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# Stoking the Research Fire: Three Views

Charles C. Self  
*University of Oklahoma*

Margeretha Geertsema-Sligh  
*Butler University, mgeertse@butler.edu*

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## Stoking the Research Fire: Three Views

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## Stoking the Research Fire: Three Views

By Charles C. Self,  
Margaretha Geertsema-Sligh,  
Amy Schmitz Weiss

*Most academics are fired up for research right after graduate school, but after a few years on the job, the flame might wane. Perhaps you are over-burdened with service or administration and can't imagine finding time for a research project. Budget cuts may have you feeling overworked or uninspired. Perhaps you've achieved your goal of becoming tenured and you wonder what comes next. The purpose of this collection of essays, presented originally at a 2011 midwinter conference, is to share ways to stoke a passion for research. The perspectives included here represent three stages of academic life: tenure-track assistant professor, tenured associate professor, and full professor.<sup>1</sup>*

### **Assistant Professor: Research (Always) on My Mind**

*Amy Schmitz Weiss, San Diego State University*

At this early point in my career, the importance of being an excellent teacher and scholar is always on my mind. I love guiding my students on their intellectual journey, but it's imperative that I tend also to my own research trajectory. How do I succeed as a scholar while also satisfying expectations as a teacher and colleague?

**Get Organized.** Juggling multiple roles and tasks as an untenured professor is difficult. Careful organization helps my research in many ways. More specifically:

1. *Organize a research trajectory.* For my research in progress, I use a simple Excel spreadsheet to organize (by columns) the work as I begin it, as it progresses toward submission to a conference or journal, deadlines, and follow-up remarks. This way, I can see where I am with

all my projects and plot next steps for each. Identifying a method to sort, categorize, and pace my research projects is an important way to stay focused and stay on track.

2. *Dedicated days/schedule.* As scholars and teachers, our calendars tend to be brimming with classes, appointments, meetings, and such. As a result, finding time for research is often hard to do, but it is absolutely necessary. Upon the advice of a friend and mentor, I devote part of my schedule to research exclusively. Start by setting aside a few hours on a particular day. Don't make research an afterthought; schedule time when your energy and concentration levels are at their highest.

3. *Realize your limitations.* Working on a research project that you are committed to and passionate about *is a journey.* The outcome is important, but you need the time to comprehend and reflect on the material. Don't push yourself to do more than what is feasible in a few hours or a day. Instead, create blocks of time to focus on one particular research task as a way to make the project more manageable, less stressful, and more enjoyable. Quality work results from a series of steps; allow ample time for each one.

4. *Create extended abstracts.* Another technique that I use to stay organized and motivated is to create extended abstracts of the books, articles, chapters, and other resources I come across during my research journey. I file them into a general directory by author's name, topic, or year. Organizing the abstracts in this manner makes the information easier to locate and incorporate into future research projects. The abstract should include the following information: bibliographic information, the author's field or background, three key points about the article, an overview, the scholars who would agree and disagree with the author's perspective, potential critiques about the article, and its significance.

5. *Identify a project that can lead to multiple research venues.* When embarking on a research project, don't limit yourself to one article that ends in a conference or journal acceptance. Try to conceptualize a robust, comprehensive research project that allows you to explore multiple facets

of a phenomenon. That way, you can submit different articles to different conferences and journals. Creating this kind of umbrella for research activity can allow you to explore your research trajectory and build your expertise without having to juggle multiple, seemingly unrelated projects at once.

6. *Keep the wheels turning.* It's helpful to organize your schedule to have a research project/article under review for a conference, another one under review at a journal, another in the early writing stage, and another one in the final stages of analysis. This approach keeps me in constant motion as a scholar; while I'm waiting on the acceptance or rejection of my work, I'm already onto the next part of a research project.

7. *Learn to say "no."* Opportunities will come to you often as an assistant professor, and saying no is sometimes difficult. However, at this critical stage in my career, I know it's important to not overextend myself with commitments that take away from precious research time. If I choose carefully and stay focused on my research, I'm confident I'll have plenty of chances later.

**Get Inspired.** Another necessity for fanning the research fire is inspiration. Here are a few places to find it:

- *Create a Google RSS Reader (news feed) of relevant websites.* Identify blogs, news organizations, journals, and other online publications that relate to your research interests and add them to your Google RSS Reader. I check my Reader daily to keep up with the latest trends in the field which often become sources for new projects.
- *Attend conferences (academic and professional).* Conference speakers and panelists can be a great source of new ideas and new perspectives.
- *Online social media.* Get on Twitter, Facebook, Google+ or other social media channels and follow scholars from your field. And don't just lurk, engage with other users. The conversations that occur in these settings—related to studies, trends, events, news and such—can help you think about research in new ways.

## **Associate Professor: The Research Journey or, Are We There Yet?**

*Margaretha Geertsema-Sligh, Butler University*

I received tenure and promotion last year and like others before me, I heaved a sigh of relief after years of graduate school and serving probation as assistant professor. But this reprieve also opened new vistas in my mind: about what kind of research I might do now that I didn't have the pressure of tenure, about how to juggle a research agenda while also taking on service and administrative responsibilities, about what kind of long-term academic life I wanted for myself. These questions were triggered somewhat prematurely by an informative panel organized by the AEJMC teaching committee at the 2010 conference in Denver. The title of the panel was "Exploring the Delay in Promotion to Full Professor: Petty Politics, Mid-Career Crises, or Post-Tenure Inertia?" The panelists, who mostly worked at research universities, uttered that familiar refrain: publish, publish, publish. I wondered to what extent their advice was applicable to academics who, like me, work at smaller institutions where teaching comes first and research second.

At Butler, a tenured faculty member (and those on tenure track) has a workload consisting of 75 percent teaching and 25 percent research. We teach three courses per semester and instead of teaching a fourth course, we get a reduction to pursue research. Thus, we do not have the stringent research demands typical at research universities, but make no mistake—there is a research expectation. Yet, when you add up the time required for teaching, service, and research, it's the latter that most often gets put on the back burner.

To stoke the research fire, I believe we need three things: motivation, the ability to imagine meaningful research projects, and the circumstances for completing them. All three of these can be challenging. In the next paragraphs, I will reflect on the importance of motivation, ways to identify research projects, and strategies for successfully completing them.

***Personal and Professional Motivation:*** For each of us, there must have been some initial motivation to join academic life. In graduate school, we're energized to complete term papers and, eventually, the dissertation. The next goal was to get tenure and promotion, and for most of us that sword hanging over our head provided plenty of inspiration. Research has become part of who I am. Yet, post-tenure, I want to reflect on the deeper meaning of my scholarly role and in that, find renewed motivation.

***Imagining Research Projects:*** The second ingredient for keeping a research agenda on track is the ability to imagine meaningful and achievable research projects.

As a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin, where there was a strong emphasis on research, I took a seminar in which Stephen Reese talked about cultivating “habits of the mind.” Among the techniques suggested was collecting and storing ideas for future research projects, so we would never be without. Faculty members and graduate students alike would often respond to current events by remarking that this or that “would make an interesting study.” I learned to consciously think about research and to find ideas by keeping my eyes and ears open, much as a journalist would do to find story ideas.

Most assistant professors arrive to the job with a dissertation and several graduate papers to repurpose for publication. That is a great place to start. The dissertation can serve as a source for several conference papers and perhaps a couple of publications, even a book. It’s important to not be discouraged by the revision process, which can go on for years. Rather, think of it as an opportunity to work toward publication.

Another source of inspiration for me has been attending conferences, where research and panel presentations have provided the spark for a new project. Conferences have encouraged me to build networks of like-minded colleagues, and led to invitations to participate on panels and submit work for publication.

My colleagues and I often talk about what it means to be a teacher-scholar, and how our research can enrich our classes. I also believe our classes can enrich our research. I frequently include new articles in my reading lists, and these same articles inform my research. Students, in discussion or in their written work, sometimes offer a perspective that I find interesting or unusual, or that reveals connections previously unseen.

Other teaching activities have also led to ideas and collaboration. Working with students in the honors program and those who sign up for independent studies in my area of expertise allows me to identify new intellectual allies. Post-tenure, there are more opportunities for course development, which can inspire and contribute to a research agenda. I recently developed a new course in social media, and in doing so discovered all kinds of interesting topics for future research.

The opportunity to collaborate with enthusiastic scholars is an important source of motivation and inspiration. A few years ago I

participated in a panel, “Feminist Ways of Teaching Journalism,” and afterward, the three of us put our ideas together for publication.<sup>2</sup> On campus, I teach with members of Butler’s Collaborative for the Critical Inquiry into Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Class. As a group, we decided to write for publication about our experience developing and teaching “Resistance and Rights: Global Women.”<sup>3</sup> Some of my colleagues have also found writing groups an effective way to maintain research momentum.

***Circumstances for Completing Research.*** Once there is motivation and a viable project, it is up to each of us to create the circumstances for completing the research. The most frequent complaint I hear (and have!) is that there simply isn’t enough time. The fact of the matter is, all the time in the world won’t guarantee success. Time management is crucial.

As a graduate student, I worried about how I was going to finish my dissertation, an expansive project, in a reasonable time. In her book, *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day*,<sup>4</sup> Joan Bolker suggests that writing every day, even if just for fifteen minutes, increases your chances for success. Rather than distract me from my dissertation, Bolker’s book helped me to be a more disciplined and therefore more productive thinker and writer. I find myself returning to her advice years later: just get started, write about your research, write about writing the research, and things will move along. Robert Boice’s *Advice for New Faculty Members*<sup>5</sup> likewise recommends brief, daily writing sessions as a way to be productive.

None of these changes happens overnight. But I’ve come to realize that doing research is like tending a garden on a daily basis: with sustained attention, it thrives. I’m beginning to see more clearly where I’d like to end up, and I’m learning the best ways to get there.

**Professor: A Double Paradox for Stoking the Research Fire**  
***Charles C. Self, University of Oklahoma***

“The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves.”  
*Julius Caesar I, ii, 140–141.*

The heart of the dilemma for faculty wishing to “Stoke the Research Fire” lies not in our service and administration burdens, not in budget cuts, not in our teaching responsibilities, but in



ourselves—and more particularly in a double paradox that lies at the heart of the mind and therefore of all research work. It is a paradox that we must understand and confront, each in our own way, if we are to successfully tend the flames of passion for research and the expansion of knowledge about our field that brought most of us to communication scholarship.

The political thinker and philosopher Hannah Arendt several decades ago wrote a fascinating double book called *The Life of the Mind*.<sup>6</sup> In her two volumes she guided the reader through the history of commentary by great philosophers about the nature of thought and action. That exploration revealed a double paradox that must be confronted in order to successfully negotiate the production of knowledge.

The first volume was called “Thinking.” The second was called “Willing.”

In the first volume, Arendt explored the ideas of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and many more. She described the “World of Appearances” revealed to us by our sense perceptions.<sup>7</sup> She suggested that the first paradox is that in order for us to think, we must engage in what she calls “an intramural warfare between thought and common sense.” She argued that thought requires that we withdraw from this world of “common sense” in order to think. Thought, she argued, turned us toward an ideal world outside of the world of appearance, the world of perceptions, the surface appearance of things.<sup>8</sup> In thought we deal with appearances through the “metaphor” of language—representations of things no longer present, memories of perception—and things not yet present, projections into an unrealized future: what could be and what should be.<sup>9</sup> When we think, we engage in what Plato called the “two in one”—a conversation with ourselves<sup>10</sup> That conversation can lead us to challenge ourselves, to argue with ourselves, to disagree with ourselves. It also allows us to ponder possibilities and principles not given to perception and common sense.

“Willing,” the second volume of *The Life of the Mind*, introduces another paradox. According to Arendt’s review of philosophy, willing (or the free will) is very much concerned with action and with acting. It is the part of the mind that wills us to accomplish projects, things that need to get done.<sup>11</sup> It is focused on the future and how to manipulate the world to accomplish goals that we “will” to accomplish. The paradox is this: We can will to act but we also can will not to act, regardless of what thinking suggests we should do. This “willing” and “nilling,” Arendt said, is captured in the

Apostle Paul's well-known phrase from Romans 7:15: "what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate, that I do."<sup>12</sup>

So, we have these two paradoxes: In thought, we withdraw from the world of appearances and the world of getting things done to debate with ourselves—sometimes bitterly—about what we should do in our research. When we decide what we should do and we are confronted with the moment for acting, we face the second problem of "willing" and "nilling"—willing action or willing not to act—perhaps because we have more pressing short-term tasks.

The final irony, Arendt points out, is that philosophers can't seem to agree on whether thinking is really in control and commands the will or whether willing is in control and that thought serves the will in order to accomplish a recognized project or goal.<sup>13</sup>

So, what does this have to do with stoking the research fire?

Last semester I asked my doctoral students to read two articles published in the *Communication Quarterly* about 20 years ago. One was by J. W. Chesebro called, "How to Get Published."<sup>14</sup> It is a wonderful article full of all sorts of practical tips on staying on task (willing), moving a research project along, finding the right publication outlet, making sure your article includes the essential elements to appeal to a journal, and so forth. It is all about getting moving and not getting bogged down.<sup>15</sup>

Three years later Bach, Blair, Nothstine, and Pym published a powerful reply in the same journal titled "How to Read 'How to Get Published.'"<sup>16</sup> It excoriated the original article for advocating publishing for publishing's sake.<sup>17</sup> It suggested that thought should take precedence and command action in order to contribute new knowledge that is worthwhile. It suggested that we have created an academic environment in which the act of publishing itself is valued, rather than the excitement of thinking. It said new knowledge that will move the field forward will require reflective thought that should be the foundation for publishing.

For most of us, graduate school was an exciting time of exploration—searching for new ideas—carving out, in the passion of discovery, new thoughts, new ways of thinking, new approaches to old questions. As graduate students, we were required to carve out time to withdraw from the hurly-burly world of appearances, to read deeply, to think alone, to struggle with "the metaphor of remembrance" and to project into an unrealized future of ideas. Of course, we had to get our research papers and dissertations done, but we were, first and foremost, about creating knowledge—for ourselves, for our colleagues, for our professors, and for the field.

Then we took a job.

The world of work—even in the academy—tends to be focused on a world of appearances. Get the job done. Create the reading list for classes. Get the papers graded and returned quickly. Get to the committee meeting. Host the visitor. Meet with the dean. Turn in the annual report. And, of course, get published. Doesn't really matter what you publish, just get that publication out so it can be counted.

It's no wonder the creative fires of knowledge burn low. It's no wonder we begin to focus more and more on the short-term pay back from admiring students, colleagues who appreciate how we helped a department committee succeed, and department chairs who compliment us for completing that report for the provost on time. And the more we will to complete short-term projects and bask in the compliments for practical work well done, the less time we have to withdraw, to read, to ponder, to learn, to plan, to imagine, to explore.

We live in a world of strong wills—projects with deadlines—projects that must be done right now, that can't wait. People depend upon us and we don't want to disappoint.

Thinking, as Arendt suggests, requires time alone—time away from “input.” Thinking requires long, unfocused conversations with ourselves to imagine something new. And when we find that insight, that new idea, that imagined possibility, we still face the challenge of “nilling,” willing other short-term goals to be more important. Willing inaction on getting that innovative thought into the delayed and uncertain pathway of publication.

So, what is a faculty member to do?

I don't have easy answers, but this I know. The fire of research is fed by thought. Certainly, the struggle to will action rather than nill action into inaction is one hurdle in successful scholarship. But if Arendt is right, the successful researcher is not simply the efficient one. New ideas depend upon feeding the metaphor of remembrance. New ideas stoke the fire of passionate research.

Ideas in yield ideas out. We must make time for personal thought. We must find ways to withdraw into imagination. We must read and learn and imagine and plan. Then, what we will, will excite us and feed the kind of new ideas that will compel us to act. It is that thought-based act that is worthy of publication so that it can excite others, as well.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> This essay originated with a similarly named panel for the International Communication Division at the AEJMC Midwinter Conference, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, March 4, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Danna Walker, Margaretha Geertsema, and Barbara Barnett, “Inverting the Inverted Pyramid: A Conversation about the Use of Feminist Theories to Teach Journalism,” *Feminist Teacher* 19, no. 3 (2009): 177–194.

<sup>3</sup> Terri Carney, Margaretha Geertsema-Sligh, Ann Savage, and Ageeth Sluis, “Defying Borders: Transforming Learning through Collaborative Feminist Organizing and Interdisciplinary, Transitional Pedagogy,” *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, in press.

<sup>4</sup> Joan Bolker, *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Boice, *Advice for New Faculty Members* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think*, 2 vols. (New York: Harcourt, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:67.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:80–92.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:98–110.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:179–193.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:13–14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:64–65.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:113–146.

<sup>14</sup> James W. Chesebro, “How to Get Published,” *Communication Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 373–382.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 373–374.

<sup>16</sup> Tullen E. Bach, Carole Blair, William L. Nothstine, and Anne L. Pym, “How to Read ‘How to Get Published,’” *Communication Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Fall 1996): 399–422.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 402–403.