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A SPACE FOR SCHOLARS ON THE MARGINS OF
ACADEMIA

08.08.13

by Jeana Jorgensen,
Ph.D.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL WAYS OF VALIDATING THE ADJUNCT EXPERIENCE

Dr. Jeana Jorgensen is a folklorist, writer, and dancer. Her scholarship explores fairy tales and other narratives, dance, body art, gender identity, feminist theory, and digital humanities. She is also a blogger at MySexProfessor.com and on [her own site](#) (e.g., [many posts](#) on her reflections on folklore and academia in general). Below, Dr. Jorgensen reflects on seeking (and hopefully finding) validation as an adjunct instructor, though these experiences may resonate in some way with all scholars.

Some Internal And External Ways Of Validating The Adjunct Experience

I try to limit



Photo by James Moriarty

how much I read about adjuncts in the news, though I feel I must keep up with it to a degree as I am currently working as an adjunct. News stories such as [this one](#) give statistics as well as food for thought, but they also make

me feel—to choose a mild description—crummy about my current status as an adjunct. I had hoped (perhaps naively) to land a tenure-track job straight out of grad school, and so anything other than achieving my hope feels like failure. More on that shortly.

This has me thinking about why I do what I do, and what I'm getting out of it. As an introvert, I spend a lot of time in quiet reflection and solitude, and thus I tend to be pretty attuned to the sense of internal validation I receive from a given pursuit. By "validation," I mean a feeling of fulfillment and achievement that comes from accomplishing something worthwhile. External validation derives from having someone other than yourself recognize your achievement, status, or skill, while internal validation is something that you confer on yourself. The diploma I received upon completing my doctorate is an example of external validation, while the pride I feel when my students excel in discussing a complex topic exemplifies internal validation.

Internally? I love teaching. I love connecting students with the most exciting ideas, topics, and methods of my disciplines, folklore and gender studies. Few things fill me with more joy than seeing students "get it," whether "it" is the

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realization that folklore is, indeed, all around us, or the recognition that the fairy tales they enjoyed in youth contain coded messages about gender roles and socialization.

While examining external validation, however, the picture becomes more complicated. In terms of modern expectations for productive adult members of society, I am not successful. I'm a failure. While it'd be gauche to go into too much detail (though I wonder, in part, how much the distaste for discussing financial details is class-motivated), my adjunct salary wouldn't put me above the poverty line. In America, where money counts for so much, I'm a failure because I don't earn enough to support myself. It galls me to come to terms with the fact that were I not married, I likely wouldn't have health insurance—which, of course, foregrounds the fact that I benefit from heterosexual privilege, as I don't currently reside in a state where non-heterosexual unions are recognized.

And yet if we shift the perspective, I receive plenty of external validation as a scholar in my field. Not counting my current employment status, I'm otherwise pretty successful as a scholar: I finished my Ph.D. in a decent amount of time, and as [my CV shows](#), I have a lot of publications and presentations under my belt. And I love what I do as a scholar. It makes me feel giddy every time I see that someone cites my research, which is yet another form of external validation.

From the perspective of my campus or department, the question of external validation is more ambiguous. I haven't yet figured out whether my identity as a scholar who publishes and presents has any bearing on what I do as an adjunct instructor. This is partially because different institutions seem to have varying degrees of oversight when it comes to what their adjuncts do. For instance, is canceling class to present a paper at a national or international conference something that my supervisors care about? Does

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having more publications make me an asset because it shows that I really know my stuff, or does it make it seem like I don't spend enough time on my teaching preparation? I have yet to figure these things out, so I mostly do what fulfills me as a scholar, teacher, and person.

On the whole, I'm getting to do what I love, so I hesitate to go on about the unfairness of the adjunct situation. And yet even as I write this, I'm aware that the "do it because you love it" rationale can be annoyingly short-sighted (brilliant takedown of [that logic here](#)). On the level of self-interest, one concern is that I don't want to look like I'm complaining overly much. I'm aware that whining a lot, or agitating for change, in a blog post under my real name could make me look like an undesirable employee (though I don't believe that anything I've written here is terribly incendiary or unduly revealing). However, I also believe in narrating one's experiences authentically when it's possible to safely do so, and I do hope that for others, this notion of evaluating one's success from both internal and external standards is useful. I don't have all the answers, but I am getting better at learning how to nurture myself, which requires attention to both the internal and external factors in my life. And on that note, since dance is one of the things that makes me flourish, I'm off to engage in some dance therapy, leaving these questions for another time.

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