

How to manage the emotional toll of teaching

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One of the best parts of academia is that we are always learning. In our quest to develop a deeper understanding of the world around us, we occupy various positions as expert and novice learners. But, this is also one of the hardest parts of our jobs: in order to learn, we must open ourselves up to the risk of failure, mistakes and missteps.

As academics, we grapple with failure all the time and in a myriad of ways. We are rejected on the job market, we are dejected after an unsuccessful grant application, and we are crestfallen when Reviewer 2 destroys our central argument. Our ideas are challenged during a conference session or during a departmental meeting; we are criticized in the Twittersphere or in book reviews. A class can spectacularly self-implode despite careful preparation or a student might fail to thrive despite our best efforts.

Notwithstanding the prevalence of failure in academia, we tend to gloss over the emotional labour expended in these scholarly endeavours. Even though we reassure students about the benefits of failure in their learning process, it hurts like hell when it happens to us. While we might carry on with a stiff upper lip, there is a cumulative effect that can manifest itself in different ways; without careful management (and sometimes despite it), this can lead to burnout, elevated levels of psychological distress, substance abuse, and higher rates of depression.

While I have been lucky enough to avoid significant mental health challenges, I descend into a week-long funk at the end of every term. This blue mood is characterized by unlocatable anxiety and existential angst: what am I doing, why am I doing it, and does it matter? As a self-identified optimist, this funk always takes me by surprise; however, I have begun to anticipate and make room for this semi-annual phenomenon as an inevitable effect of academic emotional labour.

Academic, know thyself

After a decade of experience, I have learned to manage my academic funk with a series of strategies to replenish my soul: I have found one of the most effective ways to process the funk is reading Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach*. His central premise is, "When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject – not at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning."

Palmer argues that self-reflection is neither narcissistic nor selfish but instead essential if we hope to serve our scholarship and our students with integrity and wholeness. So, instead of denying or avoiding the academic funk, I explore the complex field of forces and pressures that

generate this state of being. For Dr. Palmer, “Integrity requires that I discern what is integral to my selfhood, what fits and what does not – and that I choose life-giving ways of relating to the forces that converge within me.”

When we make emotional labour invisible, we privilege perfection over process. Erasing our vulnerability runs counter to true learning, which requires us to make mistakes as a precondition for generating new insights about our discipline, our classrooms and our selves. We often lose sight of our role as learners: our students and our colleagues expect us to be experts in our field and in the classroom, and any crack in the veneer is met with disbelief or mistrust. No wonder we are so exhausted.

As a way to replenish our emotional reserves, Dr. Palmer suggests that we reflect on what called us to academia in the first place. He urges us to revisit “the mentors who evoked us and with the subject of study that chose us” to make sense of the forces that converge in our lives.

In my most recent academic funk I assigned myself a writing prompt: when and how did I fall in love with Shakespeare? As I wrote, I remembered the exact moment my heart was stirred and my imagination captured (I was lying on the floor looking up at my professor who was reciting Othello’s “put out the light” speech). I see more clearly in retrospect that it wasn’t just Shakespeare that gripped me but rather my experience of Shakespeare in the classroom under the guidance of a professor who loved her craft.

Dr. Palmer says, “By remembering our mentors, we remember our selves – and by remembering ourselves, we remember our students.” Our intellectual pursuits are not merely limited to mental labour; as whole beings, our hearts, heads and souls are all brought to bear in the creation and sharing of knowledge. Finding ways to recognize emotional labour offers us a way forward but also offers us a way back to our selves.