

English Department Faculty Development Forum

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Chapter One

What was my department about when it elected me chair of the Policy Committee as a third-year assistant professor? Faculty from other departments are scandalized when they hear this. At the meeting where the chairship was decided there was some discussion about whether I needed to be protected from taking on this work and finally one faculty member said “We have to *ask* Beth whether she *wants* to do it. Otherwise it’s not protection, it’s paternalism.” I suppose a lot of people could have made the political point but only an English professor would have done it with such concise and alliterative elegance. (There’s even more I could say about the poetics of that sentence, but no room here.)

So that’s how it happened that toward the end of my fourth year I was still chairing the Policy Committee. It was going well enough that when something called the Faculty Leadership Academy came along it seemed to call my name so I hopped on board and just before that started I also took on organizing our department’s first-ever retreat. This was at WMU’s Southwest Campus which is not in Santa Fe I’m sorry to say but Benton Harbor, MI. But a one-hour car ride was plenty of time for me and our director of composition, who had also worked on the retreat, to remark to each other how many shared interests our faculty have in spite of traveling on different disciplinary tracks (Linguistics, Rhetoric and Writing, Literature, English Education and Creative Writing) whose intersections are sometimes hard to predict, and as we talked I began to imagine an event where we could all discuss one central concept in our manifold ways and maybe learn enough about each other that we could start pulling in the same harness once in a while. Like when we need some institutional resources.

Chapter Two

This conversation had other consequences, ones that seemed personal at the time but that have come to inform my theory and practice of leadership quite deeply. She and I are very different: I am always quiet and calm and she is always excited and voluble. When I was younger I might have steered clear for that reason, but only because I had never met someone who knew so surely and could say so clearly what gift she had to offer someone like me. In different layers of our selves we each work hard to make our discourse true to something and I think that is one way to describe the common labor of our discipline and the conduit for the inspiration she gives me.

Chapter Three

So I came up with an idea for a forum called “What Is a Difficult Text?” because we all deal with difficulty in various ways in our scholarship and pedagogy. And I found a collaborator in the department, someone else from whom I also learned a great deal, and we invited the faculty to come together for an afternoon and answer our question.

In case you are wondering what is a difficult text: you are reading one right now, because I am using this genre, the conference poster, in a way you were probably not expecting. I suspect it’s difficult for another reason too. Because of the medium I, unlike most writers, have some idea what you’re doing with your body as you read. If I were in your position I would probably have unconsciously allowed my knees to lock and the left one would be starting to ache about now. So whatever your discomfort, I appreciate your reading on.

Chapter Four

The forum was the same day as a department meeting, at which the department chair, in what I imagine was a desperate attempt to get faculty to stop bringing all their little interpersonal quarrels to him so that he could get some work done, asked us to abide by the Golden Rule. This was well meant and something I probably would have tried myself in his place, but the effects did lead me to theorize that people always respond to a rule (even the Golden one) the same way: by reflexively performing their most conditioned attitudes and behaviors.

So the forum was fairly well attended but not *inspiringly* well attended. Later that weekend I was at a social event with some other department members and one who hadn’t come to the forum asked me whether I thought that some people had stayed away because they were offended by the department chair’s request. The answer was no, this idea would not have occurred to me in a million years, but of course he was not really asking me something but telling me something.

And this has been a very hard lesson to learn about leadership, and one that I still haven’t fully come to terms with. That not all people are going to communicate with me the way I want them to but because I am in a position of responsibility I can’t just dismiss or avoid them. I have to try to listen around what I don’t like because they all have something to tell me that I need to know, and I am answerable to their needs and desires, even the ones they don’t own.

Chapter Five

And the only reason I was even able to think in these terms is that in the meantime I was also attending the Leadership Academy, for which I needed to do a leadership project. I wanted a project that could help integrate my department, but I also wanted to observe nonjudgmentally with the goal of deepening my understanding, rather than acting on my preconceptions or creating some kind of “crisis” to “solve.” Some members of the academy from other disciplines suggested that I do an *autoethnography* and very kindly provided me with some literature about that genre. Finally, though, I decided that I didn’t have time to learn a whole new methodology and also that it was important to me to do something in keeping with the goal of my own discipline, which is, as Bruce McComiskey proposes, “the analysis, critique, and production of discourse in a social context.”

I also realized that I was already doing a leadership project by organizing the forum. This happens all the time in my discipline (I imagine it does in all disciplines whose method is dialectic), the discovery that what you are doing has a different meaning or context than you thought it did. So when I was asked to fill out a form describing my project and its goals the forum fit perfectly and all it needed was a name, which you see at the top of this poster.

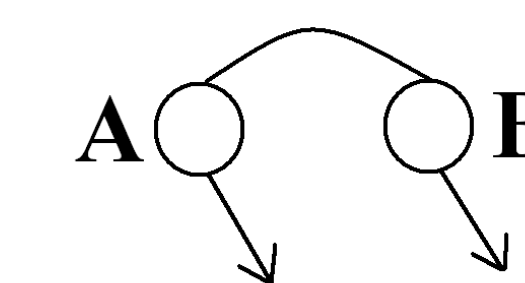
Chapter Six

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Agency:



Linked Paths:



Chapter Seven

Because it was now a project I decided to organize a second forum, with the help of the director of composition, in the spring semester. The topic this time would be “Authority,” recognizing that this means different things to us in our various subdisciplines and separate roles as teachers, researchers, writers and colleagues. For the fall forum we had invited individual faculty members to make brief presentations, but this time we sent out an open invitation asking people to nominate themselves or others to present. Perhaps you can guess how that turned out.

Chapter Eight

Meanwhile, through the Leadership Academy I saw a video by Marshall Goldsmith who suggested that leaders should get in the habit of asking for feedback directly, and since I am trying to test everything I learn as soon as possible, a few weeks later I asked a senior colleague: what can I do to be a better Policy Committee chair? And I could see that something instantly popped into his head so I waited because I know this person has the courage to be honest and it turns out his answer was Stop. And it was like he had held a mirror to my face: I saw that three years is too long and I’ve continued to do it for a few of the wrong reasons as well as some of the right ones, and I have been neglecting my scholarship and the time to worry about that is NOW and not in October when my tenure file is due.

I resigned. It was a difficult decision, made harder when I learned about a week later that the director of composition is leaving here for her dream job. We decided that I should postpone the forum until the fall, for all kinds of reasons. So one source of my inspiration is going away, and the project is delayed, but not derailed.

Chapter Nine

One of the things that makes a discipline a discipline is that it has a method for coming to terms with its losses, as when a scientist gains information even from a failed experiment. In my discipline one such method is narrative, an ancient and adaptive human practice that in the Anglophone world was nurtured during a time when the word *success* just meant *outcome, what happens next*.

So when I was given a space in which to describe my project, I decided to fill it with narrative discourse, because narratives can have multiple beginnings and endings and several integrated or parallel tracks. And even though I have written a lot more than I might have if I had used this poster in the manner intended by the disciplines in which the genre originated, there is still so much I’ve left out, as though I just gave some shape to all the gaps and unfinished business of life. Even if you are not an English professor I think that you know how that is.

Bruce McComiskey, *English Studies: An Introduction to the Discipline* (NCTE, 2006)

Jean Matter Mandler, “How to Build a Baby: II. Conceptual Primitives,” *Psychological Review* 99:4 (1992)

Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (various publishers, 1759-1767)