From Prof(Essional) to Prof(Essor): Best Practices for Transitioning from Environmental Journalism and Environmental Communication to Academia

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Introduction

Journalism education and communication at the college level has long reflected a mixture of priorities -- sometimes mutually satisfactory, other times conflict-ridden -- between the teaching of practical skills and the teaching, development, and research into media theory and effects. But throughout history, experienced journalists and communicators have dedicated at least some of their time away from the newsroom or communications office and into the classroom, either as adjunct instructors or as full-time faculty members, sometimes on the tenure-track and other times as professional faculty who can go by various titles. In doing so, they draw on their own experiences, the experiences of their colleagues and newsroom managers, their insights into the industry, and their network of news sources, professionals at other media organizations, and current and former employers. Professional experience gets reflected in the content of what they teach, their ability to bring in other professionals as guest speakers and presenters, and their assistance to students seeking internships and jobs.

As for the move from full-time professional to full-time professor, many do so mid-career from a variety of motives, such as a desire for change, a geographic relocation for personal or family reasons, dissatisfaction with a present employer or employment situation, the lure of a potentially higher salary and better benefits, more time for longer-form writing, or the need for more predictable work hours. Sometimes the quest for an academic job flows from an involuntary disruption of their professional career caused by outside forces, such as downsizing, merger, or closure of their news organization or from a strike. Others make the transition after retiring from a professional career, whether planned or due to an early buyout from their employers. While some return to school to earn a Ph.D. or other advanced degree as an academic credential, most do not.

Our study of such transitions comes amid major changes in the news industry, leaving many environmental journalists without media jobs or in fear of losing their jobs. At

the same time, many colleges are rethinking their approach to professionally oriented majors. The American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) conducts an annual 'newsroom census' that shows a deeply disturbing trend of continuing shrinkages in editorial-side jobs. For example, ASNE reported a net drop of 3,800 jobs, or more than 10 percent, in 2014. That reflects a decline of about 40 percent from 55,000 jobs in 2006, just before the start of the Great Recession (Edmonds, 2015).

The Center for Media Research (Loechner, 2016) reported a drop in of 79,000 U.S. newspaper jobs between 1993 and 2007, followed by 168,200 fewer between 2007 and 2016. Overall, newspaper publishers eliminated more than half their jobs between January 2001 and September 2016, plunging from 412,000 to 174,000 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). The bureau reported that gains in the Internet publishing and web search portal industry -- from 67,000 jobs in January 2007 to 206,000 in September 2016 -- did not make up for the lost numbers in traditional newspaper employment. In the magazine industry, there were only 300 fewer jobs in 2007 than in 1993, but another 48,400 disappeared between 2007 and 2016.

The picture in the local television newsroom is better. A Radio Television Digital News Association/Hofstra annual survey reported local TV news jobs in the United States in 2015 reached a near all-time high, expanding by 270 positions, or 1 percent, to 27,870. 'Generally, TV newsrooms keep growing in size, but there aren't as many of them as in past years. Even so, the growth in employment overcame another small loss in the number of stations producing local news', namely three stations that discontinued producing their own news (Papper, 2016).

While specialized and niche environmental media outlets, mostly online, have sprung up, some major news organizations have reduced or eliminated their environment or science specialty beats. For example, the *New York Times* dismantled its environment desk in 2013, eliminating the environment and deputy environment editors and reassigning its staff. At the time, a managing editor at the newspaper called it 'purely a structural matter' and a reflection of reporting's shifting interdisciplinary landscape (Bagley, 2013). The next year, National Public Radio reduced the number of employees working full-time on environment and climate change from four to one, and a senior supervising editor attributed the change to a desire to cover other topics more deeply (Bagley, 2014). The president of the Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ) wrote recently about what the landscape for environmental journalists looked like: 'Traditional newsrooms would continue to shrink. The share of SEJ members who are freelancers would continue to grow' (Magill, 2017).

Research question

This research question drives the study: To what extent do individual level (for example,

previous teaching experience, previous research experience, education, self-efficacy, etc.) and/or organizational level (for example, class size, teaching requirements, mentoring system, socialization, etc.) factors influence the successful transition from professional work into an academic position?

Prior Research

The study follows previous research examining this type of transition (see Bandow, Minsky, & Voss, 2007; Wilson, Wood, Solomonides, Dixon, & Goos (2014), particularly in fields such as education (LaRocco & Bruns, 2006) and advertising and public relations (Thomsen & Gustafson, 1997).

Faculty members in fields such as journalism and law are expected to bring real-life skills and experiences in the classroom that allows students to bridge the research-to practice- gap. Universities expect that professors in such fields engage in public policy debates and that their research contributes to the betterment of society. This expectation has given rise to the concept of the *pracademic* (McDonald & Mooney, 2011; Panda, 2014; Posner, 2009; Volpe & Chandler, 2001). *Pracademics* play many bridging roles between industry and academia that benefit the learning experience for students, such as giving 'their teaching more depth and credibility by enabling them to draw on a wide range of experience to support theoretical points' (Posner, 2009, p. 17). However, new faculty members might have limited knowledge and abilities about the culture, language, processes, and politics of academia. For instance, the balancing act of new roles such as teaching, research, and service can be challenging (LaRocco & Bruns, 2006). Wilson et al. (2014) refer to the transition as a 'culture shock'. In the context of nurse educators, Anderson (2009) described a series of metaphors related to the sea to describe such shock: sitting on the shore, splashing in the shallows, drowning, treading water, beginning strokes, and throughout the waters. Second-career academics in education have reported various degrees of ambivalence about their preparation to engage in teaching, research, and service. They also reported lack of clarity in regard to scholarly and service-related expectations (LaRocco & Bruns, 2006).

A key factor that could determine a successful transition is the process of socialization (Wilson et al., 2014). Socialization refers to the process in which an individual becomes a member of the group, organization, or community. This process depends on a range of factors, including but not limited to the size of the organization and the culture within a department. New faculty might experience anxiety and stress if this process of socialization is uneasy and if they perceive themselves as not credible enough to their colleagues and students.

Socialization can also be conceptualized as an induction process. In the context of public relations and advertising, Thomsen and Gustafson (1997) explain that induction – the

evolutionary phase during which new teachers become integrated to the profession – is an effective process, especially under the close mentoring of seasoned faculty members. In their study with 25 practitioners-turned-professors, they suggest that mentoring should be a formal process and begin during hiring. Mentors should also be practitioners-turned-professors, and the process should have regular checkups on topics such as academic life, teaching skills, the development of teaching portfolios, student advising, developing a research program, and tenure and promotion guidelines. Mentorship, formal or informal, 'can foster feelings of safety, respect, and support, key factors that may positively influence resocialization' (Barrett & Brown, 2014, p. 12). But for mentoring to be effective, Thomsen and Gustafson (1997) suggest that deans, directors, and chairs should provide incentives (e.g. course releases) to potential mentors.

The transition from industry to academia also depends on the individual characteristics of the new faculty member. Those who first transition into a Ph.D. or other terminal degree program are socialised into academia earlier (Austin, 2002). Those who transition straight from industry have been shown to follow a slightly different path. For example, their 'career capital' does not directly translate to a similar position in academia. This means that someone who might have had a managerial position in industry may have to adjust into a junior position in academia. In addition, as professionals transition, their professional skills become less and less marketable in industry (Wilson et al., 2014).

Methods

Using a survey and in-depth semi-structured interviews with eight former environmental journalists, communicators, or writers who moved to full-time teaching positions, this study presents their problems in transitions and assesses best practices for a successful academic work experience. We solicited respondents from the International Environmental Communication Association, the Society of Environmental Journalists, and relevant divisions of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication and the International Association for Media and Communication Research. Even though the interviewees represent a small sample of environmental journalism and environmental communication faculty who have made such a transition, a small number of cases can enable researchers' close association with their subjects through in-depth interviewing (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006, p. 485). As they wrote, such interviews 'target the respondents' perceptions and feelings rather than the social conditions surrounding those experiences: at least, the collection of the interview material and its interpretation and analysis are not primarily directed toward establishing "objective facts" concerning these conditions'. The authors interviewed respondents from the United States and the United Kingdom by telephone or Skype, plus one face-to-face interview. Interviews lasted about 30 to 45 minutes and were

transcribed. Interviews took place in March and April 2017. The interviews were analyzed by grouping the answers into categories based on common content.

Before their interviews, respondents completed a questionnaire about their professional and academic backgrounds and the environmental and science communication and journalism courses they have taught or are teaching. Interviewees had the choice of having their interviews recorded or not and of having their names, universities, or both kept anonymous in any publications based on the study. In this paper, all respondents' names and their institutions have been kept confidential.

Seven respondents are full-time faculty, and one is retired. Among those who teach, 83% have both graduate and undergraduate classes, while 17% have graduate classes only. Two respondents hold faculty positions but don't teach courses. Thirty-six percent of the respondents have taught at the college level for five years or fewer, 13% for 6-10 years, and half for more than 10 years. As to professional background, 14% spent 1-5 years working professionally, 14% spent 6-10 years, and 72% worked full-time for more than 11 years. One respondent was an unpaid environmental blogger and writer before taking an academic position. The oldest environmental journalism class taught by a respondent was held in 1978. Other respondents did not start teaching until 2000 or later. Two began teaching in 2012.

The study also draws on the personal experiences of two authors who made the transition from full-time professionals to full-time academics.

Findings

While professional environmental journalists or communicators owe their primary responsibility to their employer -- usually a company or public agency -- and its audience or clients, professors' primary obligation are to their students. Other dramatic differences between the two types of jobs range from the pace of duties and assignments, autonomy, and time management to performance assessments, collaboration strategies, and competition for financial and support resources such as grants. There also are many nitty-gritty things that the transitioning professional must master, including how to design a realistic syllabus -- in effect, a contract between the instructor and the students -- professional-level versus student-level expectations for quality of work, how to navigate college bureaucracy, red tape, and politics, and how to balance reaching, research, grant-seeking, and service responsibilities, as well as personal life.

Some professionals-turned-professors earn higher salaries at colleges but others take a pay cut, especially those transitioning from high-level positions at major traditional news organizations or communications firms in large urban areas. And colleges range

in size, shape, and pay, from small, private liberal arts schools in college towns or rural areas to major Research 1 public institutions with tens of thousands of students.

Environmental journalism professionals have been able to use their real-world experiences to create new venues for telling stories about science and the environment. For example, a former environmental reporter for a statewide newspaper chain launched GreatLakesEcho.org, an online news service that covers the environment in the Great Lakes region of the United States and Canada. Most of its articles and many of its visuals and podcasts result from reporting by students in environmental journalism classes or working for the environmental journalism center at Michigan State University (Freedman and Poulson 2014).

For one respondent, real-world experience was not considered a valuable asset at an R1 school. She reported that her impression from her bosses was that they expected 'serious'research, which she assumed meant topics other than those practiced by a daily journalist. As a new faculty member, another respondent said, 'I didn't consider that I could draw on my professional life that much. I need to do 'serious' research. It took me a while to see how wrong that thinking was. There's a whole field out there on alternative forms of journalism'.

A topic of interest among the respondents was how much professional experience was needed. One worry was that professionals would rule themselves out of academic jobs because they lacked 'enough' or the right 'major' market experiences. Such worry may be overstated. "'I would tell anyone who has just a few years [experience] to not underestimate the wisdom of what they've learned', said one. 'It's easy to say "well I've only done it for a few years'" – that does not matter – you still know more than your students. Even if you weren't a Pulitzer Prize- winner yourself, don't underestimate what you have to contribute'.

In a similar vein, a tenure-track professor reported that the expectations for tenure did not include journalism or creative activity related to professional communication. 'I am more concerned about meeting the traditional requirements', the respondent said. Part of the issue, said another, is that an environmental communication faculty might only be two persons, even at the largest, well-funded schools. In small departments, who evaluates such a specialist? It should be noted that this phenomenon is not unique to journalism nor communications – many fields have sub-specialties and small niches.

Many respondents found adjunct appointments to be gateways to full-time academic jobs, although several commented on the low adjunct pay despite their professional expertise. 'It certainly gives them teaching experience, which these days is critical if you want to move into an academic life', one said. Another advised, 'Being a great journalist doesn't mean you're a great teacher. Give it a try. Some people get into teaching and

hate it, so find out quick whether you hate it or not, if you really get a thrill turning the light on in somebody'.

Nearly all the respondents commented on the surprise (to them) about how time-consuming their new teaching job was. '[They are] very surprised to find out how labor-intensive it is to be a teacher', said one, referring to recently hired colleagues. Some were looking for a soft landing after a long professional career. 'We've had a couple instances where we have hired splendid professionals, and they were retiring to teaching', a respondent said. 'They were not getting involved in the professional life or the lives of their students. I found that troubling'.

Transitioning professionals can benefit greatly by consulting with others who have made a similar move, whether at their own institution or elsewhere. They can share syllabi, assignments, and sample exams. They can bounce ideas off each other and can provide insights into the politics and culture of a department or college. But respondents caution not to expect mentoring. 'Maybe they should agree with the employer to make the transition in a sensible order, like getting the training first and the practice after', one said. Another said, 'The most astonishing thing I discovered was how little university faculty are taught about teaching. Anybody in K through 12 education has got much, much more experience and skill and practice teaching than anybody at the university'.

Fitting in and deciding their own identity posed challenges for some. A former newspaper reporter and environmental advocacy group editor now at a major public university said, 'In our field, we are fortunate to have a lot of academics who come from professional backgrounds. It's not as stark a [culture] difference as, say, in economics or anthropology. But it is quite stark'.

Yet none of the respondents expressed regret at transitioning from profession to campus. One observed, 'One advantage that excited me about moving into this is that having an academic platform and an academic day job gives you a lot more freedom'. For example, he continued, 'there are a couple of things I've been able to do but couldn't if I were just freelancing'.

Discussion

There have been tensions within some journalism programs between traditional 'academics' in tenure-stream positions that often carry research expectations and 'professionals' who work with fixed-term contracts and less job security but no research obligations. A respondent described the situation at one of his past institutions where some colleagues with doctorates 'were wonderful, and some were in opposition to the notion of journalism… I was willing to take on that internecine challenge professionally. I got much more interested in science and environmental journalism than regular

curriculum development'.

Some programs have instituted parallel tenure or job security tracks for 'academics' and 'professionals'. Others, have created the 'professor of practice' or 'clinical faculty' title with greater prospects for long-term contracts. Those measures are intended to achieve several goals: give more respect to the contribution that professionals make; strengthen their job security; and assist in recruiting and retaining talented professionals.

Professional organizations offer opportunities for those who have made the transition to assist those who are considering or are in the process of doing so. For example, the 2016 annual conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) included a workshop session called 'Making the Transition to an Adjunct or Instructor'. It included presentations on such topics as 'turning real-life experiences into exercises. Running a classroom and writing a syllabus, dos and don'ts of classroom operations, time management and work-life balance, and grading and rubrics' (AEJMC 2016, p. 29). AEJMC (Roush, 2017) also has developed a textbook with similar advice for new journalism and mass communication instructors.

Best Practices

These interviews and two of the authors' own experiences enable us to lay out a set of best practices to assist the transition for future professionals-turned-professors. Some are specific to environmental journalists and communicators, while others apply broadly to professionals from any discipline who move to academe.

Maintain and Expand Professional Skills

We believe that faculty, regardless of discipline and regardless of whether tenure-stream or fixed term, should regularly demonstrate to students that they can practice what they preach, or teach. For professionals-turned-professors, that includes producing environmental journalistic and communications works – stories, documentaries, websites, newsletters, photos, infographics, press releases, ad campaigns, and so on. That can help instructors remain connected to the industry, keep their skills up-to-date, and generate freelance income. Involving students in a project's field reporting, research, writing, and production stages advances their professional skills and provides insights into how professionals work.

Get out of the Traditional Classroom

Teaching environmental journalism and environmental communication is a strong rationale for taking students out of the classroom and into the field for practical assignments and on-site guest speakers and presentations. Places such as science laboratories, public parks, landfills, zoos, and field research sites can provide students

with story ideas, interviewing experience, and observation exercises. To educate them about environmental policymaking, take them to observe and report about state legislative, congressional, regulatory agency, or municipal council hearings and meetings, for example. One educator had his students serve as a focus group for a signs-and-symbols campaign by a local watershed group in which many of the stakeholders did not speak English as a first language.

Maintain Networks

Ex-professionals should keep up their industry connections to assist students find jobs and internships in environment-related journalism, public agency, advocacy group, and corporate communications. Those networks also serve as pipelines to find potential guest speakers while helping the instructors design and maintain their own freelance and consulting projects. Former professionals can also serve as important contacts to university alumni groups, not the least because they can talk the talk.

Understand Institutional Expectations

Hiring letters, individual and union contracts, and faculty handbooks should lay out the college's expectations for its faculty. They include teaching and research loads, service and committee requirements, minimum office hours, student privacy rights, accommodations for disabilities, tenure and promotion standards, exam policies, and make-up classes. Some are procedural, such as whether non-tenure track faculty have full voting rights at faculty meetings, while others may have a major career impact. For example, are there restrictions on a full-time instructor's freedom to undertake paid freelance assignments? Some expectations may be informal and unwritten, such as ones involving community engagement or recruitment of students to the major. Incoming professionals should discuss such matters and clarify any uncertainties or ambiguities with department chairs, program directors, and longer-serving colleagues.

Seek varied Opportunities

There are several major reasons why instructors who aren't required to do scholarly research or to seek grants may want to do so anyway, either on their own or collaborating with colleagues, often tenure-stream ones. First, their professional experience in environmental journalism or environmental communication can strengthen the credentials and broaden the expertise of the research team. Second, such projects are resume builders that can improve prospects for reappointment. Third, they demonstrate initiative, drive, and an interest in professional development. Fourth, these projects can help fixed-term faculty aspiring to a tenure-track position by building a research record. Fifth, they integrate transitioned professionals into the intellectual culture of their departments. And sixth, research can be intellectually stimulating and a change of pace from teaching.

Patience

Performance counts, but in different ways. Newsroom and communications managers demand professional-caliber work, whether from recently hired grads or veterans with decades of experience. They expect employees and freelancers to follow style and grammar rules, act ethically, meet deadlines, be aggressive and creative, beat the competition, manage time efficiently, and understand their audiences. With rare exception, those are unrealistic expectations for college students, who often frustrate instructors by missing deadlines, failing to consult stylebooks, forgetting or ignoring basic spelling and grammar rules, cutting corners, refusing to ask questions, and ignoring the mandate for intellectual integrity. One respondent said, 'What really surprised me was how ill-prepared so many of them were, that I had to teach more basics, even more basic than I had anticipated… I was surprised at how many motivated, really smart students I had… and that they were challenged to write coherent sentences'. Instructors' overarching obligation is to train -- teach -- students, including professional and analytical thinking skills, ethical practices, communication skills, and even basic life skills such as time management and professional attire. Doing so requires patience.

Patience also helps coping with the pace of decision-making at most colleges. In the private sector, media managers generally make decisions quickly, knowing that the wrong one may swiftly cost the company money and reputation and lose them their jobs. By contrast, decision-making in academe may stretch for months, even years. And heads roll more rarely for poor decisions at colleges than at media companies.

Innovate

You may inherit courses and can adapt them to reflect your own priorities and professional experience. Sometimes, however, there may not be much advance warning for an incoming instructor, as a professional communicator with a science doctorate quickly discovered: 'They plunged me in the deep end because my predecessor had left and couldn't deliver it. I just went for it and developed my own materials based on my practical experience and the little background I could put together on short notice'. You may also have the chance to design your own dream courses. When one respondent took her first academic job, she joined a program that offered no science or environmental journalism courses. 'I created the course there and it lasted well beyond my four years there'. Another has done so by bringing natural science and journalism students together. A third envisions developing a course in which students write about and maintain a website about her city's air pollution and climate-related issues that would be available to journalists and local residents 'so they can really see the impact of climate change on their lives'.

Syllabi

Syllabi provide a venue for instructors to highlight their vision for a course. Carefully prepare syllabi but remain flexible. That requires a balance between being too comprehensive, with pages of single-spaced procedures and details, and too vague. Leaving students to wonder about assignments, expectations, and grading criteria is a gateway to complaints. News professionals know that breaking developments often required abandoning well-laid plans and schedules, requiring journalists and communicators to swiftly respond. Although they are usually less dramatic, unexpected developments arise in the classroom as well, requiring instructors to change the syllabi. For example, an instructor secures a guest speaker on short notice, a blizzard closes campus for a few days, or an instructor realizes that the pace of assignments proves unrealistic for most students. Responding to any of those could lead the instructor to rethink and adjust the syllabus, including due dates.

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