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Reclaiming the Joy of Teaching in a Post-Pandemic, Post-Tenure World

Jennifer Luetkemeyer

In this essay, the author reflects on her journey from joy in teaching to ennui and back again. She shares three lessons that she learned from her journey that can be applied to your own teaching practice.

Keywords: teaching; joy; reclaiming

Jennifer Luetkemeyer is Associate Professor of Library Science at Appalachian State University. She is interested in the ways that students access information and knowledge, in what resources and information they have access to, and in how information and knowledge are presented to them. The fundamental principle that all students deserve, and should be provided with, equal access to information, knowledge, and resources guides her work. Dr. Luetkemeyer is also interested in mentoring at all levels.

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I have had the heart of a teacher since elementary school: helping classmates with their homework; explaining difficult concepts for friends who were struggling; “holding classes” for my younger siblings (and even assigning them homework). For a long time, I resisted the call to teach (after watching my teacher parents struggle), knowing that there wasn’t much money or prestige in it, but it kept luring me in and I eventually succumbed. That might sound like I felt that I was giving up, but I recognized that I was finally giving in to the passion that truly drove me. As you may have deduced, I came to the teaching profession later, well into my 30s. I spent seven years in K-12 where I served as a middle grades teacher of science, social studies and English, followed by a stint in the school library, where my passions for teaching and people and books were gloriously melded into a job I loved fiercely. And then I got the Ph.D. bug.

My love of teaching didn’t diminish, however, as I set off on a new career path, and I attacked the courses assigned to me with vigor, and with joy. And then came the pandemic, followed quickly by promotion and tenure, and next . . . the unthinkable. I never thought I would be that person who dreaded going to class, and yet I found myself actively trying to think of ways to make class shorter or even cancel altogether. What had happened? I have done a lot of soul-searching in the months since I earned promotion and tenure and I have actively worked to reclaim the joy I’ve always felt in teaching. Here is what I learned along the way:

You get out of it what you put into it. I know what you’re thinking - “duh, everyone knows that” – and you’re right. But you can know it and not actually practice it. Over the course of the pandemic, like many others, I was listless and, oftentimes, even morose. As a woman living alone, I spent a lot of time by myself. Sure, I have lots of friends and family that I checked in with, and they with me, but it’s not the same as having someone actively in a shared space, especially for a self-proclaimed extrovert like me. And the more isolated I felt, the more I disengaged from the things I loved, like teaching. I’ve been teaching the same courses for years now, and it was all too easy to just pull up old presentations and tweak dates and teach from those. And just when I might have pulled out of it, I had promotion and tenure to worry about, which just compounded my sense of ennui, especially once I’d passed. I could rest now, right? Basically, I had disengaged from my work life. This often happens to folks mid-career, so I know I’m not alone, but the guilt was not assuaged by that knowing (Beauboeuf, Thomas & Erickson, 2017; DeFelippo & Dee, 2022). I wish I could tell you the exact moment, the exact trigger, that turned things around, but I’m not sure there was one. Instead, I think it was a lot of little things that made me realize that I needed to reengage, as much for me as for my students. Ultimately, those little things added up to me internalizing and embracing the fact that I would only get out of teaching what I chose to put into it.

What that looked like for me was choosing to attend pedagogical workshops, book clubs, and other events hosted by the university where I could learn new strategies or simply brush up on the old,

and then turning a critical eye to those courses I'd been teaching over and over. It also meant reengaging with K-12 by partnering with the school librarian at our institution's lab school. There's nothing like the eagerness of young faces to reignite the passion for teaching. I now know that I need to continue to seek out these types of opportunities and keep up with the latest in pedagogy in order to maintain a more constant level of desire for the teaching aspect of my job.

Be who you want your students to be. Have you ever worked with someone who could bring the whole room down just by entering? Is there someone's company you leave feeling angry or depressed for no apparent reason? Our students' behaviors and attitudes reflect ours. We set the tone for the class, the semester, and even the program, for our students. If I come to class joyful and excited about the work, I have found that students will reflect that joy and excitement (despite their inclination to do otherwise at times). Yes, this is another instance of something that you likely already know, but it helps to be reminded of the obvious sometimes, am I right? Teaching is a solitary effort in many instances, and so we often feel like we are alone in our struggles and/or suffering. We don't talk enough about viable solutions because we don't talk enough about the problems to begin with. Student engagement is a topic of concern for most of us. It's such an important topic, in fact, that my search for literature on "student engagement in the classroom" elicited 1,067, 406 results. We all want our students to be actively present in the learning process, and there is a plethora of strategies for accomplishing just that, but I have learned that the best way to engage students is to BE engaged.

One way to encourage your students to mirror your behavior and attitude is to be your authentic self. Students sense when we are not being true to who we are and this causes them to disengage. Being genuine humanizes you and opens the door for students to in turn be genuine. When students feel like they have permission to be their authentic selves, I have found that they are often more at ease, which leads to a willingness to share their thoughts and opinions with others, thus increasing class engagement. What this looks like for me is sharing personal details from my life without oversharing – things as simple as "it's my birthday next week and I'm headed to X location for the weekend – anyone have any recommendations?". This type of sharing makes students feel that their thoughts and opinions are valued and gives them confidence to share thoughts and opinions about course topics, thus building that all important community in the classroom.

Fake it until you make it. Okay, here's another one for the "duh" pile: if you pretend that you are joyful, you eventually might be. As I began to emerge from my ennui, I still wasn't feeling joyful about teaching, or much else in my work life, but I realized that I had to make some kind of change, so I became what I like to call *aggressively joyful*. I thought about lessons I'd learned in public speaking and in acting and applied those to my persona in class and in work spaces. I overacted until the joy felt real again. I projected that joy at my students and colleagues. I'm sure I was "too much" for some of the people I interacted with during that time, but being "too much" for a couple of semesters led me into being truly joyful this Fall, so I find that I don't care if I was over the top. (Disclaimer:

There are mental health issues that may make it difficult, if not impossible, to “fake it til you make it” so please consider this particular lesson learned on a case by case basis and discard it if it does not apply to your unique circumstances.)

What I discovered during this process is that my joy, or lack thereof, is up to me. No one is going to come along and say “you seem to have lost your joy – what can I do to help?” Don’t misunderstand: there are plenty of colleagues who would be willing to try and help, but reclaiming joy is such a personal endeavor that their effectiveness would likely be minimal anyway. To reclaim joy involves a lot of self-reflection, and no one path back will work for everyone. What I’ve outlined above are some relatively simple proactive outward facing steps that you can take toward reclamation but, ultimately, you have to do the hard work and embrace the emotional roller coaster that you may find yourself riding. If you are struggling with lost joy, as I was, I hope that your ride comes to a smooth and happy ending.

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