



The Irascible ProfessorSM

by Dr. Mark H. Shapiro

Irreverent Commentary on the State of Education
in America today

"In Washington, it's dog eat dog. In academia, it's exactly the opposite."Robert Reich.

Commentary of the Day - December 28, 2012. My Life (Not Quite) In Academia. Guest commentary by Noelle Sterne.

After earning my Ph.D. from a university considered prestigious, I landed a job as an English professor at a university a short commute from my home. I was sure my academic career had launched.

Near the end of the semester, in May of my first year the Chair called me into his office. I assumed, blushing expectantly, that we would finalize my contract renewal for another three years. After the initial cordialities, he asked what my publishing plans were. Naïf that I was, I didn't realize this was a trick question. As every academic knows, at universities the only publications that count are scholarly articles, read by few, understood by fewer.

I proudly replied that I was indeed planning to publish. His eyebrows raised in approval. Then I added, unknowingly torpedoing myself: I would publish my short stories. His eyebrows furrowed and he looked down at the stack of papers on his desk, muttering as if he knew it would never happen, "Well, if you get famous from it."

He renewed my contract for one more year, mainly because the other professor who usually had the horrific 8:00 am freshman English slot was pregnant. After a short two years, I was "terminal."

If I had any lingering indecision about university teaching, that conference with the Chair pushed me over the edge. I'd declared to him my promise to myself-- to devote more time to writing short stories, my lifelong love. And after this two-year stint, I had no stomach or aptitude for the departmental politics, the interminable pointless committee meetings, the students' ever-inventive sob stories, and the closely guarded letterhead.

So, after exams in the second year, I packed up my few favorite books (publishers' comp copies), took my little crafts-fair handmade vase from the desk, wrapped it carefully in newsprint, and stole a good handful of department letterhead. I didn't quite know what I'd do to earn money, only that university teaching was no longer for me.

One day at lunch with a friend, as I complained yet again, she pointed out that the university where I earned my Ph.D. was only a few blocks from my apartment. I'd survived the doctoral rigors, and with my now-considerable knowledge of the graduate school "ropes," she pointed out that I could offer students a valuable service. Her words made sense. I established a typing/word processing business, specializing in the voluminous and inexplicable formatting rules of master's theses and doctoral dissertations.

I created a business card that proclaimed only "Intelligent Typing" with my phone number, and trekked through every building and department, plastering the cards on bulletin boards and handing them to secretaries.

Clients appeared quickly, maybe attracted by the adjective. I tried not to think about my aborted professorial career and self-demotion. And I certainly wasn't going to tell my mother.

While typing, I often became engrossed in the content of client's work. When they next visited to pick up the work, I couldn't help but ask questions: "Do you think Keats was heavily influenced by Paradise Regained?" "How did Heidegger reconcile his sense of Being and his Nazism?" "Does Drucker believe managers can really become leaders?"

My clients, nascent academic doctors, began suspecting I wasn't your average office drone. In turn they started questioning me about their drafts: "Does this follow logically?" "Does that make sense?" "Am I stretching it?" "Do I have enough substantiation?" "Too many citations?" "Am I sticking to a scholarly



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From these exchanges, and my honest responses, they began to spill their troubles. Impossible deadlines, menopausal committee members, spouses furious at them for always choosing library over family, and drafts of chapters either ignored by their dissertation chairs for months or endlessly thrown back dripping with red pen critiques and demands for more explication. Most clients, just before they left my office, wailed, "I'll never get this degree!"

I found myself unable to ignore their draft troubles and outbursts. Empathic and wanting to ease their misery. I began giving tentative opinions, suggesting little changes, scribbling cautious sample stuffy scholarly phrases, and generally bolstering them. Clients' faces relaxed and their small smiles of hope showed me I'd reached them. I felt wonderful.

From these informal discussions, and clients' enthusiastic responses, my knowledge and critical abilities grew -- exponentially more than from the years of courses and seminars of formal graduate school training. Clients welcomed my feedback and interest like a lifeline in a tidal wave. I gradually phased out of typing and into academic coaching, consulting, and editing.

Once I got over my regret at sliding from professor to typist, I saw the significant advantages of self-employment: greater autonomy, flexibility, freedom, and no damn power jockeying or committee meetings.

I could now make my own hours for seeing clients and completing their projects. I could make time to write more, in the house or at the coffee shop. I began to publish, not only short stories but essays, poems, and writing craft articles. And developed a business that became, eventually, one of helping adults pursue their (academic) dreams. And eventually, I published a book about helping adults pursue their dreams.

For many years now, I've guided clients to focus, plan, outline, write, edit, and deal with the many vicissitudes and unpleasant, often unforeseen, events of university life. I've learned how to handle client depression and the sabotage of our work together, coaxing them to vent their hopelessness at the apparent slow progress. I've handled blowups when they've vented their frustrations at me. One night at 11:30 pm, after I'd sent a client my edited manuscript, replete with many pointed questions about his methods and conclusions, he called in fury and blasted me about my "unfair tough" standards.

From these and many other skirmishes, I've also learned (and continue to learn) interpersonal skills, unambiguous communication, patience, compassion, tolerance, and forgiveness. I've also had to remind myself frequently that however clients act, they do so out of a desperation to finally finish the damn thing and have the last laugh on all their relatives, friends, and grade-school teachers.

The strange thing is that now, with my self-employed life (yes, and its uncertainties, constant need for self-discipline, and lack of group coverage), I've actually gotten to like the dissertations. And I feel it a calling (not to get too mawkish) to help clients create the highest quality work possible. Bad dissertations, even expensively bound with gold-embossed titles, are legion. I cringe at some of the dissertations that can be downloaded from even highly regarded universities.

I consider it a personal challenge to help clients produce great dissertations that they can then use, if they choose, for future scholarly publications and professional presentations. Some even transform their dissertation work into books.

Others remain content to bury their dissertations in the database and use their hard-won credentials to climb the academic beanstalk. Some use those newly-conferred precious letters after their names to grace new business cards as they begin to believe they've actually done it, and bravely strike out into consulting.

My friend who suggested that I type dissertations probably still doesn't know the value of her idea, although I've told her in more or less maudlin expressions over too many glasses of wine. I'll always be grateful to her.

And my former Chair? When my book came out, I sent him a signed copy. He never responded to my accompanying gracious note. But I heard that, a few years after I left, he edited and published a collection of others' short stories.

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Noelle Sterne holds a Ph.D. from Columbia University. She has conducted an academic coaching and editing practice for over 28 years.

The Irascible Professor comments: While one might think that by the time a university student has reached the point of writing a Ph.D. dissertation that he or she should be able to write coherently. In most cases that's true, but one can never overstate how arcane the rules can be for writing a dissertation. In the IP's case he was fortunate that there was a secretary in the Department of Physics at Penn who typed dissertations for extra income. Though the material she was typing very likely made no sense to her whatever, she was expert at formatting the material just the way the university wanted.

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