A couple of years ago, I read an article about some research conducted by NASA on the personalities best suited for interplanetary travel. As it turns out, the skills astronauts need to survive the dangers of blazing the trail into space are quite different from those needed to survive the monotony and close quarters of long term space flight. In the early days of the space race, NASA needed daredevils. Just to get that capsule into orbit in the first place, the space agency needed test pilots who were comfortable with the idea that the craft they were flying might explode at any time. It needed brave loners with few ties to earth and little reluctance to hurtle themselves into the unknown.

But as NASA contemplates long term travel to distant destinations, it is finding that it will need crew members with entirely different personal qualities. In order for seven people to spend three years in a cramped spaceship, where you get about as much personal space as the interior of the average van, twenty-first century astronauts will need good people-skills and a relaxed demeanor. Exit the volatile and macho space-jockey, enter the calm collaborator. “The right stuff” of NASA legend is no longer the right stuff.

Being on faculty at St. Joseph’s University is certainly nowhere near as dangerous as being an astronaut. Yet, the transition that we face in the move to full-time, tenure track teaching is in some ways not unlike what NASA faces with its astronauts. Many of us, it turns out, need to make a key change in the way that we approach our work as a professional academic.

Whether we have come right out of doctoral studies or have taught for some time before arriving at St. Joe’s, we all share the single most formative experiences of our academic lives: the dissertation. Now, as many will agree, the dissertation itself is fairly unimportant. (I know, “contribution to the field,” “ticket into to academy,” and all that.) For my money, the real importance of the dissertation lies in something much more subtle: the habits that it creates in us.

Put bluntly, the dissertation process tricks you into becoming a trail-blazing loner. By and large, we all learned our research skills over long hours working by ourselves. Over time, we learned that scholarly credibility is based on what we can do on our own. Hence, the dissertation, like comprehensive exams and all “scholarly” projects, was a solo project. And whether we accepted it fully or not, as students we were trained to critique and compete with—not collaborate with—our colleagues. Our successes depended upon making unique contributions to our fields. The significance of our dissertation projects hinged, at least implicitly, upon the inadequacies of previous scholars and their work. It is no wonder that after spending a couple of years working on them, many of us developed the habit of critiquing and devaluing the ideas of others until it was second-nature. We may even have begun to see their ideas as a threat to our own success. Our diplomas are a witness our ability to “go it alone.”

And then we show up for the job. And then we find out that the right stuff may not be the right stuff anymore. That’s because, first, teaching is not a competition. While good research may be about fixing what is wrong with the field, becoming a good teacher has little to do with being better than your colleagues or fixing what is wrong with higher education. Teaching well has to do with engaging students in a process of discovery and mastery, where students can learn about a field and bring what they have learned to bear on their lives.
Comparisons with your colleagues and rankings like “better” or “worse” mean very little once you get in the classroom.

Second, the right stuff may not be the right stuff anymore because becoming a better teacher is not a solo endeavor. The nice thing about teaching is that most teachers share the same fundamental goal: learning. Few teachers protect their techniques as if they are trade secrets. Because we all want to see our students succeed—both in and beyond our own classes—we have a vested interest in what our colleagues are doing and in working for improvement across the board. Teaching is, by nature, a collegial and collaborative endeavor.

In many ways, the central task of the first year is taking our first responses—questioning, critique, and competition—and transforming them into new habits of trust and collaboration in the service of teaching. Setting aside the habits inculcated through years of graduate school and learning to work together can be difficult. It can create a strange blend of pride, territorialism, and insecurity that leaves you wondering what to do next.

But at the same time, collaboration is also a valuable opportunity. The first year is not a time for mastery (although that would be dreamy); it is time to learn, time to adapt, time to survive. In many ways, my own learning, adaptation, and survival over the first year were made possible through the knowledge and support of my senior colleagues in the Theology Department. I also had the great fortune of being one of two new faculty members in my department. No matter how bad it got, I was never alone in my struggles. In the short run, habits of collaboration can help us make it through the difficult first years of our teaching careers. In the long run, the habits will also help us achieve that other hallmark of tenure: good teaching.

In the realm of new habits, let me suggest four concrete actions you can take.

Trust

First, trust your colleagues. It sounds basic. Even trite. But it is the first step to successful teaching. Your long-term success at St. Joe’s depends upon your ability to find out how you can teach these students in this environment. Your short-term survival depends upon figuring enough of that out quickly so that you don’t feel like you’re going down in flames on a weekly basis. Both kinds of survival depend upon your willingness to jump into your department with both feet and learn everything you can about teaching at SJU. More so than with the other Universities I have been a part of, I have found the people at St. Joe’s to be supportive and helpful. Indeed, its collegial temperament is one of SJU’s greatest assets. Faculty both in my own department and across the University have offered insights into the students at St. Joe’s and have shared techniques that they find work here. That’s not to say that every one of your colleagues will be obliging at all times, nor that everyone wants to be your friend and confidante. But you don’t need to worry that people want you to fail. Indeed, you have been hired because your department thought that you would be a good addition to the SJU community. Your department wants you to succeed. So do people in other departments. My experience so far has shown me that you can trust that the faculty here will do what they can to help you succeed.

Conversation

Second, talk to your colleagues about teaching. The members of your department share
one thing in common: they all know a heck of a lot about teaching at St. Joe’s. They all have experience about what works well with the particular students here and what doesn’t. Their wisdom can help you a) avoid getting into jams and b) get out of them when you inevitably end up in them. Again, this may sound like common sense, but many young teachers simply fail to take advantage of this opportunity. We’ve been a bit too well trained to do so. So, fight the urge to blaze your own trail right off the bat. Quiet that part of you that has learned to automatically question what other people do. Try to let go of the habit of thinking your success depends upon other people being wrong. Even those among us who have a good deal of teaching experience and training have a lot to learn. I had taken courses in pedagogy, had been a Teaching Fellow in grad school, and had taught at three other schools before arriving here. I can’t tell you how much I learned from my colleagues last year.

Start to get yourself into the habit of collaborating about the classroom. Curious about how a test question might go over? Wondering about reading load for a core class? Debating whether quizzes will do more harm than good in the upper level course? See what your colleagues have to say about it. You will, of course, get conflicting reports about what works well at St. Joe’s and about what makes good teaching. You will have to test what you learn in the classroom. Over time, you will learn how to filter the many comments in order to uncover techniques for your classroom. But if you can manage to develop a habit of being in conversation with your colleagues about teaching, you will both have access to a wealth of ideas about methods, strategies, and techniques that will serve you well in your time at SJU.

In addition to practical classroom skills, talking about teaching with your colleagues provides the perfect excuse for getting some much needed personal support. The first year is hard enough as it is without continuing the isolation of the dissertation and adjunct teaching. You are now part of a university faculty – make use of it. Every member of the faculty had a first year, and so everyone knows what it is like. Many senior colleagues are willing to accompany you on this new part of your journey. Other first-year faculty can be helpful as well. Take advantage of the many “New Faculty” events throughout the year to connect with other new faculty about your experiences teaching at St. Joe’s.

Finally, through conversations about teaching, you can begin to create good will in your department. By drawing upon your colleagues for ideas, you demonstrate how much their wisdom means to you. You also show yourself to be the interested, dedicated, and appreciative colleague that you are. These kinds of conversations will help you become an active member of the teaching life of the department.

Mentorship

Third, find a mentor. Many departments connect new faculty with senior members of the department in order to formalize and provide a structure for the kinds of conversation about teaching that I mentioned previously. Just as our mentors in graduate school helped each of us hone our techniques of research and writing, our departmental mentors can help us develop our emerging skills as teachers. The teaching mentor will offer much more personalized assistance, and as a result, can approach your teaching in a much more holistic and comprehensive manner. A good mentor will see your teaching in a developmental way, and help you step by step in addressing the issues that stand in your way of becoming the best teacher that you can be. A mentor can help you interpret your student evaluations in a way that turns what can be an onerous and, at times, dehumanizing process into a valuable learning experience. And a mentor provides another level of support for you as you adjust to teaching at
St. Joe’s.

As a side note, mentorship is especially important for new faculty members who might be reluctant to initiate conversations about teaching on their own or who come into departments that do not have a tradition of providing professional hospitality for new faculty. It is a formal structure that exists simply to open the doors of communication. If your department does not assign you a mentor, talk to your chair or ask a colleague you trust to inquire for you.

Class Visitation

Finally, fourth, once you have built up a certain level of trust in the department and have developed it with a good habit of conversation about teaching, invite faculty members in your department to sit in on your classes. As a matter of course, class visits are done by the department as a part of your first-, third-, and fifth-year reviews. These reviews are formal in nature, going into your departmental file and are used in the tenure process.

Class visits, however, can also be done informally. While many find class visits a bit nerve-wracking, they are also incredibly helpful. Teaching is a complex activity. It involves scholarship and knowledge of one’s field, to be sure. But it also involves skills like planning, creativity, flexibility, improvisation, and theatricality. But while you can talk to your colleagues and mentor about the merits of various instructional techniques at length, such conversations are always provisional. You will only know how well a given technique will work for you after using it in an actual class. Likewise, your colleagues will only really be able to assess your teaching by seeing you in action, in a real live class. How does that tone-of-voice thing that you do work? Are the students or the teacher to blame for the silence that follows each question about the reading? Are the students engaged, or do they just look like it? By getting in the habit of having your colleagues visit your classroom, you can add another set of eyes with which to see what really works and what really doesn’t.

My experience so far has been that these classroom visits provide the most helpful feedback on teaching. This is especially true of informal visits and comments. Because your colleagues want you to succeed at St. Joe’s and achieve tenure, faculty are often likely to portray you in a positive light in formal review documents that will go to your file. While they will certainly offer critiques, your colleagues may be disinclined to disparage you strongly in documents that will have a long shelf-life unless there are grave deficiencies in your teaching. In conversation, however, they may very well offer more candid and particular comments about your teaching. Such comments are the most helpful. If you really want to learn what you can do to become a better teacher, get in the habit of asking your colleagues to visit your classes.

Now, I realize that inviting colleagues into your classroom can take some willingness to be vulnerable. There is always the possibility that something you planned will not work in full view of one of your colleagues. Last year, one of my colleagues visited my small service learning class on Catholic Social Teaching. As a seventy-five minute long seminar class with an enrollment of seven, there was little room for any of us to escape notice. About five minutes into class, I realized that I had left my notes for the session—including all of the discussion questions—in my office. Clearly not my plan for success. In the end, it worked out alright; the conversation went well and the observer had no idea what had happened.

If it helps you, consider asking a colleague if you may sit in on one of his or her classes. Doing so will give you a chance to see what someone else does in the classroom and, hopefully, increase your level of comfort when your colleagues visit you. In the end, class visits are
inevitable: they are part of the tenure review process. But by preparing for them by developing the habits of conversation and visitation, the practice can become a useful tool for becoming a better teacher.

In all likelihood, you aren’t entirely comfortable with the prospect of adopting all of these new habits. In fact, simply reading this essay may have made you nervous and jittery. That shouldn’t be surprising. After all, you triumphed in graduate school. You succeeded by developing habits of critique and competition. You became a trail-blazing loner who sees trust and collaboration as signs of weakness, not strength. Well done. One would expect a bit of discomfort at hearing that these habits won’t be nearly as useful in teaching. Even if you do accept that your new work requires some new “right stuff”, it may be hard to make the change. Habits are habits precisely because they are lodged deep within us and resist modification. Yet, habits aren’t immutable. By practicing new behaviors, we can update our outmoded habits, or create entirely new ones if need be. It just takes time. Move cautiously if you need to. Or jump right in. Either way, start taking whatever steps you can to begin creating habits of trust and collaboration in the service of teaching. And take them with the assurance that by becoming practiced in collegiality and collaboration, you will gain new strength as a teacher and scholar. Indeed, it is only through such practices that we are eventually transformed from “faculty member” into “colleague.”

As you will come to find, there is a lot of discussion about teaching on campus. In the realm of formal events, many parts of the University, from the Dean’s office to the Teaching Institute, from the SJU Reads program to the Faith-Justice Institute, bring people together to talk about teaching at St. Joe’s. Informally, our colleagues gather to talk about classes every day. Even this little book that you hold in your hands right now is a bit of this conversation, committed to paper. During your first year, spend some time engaging in this collaboration and collegiality. More than anything else you can do, becoming a part of the community of teachers at St. Joseph’s will help you in your attempt to survive the first year and begin on the path to excellence in teaching.