12. NEGOTIATING THE TENURE-TRACK JOURNEY

The Competing and Contesting Discourse Associated with Becoming an Academic

INTRODUCTION AND FRAMEWORK

According to the Survey of Earned Doctorates (Welch 2008), there were 6,429 doctoral degrees in the field of education granted in 2007. In the spring of 2007, three of these graduates accepted faculty positions at Northern Illinois University. We three found ourselves drawn to faculty life. On separate occasions we expressed excitement about finally getting the job we always wanted, the job of a lifetime so to speak. What else did we have in common? We all came from research-intensive universities. That was it. Two of us were Ph.D. graduates, one an Ed.D. Two came from nationally renowned programs, one from an up and coming program. We came from different fields, different life experiences, different belief systems, and different worlds. Yet, in an instant we were all faced with transforming our doctoral experiences into faculty life. While in many, and perhaps most ways, we were different, there was an essence that was the same. As new faculty members we bonded; maybe not immediately, but over time. In late 2007, toward the end of our first semester, an opportunity arose. That opportunity was to write a column for the Chronicle of Higher Education sharing our experiences as new faculty members on the tenure track.

This essay is a compilation of our Chronicle of Higher Education articles. Our work is an autobiographical inquiry that used life notes to document the ways that three new assistant professors, from various social and cultural backgrounds, navigated the terrain of academic life on the tenure track. Autobiographic inquiry and the use of “life notes” as a methodological tool has been used by feminist scholars to uncover how people learn “to do” academe and how it’s related to the construction of our social identities, not only as academics, but also as human beings (Bell-Scott 1994; Dillard 2006; Neumann and Peterson 1997). Our work in grounded in Dillard’s endarkened feminist epistemological framework (2006), which acknowledges that reality, as it is known, exists at the intersections of our lives and overlaps with the cultural constructions and socializations of race, gender, and other identities.

The basic epistemological assumption we carried into this work is that our professional lives could not be separated from our personal lives, as all aspects of our identities are bound tightly to past, present, and future histories. Given this, we used life notes (personal narratives chronicling our thoughts, feeling, and beliefs)
as a method to construct, unravel, and rebuild our understandings of academic life (Bell-Scott 1994).

The texts presented come from short narratives that described our thoughts and emotions as we took ourselves into the various arenas of the university, reflecting back as well as forward on the very ideas and beliefs that shaped our identities as recent graduates who were now tenure track-faculty. We address a number of issues that are both common and uncommon to transitioning into the professoriate: weary excitement, understanding the role, dealing with a school shooting, negotiating the personal life and the professional life, understanding ego, and reflecting on the past while looking forward. What did we learn? We learned that our experiences are entirely shared and entirely unique.

ON-THE-JOB TRAINING

January 29, 2008

Andrew Kemp, Ed.D.

The sun was shining clearly through the tall windows of the conference room when my dissertation chair called me back in at 11:47 a.m., on March 27, 2007, and said, “Congratulations, Dr. Kemp.”

Four years of classes, research, data analysis, statistics, sleep deprivation, library stacks, copies, reading, writing, and paper after paper after paper were over. Those years – which I had also filled with a full-time job as a high-school teacher and with two daughters and a supportive wife – were suddenly and abruptly finished. What was I to do with myself?

Now, here I sit, 1,292 miles to the northwest, an assistant professor of education in my first tenure-track job. I am in a small, windowless office with my computer and my books. The overhead fluorescent lights are off, and my three antique lamps light the room with 75 watts of “natural light.” This is my place.

I look over at the disk housing my dissertation, which is desperately calling for my attention, pleading to be turned into articles. I review my notes, again, to prepare to teach my next class. I grade the newest set of essays from a group of highly motivated graduate students. And there goes my dissertation, calling out to me once again.

Where did all of my time go?

I remember when I accepted the job, my friends, colleagues, and family all joked about the cushy life I was going to have. How many classes do you teach? What are your office hours? So you get to sit around and think about things you are interested in and write about them?

I teach two classes. They take up as much time as all of the classes I taught in a semester as a high-school teacher, combined. Office hours? I’m here every minute I am not at home, or in a meeting, or sitting on a committee, or visiting a school.

When I sit here, sometimes I think that I am an assistant professor in title alone. Is it possible to be filled with confidence and fear at the same time? I have no idea