HOW TO CONTINUE BEING A PROFESSOR, REGARDLESS (FICTION)

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Abstract  
This short story, the text of which is juxtaposed with brief quotations from academic articles, is in the tradition of “How to Be an Other Woman” by Lorrie Moore and This is How You Lose Her by Junot Diaz. It suggests how to keep dancing after the music has stopped, metaphorically speaking.

“To view the foreign language classroom as a deficient, less than authentic instructional setting is to ignore its potential as a symbolic multicultural environment, where alternative realities can be explored and reflected upon.” (Kramsch, 2010, p. 210)

Arrive late. At least ten minutes but not more than 15 because some students think it’s appropriate to leave after 15 minutes. Have a policy that clearly states if a student arrives more than ten minutes late more than three times, that adds up to one absence and more than six absences adds up to an automatic F. Remind them often that there are no excused absences. And that talking on or looking at their phones constitutes a lateness because when they are doing that, they are not present.

Don’t plan. You have been teaching ESL composition for 20 years and know all there is to know. Once you had lesson plans. But that was before the age of the ubiquitous small screens, when a handful of the students in each of your four section was listening.

Arrive as if you came into the room against your will, as if someone shoved you over the threshold. Dress shabbily. Your oldest black jeans, turning brown. Your faded stretched out short-sleeved t-shirts, summer or winter. Pull the longest dangling threads from the bottoms of your pant legs, but not too hard. Remember to wear “skin tone” panties. The holes in the left thigh where the cat’s claws went through get bigger each time you wash them, which is often because the place is filthy. Remember the month of August when the chair of the department called you in for a meeting and the custodial staff had piled all the student chairs in the hall, so they could do their yearly strip and wax of the classroom floors. Remember the colorful array of gum wads on the bottoms of the chairs. And the last time you sat on a fresh piece. Dressing down is not a sign of disrespect. It marks you as a realist.

“Good teaching demands of the teacher a toleration of the frustrations to his or her spontaneity of giving…frustrations that may be felt acutely, and the student is helped in becoming civilized not so much by the teacher’s precepts as by the teacher’s own ability to bear the frustrations inherent in teaching” (Winnicott, 1964, in Bibby 2011, p.202-3).

Start teaching as soon as you walk in. Don’t try to get their attention. Don’t do the “signal” that you got years ago from that ridiculously large book with the godawful drawings of people that look like insects. Noseless people with hands like sponges and eyes right up under their hairlines. The students hated the signal. They looked up and muttered to each other, “signal,” and then turned back to their little screens or the conversation they were having in Chinese or Persian or Uzbek.

Write on the whiteboard with a red marker in the biggest letters you have the energy for and can write without visibly trembling: “Freewriting.”

Enunciate when you say: Get out your notebooks. (Collect these notebooks at the end of the semester. Tell the students that if they don’t come to their scheduled appointment a week after the last day of class you will throw them away. Then do just that. Without reading them.)

Sit down and start writing in your own notebook. Don’t look up and see if they are writing, too. They are not.

At the end of the ten minutes, get up and write the word “Share” on the whiteboard. Notice, in passing, that Grete, the Norwegian who would rub her body all over you if she thought it would get her a better grade, and her BFF, Tina, have actually written something and are politely and quietly reading what they wrote to each other, smiling with genuine affection.

The rest of them have taken out their phones.

“A conscientious teacher might note…that there seemed to be an unusual amount of apathy in the class today and come up with hypotheses…” (Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998, p. 204).

Erase the whiteboard and write “Group work.” Remind them that you did not choose the book, that it was not your idea for them to read a whole book in eleven weeks, and that you are not a vegetarian. Write on the whiteboard:

- Different continents
- Different first languages
- Different genders
- Different majors

You used to make little jokes. You used to write things like “live in different neighborhoods” or “at least two genders.”

If they continue conversing in Russian or Spanish or Chinese, give the instructions in Japanese. While it’s a cheap trick that you have already used too often, it gets their attention, if only for a moment. No one who looks like you should speak Japanese. Don’t explain how you happen to know it. They don’t ask.

Resist the urge to cover your ears as they scrape their chairs without standing up. You cannot ask them to pick them up and move them. The gum.

When they haven’t followed your directions – When one group is all men, another all Russian-speaking women –point to the white board.

When they start doing bumper cars with their chairs again, yell, “Quit it!” so that they get up and move them more quietly. Watch them nudge their chairs across the floor without changing your expression. Remind them of what discussion questions are and of which pages of Eating Animals they should write them about. Writing discussion questions and passing them to another group is an activity you came up with when you still thought about teaching outside of class.

Sit down and start reading the papers handed in by the previous class as fast as you can. You cannot have them hanging over you on the weekend.

When you were ten and announced at supper one night that you wanted to grow up to be exactly like your 4th grade teacher, Miss Lowe, your father’s face twisted into a grimace of contempt.

“You don’t want to be a teacher, do you?”

“No?” you said.

You cannot recall how long ago you stopped trying. This class, where you have discovered that you can get away with not teaching at all, not even for one minute, is the final nail in the coffin. Now you will continue this way for the rest of your career, which will feel like it is lasting for all eternity, like it did for the Catherine DeNeuve character in “The Hunger,” while outside you can vaguely hear the sounds of others talking, laughing, speaking other languages, wishing themselves elsewhere.

And there is no room for self-pity, either. You signed up for this. You asked for it, went to graduate school, got a full-time job, a tenure track position, tenure, for God’s sake. Even your father came around.

“My daughter, the professor,” he would say, amused. And you only teach 30 weeks a year. No one will ever feel sorry for you.

Somewhere along the line you lost your bearings. For ten or so years, you prided yourself on the fluency of your teaching style. But as the years progressed, your words and movements in the classroom became awkward, calling to mind three-legged dogs, and elderly homeless women wearing too many layers of clothes, leaning on walkers festooned with plastic bags.

You begin to speak, or write on the board, and can’t see why. No one is listening.

“You just got a bad group,” your colleague tells you – your handsome young colleague who is so in love with the works of Paolo Freire that he even considered learning Portuguese so that he could read them in the original – but you know it is not that simple. You are not the disciplinarian your colleague is
and when you observed him teaching you saw that even he has more and more trouble with the incoming students, treating them like herds of wild horses he has to scare into a corral each morning, shushing them as loudly as the recorded voice in Notre Dame Cathedral – SHHHHHH! – to get their attention, requiring one to one meetings with them, muttering demurely about how immature they are, how they need to “step up to the plate.”

It’s a commonplace that you sometimes get lucky, sometimes not, that you teach exactly the same lesson – or so you think – to two different groups of students on the same day and it goes wonderfully well in one class and horribly in the next. No one talks about how sometimes it doesn’t go well for a decade.

“Future research in SLA should focus on the momentary restraining forces that come into play when a speaker is choosing whether or not to initiate communication” (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 548).

After twenty-five minutes, when the class is almost over, erase everything and write your final message on the white board.

“Hand in your discussion questions. Make sure the names of the group members are on the paper. Assignment: Review pages 43-75 so that you can give intelligent answers to your classmates’ questions.”

You meant to write informed, not intelligent. Leave it.

Tomorrow you will give the questions to a different group to answer and the students who wrote them will give the new group a grade for their answers. This is an activity you all actually enjoy. At the end of it, which is also the end of the week, you almost like them.

“…students are more likely to engage if they are supported by teachers who establish inviting learning environments, demand high standards, and make themselves freely available to discuss academic progress” (Zepke & Leach 2010, p. 170).

After class, a former student comes to your office. She wants your advice on how to pass the reading test. She has taken it five times so far, each time getting a lower score. You persuade yourself you can help her when the truth is that she is a sexy, vivacious young woman that you just want to be next to. She is also troubled and being around someone troubled is a balm.

She sits on the edge of your student chair and tells you she wants to be a nurse and in order to take courses in her major, she must pass the standardized reading and writing tests administered several times a semester. She is developing a mental block, a kind of phobia about it. She is seething with frustration and angst. As she speaks, you notice that her English is not as good as you thought it was when she was in your class several semesters ago. It’s almost as if she had memorized sections of a phrasebook. She has certain set phrases that she uses appropriately but repeatedly. She does not know English. That is her first problem. As she speaks, she mentions the Italian restaurant where she works as a waitress and you recall that she is Albanian, but her parents moved to Italy when she was a young teenager and she is already bilingual, but probably in the same way, with a set of phrases.

“Are you working too many hours?” you ask, thinking that she must make a great waitress.

Yes, of course, she says but the rent, the tuition. She used up her financial aid long ago. She works 40 hours a week and carries a full-time load.

This is when you should stop. Tell her that you can’t help her if she doesn’t have any evenings or weekends to devote to her studies. That coming to class is not enough. Doing assignments in a cursory way is not going to help.

But you like her company. You like the idea of her occupying your one scheduled office hour, so that on the off chance any of your current students show up, you can tell them to come back next week.

“Do you read in English?” you ask.

She says she reads what is assigned in her classes.

“You don’t do any other reading in English? No reading for pleasure? You don’t read the newspaper?”

She shakes her head, smiling. She is lovely.

You admonish yourself for even considering saying what the sleaziest man in your field is paid thousands to say in his plenary speeches at conferences: No one has to learn to read, they just have to read for pleasure at a level slightly higher than their proficiency, to give themselves the slightest of challenges,
preferably when they are truly relaxed, for example, in bed before going to sleep. At this point, at the conferences, hundreds of elementary and secondary school teachers titter. The man is no better than a used car salesman telling them that if they drive this model, the guys will think they are really sexy.

Still, reading for pleasure is one of the cornerstones of being a good reader. So rather than telling her that she should give up the idea of becoming a nurse because she does not have the time or energy to do the work, you say,

“You have to read if you want to pass a reading test. You have to read every day. Some of that reading has to be easy enough and pleasant enough that it becomes a habit.”

You get up and go to your bookshelf.

“What kind of books do you like?”

“Romances,” she says, blushing.

“That’s fine!” you say, a little too enthusiastically. You look to see what you have left over from when you used to encourage all of your students to read for pleasure. You suggest Danielle Steel.

“Read the first paragraph and tell me how many words you don’t know. Actually, read it aloud.”

As she reads you notice she has difficulty reading everyday words and pronounces them as if they were Italian.

“I understand everything,” she says, coming up for air. “This is good. Thank you.”

Then you remind her that the test she wants to pass has topics in five areas and tell her that she also needs to read an article in the New York Times every day about one of those areas.

“OK,” she says dutifully. Already you know she won’t do it. You tell her to come back the following week, prepared to discuss the first fifty pages of the book and three of the articles she has read. She leaves, excited and happy about the progress she is going to make, and you congratulate yourself on behaving like a professor for a change.

The next week she is visibly upset and apologizes for having done nothing. She is having problems with her boyfriend.

Here is a fork in the road. Here is where you are supposed to separate the personal from the professional.

“What kind of problems?” you ask.

It’s a very long story involving her parents back in Italy, his parents here, and the date they set for their wedding in June. And the fact that the boyfriend seems more interested in her brother than in her and that since he moved into her apartment, he no longer wants or is able to have sex with her.

“Do you think he’s gay?”

“What makes you say that?” she asks and you have an opportunity to be honest with her, to come out, and to really be her friend or go back into your role of professor and remind her that she is here to talk about reading and recommend that she see one of the counselors downstairs. You do neither.

“Just a guess. If he is so interested in your brother and not in you.”

You let her talk. She is crying now. Her parents are coming over for the wedding. She doesn’t want to disappoint her mother.

“She doesn’t have to live with this guy. Do you want to spend the next 30 years feeling rejected?”

She is so grateful to you for taking her side – her mother has told her she is imagining things – that you forget to give her an assignment for the following week when she comes back to tell you about her latest brutal arguments with the guy and to rant about how a real man should behave, dress, and treat a woman. You do not tell her that you wouldn’t know. It seems too personal and beside the point.

The following week she sends you a text message that she has failed the test, surely due to the breakup with her fiancé, but that she is grateful for your advice and will start reading soon. You know that you will not hear from her again.

You delete the message and go back to your stack of student papers.
REFERENCES


