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# To Teach and to Mentor: Toward Our Collective Future

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One of the things I'm proudest about when I reflect on my term as the president of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) in the mid-1990s is initiating the attention the association now regularly gives to graduate students. Graduate students and beginning assistant professors are the future not only of ATHE, but of the whole profession. I've been proud to see my own former students assume leadership roles in the field, and want to suggest that all graduate students should plan and aspire to do the same. At the same time, having a successful career and having a calm and balanced life can sometimes feel contradictory. In these brief ruminations, I'll address (as "you") graduate students and new assistant professors, offering strategies I've pondered over the thirty or so years of my own career.

Although many of these strategies might appear to be commonsensical, I'm often amazed and sometimes appalled at how easy it is for me to forget them. Finding a balance between work and play, or between my career and the rest of my life, remains an ongoing preoccupation for me, even though I've been teaching steadily since 1986. Since these are continuing, nagging issues for most of us in the profession, I hope many readers will find helpful suggestions here, if not common cause with some of the intractable dilemmas I outline. I can't say I've successfully or consistently adopted all of the tactics I propose, but I've thought a lot about the conflicts that bedevil those of us whose commitments to our work extend beyond our jobs and into a more idealistic belief in what theatre and performance can mean and do.

## **A Few Preliminaries**

I cannot stress enough how important it is to be self-conscious about your choices. Your own mindset has everything to do with how you define your success. In fact, regardless of what anyone tells you, you have to rely upon yourself as a barometer of what will work for your career. One of the things I love about being an academic is the freedom I have to set my own schedule and to guide my own choices, within a necessary framework of institutional and professional expectations that dictate certain benchmarks. Theatre academics have a lot of flexibility in how we mix research and practice, practice and advocacy, and advocacy and administration in a field with direct ties to a profession or an industry. Within the colleges and universities at which we study or teach, our departments and our field are small enough that many of us will be called upon to assume leadership positions. We need to be prepared to be leaders, scholars, artists, and citizens while maintaining separate and fulfilling private lives. That balance can be very difficult to find and maintain.

Always start with yourself to decide how you want your choices to work for you. What are your priorities? What do you do best? What do you most like to do? What kind of career will sustain you for twenty or thirty years? If you monitor your career with honest self-assessments on a regular basis, you will claim agency that is too often lacking, especially for graduate students and first-year assistant professors. If you primarily see yourself as an artist, be sure you get a job that will facilitate that skill set and passion, otherwise an academic position won't be a good fit. I see myself as a writer

and a critic, even more than a scholar or a researcher. This means that the amount of writing I've had to do to be tenured and promoted was never onerous, because I consider writing my primary milieu. That is not the case for everyone.

If you consider yourself a scholar but you struggle with writing, strategize about how you will make it easier for yourself. Be self-conscious about your habits and practices and what you need to do your best work. Do you need a writing group? A mentor to help you with drafts? A fixed schedule by which to write? Look into books that playwrights and other creative writers sometimes consult, since the process of writing—whether creative or scholarly—is the same. Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* and Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, for only two examples, are really useful discussions of how to confront the process of your own writing with thought, care, and pleasure.

Take a step even farther back and assess whether you will be able to meet the demands of a career that requires so much writing if you absolutely hate that kind of work. Be clear with yourself about your skills, your desires, and your commitments, and if they don't match up with how you need to fashion a successful academic career, do something else. We often make choices without full knowledge of what they entail, especially in a field like the academy, for which unfounded stereotypes often proliferate more freely than real, concrete pictures of what a life on the faculty of a college or university entails. Educate yourself about what you are getting into, and if it turns out to be not what you want, embark on another career. Life is too short to be ashamed about changing your mind.

That said, I will assume that you do intend to move into an academic career as an artist or scholar and will focus my advice on teaching and mentoring in that context. I will end with a few thoughts about how the profession has (or hasn't) changed during the last ten or twenty years.

### **Why Teaching Is Important**

In some universities, you might sense that teaching isn't really very important at all. Some Research 1 institutions, for instance, send very mixed messages about our work in the classroom: on the one hand, chairs and deans insist on stellar teaching evaluations and use them as the basis of salary reviews; and on the other, administrators and colleagues warn that when you come up for tenure, teaching takes a back seat to research or creative work and must be complemented with strong institutional and professional citizenship. Then again, undergraduate liberal arts colleges sometimes privilege teaching over research. You need to know in which environment you will flourish and how teaching matters to you in the triumvirate of research, teaching, and service on which academic careers (and salaries) are judged.

I sometimes wish I could just write and imagine that I would be happiest if I could teach as little as possible. Then I remember the thrill of being in the classroom, of watching students have "light bulb" moments, and being provoked by our conversations to think in different ways myself. Those exchanges are important to me and to how I conceive of public citizenry. Too few places remain for the live, face-to-face engagement that teaching provides. I've always believed that teaching is activism, that it is a way to change minds and hearts and consciousness, as well as to challenge myself and my own beliefs. That is even truer in a historical moment when so many of our exchanges—both public and private—happen in electronic forums. The rush of being in a room with live bodies, with other people whose passions are expressed in the tones of their voices and in the postures they assume around a table or on a floor, is irreplaceable.<sup>1</sup>

Teaching is also important because these days, people often assume they know everything—or they presume, as the Tea Partyers sometimes do, that facts are changeable and that they can be used to political advantage.<sup>2</sup> I used to be a card-carrying poststructuralist who argued that truth doesn't matter; I still believe that objectivity is a myth and that truths are always invested and partial. But the

way that history has been rewritten—by Tea Partiers and Holocaust detractors, for instance—terrifies me. It has made me realize that without agreeing that the Holocaust actually happened, for only one example, everything goes up for grabs. I no longer think I could live in a world without some bedrock of truth. In the classroom, we can seek out truths on which to build, elaborate, and debate. For instance, women are underrepresented in American theatre, that's a fact. Where do we go from there? We can debate about why and what to do about it, but the fact of inequality is indisputable. Teaching, then, offers engagement with facts and interpretations, with experiences and possibilities.

## Teaching and Mentoring

I believe that teaching is mentoring. In our classrooms, we model how to be a person in the world. How do we approach knowledge? How do we approach a conversation? As a moderator/facilitator, how do I run a discussion? How do I ensure equal “air time” for all the students in the class?<sup>3</sup> How do I foster and exemplify polite disagreement? A classroom is a microcosm, and how we run it signals a great deal about who we are and what we believe in. As we teach, we need to be self-conscious and clear about the beliefs and practices we illustrate.

Especially for those of us who believe in less conventional pathways to “professional” “success” (both words in scare quotes for obvious reasons) in the arts, it is important that we mentor students to think differently about how they shape their lives as artists and intellectuals and to expand their choices for crafting their own artistry and critical abilities. I encourage students to take courses in solo performance and devising, as well as playwriting, so that they can see themselves as artists with agency instead of waiting to be cast in other people's projects. And I try to popularize dramaturgy and arts criticism as alternative career or degree paths.

Mentoring means helping students find the best in themselves or helping them consider other ways of being artists, scholars, and citizens. The pragmatics of such guidance are not complicated. I try to expand students' choices through the courses I decide to teach and the assignments I offer. For example, I consider the number and kinds of papers I assign. I always provide an option for creative work to fill my courses' requirements, and I urge students to expand their skill sets by encouraging artists to write and scholars to produce creative work. I also try to expose students to different worlds and ideas in the information I share. I forward by e-mail anything I think might be relevant: fellowship and writing opportunities, casting notices, announcements about productions I think they should see, essays I find compelling or challenging, news articles that have made me think or that moved me or made me angry. I see myself as the hub of a large, quickly turning wheel, from which my job as teacher is to create as many spokes as I can.

I also insist that students pay attention not just to their own interests and/or incipient careers, but to the field or industry at large. I urge them to be familiar with and to take stands on pressing current issues in American theatre practice. I want my students to have considered opinions on casting across race, gender, and sexuality, or the way in which casting is always cultural and political. I want them to consider how economics influences so many choices in professional (and often university) theatre, from season selection, to ticket prices, to set design and publicity. I want them to notice and be concerned about whose stories are told to whom and by whom. All of these things and many more impinge directly on my students' plans for themselves as artists. A teacher/mentor should encourage them to open themselves up to a wide sphere of influence, and to see themselves as already part of something with meaning and impact.

We have to advocate for what we do and for what they care about. We often train or work in institutions quick to cut their arts budgets, and we certainly live in a country in which the importance of the arts is not self-evident. We have to teach our students to be advocates, so that they can move on from our classrooms to articulate the importance of what they believe in and what they do.

For instance, I serve on a budgetary priorities committee at Princeton, where we recently discussed funding for club sports. It occurred to me that although student theatre groups—dedicated to Shakespeare, musical theatre, contemporary plays, black theatre, and more—proliferate on campus, they don't have an umbrella mechanism for requesting funding from the university, as do extracurricular sports teams. Students need to teach themselves how the arts practices they love and in which they participate fit into a university cosmology that often puts their work at a distinct disadvantage, even at an institution like Princeton where the president has a demonstrated commitment to growing the arts on campus. We need to learn how institutions work so that we can advocate for the import of the arts not just in the curriculum, but in the social and cultural lives of faculty, staff, and students.

Likewise, it is important for students and faculty to represent the arts as often as possible, whether on committees, at meetings across the university, or in other venues at which the emphasis is often elsewhere. At the three large state institutions at which I have taught, the arts were invariably an afterthought and easily fell off the radar of administrators and colleagues. Advocacy can be a practice of everyday life, as we work to bring what we do into people's consciousness and add it to ongoing conversations on a regular basis.

### **Balancing Idealism with Pragmatism**

One of the pitfalls of our field is that so many of us love what we do. We go into theatre because we love it and we teach and direct and help build our departments because we love it. I think many of us are surprised that we can make a living doing something about which we care deeply and that gives us so much pleasure. But that love is exactly what sometimes turns on us. The boundaries between work and play get very elastic, if not completely blurred. We have a hard time saying "No" to colleagues, students, or those with power over us. We find it difficult to set priorities because everything seems so important. Especially for those of us who are idealistic about theatre and teaching and the effect we want to have on the world, balancing our careers as mentors, teachers, artists, and/or scholars and our lives as people represents an ongoing challenge. I can't say that I'm the best model for balance—at all. I live with another academic who has similar work habits and commitments. I don't have children; I don't even have a dog right now to distract me from work. But here are the things I tell myself continually—would that I could always take my own advice.

#### *Teach on the "Percentage" Model*

The downside of everything I suggested above about teaching is that it can take all of your time. Because you are actually seeing people face to face, the anxiety of not being prepared or of contemplating a class that might not go well sometimes means that teaching becomes your top or only priority. Know that you want to do your best every time you walk into a classroom; but for reasons that are often beyond your control, not every class will be 100 percent terrific. And some days, for good reasons, you can't teach full steam at 100 percent. So give yourself permission to shoot for 50 percent on occasion; you might be surprised that these sometimes turn out to be the best sessions, because you are more relaxed.

#### *Limit the Amount of Time You Spend on Preparation*

Over-preparation is one of teaching's chief traps. Trust that you know more than your students (and what you don't know, you can tell them how to find out themselves) and go into class with confidence. Learn to trust yourself and to figure out how much preparation is enough for you: How many notes do you have to take on the reading you assigned? With how many questions will you come prepared? Do you have to create a lesson plan that structures your class time in ten-minute segments or are you comfortable going with the flow? The cliché "less is more" is usually true.

*Do Not Overcrowd Your Syllabi*

Students appreciate talking about the material they have been assigned, instead of reading things that never come up in classroom discussions. I recently saw statistics that indicated that if they are asked to tackle much more than they can comfortably manage, students will read only around 15 percent of assigned materials. If they are assigned less, they read much more. Draft a syllabus and then go back and cut it by half; make the rest of it recommended reading or else place it in a bibliography for further reading. Think about how much *you yourself* can read as you put together your course outline, and be sure to collate your syllabi with your other responsibilities. You're in charge—don't assign a book you have never read the day before you are going into tech rehearsals, or the day before you have an article or dissertation or thesis chapter due.

*Do Not Create More Assignments Than You Can Grade*

Give short assignments frequently or longer ones less frequently, depending on your own time and inclination. Because so many of us privilege student-centered learning and writing across the curriculum, grading can take a great deal of time. We consider feedback for our students a responsibility and a gift, which it is indeed. But learn how to be a fast, fair, useful grader. Most students don't read long, involved comments closely. Write a few concise sentences at the end of a paper instead of using "track changes" or writing a lengthy note. Create a grading rubric in your syllabus that explains your expectations and how you will grade, then use it so that you won't have to spend a lot of time deciding grades.

*Set Limits*

Schedule your office hours in fifteen-minute increments for an hour or two every week. Post a sheet on your door or circulate it in class and ask students to sign up so that they will know how much time they have with you and will organize it and use it efficiently. Don't linger too long after class—ask students to come see you during office hours instead. When you meet with students, be professional and succinct. Keep your office door open, as nothing you say should be private or intimate. An open-door policy protects you and your students.

*Keep a Running List of Your Obligations and Your Accomplishments*

It is important to be self-conscious about your tasks and activities. We are asked to do so many things, and so much of it feels insubstantial at the end of the day. Make a list of categories: class preparation; teaching (contact hours); office hours; meetings; research; writing; rehearsal; administrative tasks; idle time; and all the other things you typically do in a day. Track them carefully. This self-consciousness will let you know which obligations take the most time and how you need to rearrange the balance or shift your priorities. The list will also let you see how hard you have worked and will keep you from singing that horrible day's-end refrain, "I didn't do *anything* today!"

*Do Not Say "Yes" without Also Saying "Let Me Think about It for a Day and Get Back to You"*

Do this with any task you are asked to assume. Will you write a letter of recommendation? Will you serve on a committee? Will you direct a show, write an article, give a talk, or guest-lecture in someone's class? Always respond, "Let me think about it." Or, "Let me check my schedule and get back to you." Never commit right away. Ask your partner or a friend for advice; look at your list of obligations; make sure you give the invitation some thought to see if you really have the time, energy,

or desire to comply. Some invitations cannot be declined; for instance, when your chair asks you to talk about your research in her class, accepting graciously would be a good idea. But any request offers another opportunity to put yourself in the center of your choices. Even if you end up agreeing to everything that you are asked to do, you will first have reflected carefully on each obligation.

*Make Sure That the Expectations of Your Institution Are Perfectly Clear and Get Them in Writing*

What do you need to do to graduate? How does your teaching as a graduate student count toward your degree? Is your teaching supervised? Has your dissertation or thesis advisor observed your teaching? What does your advisor need to see you do or which of your work should they read to be able to write your recommendation for jobs and fellowships? Don't be mercenary, but do be pragmatic about these expectations. New assistant professors should get tenure expectations in writing even before you accept a position because they vary from place to place and often from department to department. Take responsibility for understanding the local institutional expectations and knowing how you will meet them. Know the industry standards: If you have to write a book, how long does the review process take before you get a contract? How long does the production process take? How long will it take you to write? Go to roundtable discussions about publishing at conferences, so you will understand the process in detail. If your university or college expects you to do professional artistic work outside your department, how will you find this work? How far in advance do you need to plan? How much time will you need away from campus? Are you obliged to cover your teaching while you are gone? Count back from your tenure year to ensure that you have given yourself enough time to produce what is necessary to succeed.

*Make Sure That You Have a Mentor, Both as a Grad Student and as an Assistant Professor*

Your mentor might not be your dissertation supervisor (although it could be) nor your department chair (although it could be). A mentor should be brutally honest with you; communicate with you willingly and in a timely fashion; look at your curriculum vita and at your scholarship or artistic work and give you advice; and be open and clear with you about institutional expectations for your work. Actively seek out a mentor (or two, especially if you work in an interdisciplinary field) and make sure that you can trust her (or them) to guide you enthusiastically and ethically.

*Put Your Own Work in a Broader Context*

Be sure that you read the newspaper (local and national) to keep up with what is happening outside of your immediate sphere of influence. Read local news about your college or university to stay abreast of institutional issues. Too often, theatre departments are physically and intellectually removed from the rest of the campus. Because our hours are long and often late, we get tunnel vision and forget that other things are happening around us, things that are often important to our futures or that might have some impact on our work. Reading about the Middle East, about global warming, or about your state legislators and their intended budget cuts helps put your work in context.

*Cultivate Hobbies That Have Nothing to Do with Your Career*

I play tennis, typically with people who aren't academics or artists. I love it because it's good exercise; it empties my mind; and it gives me a place to be that's not about my work. Try to engage your hobbies daily to take a break from your work, your career, and yourself.

*Spend Time on Activities You Love That Are Not Theatre-Related*

This is harder. Every time I go to a movie I feel like I'm working, especially because I write a blog about theatre and film and television.<sup>4</sup> But I also read novels. Commit to doing the activities you enjoy often. You need to rest your brain, your heart, and your soul.

*Make Sure That You Take Care of Yourself*

Another truism we don't often follow. Eat well; sleep enough; take time away from the job. Most importantly, figure out how to sustain yourself. How can you get done what you need to do, and do it well, while not letting your job take over your entire life? Tim Kreider's essay "The Busy Trap," which ran in the *New York Times* "Opinionator" blog, addresses how people wear their busyness as a badge of honor. Kreider says that competing with one another over who is busiest has become commonplace and that what sound like complaints are actually boasts. Get out of that rat race before you get into it. Figure out what your own best practices are and stick to them. And read his essay right away!

**Has the Profession Changed?**

Yes, but no more than it always does. Are we seeing the "professionalization of graduate students"? Yes—that ship has sailed. The particulars depend on the institution at which you are being trained and the kind of career that you expect. But how you prove yourself professionally begins in graduate school. If you anticipate an academic career as a scholar/artist, you should have an article or two published or a production or two accomplished before you graduate and go on to the job market. Graduate students are pre-professionals; you are apprentices to a field and should be thinking of yourselves as colleagues, preparing to move into fulltime academic jobs.

Has technology changed the field? Yes, but mostly for the better. We can communicate and conduct our research more easily now, with electronic access to archives, with e-lists, with websites, with e-mail. On the other hand, this ease has contributed to the speed-up of our work and the challenge of trying to maintain a separate personal life. E-mail and Internet use should be among your self-conscious practices; know how you best engage with it and when too much online work makes you crazy. Limit your use if you need to; put vacation messages on your signature; learn how to be productive and not addicted. A colleague announced that she would be spending her leave year in Prague and then proceeded to hole up in her home in Princeton. When you need private time, tell people that you are in Prague.

Remember also that the technological revolution predicts a move toward online-teaching and knowledge-delivery systems that might take away more jobs than they create. MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), for which one professor lectures via video feed to thousands of students at once, are quickly becoming popular. For-profit programs like Coursera also take advantage of Internet technology to deliver educational product to large numbers of consumers. These technologies might bode well or evil; regardless, we can't be naïve in front of increasing pressures, especially on public institutions, to monetize education in ever more creative, less labor-intensive ways. Some technological innovation will inevitably affect hiring practices. For theatre departments that rely on the live presence of students and faculty to practice the art, these developments bear watching; preparing our arguments about how we fit into these new scenarios is necessary and urgent.

Has the job market been irreparably diminished in the twenty-first century? Possibly. Yes, the Great Recession of 2008 dried up jobs in higher education. The expectation that open jobs will be filled with new tenure-track hires no longer pertains. But older faculty members will still retire



eventually and some new jobs are still being created at some institutions. The competition is stiff for the smaller number of positions available, but someone will fill these jobs—why shouldn't it be you?

On the other hand, the skill set you are practicing and honing in graduate school can also be applied elsewhere. Although the nonacademic job market is the subject of another essay, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed* (<[www.insidehighered.com](http://www.insidehighered.com)>) regularly run essays about creative applications for PhD (and occasionally MFA) degrees and crunch numbers about the ups and downs of academic and alternative job markets. The take-away here is that you should educate yourself about employment trends, consider alternatives to academia, and know that ultimately your experience on any market will of necessity be idiosyncratic.

I will end where I started. Go your own way. Make your career work for you, within the framework of what you want from your life and what your position demands. Take agency, be motivated. Don't sell your soul for this profession. Keep track of what you love, what you are good at, and what you care about. Your contributions to your students, to the field, and to theatre will be all the better if you are self-conscious about who you are, what you need, and, inevitably, how hard (and hopefully how effectively) you work.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Cassidy Brown and Bryan Vandevender, senior and junior co-chairs respectively of the Graduate Student Subcommittee of ATHE, who invited me to give the remarks on teaching and mentoring on which this essay is based at ATHE's 2012 conference in Washington, D.C. I also appreciated the warm and generative conversation that followed with all those present. Thanks also to the *Theatre Topics* readers who helped sharpen my practical suggestions and my arguments and to Jim Peck for his expert editorial insights.

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## Notes

1. I realize that there is also a certain privilege in assuming that all teaching is or should be face to face. Distance learning and online forums potentially make education available to diverse populations that might not otherwise have access to it. But for the purposes of this discussion, I will presume teaching as a live, interactive project.
2. For an excellent discussion of this problem, see Jill Lepore's *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History*.
3. For a discussion of classroom ethics and strategies, see my essay "Casual Racism and Stuttering Failures: An Ethics for Classroom Engagement."
4. See my blog "The Feminist Spectator" at <[www.TheFeministSpectator.com](http://www.TheFeministSpectator.com)>.

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