Seven Tips for the Brand New Professor (in 2008)

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This morning, I received an email concerning course schedule decisions for Spring 2016. It seemed so far away until I realized that it is already 2015. Unbelievably, seven years have passed since I finished my degree and entered my first full time appointment.

For most of us, the seasons of the academic life have a yearly rhythm: orientation, new classes, SBL/AAR meeting, winter vacation, January return, spring break, graduation, three months of ~~procrastination~~ furious writing, then repeat. I enjoy the familiarity of the cycle. But this year, the reality of a sabbatical in another country gives me enough separation for a retrospective look at my teaching career, including lessons learned, as well as the ways in which I stubbornly refuse to grow.

I compiled some of these reflections into a sort of an *ex eventu* prophecy in the form of a list of seven tips that I would present to any professor beginning her/his career in 2008.

"Come to think of it, my grad school years were a long time ago."

1. Defending your dissertation does not stop the chaos of your life. Nor does finding the first job, publishing the first book, getting tenure, or even taking a sabbatical. Academic successes often beget more responsibility, not freedom. Case in point: I am writing this sentence at 1:26am. I think this draft is overdue, but I'm too sleepy to do the time zone math.

2. Practicing good boundaries in grad school prepares you to practice good boundaries as a professor. You survived the doctoral program because you learned to prioritize the completion of the dissertation. Working on the prospectus over the holidays? Check. Signing up for that "Beginning Hittite" doctoral seminar? Not so much. The first years as a professor require a similar drill. Decide what you want, whether it's tenure, exemplary teaching evaluations or a future in academic administration and adjust your decisions accordingly.

3. Theological and religious education will become more economically precarious than ever before. Using profane terms, the market is down, and future prospects are bleak. But every downturn spawns opportunity. As the newest, and likely the youngest faculty member, be open to innovation, risk, and creativity.

4. Do not make student evaluations more than they are. Try to get a sense of the student experience and glean what you can for future improvement. Take some general notes for tenure review. You may indulge yourself on both the positive and negative ones for about an hour. Then let them go.

5. Do not sabotage yourself. If you assign four research papers for a single three-unit class, your students will hate you, but that will not compare to the amount of self-hatred that will slowly build as you wade through that ginormous pile of papers.

6. Push yourself to try new things but only while setting limits. It is perfectly acceptable to create your class by drawing on your colleagues (reduce, reuse, recycle!). Teaching that class outside your field? Great, but try to wait until your third year. Writing popular op-eds? Excellent idea, but work on those after your dissertation is published.

7. You will learn to embrace online teaching. Yes, I realize that many of your colleagues will see online education as just a short step before the rise of the machines. But suspend your judgment for now. Ask yourself, what can the online delivery system offer that may even be more effective than traditional classrooms? If you are honest, you may be surprised at what you find.

So there you have it. Fellow educators, stop for a moment and look back. What advice would you offer your younger self as you enter your career as a theological or religious studies educator?

"Seven Years Ago…"

https://wabash.center/2015/02/seven-tips-for-the-brand-new-professor-in-2008/