

## PERSONAL IDENTITY AND INSTITUTIONAL VENTURE

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### Vexation

As conference organizers, we maintain this strict rule of “all conference attendees are also presenters.” In the Crossroads format and attitude, this is appropriate, but even I get frustrated with the amount of effort this requires. It’s not so much the extra work required to produce a coherent paper, but the reconsideration needed to come up with a *new* vexation and venture. For many of us, we have recurring vexations and we are continually working on the same project. I’m always delighted to see people who evolve a previous venture into a new one, or who are able to show progress and adaptation. In my case, I feel as though I haven’t really made progress on my past ventures, aside from new directions and the laying of foundations for future work.

The challenge in coming up with something “new” is that there’s a natural tendency to try to create something new, and this “something new” seems to be something that you would either need to finish in the next year (before you propose something else to Crossroads, provided you feel an intrinsic need to attend and/or you are a conference co-organizer) or something with so many pieces that it has a continual vexation and venture to be focused on. In many ways I’ve always pictured “vexation” as a natural and necessary state for professional and societal change. I should always feel so “vexed” about my professional life – to feel otherwise would be to be an inert body in an interactive field. I’d just be adding dead ballast to the vessel, and not doing much to even entertain myself in the meantime.

On the other hand, the things I often feel troubled by and naturally want to address are things that simply require more work. My office needs to be organized. I need to read some things. I need to put more effort into writing. I need to push forward a course proposal. These, very necessary and sometimes even innovative things, are still just the equivalent of making sure that there is enough air in the tires to get to the next destination. Or, more analogously, these are the different turns that I need to negotiate and the hills I need to climb to get things done. At a Crossroads, these aren’t always interesting to dwell on too much, and I feel like I’d just be wasting the time of others to bring them to the table.

The Crossroads topics that get the most attention and care are those that have a radically new initiative, and sometimes I wonder if we can individually sustain this. Or maybe I’m just getting lazy in my own proposing.

So here’s where I am left. I don’t want to bring the “I’m still working on that idea for a new \_\_\_\_ (book, journal, conference, etc. – fill in the blank); what should I do now?” Not exactly. I’m at the point where I need to bring up the “I’ve been on sabbatical and I’ve really been thinking about my career and my identity as a science education scholar.”

“Identity” is nothing new to this venue. It’s been a piece of research frameworks that many use to look at learners (teachers and students) with, and individuals have considered their own identities as researchers (Cox-Peterson, 2007), teachers (Ceglie, 2006), students (Drits, 2007), and even administrators (Meadows, 2007). My sabbatical has given me lots of things – time to walk the kids to school, time to write, time to plan, but mostly time to think a bit about what I’m doing. There’s never enough of this.

I’ve long thought that one of my “problems” was that I could find too much to do. Some context: I’m stationed in a department of physics within a college of science, where I’ve earned my promotions by doing research in science education and teaching some of our science ed coursework, in addition to physics coursework. And, where I’m positioned is at a regional, undergraduate-focused teaching university with a strong research mentality in many departments – mine being one of those. That is to say, I teach generally 3-4 courses and some labs each semester, as do my colleagues, and I and others still get a publication or two out in a year, along with a couple of conference presentations.

The uniqueness of this combination means that I also get to do a fair amount of service. In fact, my service and research and teaching blend fairly well, with Crossroads being one of the best examples of this. Being within the walls of a college of science but doing research as an educator means that I’m called on often, even though my position is not well understood all the time. This ranges from being literally in a circus show – a set of physics demonstrations during an open house – to being called upon for committee work and task forces to being the go-to-academic when a grant proposal needs an evaluator documented on the project team. Most notable (beside Crossroads) are the efforts I’ve taken on that have strong community service components.

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This ranges from consulting with our planetarium and science museum to actually bringing an outreach program to our public parks during the summer.

Back in those days when I was in graduate school, I really did dream that I would land this kind of teaching position at an undergraduate focused institution, but be able to maintain a high profile research record. The research record, I've realized and accepted, will never be award winning. I'm more hopeful, though, that my combination of teaching, research, and service, will become coherent and notable, at least in a particular local context. To make this really happen, though, I think I need a different structure.

## Interlude

*...shit young feller, you ain't got started yet and the reason's cause you trying to do it outside yourself and ain't looking in and if you wanna by god write pomes you gotta write pomes about what you know and not about the rest...*

David Lee, from "Loading a Boar," in *The Porcine Canticles*

## Venture

In the past at Crossroads I've Vexed and Vented ideas that were relatively grand. True, I placed myself in these contexts and suggested specific courses of action for myself, but I considered fairly global issues, such as reforming how we communicated as scholars in the field. I've derived a great deal of benefit from these ventures, even as they haven't completely taken shape. They are, I now realize, long term and enduring efforts that I can't jump into quickly. A part of me reached for these ventures, and I thought they were within my grasp more immediately. I think, though, that (as our poet for this year's Crossroads writes) I "ain't got started yet . . . 'cause [I'm] trying to do it outside[my]self". The venture I need to work on right now is me and my immediate environment. As a fairly lonely science educator engaged in what a friend refers to as a "burdensome undergraduate teaching load" – one I take on joyfully – I think I have a unique situation. I also don't think I can sustain this particular uniqueness forever.

I've engaged in a conversation with others in my college – a college of science – about what my role is within the college and the university. Basically, it comes down to the fact that I can maintain a nice position with some nice projects and some nice papers and some nice teaching. But I want to sustain a culture of science education research, outreach, and interactivity within the walls of the university and beyond. Many ways exist for this to work, and I could be foolhardy and continue to write outside myself and think too grandly and too vaguely. I also need to be aware of what specific goals are tenable at my institution and within its environs.

So here's what I want: a college of science that does not simply host a science educator here and there, as departments see fit. We also should not separate a planetarium, natural science museum, and center for science education into small, isolated confines with missions that do not get recognized in the grander mission of the college. Instead, these entities for science education for the university and the greater community should be united in their efforts, both through leadership and funding. Further, the college should specifically push to engage departments in science education research by having faculty lines dedicated to scholarship and service in education.

That's a lot of want, especially if it had no particular direction. I realized this while sitting down with my dean and department chair one morning in May. This doesn't fly without funding or directive. That's when I pulled out of my hat one of my long term but still inside myself ambitions: we should host not just a center and faculty with a mission, but an entire program that this will all fit under. This new program could be its own department, offering the college's first master's program, in science education.

Typically in my venture, this is where I detail exactly how I believe this is going to go, what I'm going to do to make it happen, what it should entail. But for this I'm at a loss. I need advice about *if* this is a good heading to take, suggestions for models of the program I envision, and words of advice and caution. Is starting a master's program in science education a viable step toward my grander vision? What issues must be considered when trying to establish a comprehensive center? Are there aspects of my identity that I should be prepared to lose if I move forward? Should I more thoroughly reconsider my identity as a science education scholar and where I place myself? And how does one, pragmatically, push an institution towards restructuring (if that's necessary)?