

On Doing My Job
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A few months ago, I was checking to see how many students were enrolled in an upcoming course of mine at the university—I'm a professor. I was concerned that the numbers were going to be low, and indeed they were, and I felt bad about it; I had failed because so few students were signed up for my course.

And then it hit me--and why had it taken so long—that, really, getting students to sign up for my courses is not my job. While I'd like students to flock to my courses, my job as a teacher is to provide a rich and challenging learning opportunity for the students who are enrolled in my courses, and to do my very best in supporting those students as they take advantage of that opportunity. Whether students like my courses, and even whether they learn in them, isn't my job. It's the students' job to decide what they think of the courses and me and to take advantage of the contexts for learning I provide, not mine, and scheduling and enrollments are the university administrators' job and not mine. I perked up; not completely, in truth, but significantly.

While I was thinking about this, I read an email message from a student in a current course of mine about setting up a meeting to talk in my office about her progress in the class. I emailed her back suggesting a time and asking her to reply confirming it, and then went on to suggest ways she could improve her work in the course, which I gave a lot of care to. While I was writing the email and just afterwards, I felt good about myself where just a few minutes before I had felt bad about the enrollment numbers. I was doing my job setting up the meeting and offering advice. That's all I can do, my job. I thought to myself, figure out exactly what your job is and do it the best you can and let the rest of it go. I perked up even more.

I then spent some time thinking about what my job is, or better, what my jobs are, not just in the university but in the whole of my life. I decided that, in general, my job is, metaphorically, to paint positive pictures. By that I mean bring to reality the best, the most needed, states of affairs I can imagine that are manageable for me to create (no sense trying to produce something that is not going to happen due to limitations in me or my circumstances).

My time and energy are limited, so I need to prioritize and focus on painting the pictures that really count to me, the ones that align with my most profound insights into the world and myself and my most cherished values and commitments. If I go into a stew when students don't learn or don't like my courses or don't sign up for them, I might fall into the trap of centering the course on catchy, immediately interesting content at the expense of truly important and empowering material; lowering my standards and throwing grades at students to ingratiate them; and "charming" up my courses by drawing attention to what a neat guy I am. Doing that is contrary to what I consider my job: to offer an intellectually challenging learning opportunity for students and to focus the course on their efforts to learn and grow and not my appealing personality and their relationship with me.

Taking responsibility for students' behavior and accomplishment and assessments is getting me into areas beyond my control. I can be responsible *to* students—that's my job—but I can't, and shouldn't, take responsibility *for* them, for what they learn and for what they think of the courses and me. The more I get it across to students that the success or failure of a course is in my hands (and not theirs), the less likely it is that they will realize that if something truly valuable is going to come out of their enrollment in the course it will be because they took it upon themselves to produce it for themselves. Don't wait around for me to make it good for you should be my message to students. Don't be a judge and critic. Go to work and get make good things happen for yourself (staying with the metaphor I'm using here, get busy creating positive inner pictures and making them outer realities.)

That clients or customers like something, my course or anything else, isn't necessarily a valid measure of how good it is. The best selling books and the biggest box office films aren't necessarily the best ones, and in fact usually aren't the best ones. Approval and excellence are not one and the same. My job is to produce excellent learning and growth environments and let the chips fall where they may.

I took out a sheet of paper and wrote down what my jobs are right now in my life. What pictures am I trying to paint? For what should I hold myself accountable? Being clear on that tells me not only where to focus my energies but also helps me get straight about what is none of my business. The list wasn't a long one. One

of my jobs is to be the best dad possible to my eight-year-old daughter who lives on the other side of the American continent with her mother. There's what I have been talking about here: to provide the best learning opportunities to students I can and to do the most that is in me to support them as they take advantage of that opportunity. My job is to use this site as a vehicle for going public with the most important things I have to express, written as clearly and truthfully and completely as I can manage. How I come off to readers or what reaction I get from them is not part of my writing job. My job is to take on high quality activities that fit who I am—good films, good books, good travel, good people. About people, as Tennessee Williams once wrote in his journal, better alone than in bad company. My job is to be kind and decent to people and help them where I can. My job is to get as physically healthy, mentally clear, and personally strong and effective as I can; my mind and body are my instruments for getting my jobs done well, my pallet and paintbrush for painting my pictures while I still have the gift of life.

Those are my jobs at this point in my life, I decided. I taped the list I drew up to the inside cover of a notebook I write in and first thing every morning I re-read it and reflect on it and think about what I need to do about it and whether I want to alter it. I've noticed some changes this job clarification and review process has brought about. For one thing, I haven't checked on course enrollments since that day. Another example, I recently wrote an article for a web site that solicits comments and caught myself getting down because my article had prompted fewer comments than another one on that same site. No, no, no. It wasn't my job to get more comments than somebody else. My job was to do my best with that writing and I did that. So relax. Another, a couple of weeks ago I sent a proposal for a new course I have designed to two administrators at my university for their response. No reply. I got snubbed, rejected. How terrible. How could they do that to me? So unfair. I'm all agitated. I obsess over these two administrators the rest of the day (while, I have a hunch, my existence never crossed their minds). I know, I thought to myself, I'll track those two down and get right in their faces and compel them to respond. My morning jobs review the next day brought me to my senses as it reminded me that I could track them down and put it to them if I really wanted to, but I didn't have to do that. Wringing a response

out of those two, turning around their indifference, negation, whatever it was, making them see the error of their ways, anything like that, was not my job. My job was to prepare a course that would be good for the university and for students, and I did that. Quit owning others' response to what I do. Stop trying to control others' behavior. Just do my damn job. My daughter wrote two notes this week telling me she loves the two books I sent her and that she can't wait to see me on my birthday in a couple of weeks. That's doing my job. Cheer up.

These days, I ask myself at the end of the day, were you responsible to your jobs today, Robert? To my gratification--and I'll admit, some measure of surprise--invariably the answer has been yes; night after night it's been yes. I'm finding that the conscious realization of that fact at the end of each day, whether or not anyone else ever acknowledges it, results in a pervasive sense of peace with myself and a good night's sleep.