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Jason Suratt
University of Northern Iowa

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A Review by Jason Suratt of *Professing to Learn: Creating Tenured Lives and Careers in the American Research University*, by Anna Neumann

Part of the journal section “Reviews and Responses”

Anna Neumann, *Professing to Learn: Creating Tenured Lives and Careers in the American Research University*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2009.

Reviewed by Jason Suratt

In her book, *Professing to Learn: Creating Tenured Lives and Careers in the American Research University*, Anna Neumann presents a valid case for the importance of investigating the types of learning and work performed by professors following their promotion and tenure. She argues there are popular misconceptions regarding scholarly learning and the amount of work carried out by professors at this point in their careers. These misconceptions are pervasive not only among the general public but also among academics. To that end, she draws attention to the potential advantages this research has for professors who are about to embark upon similar paths. Additionally, Neumann points out that there is very little existing research on this topic, and explains that this project will help to fill that gap in the scholarly literature.

Method and Data Analysis

In order to investigate scholarly learning and work in the post-tenure career, Neumann relies on qualitative data that she collected during two different, three year studies of recently tenured university professors. The first involves professors from a single university; she refers to this project as the *People’s State University Project*. The second study, the *Four Universities Project*, was initiated in response to her early findings that professors were passionate about their particular area of research. The choice of a qualitative method is well-suited to this research question as this method allows her to gather data and thick description on post-tenured faculty perceptions of scholarly learning.

The way in which Neumann organizes the book breaks away from a more conventional form which goes over the main points of the argument and then uses sparing quotes from respondents to bolster the author’s line of reasoning. Rather, Neumann utilizes extended segments of the interviews to expound upon an idea. This organization has given the respondents a greater voice and presence in the work.

The questions in Neumann’s interview schedule are very direct, and often require the respondent to self-analyze rather than elicit a story rich in data for her analysis. For example, one of the questions on her interview schedule reads “Do you think you have changed as a teacher since you first became a professor?” This question asks the respondents to analyze their own changes as teachers over time. Another approach one might use to gather data of this type would be to elicit stories from the respondent regarding their teaching strategies over the years by asking questions such as: Could you tell me about your experiences as a teacher when you first started teaching...when you had a few years experience...post-tenure...etc. This line of questioning would allow the respondents to recount their stories without having to do the analysis that should be done by the researcher. Questions such as the one she

uses may make good probes if there seem to be changes or differences in the respondents teaching style from story to story, but they should be used carefully as they may lead the respondent to say things she/he would not have come up with on her/his own.

Another problem with the same question (and others in the interview schedule) is that it is a dichotomous question; it can be answered by simply saying yes or no. These kinds of questions are generally not ideal for qualitative research as they do not often elicit the kind of thick description that is necessary for qualitative analysis. Though some will pick up on anything and run with it, others may simply answer the question by saying “Yes” or “No.” Though a good qualitative researcher should be able to probe these answers for greater depth, the quality of the initial question may help avoid the necessity of backpedaling and lead to greater consistency between interviews.

The interview schedule is also filled with leading questions. For instance, questions such as: “What is it about your work that you love?” assume that everyone loves something about their work. These types of questions may lead someone to say something about their work that they love in order to answer the question; if the question had been phrased differently they may have said what they really feel, that they do not like anything about their work.

A feminist critique regularly offered of qualitative/ethnographic methods of research is that researchers frequently fail to acknowledge, much less problematize, their own positionality. The investigator’s positionality refers to “the location of the researcher’s self and its *positions* in relation to larger socio-historical structures (i.e., race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, global location, etc.)” (Egan and Frank 2005). Many scholars, especially feminist theorists and methodologists, have examined issues regarding the positionality of the investigator in conducting research projects (Anderson-Levy 2010; Egan and Frank 2005; Egan 2003; McCorkel and Meyers 2003; Stacey 1998; Hertz 1997; Wolf 1992; Harding 1991). According to Egan and Frank (2005), feminist methods problematize the processes involved in carrying out the research, the identity of the researcher(s), and their reasons for being concerned with the issue (300). This theoretical orientation is offered in contrast to the positivistic tradition of scientific neutrality in which researchers present themselves as objective and value free observers (301).

Her positionality in the project is something that Neumann does not address thoroughly in the book; however, her own identity as a post-tenured professor is likely to have had an influence on many aspects of the project. Additionally, her identity as a post-tenured professor is likely to have played an unexplored role in her selection of this topic for research.

Though Neumann casually mentions the fact that she is a professor in her post-tenure career, she does not make any attempt to analyze the ways in which her positionality drives her interest in the subject; impacts the way she thinks about (and has thought about) the subject; impacts the way she carries out the research; and the way she interacts with the subjects of her study. For instance, what effect does her insider status as a fellow tenured professor have on the rapport she is able to build with her subjects? And what sorts of variables does this insider status cause her to take for granted, rather than seeking thick description, during the interview?

Resonating Points

One of the main points from the book highlights how much of the work professors do comes from an intrinsic passion for their field of study. This passion is sometimes sparked as early as childhood and ultimately leads them to the careers that they have chosen as adults. The passion for their field of study sparks scholars’ creativity and drives them to pursue new and exciting ideas in their fields. However, I see passion as a purely emotional experience that cannot be conjured up at a whim. Scholars cannot maintain the same level of passion for what they

are doing at all times. Therefore, scholars have to rely on something in addition to their passion for their work to motivate them to continue working even when it seems to be drudgery or seems to be getting them nowhere.

Additionally, as Neumann's research shows, much of what professors do post-tenure is, what she refers to as, "instrumental". That is, it is not the kind of learning or working that is intrinsically motivated by the passion from within the professor; rather, it is part of the job requirement. One can imagine that it can be hard to conjure passion about chairing committees or mentoring junior faculty in their research endeavors. Though the latter could be closer to the sort of work that the newly tenured professor is passionate about, it is still another person's interest and not one's own.

Another key point that may resonate with different academic experiences is that while some professors were able to work with colleagues who shared their interests, others felt alienated from the institution and the people that inhabit the institution for one reason or another (Neumann points out that in her research this was often mediated by gender).

Ultimately, what one can conclude from Neumann's *Professing to Learn: Creating Tenured Lives and Careers in the American Research University* is the idea that scholarly learning is something that is done by individuals who are passionate about their interests, and something that those people do not quit doing just because other circumstances may arise in their life and attempt to get in the way (including their "career" and the people they work with). This passion is sparked by something intrinsic and drives them in all of their endeavors. Though one may have to endure other obstacles in order to pursue the area that she/he finds exciting, the desire to gain understanding or accomplish new goals in her/his field drives scholars to push through the boredom of instrumental learning and service obligations, and to continue to challenge themselves in her/his fields of interest.

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