

## PERFORMING PROFESSOR

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### Abstract

In this piece, the authors, two newly named Ph.D.'s and new tenure track faculty members, question life in the academy as they find themselves juggling what they think their new role should be and what the performance of that role actually is. Using a framework of autoethnography, their journaled experiences and performances are shared through dialogue with the intent that readers will gain an understanding of their evolving roles as performing professors. Dialogue was chosen as a means of re-representing the authors' personal narratives in order to illustrate the complexities and reflections of their new roles as assistant professors, including how they perform professor, validation of that performance, and their desire to perfect the performance, specifically with regard to teaching. The authors constructed this dialogue as a way of telling the story of their first-year experience and in doing so hope to open a space for more consideration and dialogue regarding performance and the professoriate.

### Introduction

The transition from graduate student to professor is a dynamic experience filled with complexities and uncertainties. Although many doctoral programs groom graduate students for the professoriate by providing content knowledge and a basic understanding of the academy, new faculty members, no matter what their capacity (tenure track, fixed term, adjunct, etc.), are often left to their own devices to navigate their transition from student to professor and to decide how they will perform their new role. Boice (2000) notes that "The change from student to professor is far larger than most new faculty anticipate" (p. 22) – and that was our experience.

In August 2012, we both started our first tenure track positions as Assistant Professors of Educational Research at public regional universities in the southeastern United States. Having journeyed through graduate school together we were groomed for the professoriate through our respective programs as they pushed us to research, write, present, and publish. So, considering our training, starting our careers in higher education was the obvious next step for each of us. The move from student to scholar was exciting for us and, at the same time, overwhelming. Before the start of the Fall semester, anxieties were high and questions like "What have we gotten ourselves into?" filled our almost daily conversations. We knew that our experiences would be grand but we did not know what they held. To that end, we decided to document our journey through the first semester in autoethnographic journals (Ellis, 2004) that we would share with one another at the end of the semester. We re-represent the product and interpretation of those autoethnographic journals in this manuscript as a performance text (Leavy, 2009), which is written as a dialogue that shares our experience. We chose to use this mode of re-representation because autoethnography frees us from "writing dry accompanying narratives" (Bartleet, 2013, p. 456) and allows us to share with the reader our experiences in an evocative and embodied way; the way we shared our experience with one another.

In this piece, we recognize autoethnography not has a single method or approach but one that has various interpretations (Anderson, 2006; Ellis, 2004; Spry, 2011) and representations (Bartleet, 2013). We have chosen to use autoethnography as a technique that combines autobiography and ethnography to describe and analyze a personal experience, in our case, the experience of being first-year professors of educational research (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). The autobiography aspect incorporates our personal accounts, reflections, and interpretations of our experience. The ethnographic aspect speaks to the cultural dynamics of our experience illustrating rules, social norms, and common practices (Ellis et al., 2011; Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012). Together these pieces provide a unique insight into our

experiences as performing professors using thick, rich description to describe our professional and emotional journeys as both individual professors and professors as part of a larger academic culture (Ellis et al., 2011). Translating our experiences into “autoethnographic fiction” (Ellis, 2004, p. 332) allows our audience to gain a deep understanding of our evolving roles as performing professors while also comparing our experiences to topics presented in research and literature. The literature surrounding the experiences of new faculty beginning their careers in academia focuses on strategies to be successful. Strategies stem from establishing mentoring relationships to writing practices ensuring promotion and tenure (McCormick & Barnes, 2008; Puri, Graves, Lowenstein, & Hsu, 2012; Reybold & Alamia, 2008). While these approaches are important and fruitful, we decided to take a different approach providing a more in-depth account using autoethnography to both process and produce our experiences as first-year faculty (Ellis et al., 2011).

Though autoethnographies in education are not a new phenomenon (Duarte, 2007; Hughes et al., 2012), our approach uses dialogue taken from our personal narratives to re-represent our experience and illustrate the complexities and reflections of our new roles as assistant professors. We constructed this dialogue as a way of telling the story of our first-year experience since “Stories are the way humans make sense of their world” (Ellis, 2004, p. 32).

Next, we present a dialogue of our experience as first year tenure-track faculty members through a performance text titled, “Performing Professor.” Rather than weigh this dialogue down with formal sections on our research method<sup>1</sup> including data collection and data analysis, we have chosen to include those details as endnotes for readers who are interested. We invite readers to engage with the dialogue and fill in the gaps as they consider similarities and differences in their own experiences that may push them to places that are both familiar and uncomfortable.

## Performing Professor

### Scene: The Journey Begins

*August 2012. Mary Alice has just accepted a tenure track position. Amelia calls Mary Alice to congratulate her and find out more about the position she has accepted.*

Amelia: Congratulations on your new position! What’s your official title?

Mary Alice: Assistant Professor of Educational Research.

Amelia: How funny, that’s exactly what my title is. What are you going to be teaching?

Mary Alice: I thought that’s what your title was. I’m teaching Intro to Ed Research and School and Classroom Assessment.

Amelia: I’m teaching Intro to Ed Research, too.

Mary Alice: I’m excited but it’s a bit daunting as well, thinking of myself as the professor.

Amelia: I know. I feel the same. I can’t imagine *me* as a *professor*. You know what we should do?

Mary Alice: What?

Amelia: Well, since we are both in our first semester as tenure track faculty in basically the same position at similar universities and we have both been assigned to teach one of the same courses for grad students, why don’t we do a piece on what it is like to transition from student to faculty member – like an autoethnographic piece?

Mary Alice: I love it. Count me in! What do you envision the piece to look like?

Amelia: I'm not sure yet, but what I am thinking is that we can each keep a research journal during the first semester and this journal will note our reactions to teaching and learning, our experience as a first semester faculty member, our excitement, fears, anxieties, challenges, successes, and reactions to our new positions, those sorts of things. We always talk about being reflective, which we are, but I have a feeling this is going to be a really important time for reflection. I think we should make time to journal every week.

Mary Alice: That all sounds great. In a previous collaboration I worked on, we decided not to share our journals with one another until the end of the semester. I think we should do the same. What do you think?

Amelia: Yeah, that sounds fine. I think we can journal and document how things are going each week and maybe through writing, we'll be able to make sense of all this. Then, at the end of the first semester, we will share our journals like you suggested, and analyze them together. Hopefully our journals will illustrate our journey and offer a reflexive look at our experience, but we will have to wait and see.

Mary Alice: I love it. I'm excited about this.

Amelia: Me too! It'll be great to work together on this.

As Lindholm (2004) points out, newly appointed assistant professors often begin their roles full of passion and excitement much the way we did. Though doctoral programs do what they can to prepare new faculty for work in academia, interest in pursuing a faculty position often begins with personal graduate school experiences (Lindholm, 2004; Puri et al., 2012) that make appealing the idea of joining the academy to engage in scholarly work and individual expression on topics that are self-selected. Graduate-students-turned-faculty-members are often enthusiastic about their new positions and consider the freedom they have been rendered to pursue a variety of intellectual interests a "privilege" not always prevalent in other professions (Lindholm, 2004, p. 612). We too were enthusiastic about our new positions. We recognized it as a privilege to have been offered tenure-track positions and acknowledged the autonomy and independence that came with being on the other side of the lectern, including academic freedom and flexibility.

### **Scene: The Performance**

*Early Fall 2012 – The beginning of the semester is in full swing and the pressure of performance is finally realized.*

Amelia: Taking on the role of professor is different than I thought it would be. I just feel like I am constantly planning. I struggle to find a balance between what I *want* to assign and what the students will likely *do*.

Mary Alice: Planning the course has been fun for me. Then again, this is what I like to do. I have, however, had several moments of uncertainty – "Do I know what I'm doing?" and lots of "Do I know the material?" Then I think back to my prior teaching experiences and I realize I will be okay. But then I think of the added element this semester of the class being online and I get scared again. I hope it goes okay and that I will be able to clearly articulate the foundational knowledge important to understanding educational research.

- Amelia: Ugh! The uncertainty! Yes, me too! I think to myself, “Am I prepared to do this?”
- Mary Alice: I know I am prepared, but I could feel myself (and hear myself) being shaky when I was recording certain parts of the lecture I did to put online. I know I got shaky particularly when I was trying too hard to “perform” as an instructor who knows what she’s talking about!
- Amelia: That element of performance is something I’ve been thinking about. I feel like so much of what we do is a performance. It’s like we are *performing professor*.
- Mary Alice: Performing professor. That’s interesting.
- Amelia: For me, the adrenaline rush is starting to wear off here within the first few weeks of the semester. The reality of what lies ahead for the semester is starting to sink in for both the students and for me. I feel my energy waning at times and recognize that I have to push myself to keep going because I am not engaged in the material in front of me. At those moments I find myself somewhere between being a graduate student and being a faculty member. I don’t know how to describe it really. It is like I have moments of thinking I can get away with not reading the full chapter and still be able to “perform” in class. When my reality is that I have to not only read the full chapter but, I have to be able to “perform” as expert both in the class and for my colleagues. I have to be both teacher and researcher. It’s a performance (Denzin, 2003). I am performing professor and I am not sure I am good at it.
- Mary Alice: Yes, and it’s also about those things that we cannot be or simply weren’t “taught” during our graduate program when preparing to become professors. You’re right. It is a performance.
- There is so much “learning on the job” that is done, much of which seems to vary among institutions, departments, and even programs. For example, I’ve been reading the online discussions my students have been posting and I’m really beginning to freak out. Most of my students are older students and practitioners in primary and secondary education. Their discussion board posts remind me of how little I know about this realm of education. I have always been focused on higher education and they are talking about things I have never heard before. I know I am not supposed to know everything, but this concerns me as I begin to think about the research proposals they will write in this class. I know it is not my responsibility to be a content expert in everything. But still, I feel so uncomfortable. It’s ironic, really, because what I have been focusing on for the past week is getting them comfortable with becoming researchers, yet here I am now uncomfortable as a researcher teaching research. It’s like the more comfortable they get, the more uncomfortable I get.
- Amelia: Would this be the start of what some have named “imposter syndrome” (Brems, Baldwin, Davis, & Namyniuk, 1994; Viczko & Wright, 2010)?
- Mary Alice: Maybe. I guess it could be. I find that I am second-guessing myself even though I learned what I need to know in my doctoral program and from my own experiences. I wonder why there is such the self-doubt?
- Amelia: I’m not sure if the self-doubt comes from being new to something or the fact that it feels like we should be their classmates rather than their professors! I can’t get used to that

idea just yet that I am on the other side of the lectern so to speak. Plus, I am so afraid of screwing up, messing up, giving them the wrong information and somehow ruining their learning in the process; I find myself worrying, over-planning, and trying to fill some deficit that I think exists or could exist in my teaching.

Mary Alice: I am constantly planning and I constantly feel like I am not good enough for my students.

Amelia: I have the same trouble, Mary Alice. I keep questioning what I know, kicking myself when I can't remember something, and worrying myself over being thought an imposter by my colleagues. I keep thinking "When are they going to discover that I really don't know everything they think I know?" Supposedly this is how many new faculty feel (Viczkó & Wright, 2010).

I keep thinking about this transition from student of research to professor of research. I wonder if my anxiety stems from the imposter syndrome? I wonder if there is an expectation that new assistant professors are going to come in and be *experts* on *all or most* of the subject matter they are going to teach?

Mary Alice: I have resigned to understand that it is not my responsibility to be a content expert in everything. My responsibility is to help the students become researchers – to find the information they need, design research to generate new knowledge, etc. I am giving them the tools they need to make sure their research is solid.

Amelia: That's a good way of looking at it. I am so ambiguous toward this new idea of *performing professor*. I think I like the *idea* of being a professor but find the job unrewarding at this point. I've read lots of stuff about the transition to academia from graduate school – about the imposter syndrome, the challenges to keep up, feeling overwhelmed, being stretched too thin, etc. I guess my question is, "how do you know you are doing a good job?" Not only do I feel like we are performing professor but there seems to be this need to perform professor in a particular way and to be good at it.

Much of the literature on professional identity development focuses on the product of identity rather than the process of developing an identity (Ibarra, 1999). Early in our first semester, we began to struggle with our new professional and social identities as professors. Drawing on Goffman's (1956) *Presentation of Self*, the experiences we began to have transitioning from graduate school to faculty life were a series of "iterative performances" that caused us to constantly alter our presentation based on our assumptions of what an acceptable performance of a professor was (p. 17). As Goffman (1956) pointed out, "People perform...to generate specific impressions, often so that others will perceive them in a positive light" (p. 17). Indeed, this was our hope as we came to confront the battle between our experience and our performance versus our performance and our experience (Turner, 1982; Madison & Hamera, 2007). We wanted our colleagues and our students to see us as 'the smart new hire' and 'the great new professor' so we performed in a way that we thought would portray us in that way and not reveal how very insecure we actually were.

### **Scene: Evaluations as Validation of Performance**

*It is now mid-semester and thoughts regarding evaluations of student and faculty performance become more and more pervasive.*

Mary Alice: I knew this was going to happen – if all of my students didn't do well, I would blame myself. That blame as translated into me panicking a lot about my teaching evaluations. Perhaps it's because I'm afraid the students will think I don't know what I'm talking

about and say so in my evaluations – then my superiors will find out and I’ll be fired from teaching. I know that may sound a little extreme but that’s how I feel a lot lately.

Amelia: Evaluations – they are on my mind a lot, too. I have been thinking about the question on the course evaluations that asks students to rate “instructors knowledge of the course content.” I wonder how my students will rate my knowledge of the content? I find myself worrying about the same thing as you, Mary Alice. I keep thinking, “If that rating is too low, I could lose my job.” That is probably a bit extreme, but I do wonder about that.

Mary Alice: I sent out a mid-semester evaluation to see how the students were feeling about me as a teacher. I was nervous but I needed to know! I needed feedback because I really want to be better.

The comments were overwhelming positive and made me feel so much better and so much more confident in my teaching. I’m really glad I asked for their feedback. The numbers were great, but of course, the comments were much more helpful. I am so happy!

Amelia: That’s great. I think there is this desire to perform as the best professor we can be and somehow we give power to these evaluations as what we need to validate that performance.

In times when I am feeling down about my teaching and in times when I am feeling good about what I know well and what I *do* well, I am reminded the Palmer’s (1995) statement, “My fear that I am teaching poorly is not a sign of failure but evidence that I care about my craft” (p. 39). This usually helps me keep my teaching in perspective and reminds me of why I am doing it. It feels less like a performance in those reflective moments.

Mary Alice: I am looking forward to using the feedback I got from the students to improve the course for next semester, and I’m glad they were so pleased with the course, but I guess I was expecting it to be horrible and full of suggestions and recommendations to make it better.

Amelia: Why is it we expect the worst? We don’t trust ourselves, do we? How did we get to that point? Why do we want to please the audience so much?

Mary Alice: I’m not sure, but I feel that weight on me all the time. It’s as if I am constantly seeking approval and if I keep improving that approval will show itself.

Amelia: I know what you mean. I am doing constant evaluations. I like to use Critical Incident Questionnaires (CIQ) (Brookfield, 2006) to try and determine when the students felt engaged and disengaged in the class as well as what learning gaps there are still to fill. I gave one a few weeks into the course, followed by a midterm evaluation, and then another CIQ later. All the feedback was great. I was so pleased. One student remarked, “I don’t hate research as much as I thought I would.” Another said, “I feel so engaged when we are doing activities.” And another, “When the teacher comes around during activities to offer help, I am able to ask questions.” “I enjoy the way the class is set up.” “I like you and the class.”

When I read comments like this I remember why I teach. I do it because I believe in my heart of hearts that I am a good teacher. Regardless of how I perform professor, I don’t have to perform teacher.

Mary Alice: Performing professor involves so much more, I think. There is a performance for your colleagues, a performance for your students...

Amelia: ...and a performance for yourself. That is the one I think I struggle with the most. Does my performance meet the expectations I have of a professor? I think that is why I give so many evaluations in my classes. The validation of my performance for myself comes from the student responses.

Mary Alice: It definitely validates what we are doing. It gives us the reassurance we need to keep performing.

Teaching evaluations in higher education have traditionally been used to improve and enhance instruction; however, teaching evaluations are now also used in the promotion and tenure process for faculty (Lindahl & Unger, 2010). Quickly and clearly we came to understand these two important points during our first semesters and began to feel the angst that is common around evaluation time (Lewis, 2001; Yao & Grady, 2005). New faculty members tend to set unrealistic expectations for themselves early in their careers and tend to doubt their capabilities or performance when they do not meet their own expectations (Sorcinelli, 1992). We found ourselves doing the same thing; setting lofty expectations of ourselves as we developed our professional identities, which only brought on a heightened awareness of what our presumed weaknesses were. For us, evaluations provided the validation of our performance that we thought we needed to develop professionally within the academy.

### **Scene: Perfecting the Performance**

*The end of the semester elicits reflections and prompts thoughts on improvements for the future.*

Amelia: Here at the end of the semester, I am thinking about the lessons learned over the semester. One thing I learned is that research is a tricky subject to teach. It forces us to stay on top of method and design and to be versed in areas of research that we might not normally practice. As researchers we adhere to our agenda and read relevant material related to both our method and our topic. But, as *professors of research*, we have to read even more widely. We have to remain open to all types of research, even if we don't epistemologically or ontologically align with them.

Mary Alice: So true! I also realized that I am, myself, learning more about research design. It's true what they say, if you want to learn something, teach it. I find myself learning more and more things every week as I grade and put lectures together. I also realized there is nothing else I'd rather do or teach. I don't know what it is, but I really enjoy teaching research methods. I knew I would.

Amelia: It sounds like maybe you've found your calling, Mary Alice. Maybe it isn't as much of a "performance" for you, after all. For me, I just can't believe my first semester as a professor is nearly over. I end this semester wondering if I did the best job I could and asking myself, "Did I do the job I was hired to do?" "Did I perform professor well enough?" If you had to summarize how you performed professor this semester, what would you say?

Mary Alice: When I reflect on this semester, three things come to mind. First, I gave it my best shot! Although not all my students were successful in the course, the majority of them were and that says a lot. Second, this is what I was meant to do. Although it is a lot of work, I really enjoy helping students learn about research and turn something they are passionate about into a fun research project. Third, I know I will get better. I started out this

semester with a lack of confidence that I thought would tarnish my career. I wasn't absolutely sure I knew everything I needed to know about educational research and I was afraid I wasn't ready to help others. What I found out was that I wasn't entirely correct. Sure, I didn't know everything about educational research, and I still don't! No one does. I was, however, ready to help others. When I didn't know the answer to something, I would find it. Constant learning. I have learned so much this semester and I'm looking forward to learning more, teaching more students, and building up my knowledge as an educational researcher.

Amelia: The time has flown by. We will never get back our first semester. It's sort-of bittersweet. I feel the same as you. I want to build my skills and improve my scholarship and teaching. I know this performance has to be perfected. It is a performance we are going to have to perform beyond teaching. We have to perform scholarship and service in order to perform professor well. I don't believe there is a happy ending to this performance, but instead it is ongoing. We will continue to perfect the performance we started this semester, but after some time, what happens if the performance becomes dull for our audience and for us? Just like a show that runs too long on Broadway. What happens then?

Academic transitions can be viewed as a developmental opportunity (Reybold & Alamia, 2008) and we view our ongoing performance of professor as our process of experimenting with evaluating our provisional selves in new professional roles (Ibarra, 1999). Though we experienced conflict and anxiety in our thoughts, actions, and at times, relationships during this transition, we understood this to be a learning experience and the opportunity for "professional insight and constructive change" (Reybold, 2005, p. 109). It is with this attitude of constructive change that we press forward in our efforts to perform towards tenure. Tenure is typically judged on teaching, scholarship and service and laden with institutional politics (Boice, 2000). The recursive process of acknowledging, questioning, and reflecting upon our new identities and roles is going to be an important piece of the performance that comes next for us.

### **Closing Remarks**

We began with the hope that our process of journaling might help articulate the experience from student to scholar that is so difficult to put into words unless you experience it firsthand. Writing narratives about our personal experience of shifting identities was challenging. At times, as our new identities and knowledge were constructed, we found it difficult to articulate an understanding of our experience and extract moments within that experience to share and reflect upon critically and collaboratively (Viczo & Wright, 2010). What we discovered together was that the transition we were going through was a performance, a performance of experience and presentation (Goffman, 1956) and a performance of identity (Ibarra, 1999), a performance derived from feelings of worry, self-doubt, and the need for validation, a performance based on our constructed understanding of what a professor should be. It is a performance that we are still striving to perfect. It is a performance that has not ended. It is a performance that we question and consider in the responsibilities we are given as faculty members. Given the complexities of this performance, it is not surprising that conflicts arise stirring up feelings of inadequacy, challenging identities, and opening spaces for professional and personal development (Reybold, 2005; Sorcinelli, 1992). We have embarked on a "dynamic journey" (Reybold & Alamia, 2008, p.107) that will take us through many different facets of the academic life. As we become more comfortable performing professor, we intend to welcome the challenges and circumstances initiating our growth as scholars and individuals.

Finally, we believe understanding the role faculty play in academia and what it takes to be a faculty member is increasingly more complex. In an effort to break down that complexity, it is important to reflect on academic transitions as key components of professional identity and transformation. It is our

hope that this performance piece has, in some way, challenged readers to reconsider the still life perspective of academia by painting a new, more dynamic portrait of what it means to be a professor.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Data for this project included reflective journals kept by each of us over the course of our first semesters as professors of educational research. We agreed to journal our experiences on a weekly basis to capture what we were feeling and experiencing over time in our respective classes. Each of us was given an Introduction to Educational Research class to teach during our first semester. Mary Alice taught her class entirely online whereas Amelia's class was face-to-face. We thought that the different class formats would produce different experiences, but we were not sure to what extent those experiences would differ. We decided to keep weekly journals that reflected our individual experiences as a first semester assistant professor of educational research. Reflective journaling is an important aspect of autoethnography. For us, keeping reflective journals served two purposes. First, it gave us the opportunity to document the experience we were having transitioning from student to scholar. Second, keeping a reflective journal proved to be a useful tool for improving our teaching "in the moment" rather than after the course was complete. Throughout the course of the semester, we did not discuss our experiences or share our respective journals with one another. At the end of our first semester we exchanged journals and did a read through of each journal in its entirety. Using Skype™ to meet virtually to discuss our reactions, we discovered that while our class formats were different, we experienced many of the same emotions, challenges and rewards through the course of the semester.

Coding was completed at two levels to organize the data set. The first level coding included both in vivo and descriptive codes (Saldaña, 2013). Usually in vivo codes use the language of the participants and descriptive codes are the language of the researcher used to categorize the data. In this piece we were both the participants and the researchers. So the in vivo codes refer to the language we used in our journals while descriptive codes were the language we used in our reflective interpretation of our own journals during our analysis. In the first round of coding, each of us coded both research journals by hand using in vivo and descriptive codes. The coded data was scanned up uploaded electronically to share with one another. A code list of descriptive and in vivo codes was created. We met via Skype™ to discuss the coded data. Based on our discussion we decided to proceed with second level coding, using first iteration codes in the second round of coding. Once the data was coded using first and second level coding, we identified the main themes we wanted to focus on in re-presenting our experience. Those themes became the four scenes illustrated in the script.