

FUTURE FACULTY FOCUS

Virginia Commonwealth University Graduate School

Fall 2016

About the program

The program offers access to resources and activities in the Academic Learning Transformation Lab and service-learning experiences through the Division of Community Engagement while providing networking opportunities with students and faculty from a wide range of disciplines, as well as discipline-specific areas of study.

Since most courses are one or two credits, students are able to easily add them into their academic program schedules. For students who complete all course requirements, the capstone course is an internship/externship experience during which the student is mentored by a senior faculty member.

PFF courses may be taken individually or as part of the Preparing Future Faculty in the Professions certification module, which places special emphasis on preparing faculty for positions in professional schools.

“It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.”
~Albert Einstein



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What To Do If You Are Stuck in the Middle of a Writing or Other Project *

Middles are tough.

It's no accident that Dante began The Inferno, his allegorical journey through Hell, "Midway upon the journey of our life / I found myself within a forest dark."

Writers (including academic ones!) also often get lost and discouraged midway through their journeys. At [Grub Street Writers](#), where I taught for many years, many writers referred unhappily to having to slog through the "Murky Middle" of their projects.

Here are some problems with middles:

- The piece (or project) is no longer fresh and new and shiny. Your early energy and enthusiasm are waning.
- At the same time, you haven't worked enough on the piece to get it organized.
- You've also become more aware of the piece's problems. It's not living up to the pristine, Platonic vision that initially inspired you!
- Moreover, you're not even sure how to solve the problems, or whether you'll even be able to solve them.
- And the end is nowhere in sight.

The middle, in other words, is where the work gets tougher at the very same moment your enthusiasm weakens. No wonder you're discouraged!

But that's not all.

Another problem is that middles are massive, comprising around eighty percent of most projects. Here's how I came up with that figure:

- The first 10% of most projects is the "Honeymoon Period" where the work is fresh and new, the possibilities seem endless, and you're filled with energy and enthusiasm.
- The last 10%, which we'll call "Paradise" in honor of Dante, is often fun, too. The major

- work of thinking out, organizing, and writing the piece is finished, and you're basically copyediting and otherwise tweaking it. That leaves 80% for the "struggling and muddling" part of the project, a.k.a., the middle. (Your middle might be more like 90% or 70%-- either way, a huge chunk of the project.)

Even worse: middles have middles.

The "middle of the middle" typically comes right after the Honeymoon Period, and I call it, "the Anti-Honeymoon." As the name implies, it's when the Honeymoon myth gets punctured, and often your Moment of Maximum Discouragement. Perhaps the most famous fictional example is the "Slough of Despond" from John Bunyan's allegory, The Pilgrim's Progress.

Solutions

1) Don't pathologize. Remind yourself that, unpleasant as they are, the Murky Middle and Anti-Honeymoon are perfectly ordinary and predictable parts of any project. Above all, don't take them as a sign there's something wrong with either you or your work. Stay Zen, and keep plugging along.

Interestingly, Bunyan's Slough consists mainly of the pilgrim Christian's "fears, and doubts, and discouraging apprehensions." In other words, it has less to do with his actual predicament, and more to do with his perceptions of, and reactions to, that predicament.

Or, as a wise teacher once told me, "The problem isn't the problem. The problem is your reaction to the problem."

2) Don't be perfectionist. If there's one thing that will get you mired in a despondent slough, it's perfectionism, which often manifests itself in a constant stream of harsh self-criticism. ("Poor word choice." "Wow, that sentence was inelegant." "This sucks." "No one's ever going to read this." Etc.) [Learn more about perfectionism and](#)

[its solutions here.](#)

3) Use an effective work process. [I've written earlier for Tomorrow's Professor about the importance of using a nonlinear writing process.](#) Along with that technique, aim to write and revise quickly: in practice, this means doing a few dozen (yes) quick pass-throughs of your text instead of two or three "megadrafts." By a pass-through, I mean you move quickly through the text, making obvious additions and correcting obvious problems, and refrain from spending too much time in any one spot. A fast process like this works because it respects the creative process (which tends to be nonlinear, organic, and holistic) instead of fighting it; also, it helps you avoid perfectionism.

This is the point where some academics typically remind me that their work is deep, serious, intellectual, analytical, complex, etc., and thus requires a slow process of focused cerebration. To which I reply: "Maybe, sometimes, but probably not as often as you think." Ultimately, you should use whichever writing style feels comfortable and brings your work to completion-but for most people that will be fast writing.

4) Maintain your perspective. Remember that, endless as they can seem, middles don't last forever; and, like Dante, Christian, and many other intrepid voyagers, you, too, will eventually reach Paradise. (Or, at least, the end of the project!)

5) Grow your perspective. When you think about it, "Murky Middle" is simply a negative label we somewhat self-defeatingly attach to a large and essential part of our process. The real problem is that we expect things to go more quickly and easily than they do. (Perfectionism, again!) So, forget your expectations, and things should go easier-and might even be fun.

And speaking of perspective... Of course, all of the above applies to far more than just writ-

ing. Many of life's important endeavors can also have Honeymoons, Anti-Honeymoons, and Murky Middles, including relationships, parenting, running and other physical challenges, and crafting and other hobbies. One of the glories of the human path is that you can practice nonperfectionism and other productive habits in one area, and it will benefit you in others: from that perspective, a Murky Middle is something to be welcomed, as it actually provides an opportunity to learn and grow.

*Rettig, Hillary. What To Do If You Are Stuck in the Middle of a Writing or Other Project. *Tomorrow's Professor*, Message Number 1417.

Alumni Spotlight:



Rachel Garthe

Rachel Garthe graduated from VCU in May 2016 with a Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology. She is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the Chicago Center for Youth Violence Prevention at the University of Chicago. Rachel works on projects related to youth and community violence prevention.

What does the PFF Program mean to you?

The PFF Program was introduced to me on one of my first days of graduate school. At the time I wasn't sure what career I wanted, and I learned that this program was designed to educate and inform students about their options in an academic career. The PFF program provided me with opportunities to explore my career options, discuss the positive and negative aspects of academia, learn innovative ways to shape my lectures and courses, and eventually write and shape my application documents for postdoc positions. The PFF program has meant a lot to me in deciding upon a career in academia.

How did your experience in the PFF program enhance your understanding of what it means to be faculty and impact your plans for a career in academia?

The PFF program and the faculty in the Psychology department were essential in building my understanding of what it means to be a faculty member. I served on a promotion and tenure committee, attended faculty meetings as a student representative, assisted with departmental events, and had regular meetings with my academic advisor. I learned more about mentorship through participation in the Graduate School Association's Mentorship program.

All of these experiences and the PFF program were essential in my decision

to pursue a career in academia. The coursework forced me to think about my career path early in graduate school, which helped me decide what opportunities I should take advantage of in graduate school. I took several teaching workshops, guest lectured, and taught several courses. Also, I continued to shape my teaching philosophy as I developed as a teacher across my time in graduate school.



How did experiences with the PFF program and receipt of the PFF program certificate of achievement give you an "edge" in your career?

All of the coursework, workshops and opportunities from the PFF program definitely gave me an "edge" in my career. The PFF program thoroughly prepared me for the job application and interview process. For example, I am able to discuss the PFF training opportunities and coursework in my teaching portfolio, and I am able to clearly articulate my teaching goals and philosophy in interviews. The PFF program helped me develop

clear teaching goals, which definitely gave me an "edge" in my career.

Tell us a little bit about your internship experience and share with us the impact the project and mentoring relationship had on you?

For my internship experience, I worked with an outstanding faculty mentor. I learned so much from attending her lectures and having discussions with her about the "ins and outs" of teaching large lecture classes, online courses, and service-learning courses. She also helped me shape my own teaching materials for future Developmental Psychology courses. She demonstrated excellent mentorship, and I'm very grateful for all of her wisdom and teaching tools.

What is the most crucial piece of advice that you would give to students currently enrolled in the PFF Program coursework?

I would advise students to take full advantage of the internship – build in activities that will help further your career goals. If you're going to teach a course, build in activities to help you prepare materials, activities and lectures for that class. Your faculty mentor can give you valuable feedback on these materials.

CONTACT US

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