

Academy Performances, Academy Rewards: Cautionary Tales

By Lorri Neilsen

Over the years, graduate students from a number of institutions have approached me with stories: tales of frustration, broken promises, and shattered ideals. How could the professor they had idolized, and in whom they held such trust, do this to them? Like many who work in the academy, I have learned that I am both participant and observer, the In/appropriate Other/Same that Trinh Minh-ha (1991, p. 74) describes. When I listen, I too feel the injustice the student feels. And yet I am part of the very system that supports such behavior: I am complicit. More than once, my chagrin and dismay have caused me to reassess not only my own behavior as a scholar, but whether I want to be here in the academy at all. In the words of the old movie, *Alfie*, "What's it all about?"

If we listen to the stories, it's about power and authority and the cult of celebrity. And the stories, I am learning, are legion. The perceived transgressions and breach of trust differ with each tale told, but there is a common pattern. Here—with names deleted and circumstances altered—are only a few of the examples:

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And so there I am, in the front row, the dutiful little graduate student. The room is packed—there must have been a thousand people in that session—and I hear my story. My data. He is standing up there at the

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podium using my data, my examples, and calling them his. I didn't realize that being the star graduate student means you give away your data.



I was so thrilled. She loved my proposal. And when I went in to see her, I saw multiple copies of it on her desk. "Oh," she said. "I forgot to ask you if I could use your proposal as an example for others." I was flattered, but I also thought, "Okay, permission and consent are important for your students, but the prof. is above it all?" I know it's now a public document, but still....



Don't worry about it. He does it all the time. I started reading in this field and he picked up on it. Now he's the one writing the book—he's got all the clout, after all—and I'm the one still trying to finish my dissertation. I was the one who introduced him to the ideas, but you'll never read that in the book. I won't get credit for changing his research direction.



It's a laugh, really. He makes his reputation as Mr. Social Justice. So he has a person of color cleaning his house and serving at parties, and when he's into the sauce—which is often—he is vicious about the feminists he has to work with. What happened to walking your talk, or am I being too idealistic?



Oh, we were so frustrated. We revised and revised our writing and she became more and more abusive. The stories had to be just right. She kept reminding us what a big deal it was that we, as teachers, were publishing. But it was, finally, her publication, her name on it. Did she think because we were classroom teachers we didn't know that we were being used?



I sent to that journal but, you know, with the two of them as editors, you won't get published unless you quote their work. I mean, it's supposed to be a respected, refereed journal, but if you're writing something in their field, they'll send you back the article and suggest—not so subtly—that it will get published only if you quote their research.



Big critical theorist guy—comes to our small conference, right? Does he stay in the university dorms like everyone else? No way. He insists on the conference paying for a suite downtown where he can use the pool and a hot tub.



The students were thrilled he was coming to give a workshop. The first thing he did when he arrived was to hand us an informed consent form. I was stunned, we

were all stunned. He thought we'd feel honored to have our stories used in his work. And, in truth, a few were honored, but most were taken aback.



You know that phrase—catchy, isn't it? Well, it's mine. And she now is known for it. I mean, no one really owns language but I coined that phrase in one of her courses and she's the one with the national reputation, so now it's associated with her. I don't mind, really. It's the work that's important. I guess.



He tells every student he can they need to work with him and convinces them he's the resident expert in just about everything. But he's a poser, a performer. He fooled me. The other students don't realize it's not them he cares about; it's the length of his *Vitae*. They're a commodity.



Let's start at the beginning, with the education system in most English-speaking countries. Like it or not, we work inside hierarchies. Secondary school teaching is too often considered more serious, important work than primary and early elementary school teaching.

A graduate student is further up the ladder. A doctoral student further still. Then, inside the academy, we have instructors, assistant professors, associates, and then full professors at the top. In countries such as Australia or New Zealand the nomenclature is different—lecturer, senior lecturer, and so on, but the effect is the same.

Add to the existing hierarchy the nature of schooling and education. Education is competitive, and everything from testing to grading to accreditation practices both force and reinforce everyone's inherent tendencies toward competition. This means low-ability children are reminded constantly about their inadequacies; elementary school teachers are bullied into changing classroom practice for fear of not keeping up with Japan, or the flavor of the week, or the school district down the road, or the demands of the market economy. Classroom teachers worry constantly about whether they are doing things the "right way" because right is best and best wins. In graduate seminars, the competition plays out in discursive hard ball—who has the citations and linguistic *savoir faire* to gain an edge in the conversation and win the favor of the professor.

And we haven't even mentioned the professional character of an educator. Yes, we might be indulging in stereotyping, as we do with the purse-mouthed, buttoned-down accountant or the gregarious, flamboyant, and colorfully-dressed theater actor. Not all educators are still the ten-year-old at the front of the class determined to be right, to be perfect, and to be approved of by all. Not all educators go into teaching because of their need for control and their well-defined sense of justice. But let's be candid, here. Some do. And some who make their way up the educational hierarchy into academia do so because they can then be indisputably

right, important, and in control. By the time they have spent years in the academy, that scared little boy or girl who needs control and respect is buried inside the body of a professor whose outward appearance belies the insecurities inside. They have a big office, graduate students, a Curriculum Vitae packed with publications, and the liberty—they may cast it as responsibility—to behave in accordance with their station. They have arrived: they are entitled.

"Publish or perish." Perhaps the phrase ought to be "publish and perish." For the costs of the scramble to the top of the hierarchy in one's field may be higher than we can measure. What's at stake? The credibility of our profession, our own integrity, and the quality of the relationships we maintain. It's the bad apple syndrome: the rotten few can soil the whole barrel. The fight to be a frequent footnote too often requires leaving footprints on the backs of those in the way. And what are the benefits? The official spin is that such influence forces educational change, and that may be true. But for a significant number, the pay-off in the fight for celebrity are the trappings of being a star in a very small, self-important galaxy (Neilsen, 1994).

The aim here is to open a topic not typically discussed in public. It is to name that elephant that everyone sees but we all ignore. At our research conferences, we are willing to address—in fact, of late, we embrace—the topics of researcher stance, of the perils of exploiting our research participants and the dangers of our colonizing research practices. Some observers among us name our *mea culpas*, our self-flagellation as mere self-absorption and urge us to get on with the work (Patai, 1994). Many feminist theorists claim that attention to our roles and relationships as researchers is central to the ethical dimensions that shape our work (Neilsen, 1998). But...

Daphne Patai is whispering in my ear: "*The people most successful at the moral one-upmanship of correctly positioned scholarship are members of a class that has time, energy and incentives for precisely such activities. What we see are make-believe politics.*" (1994, p. 69-70)

Lorri: *Am I doing the same here? Trying to claim the moral high ground, calling this discussion a naming, a making visible so that I can participate in the competitive exercise of correctly positioning myself? Who am I to presume to do that?*

But few of us are willing to address the issue of how we, as researchers, discussing our data or our data dilemmas, got to the podium. Did we exploit graduate students to gather the findings? Did we elbow our way through our colleagues' paths to bring ourselves to the head of some imaginary queue? Whose issues or egos or feelings did we trounce upon knowingly or unknowingly? Have we become so much a part of the institutional practices we once resisted (Neilsen, 1998) that we can never see ourselves in the same way again? Have we come to believe that we are much more important to the world than we really are?

I hear Paul Johnson in the background: "*It is just about two hundred years since the secular intellectuals began to replace the old clerisy as guides and mentors... I detect today a growing tendency among ordinary people to dispute the right of academics, writers and philosophers, eminent though they may be, to tell us how to behave and to conduct our affairs.*" (1996, p. 342)

Lorri: *We need to get over ourselves, right?*

It is difficult to answer these questions; in fact, it is impossible. Each of us comes to the academy for different reasons. In the case of education, the discipline, many of us began as teachers in the public school system. We may have become disenchanted (for many of us are idealists at heart) with the system, with the bureaucratic treachery, with the day to day grinding fatigue that comes from trying to nurture spirits in a soul-diminishing public system. Or perhaps we simply became physically tired; classroom teaching is increasingly hard work. The appeal of using our minds, discussing ideas, and having a schedule that allowed us to use the bathroom at will became attractive and we enrolled in graduate school.

The less cynical explanation is that we simply wanted to return to study so that we might effect change in the school system. Or that we became passionate about ideas and the tantalizing thought that we could stimulate a discussion that shaped policy or practice. Regardless of our reasons for entering the academy, we find that we become a common statistic: once we have completed the doctoral work, once we are encultured into academic life and the excitement of ideas, we rarely return to classroom teaching. Instead, we look for work in a post-secondary institution.

And once in the institution, like it or not, we become part of that hierarchy. We defer to those in positions considered "more responsible" than ours; and we learn to give direction to students who, unfortunately, are already well-schooled inside a hierarchy. Many have learned to be dependent on authority outside themselves, and many more know that the hidden curriculum of fealty and power is as critical to their survival as their program of study. Soon we find ourselves having to shape our research and our teaching in ways that serve the institution; not necessarily because we believe in the practices, but because life is easier that way, and we must choose our battles. If a student wants to engage in innovative research, for example, we must encourage her to write her proposal in institutionally-sanctioned ways in order for her to gain permission to continue. Or, if we want funding to pursue a passionate interest in some aspect of teaching, and we know that funds are available if we modify our direction, we may write the proposal to compete for the money, hoping all along we can then return to our original direction and still answer to the auditors. Fighting the good fight begins to happen on smaller and smaller battlefields, and in more incremental ways.

The institutional and professional demands grow. To earn our keep, we serve on committee after committee. Students need more of our time, and the expectations for tenure and promotion become pressing. If we want to stay in the game, we must

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learn to play it. In ways both visible and invisible, we find ourselves embodying and reifying the very distinctions we say we hope to erase: between self and institution, person and role, student and teacher, teacher and learner. And between day-to-day micro-politics and the paper blizzard, we look for time to keep current with the literature. Above all, we must remain current.

Daphne: *"Once 'politics' (being political) is judged valuable, something 'we' should all be doing...academics rush to claim this new definition as an accolade for their own work."* (Patai, 1994, p. 70)

Lorri: *Okay, I hear you. I'm only trying to imagine how, when we aim to live inside our words, the gap between the reality and the rhetoric, as you call it, gets bigger.*

In the professional arena, we note, as we have since graduate school days, that some names are more visible than others. In the institution, the size of our Curriculum Vitae becomes important. The names of where we publish and with whom begin to count. At conferences, we measure our professional currency by the size of the audience, and when the audience is small, well, it was the last session of the last day, or Sally Living Footnote was speaking at the same time, and drew our audience away. Within a few years of living in a system where graduate students often treat well-known names like rock stars, and where the trappings of professional esteem can reap immeasurable rewards, we find ourselves caught in a web that is difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle. We risk becoming, as Edward Said (1994) has noted, the professional intellectual: we follow intellectual fashion and concern ourselves, above all, with whether we are marketable and presentable.

Daphne: *"...the jockeying for status and approval."* (Patai, 1994, p. 70)

Paul: *"Taken as a group, (intellectuals) are ultra-conformist within the circles formed by those whose approval they seek and value. That is what makes them so dangerous, for it enables them to create climates of opinion and prevailing orthodoxies."* (Johnson, 1996, p. 342)

As we become institutionalized in this way, we lose our critical sense of life on the street, or, in the case of education, of the daily realities of the public school or the community classroom. We forget the challenges and anxieties of our graduate student days when we worried over every word and hung on the approval of our advisor. We lose our sense of the insidious and damaging effects of power relations, of institutional relations of ruling (Smith, 1990). We've bought into the patriarchy: we're a part of a class and economic system that is sustained by the perpetuation of hierarchical values. The academic marketplace needs commodities and currency: we create both, and we become both.

Feminist theorists have, for years, challenged the values of the academy. Many have described its deleterious effects on women students and faculty. To describe the academy as a marketplace based on patriarchal values is not news. And to assume that women don't learn to embody the same values of the patriarchy is naive.

What is missing in our professional conversations, however, is a frank discussion of why, given the radical changes in research theory and practices, we are not raising the same questions about ethical behaviour in our workplaces as we do in our research projects. Isn't it time to start talking about ourselves not only as researchers, but as professionals, who aim to embody the human values we so publicly espouse?

Lorri: *Oh come on, get real. Who am I kidding? Isn't part of my motivation here to expose those very patterns of arrogance and duplicity that offend me? Is pointing fingers how I demonstrate "human values"?*

Daphne: *"A display of power, a new and improved version of How to Do Things with Words." (Patai, 1994, p. 71)*

Lorri: *Yeah, I know. But at least I'm not engaging in the vocabulary wars you refer to. I'm being as clear as I can be.*

Daphne: *"We do not escape from the consequences of our positions by talking about them endlessly." (Patai, 1994, p. 71)*

Lorri: *All right, fine. So, what am I doing?*

Once we are inside the academy, jockeying for power, wielding our publications and research funding in the marketplace for fame and fortune, we slip into rationalizing our behavior. These students will be thrilled to think that I find their data fascinating and useful enough to claim as my own. These teachers are lucky to have someone like me to work with them on their writing: when they have a publication under their belt, they're going to be so proud of themselves. She wrote a fabulous proposal: she'll be honored to learn I distributed it to my classes—and the classes will realize what a fabulous advisor I am to supervise such work: a win-win situation.

And so it goes. From where the academic researcher sits, any behavior can be defended if it's framed right: that's the wordplay of the academy we are so skilled at doing. And any behavior can be used as data, even here, in this article. When we learn to live inside the body of a researcher, we learn to see everyone as data, every episode as worthy of our analysis, every opportunity as a line on a Curriculum Vitae.

Paul: *"This is what makes them so dangerous...above all, we must at all times remember what intellectuals habitually forget: that people matter more than concepts and must come first." (Johnson, 1996, p. 342)*

Lorri: *Right, Paul. And if we all believed that, we'd be academic roadkill. You've said yourself that Hemingway, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Marx, Brecht, even Lillian Hellman, for goodness' sake, were mendacious, conniving, untruthful, ruthless, and no one ever found out. At least not while they were alive.*

Paul: *"A dozen people picked at random on the street are at least as likely to offer sensible views on moral and political matters as a cross-section of the intelligentsia." (Johnson, 1996, p. 342)*

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Lorri: True. I think the deference the so-called ordinary person shows to an intellectual is misplaced. And the intellectuals I'm talking about here aren't nearly as influential, for good or ill, as say, Marx, or Tolstoy. But the academic researcher, unfortunately, seems to have more status in society than Joe or Josephine Public. Even as we see most intellectuals as the butt of our jokes—couldn't survive in a real job, can't button their shirt right, and won't dance for fear of embarrassing themselves, for example—people still defer to them. It's misplaced respect.

And so we publish. The academic marketplace flourishes. Eager, bright graduate students come to our door, hoping to change the world. We know in a year they will have gathered stories, lost a certain naivete, begun to question—we hope—not only what they are learning from their professors, but what their professors are about, what roles we play, and at whose expense. Their passion and their intellect continually renew our hope for a better world, and their stories fuel our determination to put people before concepts.

In the end, we know, we are teachers all.

Note

Lorri Neilsen can be reached at <Lorri.Neilsen@msvu.ca> for further discussion of these issues. I owe gratitude to the wit and wisdom of Madeleine Grumet: our conversations, over ten years ago now, helped me gain a sense of proportion about the academy.

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