Blissful Blundering: Embracing Deficiency and Surviving Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

Pursuing a graduate degree is often accompanied by overwhelming demands and expectations. When success is measured by one’s ability to develop a narrowed and exhaustive expertise, underdeveloped skills and deficiencies are often devalued and eschewed. Though academia espouses lifelong learning, discordantly, it is not easily accepting of ignorance or inadequacy. This dismissal and rejection of inability furthers the unrealistic expectation of consummate mastery, exacerbating an already stressful situation and leading a person to isolate themselves from his or her ultimately inescapable ineptitudes. Through acceptance and engagement, inadequacies can be transformed from oppressive aggravations into pleasurable relaxations. Embracing one’s own mediocrity helps to disarm unrealistic expectations and ease the incendiary fracturing of one’s successful and insufficient selves.

Key Words: lifelong learning, professional development, graduate school, expectations, coping strategies

A drive to succeed is often coupled with a rejection of failure, but this rejection is also a condemnation and dismissal of ourselves, of the part of ourselves that “needs improvement.” Not only becoming comfortable with but finding comfort in mediocrity and inequality and defeat will help erase the harmful polarizations of success and failure, of our good and bad selves, and the seriousness and absurdity of our unrelenting expectations.

As an adult, I work to maintain financial security and a high level of life satisfaction. Confronted with the necessities of a career but also the luxury to choose its trajectory, I turned to graduate school. This was a track that would allow me to continue to develop the values and skills I have learned over time, and was a direct result of the positive reinforcement I experienced in previous academic pursuits through the pleasures of
praise, intellectual stimulation, and feelings of success. Like most graduate students, I am a part of the academic community because I enjoy it, because I find academic pursuits important, and because I am good at it.

People possess a strong desire to be good at what they value and to value what they are good at. Often these sentiments work in concert, much like how an individual who finds learning a language easy but technology frustrating might become a multilingual technophobe who touts the importance of bilingualism but ignores the benefits of GISciences. The concurrent development of skills and values becomes even more pronounced when they are recognized as socially valuable as well, increasing the psychological and financial incentives. To be good at a valuable ability is the essence of success. Success is good; to acquire success you have to be good.

What I do with my person can be transformed into social and/or personal elevation. Success and good have ambiguous and variable meanings, but the equation still works. Within a culture that believes that 1) a person has some degree of control over his or her actions and future, 2) success is based on being good at valuable skills, 3) success is desirable and, 4) this desire is motivation to effect change in a person’s actions and perceived future, the result is a population of individuals striving to secure and augment their goodness and success. Everyday, these individuals fulfill a variety of roles—colleague, caregiver, producer, consumer, instructor, learner, citizen—each with their own individuality, necessities, and expectations. A graduate program is administered by and filled with people who have been self-selected to pursue excellence in and epitomize their field, in their techniques, writing, instruction, and skills as thinkers and knowers. This cycle of striving is what builds monuments of accomplishment in all walks of life but is also complicit in the creation of unrealistic and sometimes crushing expectations.

The academic community coalesces around a shared belief that knowledge is paramount. The skills to acquire, generate, possess, interpret, and discuss knowledge are greatly valued and become dominant features in an academic’s personal priorities and feelings of self-worth. Entering into a research program implies a commitment to investigate and apprehend a piece of the puzzle, to become an expert: an adroit walking, talking node of information. It is a group with high expectations for themselves and their colleagues and these high expectations are often applied to their other roles just as vigorously. By pursuing a higher degree, graduate students, like myself, participate in and promulgate this value structure on both a social and personal level.

In stressing the need for ongoing research and education, universities produce and fulfill a demand for knowledge, simultaneously creating, exposing, and addressing questions that require answers and gaps in understanding that require bridging. Although an establishment dependent on the recognition of ignorance and a desire to alleviate it through knowledge acquisition, academia can be acutely inhospitable to incomprehension. Even in a learning institution, when goodness and success are measured not by proficiency but by mastery, not knowing often equates to failure or at best to not-success. As graduate students, reared within or otherwise drawn to the environment of academia, we too can become inhospitable to our own incompetence, to those parts of ourselves that are not exemplary, and to those skills or ideas or people that we do not understand. Weaknesses become downgraded, ignored, and suppressed, while qualifications are accentuated, augmented, or even exaggerated. Graduate students are advised or required to attend a plethora of courses and workshops that aim to create, through re-representation and re-imagining, a more marketable you: the goal is not merely excellence in doing and being, but also in developing a meticulous and impeccable self portrait. Emphasis is placed so singularly on re-framing oneself to pursue and highlight strengths that weaknesses are rarely acknowledged or confronted. Academia is largely a realm of narrowing...
expertise, where a person has the expectation and flexibility to surround oneself with a similar and supportive community of niche knowledge, but complete isolation and perfection is never an option. Inability and ignorance will always persist for every person. Eventually and repeatedly, it will need to be confronted. When inadequacies are encountered the highly educated and highly skilled academic often lacks the fundamental skill that will allow him or her to manage and positively gain from the experience: being good at being not good.

In response, I advocate a return to inexperience and a revival of incompetence. The intent is not to overcome inadequacies but to overcome the rejection and repulsion of inadequacy, to interact with and appreciate the part of oneself that is a novice, that is unskilled, that is terrible at things. In our realm of infinite possibilities everyone will always be terrible at something, there is no reason to allow this reality to be unnecessarily harmful, restrictive, stressful, or avoided. After all, recognizing and confronting inability and challenging oneself is the only way to become good at being not good and a significant step towards becoming better at living well. I recommend golf. I am a miserable golfer and I hope to see little to no improvement in my game. Engaging with this failure of skill is one of my greatest pleasures, pacifiers, and successes, though I prefer not to muddy my accomplishment with words like success. Working hard to develop skills, improve oneself, and achieve one's goals should not be abandoned; but, to manage and mitigate the painful side effects of unrealistic expectations, a distaste and discomfort at the unknown, and crippling frustration at inability, the critical and all too often overlooked skills of acknowledging, accepting, and working well with one's own shortcomings must also be cultivated. And if, by some accidental fluke, I someday become an adequate golfer, I am comforted by my nearly endless supply of ineptitudes, new beginnings, and opportunities for lifelong learning.