

JOB MARKET

# Quenching a Thirst for Learning

Preoccupations

By KATHERINE JAMIESON AUG. 22, 2009

I'M an adjunct professor, one of hundreds of thousands in an overeducated, unmoored, disposable work force staffing a majority of the nation's colleges and universities. At the community college where I work, I have no permanent desk or office, no telephone, no benefits and, to many, no name. When I calculate the time and money spent traveling, grading, answering e-mail, teaching and planning, my wages come to about \$9 an hour.

Faced with this situation at any other job, I'd leave with no regrets. But these conditions are outweighed by the simple fact that I'm needed. When I walk into my classroom and look into 20 pairs of eyes ready and waiting to learn, I can't turn away.

My students don't make distinctions between a tenured faculty member and me. They're oblivious to the internal wrangling of academia, and the heroic efforts of the unions to garner us a living wage. They're just looking for someone to teach them. But once the semester is over, I can't promise that I'll see them again because I never know if I'll be rehired. When they try to enroll in my coming classes, the registrar can't even locate me in the computer system.

I teach introductory reading and writing courses, and my background as a writer

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minutes after teaching for a year and a half — I design my curriculum around my own interest: memoir.

What my students may lack in literacy, they make up for in life experience. My classes are diverse in every possible way: age, race, ethnicity, income, educational background. The high school dropout, bartending after her second child; the woman who washed dishes for 30 years; and the Ukrainian doctor, versed in Greek and Latin, all come seeking the same skills.

Each week I read two to three pages from each of them — about C-sections, lost loves, getting beaten up. I recall the young man who grew up on a street with a bicycle shop on the corner and was taunted by customers riding near his house, knowing that his parents could never afford to buy him a bike. And the young woman who was caught in gang crossfire, and still carries the scars on her knees from her dive to the pavement.

Often, my students' complicated lives walk off the page and into my classroom. One of my brightest students, who had dropped out of high school, showed up late to his midterm conference and announced that he had just gotten married. Gesturing to a teenage girl slouched in a chair, texting over the wide arc of her pregnant belly, he said they had had to marry suddenly in order to get her out of her foster home.

He'd pulled out a ragged couple of scrawled notebook sheets from his backpack, one of few papers he'd given me that semester. I agreed to see him for the conference. A wedding gift, I thought: it's the least that I can do.

I love my students' lack of pretension, their raw intellect. Messages arrive in my in-box from "hotpinkylady" and "ferretman389" addressed to "Jamieson" — the professor part lopped off, or forgotten. They're not afraid to tell me that the books and stories we read are dull, or that I'm confusing them.

In college and in graduate school, I learned to hide my ignorance, surreptitiously looking up information on my own time. My students don't bother with that kind of intellectual guile. Their honesty disarms me, and forces me to keep

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When I started at the college, I took it as a personal failure every time a student dropped out. But time and again in students' lives, the responsibility of caring for young children and elderly parents, or the effort of balancing 50-hour workweeks, outweighed the importance of distinguishing run-on sentences from fragmented ones.

Often, it is the older students who keep going, and I'm reassured by the fact that many of them left school in the past and then returned, sometimes decades later. Community colleges are forgiving in this way: students come and go, dodging the vagaries of fate, but they're welcomed again whenever they're ready to start anew.

I guess that this is why I keep coming back, too: I like to help people begin again. It takes an enormous amount of courage to re-enter school as an adult, but this choice can mean the difference between a lifelong career in the fast-food industry and a master's degree. My students' yearning for opportunity is what draws me back each semester.

The recently married student disappeared from my class several weeks after we had our conference. I'd told him plainly that he couldn't pass unless he turned in his work. One evening, after failing another quiz, he left at the break, never to return. The school is not a setting for goodbyes, and I knew I wouldn't hear from him again.

His books and papers were abandoned on his desk, but I noticed that he had taken one with him: "Drown," a collection of short stories by Junot Díaz about the immigrant experience in the United States. I'm grateful for whatever is in this book that had spoken to him and will, I hope, one day bring him back to finish what he's started.

Katherine Jamieson is a freelance writer and recent graduate of the University of Iowa Nonfiction Writing Program.

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