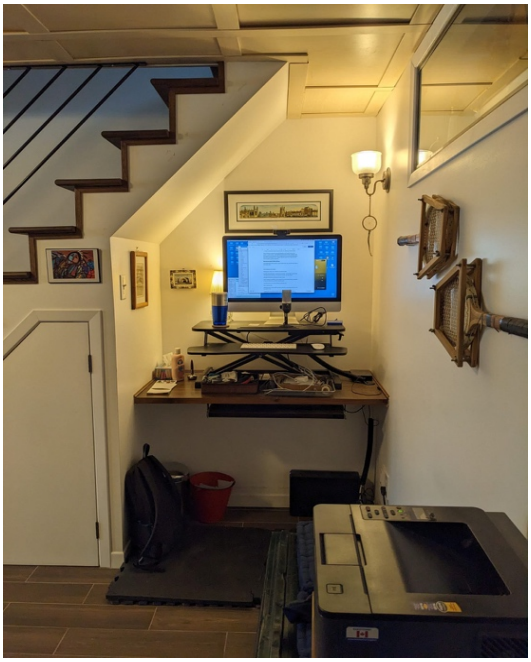


Photo by Bryn Williams-Jones

Summary

Obviously, your methods may vary. I know quite a few people who work best in work-share spaces, in cafés, or at the library. I did a lot of this when I was a PhD student in Vancouver, living alone in a dark basement apartment. And I also have colleagues who much prefer going to the office, for a variety of reasons.

Regardless, for many of us in academia, in the civil service, or in industry, work-from-home is becoming the norm, whether it is 1, 2, 3 or more days per week at home. So, it's important to have the right setup and figure out how to make it work best for you. That means paying attention to a combination of internal (personal) and external (social, environmental, technological) factors that can facilitate or impede having a constructive experience working behind a screen.

Multiple Roles in Collaborative Research

Be careful of instrumentalization and misunderstandings

Nathalie Gingras-Royer, Bryn Williams-Jones
Nov 26, 2024

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/collaborative-research
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/40255

Photo by Vlad Hilitanu on Unsplash

Summary

Collaborative research can be a powerful means to include the perspectives of minority communities in research. But to be truly collaborative involves meaningful engagement throughout the research process, something that is not always possible. And there is the ever-present risk of instrumentalizing these collaborators, of valuing them only for their lived-experience and not the skills that they can bring to the project. It's thus crucial to clarify roles and expectations of all team members, and from the very start of the research.

When minority communities are the subject of research projects, it is often appropriate to use a methodology that involves the collaboration of the people concerned. This type of research, known as participatory or collaborative research, aims to create partnerships between researchers, those involved in the field and members of the communities concerned (e.g., people with a certain illness or disability, ethno-cultural groups), in order to consider and make the most of the different types of knowledge at each stage of the research process. But it should be noted that the demands made on the various collaborators by explicitly collaborative research are considerable. Although justified in some contexts, the costs to participants (and researchers) will often far outweigh the benefits; more traditional, albeit less collaborative, research approaches may better meet the needs and capacities of participants (and researchers).

As with all research, it's important that members of the project have clearly defined roles and responsibilities. But what happens when someone involved in collaborative research wears several hats? Based on our experience of situations where there has been confusion over roles, we can suggest some practices to avoid and possible solutions to encourage lasting collaboration that is beneficial to the various parties involved in a collaborative, multidisciplinary research project.

It's not uncommon for a researcher's interest in a specific subject to stem from personal experience. For example, it is mostly women who are interested in feminist studies, and LGBTQ+ people who are interested in the various experiences and challenges of this community; and a person with a disability may focus their academic and professional career in a field related to their condition. These people have rich experiential knowledge, which is a considerable asset when they join a research team that adopts a participatory approach; their lived experience can help them to more accurately represent and contextualise the issues relating to the subject under study. However, since experiential knowledge is the product of an individual's own experience, it is singular and subjective – it is not always representative.

For example, to avoid being treated implicitly or explicitly as a symbolic representative, a person with a disability who joins a collaborative research project has an interest in defending their position on the basis of their skills, of what they can specifically contribute. Team members must recognise this person as a colleague in their own right and not confuse their expertise, based on their own professional experience (e.g., in project management, in communication, speaking the language of the community, brokering access to other participants) with their experiential knowledge, which stems from their personal situation. Experiential knowledge is built up from life experiences in both the personal and professional spheres, so a researcher who focuses over many years on a specific subject or works with a particular community (e.g., people with a physical handicap) will develop knowledge from these life experiences. In other words, experiential knowledge is not restricted to members of the community concerned. But while a researcher can come to better understand the lived-experiences of the participants with whom they work over many years, this will never make of them a member of that community nor allow them to "speak for" or "share" these lived experiences.

In participatory research, the role played by the participants, who in this case are members of the community concerned, is crucial. The data gathered through the sharing of these real-life experiences enables the project to evolve by offering a diversity of viewpoints. Participants are not required to have any research training, but their involvement throughout the research process is important for a number of reasons: to help ensure the internal validity of the information and the quality of the knowledge produced, and also to promote the sustainability and collective ownership of the actions carried out during the project.

In some cases, this participation is superficial, but sometimes participants are actively involved in the decisions and implementation of all the stages of the project, from conception through to data collection and analysis, and knowledge transfer. In such cases, these people can be described as “participant partners”, “patient partners” or “co-researchers”. This does not mean that they all have the same role or the same responsibilities, but in all cases, it is their experiential knowledge that is emphasised – but their other professional skills should also be explicitly mobilized. As for those working directly in the field (e.g., practitioners or clinicians) and academics (e.g., students, professors, researchers), regardless of whether they belong to the community concerned, it is their expertise that should be highlighted, without ignoring their experiential knowledge, where appropriate. And of course, everyone’s role must be clearly defined, and as required by best practices in equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI); everyone involved in a research project must be welcomed, respected, valued and remunerated in line with their contribution.

Unfortunately, practices can go against these recommendations and deviate subtly and without ill intent from an optimal trajectory.

A person who joins the research team as a professional and not as a “participant” may sometimes be instrumentalized and limited to being the representative of a visible category, rather than being explicitly recognised for their expertise and considered as a colleague in their own right. While this type of practice is relatively common (due to the bureaucratisation of EDI), it is not without negative repercussions. Indeed, it is a form of tokenism which, while it has the potential to make a project look good, is not inclusive in the sense that the person does not feel welcomed, respected and valued. What’s more, the research team doesn’t get the full benefit of the person’s expertise. On the contrary, this person may develop negative feelings about the project but not feel comfortable confiding this to the other members or the research team leader, for fear that their words will be misinterpreted, especially when their concern is to be recognised as a professional.

Another factor that can contribute to instrumentalist practices, in the specific case where a person with a disability (or other minority characteristic) is involved in a project, is society’s lack of knowledge about these people, and this may even extend to other members of the research team without them being aware. Indeed, people with disabilities are often and a priori judged as being less competent, but more “nice and courageous”, than others; they are rarely associated with the professional world and so may not be recognized as having pertinent professional expertise. That said, it is important not to ignore the potential challenges and issues for a colleague in relation to their particular condition in order to reduce barriers and create a working environment that is as inclusive as possible. What’s more, if a person with a disability has completed a university program and works in their field of expertise, they have no doubt developed compensatory strategies and learned to use adapted technologies that enable them to carry out their tasks. The barriers they may encounter are not all functional, but also social, when they are confronted with prejudices that limit their career advancement.

The goodwill of the various parties involved in a participatory research project is not enough to ensure that best practices in terms of inclusion are integrated. For research teams, it is strongly recommended not to allow misunderstandings to develop, by ensuring that everyone has clearly defined roles. This can be done through the use of specific contracts that outline individual responsibilities for particular tasks and deliverables – but key to this is open dialogue and negotiation to determine mutually acceptable expectations for all members of the research team. Although faced with constraints (budgetary, temporal and organisational), the project leaders must ensure that the working environment is inclusive, that everyone’s interests and expertise are named, and that all the stakeholders (participants, patient partners, consultants, researchers, etc.) are free to express themselves and are properly remunerated and recognised for their contributions in all research deliverables (e.g., publications, reports, presentations).

Furthermore, in the case of a project dealing with a minority community, it is important to learn about the prejudices held against this group in order to change the paradigm and adapt to the realities of the people concerned. And those involved in the research (i.e., researchers, participant-collaborators) should not accept a collaboration with unclear conditions (who does what), since everyone bears their share of responsibility. It's thus a good idea to draw up a detailed research plan that spells out the various roles, responsibilities, and expectations, while remaining flexible and open to change throughout the research process; and this should include the possibility of calling up an EDI consultant to mediate certain situations.

The contribution of experiential knowledge to research is not negligible, but it can lead to undesirable situations when the roles of certain partners are not clearly defined. Research groups are not ill-intentioned when they adopt, often unwittingly, practices that can lead to instrumentalization; it is often ignorance that leads to blunders and misunderstandings. If a confusion about roles develops, this can negatively affect an individual's integrity, generate conflict within the team, cause a loss of trust, put an end to collaborations and, consequently, compromise the success of a research project.

Nonetheless, a misunderstanding, although problematic, can be an instrument for understanding behaviour to be avoided in the field of collaborative research.

Hobbies are Good, Guilt is Bad

Finding balance in academic life is a challenge

Bryn Williams-Jones
Feb 15, 2023

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Photo by Elena Mozhvilo on Unsplash

Summary

Some thoughts on finding a work-life balance. Academia is intense and can be all-consuming. So take the time to disconnect, take up a hobby... and don't feel guilty about it.

Academia is an incredibly stimulating environment because of the wealth of opportunities for experimentation, for learning and for stimulating discussions with smart people from around the world. But it can also be all-consuming, taking up an inordinate amount of our lives and our attention, to the point that it may appear to others as a form of mania!

The intense concentration needed for university research is linked to a passion for our chosen subjects – it is one of the things that drives us to invest the energy and time needed to conduct multi-year projects, write innumerable funding applications (over and over!), draft and submit manuscripts for publication. Whether during our graduate studies, or later as researchers and professors, this focus is a prerequisite to success, however that may be defined.

But this focus can also, at times, appear as selfishness because it involves time that we are not giving to other aspects of our lives, or to our friends and family. And when taken to extremes, it can lead to mental and physical exhaustion and even burnout (more on this in another post).

So how do we strike a balance between our academic passions and those other important and necessary parts of our lives?

The academic brain is hard to shut off – it often requires conscious effort and support from those around us to disconnect and just do something else. Working against this necessary disconnection may be a sense of guilt at not "finishing this [paper, grant, experiment…]" and so "risk falling behind" and never catching up, which then generates more stress… and the mental hamster starts running again on its wheel.

Put this guilt aside and recognize it as something counterproductive. In academia there will always be something else that needs doing, there will always be another grant deadline, always another paper to write… and a mountain of email to answer. But that personal time to recharge can be a fleeting. Vacations are important, but they're sporadic. So, think instead about ways to systematically take a break every day and week. Go for a walk, do sport, do something creative. And spend time with the important people in your life doing explicitly non-academic activities.

Don't try to do it alone. Share responsibility with those around you by asking them for help: "Stop talking work!" or "Are you finished yet?" are a common refrain in my home, and something that I openly welcome. It may be frustrating in the immediate when I'm working through an idea (because I think by talking or writing) or when I'm trying to finish editing a manuscript or sending one last email. I'm consciously aware that this disconnect is necessary, and so I accept that this is the help I need… and I stop.

To make this a sustained commitment, take up a hobby that gives you pleasure and allows you to not think about academic life for an hour, and then build this into your week as a regular activity. Having done martial arts on and off all my life, I've come back to them in the last few years, taking up karate with my son. The result is 3 to 4 hours per week that I'm not thinking about academia, because I'm in the physical, exclusively doing the martial art with my son and our fellow karate students. Combining this hobby with long walks each weekend with my family, media entertainment (pure escapism), and now writing this blog (I needed a creative outlet) are all intentional means to force the academic brain into "off mode" by doing something else...

And you know what? I'm still getting all my university work done. But I'm doing it better and more efficiently because I'm recharged and so more energetic, all because I've given myself the obligation to disconnect. And I honestly think this has made me a better father, husband and friend because I'm finding a way to put my academic passion in a box and not let it dominate my life, thereby recognizing that academia is a core part of my identity but not the whole.

Hobbies and time with friends and family are a key means to finding much needed life balance. So don't feel guilty about this time doing other things – see it as an investment in your mental health and your well-being, and those important people in your life will thank you for it.

Listen to Your Body

The signs will be there if you pay attention

Bryn Williams-Jones
Oct 31, 2023

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Photo by Franco Antonio Giovanella on Unsplash

Summary

Academia is a creative exercise, so we often work best where and when the moment is right, when the creative juices are flowing – and that may not be 9-to-5. Your body will talk to you if you listen, telling you when you need a break. The trick is not to feel guilty.

One of the most important lessons I learned during my PhD – and one that I ignore at my own peril – was to "listen to my body" and to take a break even if that meant putting off planned work for another day. But so internalized is the sense of having to be productive, that despite decades of self-reflection and having a strong critical self-awareness, I still have make a conscious effort not to feel guilty about not working, even when I know it's the right thing to do.

This guilt is pervasive in academia and linked to the imposter syndrome, that overly self-critical feeling that we're never good enough and have not been sufficiently productive to warrant our position in the university. It's also, I would suggest, the result of the difference in our profession. Being an academic is not a "9-to-5" job like those occupied by most of our friends and family, and with rare exceptions, we cannot do productive work for a sustained 8-hour period. But it's also a myth that our friends in 9-to-5 jobs actually work productively for 8 hours – they don't.

Academia is a creative exercise. Whether it's doing an experiment, studying a phenomenon, reading an article, or creating new content (a presentation, a manuscript), this work requires concentration and a clear state of mind. I regularly tell my graduate students to aim for 3-5 hours of productive analysis or writing, when they're "in the zone", and then to either call it a day and relax or do something else that doesn't require higher brain functions (e.g., email). This 3-5 hours is worth much more than 8 hours staring at a screen and writing a few pages that, the next day, are thrown away because they no longer make sense.

It should not be surprising, then, that many academics work "flex hours", doing our work where and when the moment is right for reflection and creativity, which can be during the "normal workday" but also, for some, during evenings and weekends. For me, creative writing or editing of manuscripts is best done in the morning, in my home office; networking and meetings are best done at the university.

Working when the creative juices are flowing is one of the real pleasures of being an academic. I went through a period where I regularly experienced insomnia, and so instead of staring at the ceiling for hours (which made things worse), I would get up and write; at 3am I wrote some of my most creative commentaries and brainstormed innovative research project ideas, because the academic filters inhibiting creativity were down…but I also learned never to send insomnia-emails to avoid saying things that I might later regret!

While enabling me to be very creative, my insomnia was, I realised, the result of mounting stress that ultimately took me to the edge of burnout – it was the symptom of a problem that I had to address by substantially changing my behaviour and finding a balance that worked for me.

I'm by nature a morning person and wake-up between 4 and 5am. My optimal work time and maximal concentration is from 6:30am (where I do email for 1-2 hours) to about 2pm, after which I would do more email and administration. Changing my habits to protect my mornings and to not work evenings or weekends was a part of listening to my body. But so too was the recognition and acceptance that not everything could get done in a day or a week without over-taxing myself. I had to do better time management and planning to be more realistic with my expectations. And most importantly, I had to consciously let go of my need to strictly organize my time and instead adjust to how I was feeling.

When I'm tired or not feeling "up to" the task at hand, then I know I will be unable to concentrate. I may have planned to read a student's manuscript or to write, but if I'm feeling foggy-headed due to seasonal allergies or because I slept badly the night before (e.g., the mental hamster wouldn't stop running on his wheel), then I know it's a waste of time and effort. I do something else and shift the planned activity to another time or day in my calendar.

At the more extreme, I've had days where I'm just mentally tired and unable to concentrate – even responding to email is too much. So I take a "mental health day" and just relax, read a Sci-Fi or Fantasy novel, watch a film, or drag my wife out for a walk (and vice versa). Experience has demonstrated that when I get back to work the next day, I'm invariably clear-headed, energized, have better insights and so am productive. But still at the back of my mind (although less and less the case), is that niggling sense of guilt that "I really should be working", something that I consciously suppress because I know it's not healthy.

The academic brain is hard to turn off "after work hours" or when we are socializing with family and friends. Ideas can emerge in the strangest of circumstances, and woe be it the researcher who doesn't jot down the idea…because it may not come back! It's important, however, not to let this idea lead one back into work mode at the expense of much-needed down time.

At the end of the academic term, in December or May, I recognize that I am (and will be) increasingly tired and looking forward to a break or a much-needed vacation. In June and July, email drops off dramatically with students and colleagues at conferences or on vacation; and I systematically notice a loss of energy – I just don't feel like working! The pressure of the academic year has come off, and the accumulated fatigue becomes palpable. So, I have to find a new rhythm and balance during the summer in order to start recharging before the next terms starts.

Your body will talk to you if you listen to it, telling you when you're "in the zone" and creative, and when you need to do something else or to take a break. The trick is to both listen to your body and not feel guilty, especially when taking a much-needed rest.

Vacations are Essential

Not a luxury, but a necessity

Bryn Williams-Jones
May 2, 2023

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Photo by S'well on Unsplash

Summary

It surprising how few people in academia take real vacations, even when they know it's good for them. The summer or winter "vacation" periods get used for much needed catch-up. But academic life is a marathon and so we have to learn to pace ourselves. Focus on your mental health, completely disconnect for weeks at a time, and when you come back, you'll be energized and have the creativity and insights needed to turn commitments into accomplishments.

As the academic term is winding down, students and colleagues start thinking about their plans for the summer, whether that's conferences, writing projects, or even vacations!

In a similar vein to my previous post about hobbies, and in complement to my views on avoiding burnout and the need to "Say No!" to Fall commitments, here I make the case for the critical importance for all academics – whether they are students, professors, or administrative staff – to take real vacations.

This may seem obvious, but it's continually surprising to me how few people in academia take real vacations, even when they have the right to, and they know that it's good for them. And for many years, I was part of this group.

It's far too easy to get sucked into the trap of using all our "free time" on those projects that were delayed during the Fall and Winter terms while we were busy with our teaching, research and administrative commitments. The summer or winter "vacation" periods look like the perfect time for this much needed catch-up.

As a PhD student, then a post-doc and finally a professor, like many I was focused on getting to the next step in my career, and did this by working 6 days/week, and taking very little extended vacation. I'd disconnect completely for about a week over the Christmas holidays because I was exhausted. But I would systematically work through much of the summer to "be productive", only taking a week or so of real vacation. In part this was driven by a sense of academic guilt and fear of not being competitive, because "my colleagues are working and are much more productive!"

Having a family forced me to change this view because I now had explicit responsibilities towards my wife and son. But I also had to change due to a vicious cycle of work, stress, and exhaustion that was leading to burnout.

I learned, the hard way, that extended vacations where I completely disconnect for weeks at a time are not a luxury – they're essential for my mental health. Academia is incredibly intense, with a never-ending flow of projects, deadlines and responsibilities. And when I've not taken serious time off, I've found myself – not surprisingly! – more tired, and also much less efficient and creative.

So, I now tell all my graduate students and colleagues: "take at least a week off over the Christmas holidays and then a full month during the summer." A few days or a week here or there are just not enough. Don't cheat and take work on vacation. Turn on a vacation message and turn off your email. And spend quality and quantity time recharging and reconnecting with your passions and the people you love.

I guarantee you that when you come back, you'll be in a much better state. You'll be energized for the next term, and you'll have the creativity and insight needed to turn your commitments into accomplishments. The academic life is a marathon, and we have to learn to pace ourselves.

Real, regular and extended vacations are necessary if you're to both survive and thrive in academia.

When We Do Too Much

Devotion to career can become all-encompassing

Bryn Williams-Jones
May 21, 2024

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Photo by Jackson Simmer on Unsplash

Summary

Being a good colleague and "team player" is important in an organization, but sometimes we take on unreasonable responsibilities or commitments, either because we're passionate about the project or because it's expected. And this overwork can have negative spill-over into our professional and personal lives. It's thus important to evaluate major commitments, regularly reflect on whether we're still happy, and plan well in advance the end of the project.

Devotion in academia is expected: to research, to knowledge production, to the discipline and the scientific community, to students, to teaching, and even to the institution. As professors, for most of us our job involves doing all of these things, and more, but to varying degrees; and we may reasonably be more invested in some areas than others, and at different points in our careers.

For some of these responsibilities, we do what is required and expected, but not more – we teach our courses, supervise a certain number of students, obtain grants and publish at a reasonable volume (whatever that may be). For other responsibilities, notably those areas for which we are particularly passionate (often, but not exclusively, research), we will invest far more time and energy than is either required or expected for our stage of career. At some point, however, it will be necessary to back off and reduce the investment of time and energy, because we realize that we are doing – and caring – too much.

The passionate, dedicated investment in a project can involve substantial volunteer work. Whether it involves being on the board of directors of a professional or academic association, organizing an academic conference, or mentoring a group of students in developing a major project, the time and energy invested may be immeasurable. There will be numerous planning and administrative meetings, strategy sessions and fundraising initiatives, publicity and marketing campaigns, and the ongoing recruitment of members to join the project. These all require a long-term engagement and willingness to invest, and without counting the hours involved.

As my wife, colleagues and students can attest, I'm a passionate and even obsessive person. When I invest in a project, I go-in 150%. Some of these projects may be of short duration, either because the sought-after result arrived quickly (e.g., a grant being funded), or because despite the energy and time invested, the project didn't pan-out… And so, I move on to the next project.

I've also invested in multi-year initiatives to which I devoted my energies to ensure their growth and success, while also assuming all my other academic responsibilities. Through these experiences, I've become acutely aware that such major projects cannot and should not be open-ended engagements – they require an end-of-commitment date, and a transition plan. Two personal examples are illustrative.

In 2010, shortly after tenure and promotion to Associate professor, I took over direction of the Bioethics Program at the School of Public Health. In part, accepting this academic responsibility was a normal thing to do: at this stage of my career, I was looking for new professional experiences, and this provided a great opportunity to learn about program management and development, engage in broad student mentorship, etc. But being program director is also a normal administrative responsibility of professors, something that is shared with colleagues in the department and discipline – it was my turn.

At my university, the normal mandate for a program director is 3 years, renewable once, for 6 years in total. I spent 12 years as director of the Bioethics Program and loved it! I am proud to say that I grew and reformed our programs to welcome students from a wide range of disciplinary and professional backgrounds. I boosted our national and international reputation through massive and sustained social media engagement. I successfully defended the program during some difficult years when its pertinence was being questioned, and I launched the first PhD in bioethics in Canada. These, for me, will be important and meaningful legacies for my career as a bioethics professor.

Being program director required a huge commitment of time, as well as mental and emotional energy, and I have absolutely no regrets, even if not all of the related initiatives succeed. But I far exceeded the normal mandate of 6 years, and during my tenure, I came close to burning out twice. So, while I'm proud of what I was able to accomplish in this role, during the last few years of my mandate I was also running out of energy. In December 2020, I accepted a major administrative responsibility, becoming Head of Department; it was evident that I needed to hand over responsibility to another professor, which I did in 2022 with the recruitment of a new colleague, Charles Dupras. Under his leadership, a new energy has been injected and Charles is taking our Bioethics Program in novel directions, with expanded international collaborations, amongst others; as a result, the Program is continuing to grow and to flourish. This is exactly why academic program responsibility should be time-limited.

A second example.

In 2012, with a group of students, we launched *BioéthiqueOnline* – which would become the Canadian Journal of Bioethics/Revue Canadienne de Bioéthique (CJB/RCB) in 2018 – the first and still only bilingual, open access bioethics journal in Canada. Almost entirely volunteer-driven, we started with no budget beyond my small annual professor stipend to cover the cost of web hosting; I did the web design, all the publicity and indexing, most of the manuscript page-setting, and all the final production. In 2018, we succeeded in obtaining our first Aid to Scholarly Journals grant from SSHRC, started collaborating with the non-profit publishing consortium Érudit, and were able to hire (part-time) our Scientific Director, Aliya Affdal, who still does far more work than that for which she is paid.

In 2022, we celebrated our 10-year anniversary, having grown from a small student-run project into an established journal with a national reputation and growing international audience. Still almost entirely volunteer based, we've expanded our editorial team to ensure that this work is manageable for the editors. Nonetheless, Aliya and I (as Editor-in-chief) put in countless hours (including some weekends) doing editorial review, page-setting, publicity, and grant writing. The recognition from authors, readers and the bioethics community has grown, and is very much welcome – but we do this work because we're passionate about the project and know that what we're doing is meaningful.

Another one of my obsessions – and one that overlapped with my time as program director – I'm thrilled about what we've accomplished to date, the great special issues produced and in development, and the ever-growing number and quality of submissions and publications. We've signed an important collaboration agreement with the Canadian Bioethics Society-Société canadienne de bioéthique to support mutual promotion and co-develop initiatives. And as part of my ongoing effort at fund-raising to increase our operating funds, we've launched an open funding campaign with Lyrasis (please share with your institution!).

I'm not yet ready to hand-over the reins of the journal to a new Editor-in-chief – I still have far too much that I want to do, and I know I can do it. But I'm also in my early 50s, and planning to retire by 65, so I've also started thinking about the transition. As part of best practices in academic journal governance, many years ago we wrote policy on editorial responsibilities, including how to ensure a smooth handover of leadership for the journal. When I step down, someone else will be identified, and the journal will continue to innovate under a new Editor-in-chief… and that's healthy.

I've been fortunate with these two multi-year projects (among others). They've been incredibly rewarding, but they were never easy, and at times the burden became such that I asked myself whether it was worth the effort, whether I should just throw in the towel. Sometimes you have to cut your losses when, for example, despite all your efforts you still don't receive the support that's necessary for the project to succeed. When it becomes a significant and enduring source of stress, or you've hit a point of diminishing return, or that you're simply fed-up, then it's time to re-evaluate whether you're doing too much.

It is possible to care too much for a project and then find out that other important parts of our personal and professional lives are suffering because of this devotion. So, yes, we can and should invest fully in major projects – but we should also regularly question ourselves to see if we're still happy and productive, and to plan an end to the project and a transition of responsibilities.

Exhausted

Recognize when you're tired and act before it's too late

Bryn Williams-Jones
Apr 16, 2024

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Photo by Tricia Galvin on Unsplash

Summary

In spring, we should be feeling an energy boost, but many of us aren't. We need to listen to our bodies and ask ourselves why we feel so exhausted. We need to listen to our families and colleagues, and in turn, model positive behaviours by taking time to rest and recover. In talking about the issue of fatigue/exhaustion, and taking care of ourselves and others, we can begin to address the underlying factors and so be better prepared in the future.

I've noticed that this year in particular many of my colleagues are more tired than usual. Alongside COVID, there was a nasty set of respiratory viruses circulating that hit people hard over the Fall of 2023 and Winter 2024. My wife and son also got hit hard, with intense nagging coughs that lasted for months, and kept us all awake at night; somehow, I managed to get off easy with only a bad head cold for two weeks. But even after getting over our respective illnesses, we've all been running low on energy, and for many months now.

Usually by late March or early April in Montreal, we're seeing the end of winter, thinking about spring, profiting from longer days, and starting to get out more and enjoy long walks. This also coincides with the end of the Winter academic term, which while busy is, in my experience, much less intense and exhausting than the Fall, which feels like a sprint to December followed by two weeks of much needed down-time to recover.

We should have been feeling an energy boost as we started looking forward to summer freedom, nice weather, and eventual vacations. But this year, we haven't had the physical or mental energy that we normally do. After a day of work, the only thing I was thinking about was dinner and bed. I couldn't work up the energy to go to my evening karate classes, which is something I love doing and had no problem with last year, when my son and I were going 2-3 days/week; this year, we only managed 1 class, and on the weekend. Even my blog writing slowed down substantially, from my norm of generating 2-3 posts/week to 1 every two weeks, because I simply didn't have the energy to concentrate, nor the inspiration.

It's normal to be tired after a busy week, but it's more problematic when after a relaxing weekend, Monday morning rolls around and you're still feeling tired and wishing for vacation. Clearly, it's important to listen to our bodies, to adapt to how we're feeling and, in particular, not feel guilty about taking some time off. But feeling really wiped out is more serious. The level of exhaustion that I and my family were feeling, and which I saw shared by quite a few colleagues, was far more serious and required action.

My wife and I recognized and acknowledged that our family was exhausted, and so we consciously took off the pressure by reducing our expectations, in all spheres of our lives. At work, we started saying no to more invitations and declined opportunities that we normally would have accepted. We even backed out of current commitments and explained why (when it wasn't obvious based on how awful we looked), to take the necessary time and space to recover. And we talked about this explicitly with our colleagues, sharing our challenges, our frustrations at being so tired, and also wondering why this year was so bad. Maybe it was a delayed after-effect of living through the COVID years?

As senior professors who have both come close to burnout on multiple occasions, and who are committed to being positive role models for our graduate students, we're very much aware of the opportunity and privilege that we have to talk about workplace issues with our colleagues, and to be heard. By showing that we were exhausted, and by explicitly refusing commitments, we were modeling behaviours that can contribute to a healthy and collegial work environment. This was made all the more important by the fact that we each had colleagues (and students) who were clearly also exhausted but were nonetheless trying to tough it out, to get through the term with all the same commitments and with no compromises.

Despite the collective experience of the COVID pandemic, we are again seeing colleagues (and students) who insist on going into the office (or to class) when they are clearly sick and infectious, either because they think it's expected of them or it is in fact required by their managers (or professors), which is unconscionable. We should know better, by now – staying home when sick and keeping our germs to ourselves is a civic duty, an individual act to protect public health.

It's far too easy in academia, as in many other work environments, to get sucked into a pattern of behaviour where we continue working because we have commitments and expectations, even when we're sick and/or exhausted and so should be taking time off to recover.

The exhaustion that many of us experienced this year should be a clear signal that we need to be much more reflexive, both individually and collectively. I would argue that it requires challenging the norms of our work and learning environments (is in-person really better for everyone compared to distance-work or learning?), and our expectations of productivity and continual growth (do we always have to produce more and better or can sometime what we do be good enough?).

We need to listen to our bodies, and to ask ourselves why we feel exhausted. But we also need to listen to our families, and to our colleagues, and together think through what we can do to address the underlying (social, economic, political) factors behind such exhaustion, and so be better prepared and hopefully able to avoid or at least mitigate it in the future.

Care and Emotional Labour

Important work that needs to be taken seriously by individuals and organizations

Bryn Williams-Jones
Jan 14, 2025

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/emotional-labour
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/40428

Photo by Milada Vigerova on Unsplash

Summary

Emotional labour is an important part of many professional roles and helps in the good functioning of institutions. In the university, it's been formalized through increased support of students to ensure their success. But what of all the care provided to colleagues? Where does this fit as part of professional responsibilities, who does it, and is it valorized? It's important to recognize emotional labour, and to set reasonable limits.

A series of texts on "emotional labour", by Loreen Berdahl and Christie Schultz, published in University Affairs/Affaires universitaires – the go-to Canadian academic newsletter for academic career news, advice and job postings – got me thinking about what it means to be a good colleague, besides the standard performance metrics listed in our CVs (for professors, its research, teaching, service and outreach).

Aside from just being collegial and doing our fair share, there are a host of "soft skills" that we deploy and care that we provide to students and colleagues which, while important and even critical for the good functioning of our institutions, is undervalued. It doesn't appear in our CVs nor is it evaluated for promotion; the energy required and fatigue that may result are invisible; and this labour is not always distributed equitably among the members of an organization.

For Berdahl and Schultz, emotional labour involves

> the management of emotions done as part of one's role [… and is] an important component of academic work. Many people working in academia perform emotional labour daily through activities such as emotional caretaking of students and colleagues, mentoring activities, and emotionally-charged service roles and activities. This work benefits institutions and individuals alike, but it takes a toll on those conducting this labour in terms of time and energy, as well as potential negative health impacts.

In their three articles, Berdahl and Schultz explore the importance of acknowledging emotional work and it's connection to exhaustion and burnout, the need to develop skills in caring, and propose ways to integrate these as part of leadership. They anchor their analysis in a feminist care ethics – which speaks to me given my training with feminist bioethicists – and point to the need to attend to both context (where, why and how this labour occurs) and inequality (who provides and who benefits from care).

At my university, like many others, we've implemented various programs to help students who're dealing with learning challenges, including those related to mental health, such as anxiety, depression, etc. These important services, often staffed by colleagues who volunteer to be sentinels, are a demonstration of an institution seeking to care for its members. These roles are clear, and the work is documented, a "line on the CV", and so valorized. What may be invisible, however, is the emotional toll that such caring can have on the carer; and this mandate is aimed at only one group, students.

As department director, much of my work involves management (organizing meetings, assigning teaching responsibilities, presiding hiring committees), but there is also a heavy dose of human resources work: coaching (junior, mid-career and senior) colleagues on career progression; helping people who're doing too much to prioritize and learn to say No; and occasionally doing conflict resolution. These are all an implicit part of the job of director and can be more or less emotionally taxing. And they complement the other emotional work I do as a professor in my relations with students and colleagues.

Particularly demanding are those situations that are emotionally charged, and where keeping a neutral stance is impossible or even inappropriate. For me, these have included, amongst others:

- ***Dealing with* arrogant colleagues *who're convinced that they're (always) right and rarely (never) take No for an answer.*** I have to bite back my initial response and not simply tell them to "grow up!" or "stop being so self-centred". I listen to their argument, complaint or grievance and keep my cool (an act of will), and I real-time problem solve by trying to identify spaces for compromise or processes that can be deployed to re-centre their concern around collective, departmental interests.
- ***Helping students find scholarships or contracts to finance their studies.*** There's the formal work of writing reference letters, which is easily planned-for, but also the shared emotional investment in hoping for success and the deception of failure (although obviously to different degrees). Trying to stay optimistic and to think about other strategies to help my students flourish takes mental energy.
- ***Supporting colleagues who are unhappy with their current work responsibilities.*** Active and empathetic listening and directed questioning help them identify the source of their discomfort or dissatisfaction, and then we think through strategies to manage these problems, something that is particularly challenging in the context of toxic workplace relations.
- ***Being present for colleagues living through personal life challenges.*** Colleagues who lose a loved one or are dealing with personal/family problems (e.g., illness, separation), need support. This can be as simple as reaching out occasionally by email or chat to see how they're doing, to show that I am concerned for their well-being; a quick touching-base without being invasive.
- ***Promoting the interests of students or colleagues.*** Being the department cheerleader is a fun part of the job of director (and professor), and something that fits well with my personality. But it also requires emotional energy, to enthusiastically promote the excellence of colleagues (and students) in different forums (e.g., for promotions, grants, awards) and to think strategically to help them expand their networks and identify promising opportunities for professional growth and success.

There are limits to what we can do as colleagues (or professors). We are not therapists, and even if we have that skill, it is not our role to provide therapy to our colleagues or students. But there are things we can do. We can find organizational resources that can provide targeted or personalized support, and we can be present and just listen, showing that we care.

Caring about our students and colleagues is a core part of what makes for a collegial environment. It differentiates a healthy workplace where members enjoy what they do together, from a hostile or simply cold environment, where everyone does their own thing in their own corner. This emotional work is important, but it's also "labour" that necessitates time and energy, both of which are limited resources. It's thus important to acknowledge and valorise this work to our colleagues, to our superiors, and to ourselves.

For those of us who participate in emotional labour, self-care is important. For me, this involves disconnecting from work and spending time in positive spaces that help me recharge – my family, my hobbies, and this blog, which is deeply cathartic. It means not reading emails in the evening or on weekends, and even when I know there are problems that I have to deal with, consciously letting them go as they can wait until Monday. And it involves continual reflexivity to "own my own shit" and be responsible only for that for which I'm actually responsible, and let others assume that which is theirs.

Like so many things in life, recognizing that this emotional labour is important but also draining requires finding balance, but one that will be dynamic, always shifting.

Emotional labour is omnipresent in organizations and it's important for their success. It's the glue that transforms a group of individuals working side-by-side into a collective who advance both individual and shared interests and so create a whole that's greater than the sum of its parts. We must acknowledge this work, take ownership of it as part of our professional responsibilities, and set reasonable limits – to care for another, one also has to care for oneself.

A Much-Needed Recharge

Find spaces to get your energy back

Bryn Williams-Jones
Oct 29, 2024

URL: brynstorming.substack.com/p/needed-recharge
Permalink: hdl.handle.net/1866/40347

Photo by Erik Witsoe on Unsplash

Summary

When you're busy, and especially when you start feeling tired, it's crucial to disconnect and recharge. Walking in the countryside, with the range of sensory experiences and aesthetic rarely found in the city, can be one of those spaces. Find those spaces that work for you and make time for them in your busy life.

For the recent Canadian Thanksgiving, which is in mid-October, my family and I got out of town for a much-needed long weekend at our cottage in the Outaouais. The Fall colours were at their height, a glorious mix of orange, red, and yellow, with golden sunlight filtering through the trees. The weather was perfect – sunny all weekend with crisp temperatures in the morning (4C) and highs of 10-12C in the afternoon. So, we made the most of the opportunity and went for two 10km walks on nearby trails, one of which we'd only recently discovered.

On the way back from our second walk, I told my wife how much I needed this outing, and how I felt it boost my morale. I explained that I wasn't feeling down, just very tired. And this weekend, walking in the fresh air and immersing ourselves in the beauty of the Quebec countryside was the recharge that I very much needed.

Fall is always busy, filled as it is with lots of meetings, the writing of numerous letters of recommendation, teaching, grant submissions, etc. And this one feels a bit more busy than usual, because I'm teaching a PhD seminar (and loving it!) and presiding three hiring committees, along with all the other activities that occupy a professor and department director. September went by fast, and I was good at limiting my commitments and thus keeping (mostly) to planned deadlines, so feel less stressed than previous autumns. I've also kept to my rule of not working evenings or weekends and saying "No" to opportunities because I knew that I would have a very full term. But I was still tired.

I'm a high energy person, passionate and enthusiastic about different aspects of my professional and personal lives; so when I take on a task or responsibility, I invest myself completely. While an asset for many aspects of my life, the obsessive part of my personality can also be highly energy consuming. I've learned over the years, and this is a lesson I sometimes have to relearn, that to stay balanced and able to carry out all my professional (and personal) responsibilities at the level I expect, I need side-projects or hobbies that force me to disconnect my academic brain and shift my attention to other domains.

The martial arts are important for me because of the physical and mental challenge they demand; when I'm at the karate dojo and doing kata or practicing bunkai (applications), or doing coordination drills, I cannot think about anything else but the physical sensation of the particular action or technique. I invariably arrive home after karate class physically tired but mentally relaxed. And I then sleep like a baby.

Similarly, writing this blog is an important creative and intellectual outlet for all the ideas that are bouncing around in my head – when I write, the experience is cathartic. And it is extremely cheap psychotherapy as it allows me to externalize emotionally burdensome ideas, making them subject to rational analysis and creating a critical distance. Both the creative aspect and the concretization of ideas give me real pleasure, and the completion of a post a sense of accomplishment and the desire to continue writing and sharing.

To come back to my weekend walk in the countryside where we were overjoyed by seeing the Fall colours at their peak, I was wondering what made this experience so different from the long walks that my family and I do around Montreal. During these city walks, which are a regular part of our weekly routine, we do similar distances and walk and talk, but they are more maintenance than relaxing or energizing. In part, this is because we've done these walks so many times; and we're on sidewalks, with the ever-present ambient noise and bustle of the city. And while Montreal has many interesting neighbourhoods and numerous green spaces to explore, each with their own aesthetic, for me this is not the same as being out in the countryside.

The beauty of the Fall colours, the sound of the leaves and pine needles crunching underneath our feet, and the crisp air of early afternoon combined to provide an aesthetic experience unlike any I have when walking in the city. And while we crossed quite a few groups of people also enjoying the day, we largely had the trails to ourselves. This experience had a profound effect on me – it gave me the recharge I needed. And it got me thinking about those spaces that allow me to regain my energy, that is, karate, blog writing, and walking in the countryside, which is good for my health and proven to reduce stress and anxiety.

The take-away message from this reflection, if there is one, is to find those spaces that allow you to recharge and then make time for them in your busy life. I know I will.

Summary

"*Playing the Academic Game*" is the culmination of two years of weekly posts on the *BrynStorming* blog by Bryn Williams-Jones, professor of bioethics in the School of Public Health at the Université de Montréal.

As an ethicist long interested by questions of justice, an important motivator for this project has been Williams-Jones' need to respond to the injustices encountered in academia. Many students and researchers fail in their studies or career progression not because they don't have the intellectual abilities or drive, but simply because they don't know what's expected of them or how to best present themselves in a competitive environment. That is, they don't know "the rules of the game," and this isn't fair, because the rules are rarely made explicit.

In this book, which is organized into 5 major sections – *The Academic Career Path*, *Professional Identity*, *University Life*, *Productivity and Creativity*, and *Multiple Responsibilities and Mental Health* – Williams-Jones shares 30 years of experience in academia to make explicit the often-implicit norms and rules of academic life, so that all who wish to can fairly play the academic game.

About the Author

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Bryn Williams-Jones is Professor of Bioethics and Director of the Department of Social and Preventive Medicine in the School of Public Health at the University of Montreal, and Editor-in-Chief of the Canadian Journal of Bioethics. He is interested in the socio-ethical and policy implications of health innovations in diverse contexts. His work examines the conflicts that arise in academic research and professional practice with a view to developing ethical tools to manage these conflicts when they cannot be avoided. In *BrynStorming*, his bilingual (English/French) blog, he shares his ideas on bioethics and academic life.