The Dual Challenges of Academia: Teaching and Research

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When people know I am a professor they often ask what I teach. This seems to me the wrong question. The question should be, what is your area of research? In the public's mind, professors are teachers because that is the dimension of an academic role that is most visible. I cannot think of any academic who was appointed to a position in a university based on his or her teaching record. It is one's research, or potential for research, that is of particular interest to appointment committees. What distinguishes university professors from teachers in other tertiary educational institutions is that they are expected to undertake research and publish papers in learned journals, write books, present papers at international conferences and generally contribute to the development of knowledge in their fields – as well as teach. Managing the research and teaching aspects of academic life can be a challenge and, to be successful, teaching should be informed by research. In the initial years of academic life this dual relationship can be difficult to manage.

My Academic Journey

My career as a writer began with a punishment. I was punished for not taking my swimsuit to school in grade five in New Zealand, preventing me from participating in the class swimming lesson in the school's pool. I was nine years old and conscious that I was much thinner than my peers. The last thing I wanted to do was remove my shirt in front of the girls in the class. The punishment was to remain in the classroom by myself and to write a story for the teacher by the time the rest of the class returned from the pool. While my classmates were learning to swim, I learned to write. I had a free hand in writing what I liked. I had read about the great fire of London in 1666 and decided to write a poem about it. I remember it started "From house to house the fire spread, great buildings fell and shattered." Unfortunately, the teacher glanced at this epic poem, spanning three pages of rhyming verse, when she returned with the class and then crumpled and put in the bin. She did say, rather suspiciously, that there had already been a poem written on this topic and asked if I had copied it. No, I created my own poem about the great fire of London and wished I could keep it. I did not like to retrieve it from the bin under the teacher's desk. Next day I had somehow forgotten my swimwear and towel once again (actually my mother had packed them in my school bag but I pretended they were not there) and had to stay in the classroom and write another story. This time I wrote about the feelings of my cricket bat being taken out of the closet and oiled and then used for matches over the summer. Other stories and poems followed on a daily basis. I enjoyed having the freedom to write about whatever I wanted and the teacher each day glanced at my efforts and then binned what I had produced. Years later when I had children I used to write stories and create poems about mythical animals (a Chinese cat, a dog who could

climb trees) and today they are being re-told to my grandchildren. In between these creative writing periods, my life has been spent as an academic in universities in New Zealand, Australia and Canada with periods also in the United Kingdom. What I gained from my early life in elementary school was the confidence to write and the knowledge that I could produce stories and poems. It was a long time after my childhood writing until I published my first paper.

While my creative writing began as a punishment, my academic career began with a misconception. As an undergraduate student of the humanities and later as a high school teacher, I thought academic life looked like an appealing although somewhat curious way to make a living – reading books and then talking about them in lectures and tutorials with students. I did not realize that academics were also expected to write books, publish articles in learned journals, review and edit manuscripts and generally contribute to knowledge in their fields of expertise. Writing for publication is a key part of an academic's life, but it is not always the most visible aspect of it.

Almost all my working life has been spent teaching and engaging in research in universities. This necessitated a different way of writing from what I did in my childhood and youth. Academic work involved writing for serious publications that would, hopefully, be read by my peers. In spite of my interest in creative writing as an elementary and high school student, writing for academic publication was daunting. My first academic appointment, in the mid-seventies, was for a fixed term as a Junior Lecturer in Education. I was in my twenties, much younger than anyone else in the Education department of the New Zealand University, and aware that all my colleagues appeared to be successfully writing for academic journals. Writing for publication was, not infrequently, a topic of conversation over coffee and lunch breaks. How, I wondered, did one get a paper published? I read reprints of journal articles in my field as well as related fields and began to acquire a scholarly library of books and journals. The more I read, the more I became aware that I was in a university appointment and had not yet published a single paper. It was worrying. What could I write about? I was still completing a graduate degree and my thesis was far from complete. As well as working on my degree, I had lectures to write and to deliver to students who all seemed to be much older than I was and who were mostly teachers. Keeping one lecture ahead of the students was a challenge that made writing for publication difficult.

Challenge One: Learning to Write a Lecture

My career began with an opportunity towards the end of my Master's degree year through an appointment in a different university. The position was for a fixed term and was designed to give potential young academics an opportunity to teach while completing their degrees on a full salary with benefits. It was exciting and different from the two years I had spent as a high school teacher in a large city school. I was given a small office in the Education Department, located on the top floor of a gothic, ivy-covered building and a timetable that only required me to teach one day a week, for two consecutive hours. My workload looked very light after being a high school teacher, but this was deceptive. Nobody gave me any ideas how to prepare and deliver a lecture, but the elderly head of

department advised me that this university had high standards and that students would expect a lot of rigor in my lectures. I had never written a lecture and did not have any idea how to go about preparing one. The thought of asking a colleague was out of the question - I was in awe of them and, to be honest, in awe of many of my students, most of whom were teachers with far more experience in classrooms than my two years. How could I write a lecture that would meet the expectations of the head of my new department, my colleagues and the third year students in my assigned Sociology of Education course?

The first challenge facing a newly appointed academic is the urgency of preparing lectures. It is likely that most new appointees will be more familiar with research than university teaching, but courses have to be developed and lectures prepared and delivered at appointed times. The writing of lectures is an important matter for new academic appointees and for many, including the writer, this was a hurdle to be overcome before anything else, including writing for publication, could be considered. Formal lectures were expected of me. Some of the older professors wore academic gowns while they delivered their lectures. One even wore a black gown to lecture to his solitary graduate student. My first lecture was a terrifying experience. I did not own an academic gown and had very little idea whether or not I had enough content. I knew from my days as a student that those professors and lecturers who read their lectures were almost always tedious and boring. I knew that for my own self-confidence as a Junior Lecturer I had to write a lecture in full, even if I spoke from it rather than read it to the students.

My initial lectures were the outcome of earnestness, anxiety and over-preparation. My lectures had too much content, too many references and they were not well organized. I was very self-conscious about my age and grateful that my students took my lectures seriously, in spite of my lack of classroom experience. My weekly time with the students for two consecutive hours was supposed to be in the form of a lecture, not a discussion group. I am sure, on reflection, other professors had discussions in their two-hour time slots with students, but it did not occur to me to do so. I kept thinking about the head of department's expectation that my lectures would be rigorous and I interpreted this to mean sociological theory from which to organize and interpret schools, teaching and learning. I could have brought in my students' classroom experiences to complement my rather theoretical lectures, but failed to do so. Nobody complained and I hoped my lectures would satisfy the head of my department and justify his appointment of me from another university.

Before the end of my fixed term initial academic appointment in New Zealand, I emigrated with my wife and infant daughter to a tenure-track position in an Australian university. In my new Australian lectureship I had four new courses to teach and many faculty meetings to attend. By this time I had some understanding of how a lecture should be prepared, but in this university I was expected to lecture to first year students for a whole academic year. Unlike my first academic position in New Zealand, which required two consecutive hours a week lecturing to 30 third year students, the Australian faculty expected me to take over the first year course called "Education and Society" and to make sure it was relevant to Australian students. This seemed sensible but I did not know

a lot about Australian education or Australian society and struggled in my first year to meet these requirements.

Writing a first year lecture to be delivered to hundreds of students proved to be different from writing a lecture for senior undergraduates or for graduates. I had every possible advantage in writing first year lectures in my new Australian position: I had been a competitive public speaker and debater as a schoolboy so I was used to standing up and talking in front of people. I had completed a course of teacher education by this time, and had both high school and university teaching experience. Nevertheless, I struggled with my first year lectures in spite of these advantages. I wondered how to make my presentations more organized and interesting and came to a surprising conclusion. In my anxiety I realized my lectures were overloaded with content and were delivered at a fast clip. I decided that in future, after preparing first year lectures, I would then reduce the content to a one-page outline of key points under a few headings and sub-headings and give a copy of this to each student as they took their seats in the lecture theatre. I have followed this approach in my lecture writing at all levels ever since. The key points have to be stated clearly and a coherent structure of the topic must be evident to students as the lecture is delivered. By reducing lectures to a single page, considerable discipline was self-imposed that enabled me to talk to key points rather than trying to keep to a script. I still found it necessary to write lectures in full, but the single page outline / handout, enabled students to follow the lecture, organize their note-taking and made for a more relaxed presentation from the lectern.

A lesson I learned from my first two years as an academic (when I was, in fact, a graduate student at the Masters level) was that a good lecture had to be like a good news story. The key points and purpose of the lecture had to be provided in the opening paragraph and this focus had to structure the content. To be able to write a lecture this way a professor has to know his or her subject matter very well and be able to defend if necessary, the position taken on a given topic. In my initial years of writing lectures I did not know my subject matter well enough to be able to do this.

The preparation of lectures will always be an important and time-consuming aspect of academic life. In my early years of academic life in New Zealand and Australian universities this was by far the most time consuming aspect of my job and I could not help but think of myself primarily as a teacher. It was a surprise therefore to hear a colleague from another faculty in my Australian university who had received negative feedback for his less than satisfactory lectures claim “these are research positions, not teaching positions.” Nobody, he declared, was ever appointed to a university faculty as a teacher. Academics, he believed, were appointed for their research output or research potential. In the early years of my academic journey the preparation and delivery of lectures was demanding and unrelentingly time-consuming and I wondered how this colleague could claim they were not teaching jobs. As I moved further along my academic journey, I came to the conclusion that he was right – academic positions are primarily about research, but teaching is important too.

Challenge Two: Research and Publication

The next step in my academic career was the preparation of a paper for a national conference. This involved standing in front of my peers and informing them about my fledgling research project. This was even more worrying than writing lectures for students who were mostly more experienced teachers than their lecturer. My first conference paper was written for The Sociological Association of Australia and New Zealand at a meeting at the University of Auckland (Stevens, 1974). It was difficult standing and talking about my research in front of an audience of seasoned researchers and I felt as though my career was on the line. The presentation went smoothly and I fielded a few questions afterwards and sat down with relief. Actually, writing a formal conference paper was more straightforward than preparing my initial lectures.

I realized that all my colleagues were writing about their research but I had, at this early stage of my career, nothing to write about and therefore nothing to publish. During my brief career as a high school teacher before my initial academic appointment there had been major changes to the national social studies curriculum. I knew a little about this, and at the university I was lecturing in the Sociology of Education, a not entirely unrelated field of education. I decided to write about the sociological implications of the new social studies being implemented in New Zealand schools (Stevens, 1975). The journal I wrote for was not peer-reviewed. It was a publication for high school teachers in New Zealand and articles in it were short – two to three thousand words. I wrote my first article for this journal and sent it off to the editor and waited for a response. To my relief it was accepted and was published a few months later. While this was not a scholarly journal and publication in it was not a major scholarly achievement, it was, in my academic career, a breakthrough. Just seeing my name in print confirmed that I was able to write for publication. My next article was more academic in nature and was published in a minor peer-reviewed journal in Australia (Stevens, 1979).

After four years lecturing in the Australian university and getting tenure there, I returned to another academic position in New Zealand. There were three new courses to develop and teach and I envied my colleagues who all seemed so established with their courses with reservoirs of lectures to draw upon. A big difference between the Australian and New Zealand universities was that whereas I taught almost every day in the former, all my teaching was concentrated on Mondays in the latter. I had four free days in which to write, plus weekends. After a couple of months in the new position in New Zealand the head of department called in to my office and asked what I had published since I had been there. This was embarrassing. I had not published anything at all but I told him of my plans. He smiled and left. This was a serious research establishment and I was expected to be a productive scholar, not in the area of teacher education as in Australia, but in the academic study of education. This was subsequently reinforced with the appointment of a new Vice Chancellor who requested all faculty to forward to him, for his perusal, each and every publication as soon as they appeared in print. Each week, appended to the university's newsletter, the Vice Chancellor listed, department-by-department, the publications he had received and from whom. He then opened an area of the library where every article, book and even book review he had received was

displayed for all to see and this was updated weekly. It became embarrassingly clear to the whole university community which departments and the individuals within them were productive in a scholarly sense, and those that were not. It was very important for one's name and publications to appear regularly in the Vice Chancellor's lists. This practice put faculty across the university under pressure to publish scholarly research and to have it listed and then made available for scrutiny by colleagues and students. It got worse with the introduction of quarterly reviews of publications. The Vice Chancellor (or President) would have agreed with my Australian colleague in believing the primary role of an academic was research and publication.

For a young academic the pressure to undertake research and to publish it could, at times, be overwhelming. Apart from writing a graduate dissertation, the issue facing young academics is finding a field of research that is of long-term interest and in which one hopes to establish a personal niche and make a name for oneself. If the personal niche is to be sustainable, it has to be grounded in a deep interest in and knowledge of the subject. In mid career I realized that my childhood on a sheep and cattle farm in New Zealand, accompanied by attendance at a small rural school and, for a time, being a full time student of the New Zealand Correspondence School, was my academic apprenticeship. The focus of my research for most of my academic life has been the provision of education in rural and remote areas. I undertake research in the inter-related areas of rural schooling, distance education and e-learning. The early years of my academic life were spent undertaking research in several different and unrelated areas of education, all of which I found interesting, but it was not until I began a tenure-track position in an Australian university that I discovered my academic roots and my academic raison-d'etre.

Not long before my arrival in Australia a federal government report identified several areas of disadvantage in that country's education system, one of which was the provision of rural schooling. I was encouraged by the Dean of Education to consider undertaking research in rural areas in the central north of Australia and in due course, was funded for this undertaking. For the rest of my time in Australia and upon my return to a New Zealand university, rural schools, teachers, students and their issues became the centre of my academic life. I undertook fieldwork in rural schools in several regions of New Zealand, from the far north of the country to the far south. In Australia my research focused on extreme geographic isolation in the states of Queensland and Western Australia. I wrote academic papers and attended conferences regularly in both countries. When it was time for a full year sabbatical leave I elected to move to the University of Victoria in British Columbia where I was fortunate to be asked to help the Dean respond to recent criticism leveled at all universities in that province. A recent Canadian report had pointed out that not enough was done to prepare British Columbian teachers for small rural schools in the north, located far from the lower mainland. At the Dean's suggestion I reviewed a Knowledge Network television course called Education in the Small Community and then was paid to revise and update it together with a book on rural education for students. In the course of this project I underwent an academic transformation. I entered Canada as a rural educator and left six months later as a rural and distance education specialist. The time I spent in British Columbia opened my eyes

to the possibility of distance learning and I became very interested in its applications in rural communities.

Soon after my return to New Zealand the Internet was introduced to education and it did not take long for me to realize that this could advance both rural and distance learning. At a memorable meeting at a small rural school in the South Island of New Zealand, a (pre-Internet) proposal was considered whereby it would link with nine other rural schools in the region using dedicated telephone lines to connect interactive white boards. Students could thereby be taught together using speaker-phones and white boards in a small range of specialist classes such as economics, Japanese language and agriculture. The idea of schools teaching and learning collaboratively was a new one and when the Internet was introduced to this successful rural education experiment it led to the creation of virtual classes and new ways of teaching, learning and the organization of schools. I had found what became a long-term research interest for which my personal background in a rural farming community was an ideal apprenticeship. Soon I was discussing the problems of networking small schools with a colleague in Akureyri in the north of Iceland (Stevens, 2002), and at the University of Helsinki where research was under way to connect small schools in the far north of that country (Stevens, Kynaslahti & Salminen, 1996). Later this work briefly connected with Russian scholars at Moscow State University where the teaching of physics via satellite was being organized in small schools in Siberia (Sandalov, Shkhareva, Barry, Piper & Stevens, 1999). It was exciting, challenging and above all, collegial, as in Iceland, Finland, Russia and New Zealand, we were all trying to solve the educational and policy issue of providing extended learning opportunities for students who attended small schools located far from major centres of population. The final part of my academic journey was my appointment to a Research Professorship at Memorial University of Newfoundland as the Industry Canada Chair of TeleLearning and Rural Education. In this capacity I have continued and expanded my research interests in small schools, distance learning and e-learning in Canada and worked with a wide variety of people across the province.

Lessons from my Academic Journey

Now that my academic journey is almost over it is appropriate to reflect on it. I feel fortunate in having had such a long and interesting career in universities in several countries, meeting many students and having cultured and intelligent colleagues. I have now been teaching in universities for over forty years, but when I reflect on my life in academia, I think some things could have been better, particularly in the early years.

Unlike most of my colleagues in New Zealand, Australia and Canada, I entered full time work in faculties of Education at a very young age with only two years of school teaching experience preceding my first academic appointment. I was afraid to ask colleagues for advice about writing and delivering lectures, thinking they may consider me incompetent and not worthy of tenure. I had to work out my own way of writing lectures and find my own way into print. I needed a mentor and did not have anyone to turn to. It would have been very helpful if a colleague had attended some of my early lectures and provided critical comment on them. A lesson I learnt is *not to be afraid to ask colleagues for help*

in organizing and getting feedback on lectures and on drafts of journal articles. I did not do this and so led a rather solitary, anxious and monastic academic life in my early years.

In my Australian appointment, when my main teaching role was to lecture to a full year first year course, a friendly but critical mentor would have been particularly helpful. I have noted above that I had every possible advantage for taking first year lectures with over two hundred students, but in spite of this, writing and delivering a formal hour long lecture was difficult. Content had to be well organized and presented in an interesting, informative and, at times, humorous way. I had to work out how to do this because delivering a formal lecture to over two hundred students is different from the more relaxed senior undergraduate or graduate class with far fewer students. I did not know how to ask for professional advice and none was forthcoming. *A lesson I learnt is that first year lectures are often the most demanding teaching a faculty member will engage in.* To be successful, the organization, timing and delivery of material is critical. The first year lecture is not a forum in which to explore details, but to provide a panoramic view of one's field, and, ideally, to be both informative and entertaining. To do this it is necessary to know the discipline well and to speak about it with authority. In all the universities to which I have been appointed, very few colleagues enjoyed lecturing to tiered masses of students. Some would do anything to avoid it so it was common for newly appointed faculty to be presented with large introductory courses. In my third academic appointment I felt that I was not so much teaching as making public appearances in front of in excess of four hundred students several times each week. Large first year classes can be daunting for young academics. In my experience, they require very intensive preparation.

There is tension inherent in academic life between teaching and research. To be an effective academic competence in both domains is necessary. Teaching and research are linked by one's ability to communicate. A good university lecture will be informed by research, including a professor's own publications that contribute the body of knowledge in one's discipline. It is necessary to be able to communicate ideas effectively – to write interesting and stimulating lectures – as well as develop interesting insights through one's research and publications. *A further lesson I learnt, although it took years to understand it, is that teaching and research in universities are inextricably intertwined.* As a young academic I was unsure of the relationship between research and its publication, and teaching. An academic appointee with no body of research of his or her own, will probably not deliver interesting and insightful lectures. These days such a person will probably not be able to remain in academia.

A further tension in academic life is the assumption one is an expert in one's field. Academics have very privileged lives – reading, writing and engaging in research with intelligent people. The expectation that one is an expert in one's field can be daunting. The longer I have been in academia and the more papers I have published, the less expert I seem to feel in my subject. I don't know why this is the case, but it is. As well as writing books and peer-reviewed journal articles, I have written for newspapers and popular publications and spoken on radio and been interviewed on television. I know that my views are not the last word on the subject. *An important lesson as one's career*

develops, is to be humble. Any field of academia is constantly evolving. Even if you are continuously contributing to your field through research publications, there are always going to be areas of it about which you are not going to be knowledgeable. I felt awkward and a little embarrassed on the few occasions on which I have been described as an expert. There are so many dimensions of my field about which I do not have a deep understanding, that I remain conscious of my lack of expertise.

It is very different teaching in a Canadian university after spending decades in New Zealand and Australian institutions. After five years as a research professor in Canada, not being required to teach at all, I approached a Canadian academic in New Zealand and asked if he found the local students different from what he had experienced in North America. He replied that if he went in to a lecture theatre in a New Zealand university and said "good morning" the students would probably write this down on their lecture pads. If he went into a Canadian lecture room, students would expect to participate in the proceedings. While New Zealand and Australian universities these days encourage diverse teaching styles, I found teaching in a Canadian university at the conclusion of my term as a research professor very different from the way I engaged students in the other two countries. My Canadian students did not expect formal lectures and did not seem to appreciate them when I tried this way of teaching. I quickly established that my Canadian students were indeed quick to engage in discussion and were skilled in collaborative work. This led to some very lively learning that I found myself looking forward to each week. I would not have dared try this in my early years as an academic in New Zealand. I had not been taught this way and did not know anyone who used collaborative teaching and learning that is common in Canada. *A lesson here is that one can learn a lot from one's students.*

Final Thoughts

I have concluded after four decades teaching and undertaking research in universities that I largely agree with that Australian colleague who stated that we are primarily researchers. The problem is, we are more than this. Academics are usually expected to teach, engage in research and also contribute to university administration and to the cultural and intellectual life of their communities and societies. Many people can manage two of these requirements but it is difficult to be active as a teacher, researcher and administrator. Looking back over my career, particularly my most prolific years of research and publication, I was not much different from the monks who occupied cells in medieval universities in which they illuminated manuscripts. The difference in the twenty first century is that the academic cells we occupy are electronic, with telephones, email, computers and the Internet. The production of books and scholarly papers is often lonely and exacting in contemporary electronic academic cells, just like the work of medieval monks in early universities. It can be difficult explaining to family and friends just what you do to earn a living. It can be difficult explaining that much of what you do is not the public dimension of academic life – making public appearances called lectures in front of hundreds of students several times a week – but working in solitude to complete manuscripts that will, hopefully, be published and contribute to knowledge in one's discipline. Today, when people ask me what I teach, I still feel this is the wrong

question. It can be very difficult to explain academic life. It can be very public and very solitary. Nevertheless, for those considering an academic career opportunity, my advice is to seize it. There is no other life like it.

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