November 3, 2014

Confessions of a Young, Prolific Academic

Equating protracted study with quality is exactly what causes graduate students to take so long earning a Ph.D.



Image: [Wally Gobetz / Creative commons](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/)

By Brian Ray

Read enough columns about the crisis in the humanities, the publish-or-perish dilemma, or the faculty job market, and you’re likely to think that we academic writers spend our days and nights imprisoned in dimly lit cubicles, praying for relief. But we’re not all miserable, and I think it’s time to give an alternate take on what it’s like to work hard on scholarship and actually enjoy it.

No doubt, academe—and the humanities in particular—faces a range of problems that have upped the pressure on everyone. The job market is cutthroat, and even those of us with tenure-track positions must start publishing almost immediately in order to stay employed. This state of affairs has inspired no shortage of serious critiques, as well as whiny diatribes, on news sites and blogs. Every fall, we seem to get a barrage of sad tales from A.B.D.’s and angry polemics from bitter grapes, who rail against a process they will never understand—because they don’t want to.

We’ve also seen increasingly far-fetched proposals to right the system. One[recent columnist](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2014/07/25/higher-ed-should-create-alternative-abd-status-essay) hopes to make her A.B.D. status a kind of "certificate of completion" in order to avoid writing her dissertation. Another [columnist proposes](http://chronicle.com/article/An-Open-Letter-to-Journal/149199) banning graduate students from publishing in journals.

That line of thinking is not restricted to the page, or the screen. At conferences, I often encounter other early-career academics who detest the tenure-and-promotion process. They maintain that they shouldn’t be required to publish "that much," or that scholarship is overrated compared with service and teaching. In truth, I think scholarship, teaching, and service should be valued equally. I also support efforts to create a teaching track that does not require extensive publication and offers full-time jobs, with benefits, for college teachers. But I also find it hard not to hear at least some of the complaints as, well, self-serving.

My tenure-track job at a small research university was hard won, purchased with thousands of hours and thousands of dollars in loans. Yet I went onto the market in 2011 with two articles and a book chapter appearing in peer-reviewed publications, and landed a tenure-track position. My third article was accepted during my academic job hunt, my fourth just as I was sliding into my new job.

Writing and publishing never interfered with my degree plan. In fact, I took extra coursework even while working on my dissertation, knowing that (a) it would increase my knowledge in my field, and (b) it would make me more competitive. I finished my Ph.D. in four years, despite some anxiety from my own committee that I might drop dead from exhaustion. Sure, I got tired and frustrated at times. But I never bemoaned my fate or looked to blame the system, even though I found flaws in it. I was always in charge of my decisions.

In truth, my committee demonstrated more anxiety about my future than I did. I’ve always loved writing and managed to do it regardless of my schedule. My love for writing is exactly what led me to a Ph.D. in the first place. I had already published a novel with a small press before going academic, and I wanted to expand my horizons by learning to work in other genres. (I also wanted to teach, which makes a Ph.D. sensible.) I was fortunate enough to publish my first academic article during my first year in my doctorate program. I even managed to write a collection of short stories and publish a second novel with a small press before diving into my dissertation.

People always asked what strange secret, death wish, or caffeine addiction I must have had to put myself through that much alleged torture. There is no secret, just a love of writing—and a realization that some writers are quite prolific, producing 100 articles and a dozen or more books over the course of their careers, and some aren’t.

Others in my field have published and still completed their Ph.D.’s within five years. Equating protracted study with quality is exactly what causes graduate students to spend seven to nine years on their degrees. A lot of the people who take that long don’t seem to be publishing much at all. When I began my Ph.D. in 2008, I met a number of writers who had already spent several years slogging through their dissertations. Professors, they said, had told them to take their time. No need to rush. The quality of their work, they were told, outweighed the need to "race through" and onto the job market.

I was given the same advice. But I disregarded it, choosing to work at my own pace (admittedly fast) and try to publish my ideas.

True, I eventually realized I had to leave fiction writing behind and devote myself to academic work. But I did not write less. This approach has worked for me. Going into my third year on the tenure track, I have an academic book in press and have started writing another with a colleague. I’m actually looking forward to my tenure application, and hardly regret my decisions. Meanwhile, some of those perfectionist writers I’ve met are still working away in the library and have yet to see it fully pay off. Their struggles bother me because these are some of the smartest people I know, and they have a lot to offer their fields. But they continue to succumb to the self-doubts that can consume all of us: that we’re not ready for prime time, that we don’t deserve to be published, that someone is going to tear apart our work.

Ideas obviously need time to marinate. But deliberately resisting the publication imperative doesn’t lead to better work, just to fewer publications. After all, ideas can eventually go stale or spoil. Who hasn’t toiled so long in the solitary dark that a once original and exciting project turned into a chore, and then an overworked piece of nonsense? What other ideas and projects did we miss because we focused on one article or chapter for years rather than months? What if it’s a future project that leads to our greatest contribution, rather than the current one?

Deferring publication can actually hurt early careers, especially if an article or book comes out that beats a new Ph.D. to the punch. I recently met a professor at a conference who expressed admiration for my work, explaining that he had been planning to submit a similar piece to the same journal before he saw my article. If I had waited even a few months, or listened to a colleague and taken my time, there’s a good chance I would’ve been scooped.

Academics are rightly concerned that the job market is flooded, that tenure-track job opportunities are shrinking, and that the amount of research expected of us is rising. But I have always been puzzled by people who enter a graduate program—especially in English studies—and then proceed to complain about things like dissertations and writing for publication.

And I find it equally puzzling when many of those same people take to lamenting their situations in public venues, as if their own poor choices or lack of motivation should be our cause célèbre for reforming higher education. They present writing as a hoop, not a journey. Having the freedom to pursue my own research project with feedback from established scholars in my field was worth every minute of late-night, caffeine-induced writing. I’ll confess: Even if there were some rocky moments, I really enjoyed writing my dissertation.

To be clear, we have a lot of work to do in order to improve the material conditions of undergraduates, graduate students, and part-time teachers. But retreating from publication and expecting less of ourselves and others will only make things worse.

Some of the greatest experiences I had in graduate school derived from my participation in conferences, meeting with editors of small presses and journals, hearing them speak about the proposal-and-submission process, and working on articles for publication. Those opportunities were huge motivators for me, not burdens to be delayed as long as possible. They supported rather than detracted from my intellectual development, and I would never want to deny future generations those same challenges. Instead, I say encourage those entering into the profession to confirm their commitment to research and writing, and to stop being so damned scared of publishing.

My advice to graduate students and early career academics is to rekindle your pleasure in research and writing. Think of publication and tenure as motivators, not unfair burdens or unpaid labor. When you have tenure, don’t let it go to your head. Use that position to advocate, but not to justify or validate complaints that academe is simply "too hard" or "unfair." These are not the kind of productive arguments that will lead to meaningful reform in higher education.

*Brian Ray is an assistant professor of English at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. He is the author of two novels and the forthcoming book Style: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Teaching.*

<http://chronicle.com/article/Confessions-of-a-Young/149815?cid=megamenu>