

Welcome To Post-Tenure Review

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The best part of this experience has been the totally unexpected lift in morale it provided me. Teaching is a rather, well, lonely profession. We deal with students constantly, of course, but rarely have the chance to see one another in action or to discuss at any length our common problems, frustrations, and little triumphs. To discover that colleagues whom my students speak well of actually have the same difficulties and aspirations that I have was remarkably reassuring. We speak often of the "academic community," but this was one of the few times on campus that I've really felt that sense of community.

This moving comment, conveying professional loneliness, even isolation, comes from an outstanding teacher and excellent scholar. He is evaluating a post-tenure review we had just completed, a series of five self-study seminars, one and a half hours each, held over a period of five weeks. I chaired the sessions, with eight colleagues participating, all tenured full professors.

Post-tenure review is now required by policy and contract for 18,000 faculty members in the California State University system. Anyone who has not been reviewed for retention, tenure, or promotion for five years is subject to review of teaching and scholarship by a committee of his peers and an "appropriate administrator." The concept has a simplistic appeal for the public, and I think it will become widespread in higher education in the United States.

Participants were all professors in the English Department, but their fields ranged from Old English to contemporary poetry. What they specifically had in common was that they were subject that year to post-tenure review in accordance with university and department

regulations. I set the first seminar activity, review of a course syllabus for one course taught by each professor. (This process actually required two sessions.) At our first meeting, participants set the other topics for the

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review seminars: use of audiovisual aids, discussion techniques, and group study of a short piece of literature.

What we were able to accomplish was to turn an onerous and perfunctory task into an experience we enjoyed and learned from. Particularly striking to me was the improvement in morale cited repeatedly by participants. In the following comment noting what he liked best about the seminars, a second colleague obviously sensed a state of mild siege in our profession for which our discussions offered succor and improved confidence:

First, just the tips. . . . Second, the even more important stimulus to morale. Our group obviously respects one another, and we need that affirmation, now even as we sustain a bit of negative publicity, say, in the *Mercury News*. Though we did not come to any of those impossible resounding conclusions, like the right relationship of comp to lit, we shared a true mutual concern with our profession and a sense that we bring separate, solid contributions to it.

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A third professor echoes the feelings of both the previous participants and introduces what were vital ingredients for the success of our seminars, honesty and trust:

It seems almost a miracle that, in the midst of constant public and administrative demands for yet another evaluation of our work, we were finally allowed to act like the professionals that we are, that we could join together to ask ourselves searching questions about our teaching and our learning and were allowed to answer them honestly, without mistrust.

It turned out that they were aching to talk with each other about their teaching.

Three years ago, when post-tenure review was first imposed on us, I was utterly cynical, a feeling most of us in California shared. Political animosity fostered by people like then Governor Reagan and former Vice President Agnew in the late '60s and early '70s created an atmosphere of distrust of and among tenured professors and student demands for accountability in the '70s and '80s added to the clamor for removal of the tenured immunity we have protected so ardently. We know of course that we had incompetent faculty in our midst—incompetent in the view of some, hardworking but dull in the view of others, brilliant but erratic about professional details in the view of still others. We also knew we couldn't prove incompetence at a level of legal certainty, perhaps not even to satisfy moral certainty. We knew that tenured professors had been fired for moral turpitude, harrassed for political positions. But we knew of no tenured professor who had ever been fired for ordinary teaching incompetence, at San Jose State or anywhere else.

And so when I told our Department Policy Committee that we were required to adopt a policy for post-tenure review, I presented the matter in a totally cynical way: "Nothing will happen no matter what we do, so let's reduce our sweat and grief and get it done as quickly and painlessly as possible." I was rocked on my heels by a temporary faculty member on the committee who read me out for my frivolous attitude. She had to earn her temporary job, year after year for seven years, with re-applications yearly, interviews, and subjection to critical scrutiny of her teaching and her scholarship. She could not understand why we tenured professors should consider a review once every five years an imposition, and, above all, she could not understand my treating

this review as a silly joke. She gave me pause because I knew that she was morally right. I began to look for alternatives, though not consciously at first because I thought there were none.

An inspiration came from our supervisor of teaching assistants, Professor Blecki. She was working with the TA's on such an apparently simple matter as their "green sheets" (campus jargon for course syllabi, outlining course rationale and requirements and specifying grading criteria; printed on green paper). That, at least, was something I could try to do with my colleagues under review, to improve their green sheets. When I spoke with colleagues and administrators about such an alternative to usual post-tenure review (imitative of promotion review), I got little response, partly no doubt because my plans were vague and inchoate.

But I had a chance to talk about the plans with an administrator from the CSU system's chancellor's office. He was very interested, and I used his interest as a kind of hind-pocket endorsement, thereby getting instant administrative support on my campus and greater faculty attention in our department. In fact, when we got down to the actual review, every single one of the eight faculty members subject to review this year chose a path of mutual self-study rather than our already established, minimal post-tenure review procedures. It turned out that they were aching to talk with each other about their teaching.

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At the first of our five seminars, we discussed green sheets and planned the rest of our agenda. As it happened, both of the first two weeks were entirely consumed by discussion of green sheets. That was a wonderful way to begin because as we talked about how we presented our courses to our students, we also talked about our pedagogy. These were, remember, all full professors, obligated to this review because they had not been reviewed in the past five years. It was a wonderful treat for all nine of us to share more than 180 years of experience and to regard our teaching as a serious, professional matter, not expecting or looking for miraculous solutions—or promotion.

We were matter-of-fact but serious, pouncing on good practical ideas like these from our colleagues:

- have a conference on students' *first* papers to establish seriousness and to get to know students' names
- with students who are writing journals to establish that they are doing the reading, have them turn in a few pages *each class* period in carbon (they keep the originals; we don't have to lug around huge journals, and the process keeps students up on their assignments).

For me as department chair, these seminars also provided a shift in attitude and a lift in personal morale.

These and other "tips" I recorded and distributed later to participants.

After reviewing green sheets, we determined the following agenda for our final three meetings: one session on audio-visual aids (a perfect subject for this group since one-half never used them and the other half did so regularly), discussion techniques (where the left and right emphatically agreed we couldn't discuss anything unless we devised means of forcing students to keep up on reading assignments for every class meeting), and a final session in which we discussed two Shakespearean sonnets over lunch. From the beginning one of the participants insisted that we end our seminars with a discussion of substance rather than method. We all accepted that eagerly, and I was allowed to choose the texts. I chose sonnets because they were short and immediately accessible.

And that session, over lunch, was, I think, our finest in terms of faculty engagement. By this time we could jointly struggle with two genuinely difficult sonnets: "How like a winter hath my absence been," and "They that have power to hurt, and will do none." One participant described it this way:

The best day was the last. It was exhilarating to discuss literature with such fine colleagues. It's true that we have seminars and colloquia, but those gatherings are *instructive* for the most part, and for this one day we were all engaged in the *study* of a common text.

There were minor suggestions for improving the study seminar process: that we used one too many meetings, that each participant should give a sample lesson, that the food for our final lunch should have been chosen by

a more discerning palate than mine. In general, I liked the overall rhythm of the meetings and felt that we should not have tried for anything with higher intensity or density. I had one reservation myself. What if a professor with significant weaknesses were participating? Would it not be a good idea to have each participant identify an area in which he or she wanted to improve? But reflection has made me abandon that notion. Seriously deficient teachers who come to my or some other administrator's attention are going to be called in to discuss the problem(s) anyway. Generally nothing we can propose helps. And what my colleagues were telling me in more than one way was that trust and openness were important for this process. So I would not change much.

Let me also emphasize that I did not act as a cheerleader. My colleagues are much too sophisticated for such an approach and resent it whenever they encounter it. Rather, they found great strength in pausing to talk about and question their teaching. And the process did, I think, improve our teaching, as this participant indicates, in contrast, please note, of our usual personnel processes that pretend to do the same:

When I heard I was to be "evaluated," my first response was to assume that I would bear up, survive the ordeal with as much dignity as possible, and continue on afterwards, putting the whole thing out of my mind at the earliest opportunity. It was a real surprise to discover that the process actually had led me to re-think some of the classes I teach and to want to try some new things. *That* effect, I'm sorry to say, is something I never experienced when I was evaluated in years past for tenure and for my promotions.

For me as department chair, these seminars also provided a shift in attitude and a lift in personal morale. I was, for a change, not hearing complaints from students about teachers who didn't come to class on rainy days, teachers who thought returning student essays was to be done no more than twice a semester, and others who thought they had a new way of teaching writing but couldn't put their ideas into writing because they have a writing block. Those were the people who took up my daily time ad nauseum and often made me want to shout obscenities at them. And yet I had to hear them out and try to help.

Instead, working with this post-tenure study group, I got a completely different sense of my department, one that was in my bones but, because of the distractions of student complaints, not always in my head. I experienced the power of eight teachers and colleagues, a solid core of a permanent faculty of fifty, showing their concern for teaching and demonstrating their accumulated skill. It was awesome, and a fine corrective for any department chair who may have become cynical or have lost sight of the great faculty power in his or her department.