

PERSPECTIVES ON PRACTICE

Tenure Tensions: Out in the Enchanted Forest

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Abstract

The tenure track in higher education represents a path shrouded in a fair degree of mystery. This essay provides the perspective of a middle-aged, second-career tenure track faculty member on the vagaries of progressing down the track as an out lesbian. Three dialectics that build tension into the process – covering-creating, evaluation-liberation, and alienation-authenticity – are discussed.

I am a White female. I am a “second-career” academic. I am 50. I am an Assistant Professor. I teach on a satellite campus of a Big Ten University. My hair is more salt than pepper. This is my fifth year in academia. I am a lesbian. I am on the tenure track.

No matter who you are, it seems that the tenure track is not like a linear train track, with well-marked stations and ebullient announcements by a conductor meant to guide you. It is more like a curvaceous path through a shadowy, enchanted forest. Etched into the earth only by the feet of those who have passed through before, the path is riddled with unmarked crossings and conflicting counsel. I had been on campus only a few weeks when a new colleague told me over coffee, “Look, the bottom line is you need to do one pub a year. Six pubs, and you’ll be fine.” A few weeks later another colleague put a hand on my arm and explained that “the bottom line is you need twelve pubs. Crank out two a year. Twelve. That’s the magic number.” I did some quick math and decided to aim for eight.

I was advised to be careful about commitments to service: “Service can consume you. And no one ever lost tenure because of service.” I decide to do service that matters to me that focuses on equity and inclusion. Later, I was counseled that whatever service I choose should involve money. I was a corporate vice president. I have handled multi-million dollar budgets. I believe I have established my credibility in this area. It is not germane to my teaching, or my research.

I noticed that no one offered me advice about the third leg of the tenure track stool – teaching.

Some Background

When I was offered my position at Penn State University, I had recently exited a 25 year private-sector career in training and organization development. I was determined that, finally, I

Tyler, J. A. (2010). Tenure tensions: Out in the enchanted forest. [Perspectives in Adult Education]. *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 24(2-4), 37-42.

<http://education.fiu.edu/newhorizons>

would only work in a place where I would feel fully welcome, where lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) people were recognized in diversity statements and benefits packages, where my colleagues would be more interested in my ideas than my sexual orientation. Because such places are all too rare, preparing to decline a position I had secretly dreamed of during my final years in corporate was one of the most difficult processes of my career. I got lucky. True, the domestic partnership benefits were a little difficult to unearth – they had only been approved 3 months earlier. Sure, it took a few rather awkward conversations to convince me that the University could pass these initial standards. In the end, though, I was convinced, and I accepted the position: Assistant Professor of Training and Development, tenure track. Our Masters of Education program is designed to attract a high percentage of returning adult students with its alternative scheduling, and its scholar-practitioner focus, and I am honored to work with professionals – both inside the classroom and inside the faculty suite – who share my passion for the field and for the process of learning. I love it.

My decision to “stay in the closet” during my time at corporate was driven by an unrelenting interest in discovering how far I could progress up the ladder, and an unwillingness to trade promotions and perquisites for dubious (especially because they were still wholly unknown to me) personal freedoms. I had a good long run in the Fortune 500. You might consider me a survivor of sorts, a success by some standards, but in that time I did nothing to change anyone’s perception on issues of “diversity,” nothing to normalize lesbians in the view of even one colleague. As Hollis (1993) points out, “longevity and replication of values *per se* are not automatic virtues” (p. 16). Unlike all the decisions I had made during my time in industry, my decision to work in academia only if I could be comfortably “out” was more personal than professional. This reversal of the telescope was primarily linked with the tragic loss of my partner to leukemia, but I think it was also catalyzed by the confluence of this loss and a latter-day acknowledgement that it is not organizations but the people within them that should and can hold the greatest psychological power (with apologies to Hollis, 1993, p. 17, who says they *do*). Perhaps the loss was conjoined, more simply, by sheer impatience, or exhaustion. Whatever its source, the result has been a willingness to exert my own self, the holder of my own psychological power, no longer in the spirit of my job, but in the spirit of my vocation.

Three Dialectical Considerations

As I have prepare my dossier for regular tenure reviews, I have notice three related and overlapping dialectical forces that simultaneously pull me out of the closet, and attempt to push me back in. The first is covering-creativity, which is not specific to academia. The remaining two, evaluation-liberation and alienation-authenticity, emerge directly from the forces at play in academic institutions. This collection of dialectics has a metaphor in the enchanted Pushmi-Pullyu encountered by Dr. Doolittle (Lofting, 1920). Just as the two heads of Lofting’s antelope attempted to go in exactly opposite directions whenever it tried to move, these dialectics had the potential to freeze me in their midst. This is not a complaint I am making. I do not expect or require that the institution ameliorate these tensions. I have only noticed that developing an appreciation of the dialectics and the roles they serve has helped me to break from immobility as I navigate between them.

Covering-Creativity

Being in the closet is a daily process. Being in the closet is exhausting. A closeted person is a continuous editor, carefully scripting even the most casual of interactions, constantly developing cover companions, cover stories. When I was in the closet I was an expert pronoun switcher. I was the queen of ambiguity. I could cleverly cover my tracks. None of this skill came naturally. It was borne of the burden of keeping my secret through silence (Rich, 1979), and if you have kept one you know: the keeping of secrets is a compelling and confining force. Energy that I put into sustaining the lie was no longer available for any creative endeavors, personal or professional. My experience of expending energy in this way was that it wore me down.

Being out of the closet is also a daily process. Being out of the closet is also exhausting, but for me the exhaustion is more akin to that which follows a good physical workout, or a completion of an intense intellectual exercise. Since I left corporate, I have developed an uneasy peace with the process of coming out during the course of daily interactions and, in the last three years, in my classes. It took me a year to arrive at a coming out process that felt sufficiently comfortable in the classroom, and I have adopted it for all my interactions. I leverage the heterosexual standard of simply talking about my partner as if her gender and our status as a couple were of no consequence. Now some of the energy formerly consumed by the furtive switching of pronouns is consumed each time I come out in this way, when I hold my breath in that split second while I wait for my utterance to register with my listener. I watch carefully for a twitch, a grimace, a shifting from one foot to another, and I hope earnestly for its absence. This too requires energy, but this energy creates more of a complete circuit, moving between anode and cathode and generating possibility in whatever lies between them. With batteries, this might be an appliance or a light bulb, but in this circuit, it is *me* who is energized. I expend this energy to open myself up to energy, to produce energy. In a discussion on writing, Rich (1979) says, “for an action or a character to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive. And a certain freedom of the mind is needed” (p. 43). So too I suggest, it is in life, which is so widely known to imitate art.

When I was in the closet I convinced myself that revealing myself as the Other would require greater energy than keeping the closet intact. Rather, the energy required to come out of the closet is equal to the energy required to stay in. I have traded the energy of covering my tracks for more generative possibilities. I believe this is good for me, good for the university, good for students. Not everyone agrees. I am regularly advised by well-meaning colleagues that I am too brazen, that I am putting my tenure at risk. In writing up a personal narrative for promotion, I was counseled that I should not make declarative statements that characterize my sexual orientation. I complied (responding to energy pushing me back “in”), but I used the opportunity to open and shift conversations with the head of my school (energy pulling me “out”). Ultimately, energy that would have normally been consumed with keeping my cover, has been channeled into participation on the University President’s Commission on LGBT Equity in Education, and an on-campus diversity training sub-committee wherein I focus on curricular integration of LGBTQ discourse. The covering-creativity dialectic informs my choices about

when I need to protect myself (rarely) and when there is more to be gained by being out (frequently).

Evaluation-Liberation

It was instantly clear to me that the promotion and tenure system relies heavily on student input to assess teacher effectiveness. In this dialectic, my need to receive high evaluation scores from students is balanced by my desire to create classroom spaces that can liberate the voice of the Other.

What I noticed in my first two semesters, while I was “out” in the department but “in” during my classes, was that my ability to incorporate my experience into classroom discourse was eroded, corroded, by the closet. In exchanging ideas with my students about the psycho-social dynamics of organizations, learning, and change, I was afraid to relate experiences that might put too fine a point on my sexual orientation, for fear that it would tarnish my evaluations and jeopardize my progress on the tenure track. I feared recrimination by students who would disapprove of me not on the basis of my teaching, but on the basis of my sexual orientation. The evaluations are completely reliant on the integrity of students to respond to the scaled items based solely on their experience in the class, saving their editorial comments for the verbatim dialogue boxes at the bottom of the form. As much as I want to trust this integrity, I worry that it is not always reliable, and stories from my colleagues of abuses at the hands of students are not encouraging. It was clear to me that my efficacy as an educator was, at least in my imagination, constrained by the institutional pressure to gain top evaluation scores. This evaluatory aspect of the dialectic was pushing me back in to the closet, and I grappled with ways of resisting, of finding the pull.

I made the decision in my third semester to begin to experiment with coming out in the classroom. I did so only after the mid-point of the semester, and I did so cautiously, in the context of stories we were exchanging around diversity, so as not to seem too far out of context. A reference to my partner turned a few heads, but our students are a civilized lot, and they appreciate the power dynamic typically at work in higher education classrooms, so there was no immediate fallout. In the ensuing weeks, students began to reference my “perspective” on diversity issues relative to team dynamics in my project management course, and on hegemonic pressures in my course on organizational change. This opened up new reservoirs of experience. Student exchanges became increasingly significant, their stories conveyed more richly. I could feel an opening up, a liberating of their voices as the Other, a fearlessness that I had not felt before. My own liberation allowed me to participate more in the collective consciousness emerging from our discussions, rather than facilitating from outside. In a course where students were exploring marginalized elements of organizational discourse, they asked for a sample story. I told them one that revolved around an unwitting comment by a senior administrator at the University that could have completely silenced me. A student who had participated in three other courses with me approached me at the end of the class. “It must be terribly hard for you, to tell that story, to come out in class each semester. I appreciate it.” I replied that it had just gotten a little easier. My evaluations in that course were grand.

Alienation-Authenticity

This deepening of conversations with students leads us neatly into the last of these dialectics. Here, for me, the stakes are higher. The alienation-authenticity dialectic is less about what happens when people come to my classes than about the possibility that they may not come at all. As my reputation has begun to precede students' experience of my classes, I worry about the criteria that they use to make choices about their plan of study. I have already heard that some students do not register for my classes because I ask them to read too much, write too often, or think too deeply. I do not mind this much. But when a man of deep Christian faith wanted to avoid a required class with me because I am a lesbian, a sinner, I realized that I do not want students to miss what my classes offer because they disapprove of my "lifestyle" as some still quaintly put it. I do not want to alienate students. I am not trying to make a statement. I am trying to foster critical reflection, to enlarge the discourse, not shrink it. I resist this push back into the closet, and persist in pursuing the possibilities of authenticity – for everyone – in the classroom. The resistant student took the required course, the path of least resistance. He came out in class about his faith, and I recognize his nervousness. Everybody has a closet. At the end of our last class together, he tells me that he has learned something: he judges too quickly.

This dialectic is also about a pursuit of wholeness, an integration of my own identities, a way of approaching research and service as well as teaching. The double edge of this dialectic is that the more out I am, the more this single slice of my identity can dominate, steering people and ideas in my direction, or driving them away. I have a broad research agenda, wide-ranging interests. I cringed when a student characterized an accomplished professor from a prestigious University as a "very out lesbian professor." She is that, but she is much more as well. I did my best to point out that the professor's contribution, though perhaps made possible by being out, extends far beyond her sexual orientation. I do not want to become "the out lesbian professor" or "the out lesbian researcher." That I am a lesbian, that I am now out, may make me interesting, but I hope that it is not the *most* interesting thing about me. I hope for a time when that slice of my identity is no more interesting than that I am a storyteller, a good daughter, a careful listener, a faithful companion, a lover of the light at dusk. In the meantime, I continue my efforts to integrate my various identities in the spirit of candor, holism, and authenticity in a way that supports the work of others to do the same. I hope, all the while, to advance down the tenure track.

Straying from the Path

Hollis (1993) suggests that "our vocation is seldom a straight path, but a series of unfolding tackings and turnings" (p. 73). As anyone on it would likely testify, the tenure track is, at the very least, a mysterious path (White Tison Pugh, 1998). The mythology surrounding it is as rich as the dark, enchanted forests of folktales. Entering the forest at all carries with it some risk of course, but leaving the well-worn path is seen by some as simply foolish. Little Red Riding Hood's mother tells her to stay on the path on the way to her grandmother's, and sure enough, when Little Red leaves it to pick some flowers she encounters the wolf. I too have been counseled to stay on the well-worn path, to keep my head down, to not write essays such as this one, to not come out in classes, to wait for such things until I have academic freedom. The people who provide this counsel care about me, about my institutional success, and they are

straight. They have kept their heads up while I have kept mine down, while I have been waiting for my freedom. I am not trying to make a point: I am pursuing the enchanted castle of wholeness. I entered the forest when I changed careers. It is too late to turn back, and it has been too long in coming for me to lower my head and pick my way carefully down the path. I keep my head up, and where I see flowers, I pick them. When I stray too far from the path, I trust that the wise crone and the spirited trees living in the heart of the forest will help to save me from the wolf.

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