

Slowing Down: A New Faculty Member's Reflection

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As many of my fellow union members recount in the pages of this special issue, the strike yielded more positive outcomes than we ever anticipated. For me, one of the upshots of the strike was that it forced me to slow down.

The possibility of a work action was shrouded in doubt when I accepted a job offer from Indiana University of Pennsylvania in March and moved my family of four cross-country. My more senior colleagues described the threat of a strike as just another part of the contract negotiation process while still noting that in some ways this cycle somehow seemed more bleak.

In the days before the strike the consequences of striking demanded attention. I, a probationary employee, would be walking out just two months after beginning my position as an assistant professor.

Closing my office door that Tuesday night, I felt an unexpected wave of deep sadness. I loved my job (I still do, for the record). I would miss seeing my students' faces and hearing ebullient conversations between colleagues outside my office.

Wednesday morning, I was also unexpectedly invigorated

WORKS AND DAYS 69, Vol. 35, 2017

by the contagious energy on the picket line where our students serenaded us, brought us more donuts than our metabolisms could handle, offered sincere words of encouragement, and marched with us while sporting their homemade t-shirts.

Although the strike did not last long, those three days were transformational for me. The imposed slowness of the strike was a boon for me personally and professionally precisely because it gave me time. Not just unallocated work time, but time and opportunity to think, to feel, and to listen. I don't intend to make it seem as though the strike was a panacea for my own personal time management issues as a new professor. What the strike did do was remind me of the importance of slowing down.

Participating in the strike allowed me to temporarily adopt something akin to Barbara Seeber and Maggie Berg's Slow Professor counter-identity. Inspired by principles from the Slow Food Movement of the 1990s, Seeber and Berg's *The Slow Professor* reasserts deliberative and dialogic thinking as the heart of the professorial identity. Concepts that Seeber and Berg reframe through the lens of Slow include reconceiving of knowledge as thinking so that it serves as a way to protest the knowledge economy of the corporate university and reassert the role of thinking, uncertainty, and process in our work.

Before October 19th, I felt myself always running out of time; there were never enough hours in the day or days in the week to complete my list of tasks. Even my wife, who had received many promises from me (and others) that our domestic life would be different once I finished my dissertation and graduated, felt unsettled when work inevitably followed me home every night and haunted my weekends during the first part of the semester. But I thought this is how it ought to be—to be busy was a tangible marker of productivity. But in fact, buying into the cult of busy made me less productive.

Because the strike provided unplanned and unstructured thinking time, it helped unlock creative and collaborative

modes of thought. For the first time in years, my days were not defined by work related tasks. That Wednesday morning, I was not doing my job by prepping a lesson, teaching a class session, attending a committee meeting, or revising a manuscript. Instead, I was embodying a professional identity as I stood at the perimeter of campus alongside my colleagues.

Instead of thinking about meetings, lesson plans, and deadlines, I took time to consider the bigger picture: what kind of professor do I want to be? What kind of teacher? What kind of researcher? What kind of colleague? I also re-framed my programmatic responsibilities as opportunities for change. Effecting change within institutions such as a system of higher education sometimes requires drastic measures, such as a work stoppage. However, incremental change can also occur if we change the ways we work. Though they tend to appear monolithic, institutions are inherently changeable precisely because they are inhabited by individuals who work in relation to one another. As professors, we can make micro-changes as a means of reshaping local institutions from the bottom up.

Another aspect of the Slow Food Movement that Seeber and Berg adapt to academia is attention to environmental sustainability. While the Slow Food Movement sought to restore a healthier relationship between people and food by supporting local food production, embracing the ethics and politics of food, and celebrating the pleasures of eating, The Slow Professor Manifesto seeks to repair the “poisoned” social environments of our academic workplaces by rejecting the “ethos of speed” that drives the corporate university and has had deleterious effects on academic labor. This is why Seeber and Berg also aim to rescue the term *collegiality*, which they astutely argue has become distorted in the corporate university. Specifically, they suggest nurturing collegiality as a sense of communal responsibility, shared obligation, and social support rather than as a vague measurement of departmental engagement by individual faculty members.

Returning to work after the strike, I felt a new sense of community both with my students and my colleagues. Everyone seemed to be happy to be back at work. Comments about work left undone, deadlines missed, and papers to be graded were conspicuously absent. Instead, we expressed profound gratitude to our students for their expressions of support. The positive effects of these interactions were palpable; we were happy to be back at work together.

As an assessment specialist in an English Department, my work is often met with understandable skepticism from colleagues who see technocratic assessments infringing on the critical role of the humanities. However, after the strike, I consciously used my role as a coordinator to promote dialogue and deliberation because assessment should be a process of communal inquiry. The solidarity we all experienced in the afterglow of the strike helped me stop worrying about insuring compliance and instead make space for dialogue, embrace the complexity of creating an assessment program that would meet the expectations of audiences outside the department while still being meaningful to faculty first and foremost.

Post-strike, I was emboldened to take the longer, slower road in program development for the assessment program I coordinate. I'm proud that our program is fueled by community inquiry rather than external assessment imperatives; guided by ethical principles, not measurement axioms; and propelled by a carefully cultivated culture of collegiality and trust that has no need for corporate-inspired systems for insuring compliance.

The strike not only shaped my first semester on the tenure-track, but left indelible marks on my professional identity. I may not be able to live up to all of Berg and Seiber's Slow Professor ideals, but I have learned that there is tremendous value to slowing down. I see residual effects of the strike in the philosophical and political commitments that have been enshrined in the program I coordinate. Without a doubt, the assessment process we have set in motion is more

methodologically sound, thoughtful, meaningful, and transparent because we took the time to deliberate and to adapt the assessment mandate to our own goals as a community of teachers.

While the strike did enable me to recontextualize my individual position as a laborer within a larger tapestry of critique and activism in the contemporary university, and enact some of the ideas at the core of Seeber and Berg's Slow Professor Manifesto, the upshot that I most value is evidenced in the professional relationships built on trust and a shared sense of responsibility to our students. Those three days in October drew my attention to the affective, political, and social dimensions of my professional identity in ways nothing else could.



APSCUF Returns to Table After Documenting Unfair Labor Practice

Sept. 29, 2016

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Faculty negotiators returned to the bargaining table today to continue contract talks with the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education despite the Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculty's filing of an unfair-labor-practice charge last week.

"Although we have been treated unfairly, I pledge to keep going to the table for the sake of our students and our universities," APSCUF President Dr. Kenneth M. Mash said. "We just hope we will not be met with more of PASSHE's cynical showboating."

APSCUF's unfair-labor-practice filing outlines the State System's failure to negotiate in good faith when it bargained superficially and regressed in its offers during their latest sessions. While negotiations have been ongoing since late 2014, the State System did not put a comprehensive

proposal on the table until June, and that proposal contained 249 significant changes. Subsequent adjustments to State System proposals have been progressively incendiary, Mash said.

APSCUF last met with the State System Sept. 21, the culmination of a marathon bargaining session that ended in anger. After meeting five times in a week, APSCUF negotiators headed to the organization's triannual legislative assembly and scheduled strike workshop, offering the State System five possible bargaining dates after those events.

The faculty contract expired June 30, 2015. If APSCUF and the State System do not reach an agreement by Oct. 19, faculty members will go on strike.

APSCUF represents about 5,500 faculty and coaches at the State System universities: Bloomsburg, California, Cheyney, Clarion, East Stroudsburg, Edinboro, Indiana, Kutztown, Lock Haven, Mansfield, Millersville, Shippensburg, Slippery Rock, and West Chester Universities of Pennsylvania.

