



Reflection on Teaching...or Not

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Blog Series: Stories from the Front

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Tags: critically reflective teaching | vocation of teaching | faculty well-being

Editor's note: Today's blog is Kate's final individual entry for this year of Stories from the Front (of the Classroom). Look for our final collaborative post on Tuesday May 19.

For those of us who are lucky enough to work on a traditional academic calendar, the end of the year is upon us. After all the grading is done, we finally have time to do all those professional things we can't manage to do during the school year: catch up on research, finish that manuscript, turn in that overdue book review. It's time for inspiring reflections like Eric Barreto's about the national fight for justice that framed this academic year, or Roger Nam's about readjusting our goals as we progress through our finite and specific careers. As



*Hmmm...maybe this is the
perfect time to take up the
accordion.*

committed teachers and Wabash devotees, we know it's also time to look back on last year's courses and reflect upon what went well and what we could do better.

Right?

Then again, maybe it's just time to crash on the couch and binge-watch *Game of Thrones* or *Scandal* or whatever sport is in season now. Time to garden or clean out the garage. Time to take a vacation. Maybe it's finally time to get to the dentist and the salon for some long-ignored personal care. Those of us in colder parts of the country may be especially anxious to take walks or get out the bike. Wherever we are, we may be in desperate need of detox from nine months of academic meetings and depressing articles in the *Chronicle*, not to mention that one scathing teaching evaluation we received amid the dozens of tepid ones and occasional glowing ones.

In other words, maybe the end of teaching season means it's time to do ANYTHING BUT THINK ABOUT TEACHING.

In alternate years I teach a 3:3 or a 3:2:1; this year was a 3:3, which means I finished my classes in late April. I took a wonderful vacation with my family during which I forgot all about my job and put on about five pounds, and am now in my first week at home without a schedule. Normally I spend the first week or two of summer feeling aimless, moping around the house yowling like my oldest cat, not wanting to commit to anything in particular. I meet friends for coffee, do a little weeding, and check Facebook way too often. I did manage a tiny bit of work

this week so I could say I'd done *something* (creating a Word document for a brand-new syllabus counts, right?) and here I am writing one last blog post for your edification.

One thing I haven't done is look back in any organized way on the teaching year. I always mean to do that at the end of the term, but when the time comes I can't seem to put energy into the past when I feel I should be prepping for the future. It's not that I don't ever reflect on teaching; it's just that I don't usually manage it in any systematic way. Reflection tends to happen bit by bit as I'm planning for next term. I'll invent a new assignment based on the fact that last year's students utterly bombed the old assignment. Or I'll tweak the course goals, adding something lofty in order to signal that there is more to the course than just gathering regurgitable information. Reflection also comes at random times, but I'm never sure if this counts since I might forget such insights later on when it matters.

I am hopeful, though, that if I stay open, there is something necessary going on even in my "wasted" time, something hard to quantify that nevertheless makes me a better teacher. Like a field lying fallow, teachers need time to regain our imagination and perhaps our confidence. Our jobs use up a lot of mental energy, and our minds need both feeding and rest. (And truthfully, they don't pay us to work 24/7/365.) I don't think it's all bad if we put off reflection until it begins to feel like fun rather than drudgery, like part of the creative process rather than a post-mortem. And if the time never comes that thinking about teaching gets us excited, well then it's probably time to consider another line of work.

When do you do your best reflection on teaching?

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2015/05/reflection-on-teaching-or-not/>