
The Magic In Between

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The pace and protocol of “ivory tower” academic life can often blur remembrance and distort the value attributed to bits of life sometimes called “small.” Small bits come packaged *in between* one thing and another – just-for-now preparations made anticipating a tomorrow I hope to occupy. Adjunct teaching can be seen as “small” in such a light and might consequently be devalued or dismissed as no more than a vehicle for getting from one place to another. A third-year doctoral student, I can claim more than five years employment experience in variously funded contingent positions: adjunct hires, teaching assistantships, research, and supervisory assignments. What I find to be true: As rewards increase for upwardly aspiring professional development, the right-now productive potential of classroom teaching/learning can be overlooked and the possibility for realizing the magic *in between* can be lost. I equip myself against such loss by recalling one particularly dynamic semester of teaching and being reminded again therein of the difference realized on both sides of a teacher’s podium when discovered learning is as prized as predetermined outcomes. I was first helped to remember through an unexpected interruption on a fine summer night.

That June day of summer break was already drifting into a northern Minnesota evening perfect for tennis—new lights having been recently installed at outdoor courts alongside the

local high school. Two years had passed since I'd left home to continue graduate studies at Purdue University, and summer's days of leisure were now held as treasured times for me. I love playing tennis, though like others of my family on the courts that evening, I found more pleasure than precision in friendly competition. It would be fair to call me a "born teacher" type, and I was just then instructing my daughter-in-law on the subtleties of a forehand groundstroke when, from across the span of a six-court complex, I heard my name being insistently and enthusiastically shouted: "MARY! Is that YOU? It IS you, isn't it?! Mary!"

I didn't recognize the speaker, and the situation offered no indication of identity, so I only cautiously waved a friendly affirmation, acknowledging with a lift of my chin and a smile the speaker's confident remembrance of some connection with me. I returned to the instruction from which I'd been distracted, and with repeated certainty the speaker shouted once again, "It IS you! Mary! Come over. Can you come over? My friends want to meet you." Pushed by the nearly palpable attention of players occupying adjacent courts, I surrendered to the summons wrapped with excitement, excused myself from family, and crossed over to find ... Samantha, very much a woman now yet every bit as passionate for life as she had been when still a first-year student enrolled at Northwest Technical College two years before. In her eager remembrance that night, I learned to revalue the teaching I had once done at NTC and to realize a magical potential in shared firsts and celebrated in-betweens.

Those two years before, I had arrived ten minutes to the hour feeling under-prepared, over-dressed, and obviously nervous about being a first-time adjunct instructor. The industrial clock high on the *back* wall and an alienated table standing solo at the front of the room denoted teacher from students, and I several times divided and restacked piles of handouts on the table while I watched ten minutes go by. The novelty of "new teacher" held no more than a moment of student attention before individual anxieties/excitement restored a classroom buzz. Even at 8:00 a.m. most students were early for a first day at Northwest Tech, and, before directions could be given, had intuitively or-

dered seating arrangements along customary lines: mechanics – all males – to the back; hygienists – all females – to the front. Sharon and Sue claimed senior status by virtue of age and comfortably commanded front row center. Justin was contentedly asleep in row five – far right, and at one minute to the hour, Kurt, Jeremy, and Travis shuffled match-step past me to a trio of seats in the back row, seeming to argue as they did that mechanics work better in threes. And then there was Samantha – third row, two seats in from the left, engrossed in conversation with Stacy until the very moment I began a brief introduction to get the semester underway. “Hello. My name is Mary” – dutifully writing in big letters on the board, “and this class is Applied Communications, so if ...” I had not reached the end of my sentence before Samantha’s question jumped into the air: “Do we get to call you *Mary*?” An uncomfortable pause made it clear I understood the cue, and a confirming hush in the room provoked even Justin to wake up for the answer. Though prevailing patterns directed the use of my surname, I’d never been handy with a pretense of authority, so I answered from the ease of habit: “‘*Mary*’ works for me.” Obviously thrilled with my answer, Samantha then and there dedicated herself to the liberal use of my first name. Justin went back to sleep. And that was only the beginning.

Samantha was one of eighteen students enrolled in Applied Communications, an entry-level, business related composition and speech class required of students pursuing associates degrees as dental assistants and automotive mechanics. My semester teaching these students was to be an adventure of *firsts* all around, discovery that would be in turns challenging, constructive, disappointing, and at last decisive. In what was sometimes no more than a collective act of desperation, we would chip away the granite walls of convention to overturn expectations, finding a labyrinth of possibilities where only a single channel of expression had been thought to be. There is an odd sort of freedom born at the convergence of seeming disorder and the absence of any reliable guide for what is *right* – therein can be found a fascinatingly productive liberty.

The magic of *firsts* underwrites the power of a produc-

tive “in-between” particular to the adjunct teaching experience, a bonanza of discovery for novice instructors not entirely unlike those new beginnings familiar to students receiving first instruction. Indulge my intention here, if you will, and understand my discussion as limited to first experiences of adjunct teaching. Do not suppose me to condone long-term contingent contracting or the sometimes institutional misuse of part-time employees; rather, I want to highlight here what I believe a wonderfully productive outcome common to adjunct instruction. I aim to draw attention to and value the excitement that can take place in classrooms where an instructor, herself passing through in-betweens, works together with students to combine the forces of possibility in unexpectedly meaningful ways.

When I speak of *in-betweens*, I mean to name a kind of *third space* anchored on either side by what might be regarded simply as the known: one side an occupied location defined by unquestionably familiar aspects of life and the other a (somewhere) destination imagined to be known – that goal, aspiration, or purpose believed apparent when within reach of anticipation, comfortably certain for being so often rehearsed. Between these two *known* locations of perceived stability lies a place of crossing-over, a passage where anything can happen and nothing is beyond question save the noise and movement of emergent possibility. The adjunct instructor alike with first-year, post-secondary students will foot this bridge which, for all its trepidacious swing, issues forth the thrill of a lifetime in opportunities for the creative production of person, what Michel Foucault regards a formation of ethics in relationship with oneself. The combined adventure of common crossings for teacher and student, the shared provocation for invention, and the unimagined excitement to be found in discovered lines of disjunctive flight can culminate for these players in a flow able to generate new subjectivities, a possibility for becoming that reaches beyond anticipation to celebrate the unknown. The great value of adjunct instruction is shared bridges, liberating firsts, and the common ground of in-betweens.

Pat Speckman had been both fellow student and friend in several of the graduate courses I’d taken to complete my M.A. in

English at Bemidji State University. She was also a department chair at Northwest Technical College, so, when the unexpected need for an adjunct instructor arose in her department, Pat asked if I'd be willing to fill the position. The opportunity was a first for me, and though a twenty-year veteran teacher of high school English, I was wonderfully nervous accepting the offer. All the mystique of *teaching college* informed my expectation; I was making my way into "the big game" now. Like most of my students, I stood at the threshold of unknowns. Master's degree at last in hand, I'd been encouraged then to apply for doctoral study and faced the work of tests to take, letters to write, and papers to gather just as the semester was opening for my first semester of adjunct teaching. I imagined only an outline of what acceptance to ongoing study might mean, though I guessed it would change my world in ways I could not begin to suppose. Was it not the same for Sharon, Samantha, Justin, and Jeremy? Could not beginnings common to teacher and students alike be understood as shared anxiety, anticipation encountering new places in learning? Many of my students that semester would be the first in their families to complete a college degree: the pride with which they carried themselves was evident. My own family, too, celebrated an adjunct hire as the *first* rewarding answer to a commanding completion of Master's study – new legs under a fresh born career. I was nervous; so were most of my students, though evidence of apprehension was as varied as the students themselves. None of us knew exactly how this passage was supposed to play out. So...

We opened it up a bit: You can do that when the lines between here and there are moving. We affected new seating arrangements by experimenting with directionality in the classroom: when the "front" was moved to the back, mechanics were in the front row for the first time ever – Sharon and Sue bore the displacement politely. Given a free hand in course development, I selected new texts and designed instruction to more innovatively address course requirements. "Getting it right" mattered less than exploring new ways of getting it done, so we tackled the tough part first: public speaking. Students were encouraged to liberate the assignment, to select a venue for delivery that

made sense according to the topic and audience defined – though a minimum of two classmates had to be present and some connection to course materials had to be maintained. I heard speeches in auto shop, the library, a biology lab, and the local park; every student completed the task they had once regarded “an assignment from hell”! Students engaged online resources not so much for research as for support in productive networking – defining, contacting, and interacting with professionals already accomplished in their fields of study. James worked with a local photographer to develop promotional video materials for the area United Way. Austin exchanged email with a Ford engineer redesigning airbag deployment for F150 Pickups, and Kurt’s interaction with a paintball supply dealer led to summer employment with a local paintball club. Students repeatedly found greater courage to realize themselves in new ways, to embrace identities believed validated by the notice of specialists willing to exchange correspondence or extend a respectful welcome.

Capstone projects for the course focused on group problem-solving skills and asked students to overcome roadblocks commonly confronting a developing business. One group faced an expansion of services while another solved for gender equality in workplace facilities. A third group planned a stockholders’ banquet on a limited budget, and a fourth dealt with the sticky business of missing inventory. Real-world solutions had to be calculated against constraints of time, budgets, proofs, and supporting materials. Culminating presentations were configured with respect to rhetorical devices and groups addressed their proposals to remaining class members as to a board of governing regents. Of course the proposed menu for the stockholders’ banquet was laid out in “samples” on a last day of class – treats all around. It was a good day, and the semester was over. I graded too generously, I suppose, but I didn’t care. I was proud of my students: I was proud of me, and getting it right was so much less the point now than it had been in the beginning. From the liberty of a third space between what is known and what is hoped for, I had begun the adventure of becoming a great teacher and, in the process, opened a door or two for that handful of daring students willing

just then to explore prospects in *other* directions, other lines of flight, and the productive possibility of emergent moments. Most students bought a ticket to ride; some made it all the way through with their eyes wide open. It was a semester worth remembering.

An adjunct hire might be conventionally regarded “a foot in the door” for those seeking a career in post-secondary education. As a line item on a curriculum vita, adjunct instructing is good professional grooming as well as a modest (all too modest) source of income. And, of course, teaching experience is always a plus in positioning oneself for acceptance to ongoing graduate study. I received the benefit of all these things, but the real reward for a semester of teaching at Northwest Tech was in learning to embrace the productive forces of un-knowing and explore with every willing student those possibilities of just-then, otherly ways of doing/being – the what-ifs and maybes found in between and along the way.

When Samantha blew into my summer evening of tennis those several years ago, she built a memory for me, a reminder of the value “small” properly holds when rightly situated alongside the rush of Big Ten aspirations. Bits of life *in between* tend to keep moving—want to keep moving, and they reliably surprise us for where they are willing to go. The other day I dropped a deposit at the drive-through bank in town, and Stacy’s mom, recognizing my name on the paperwork, interrupted the transaction to enthusiastically report Stacy’s progress. She was managing a dental office now and doing very well for herself. Oh, and had I heard news from Samantha? “No,” I answered with an interest to know more. Well, Sam, it seems, had gone on with her schooling and was now approaching the completion of undergraduate studies, though Stacy’s mom didn’t recall the degree focus. And it didn’t matter. I celebrated Sam’s accomplishment with the lift of my chin and a smile, appreciation for the value of next and always adventures born from magic in between, and I set myself in anticipation of any just-now possibility awaiting the coming semester. It’s bound to be a great ride.