

Semester Riff

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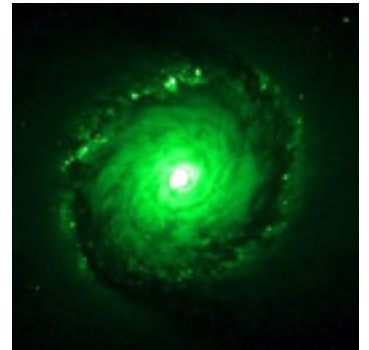
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It was a week before the semester started that I got the brief email. Because I had expressed an interest in teaching physics and math in addition to English when I registered with the community college system, I was getting the email, the writer said, in the hope that some adjunct instructor out there would be able to help the College of Alameda out of its bind. In just one week, you see, Astronomy 1 would start, but the instructor had vanished.

Well, not exactly vanished. It wasn't as though aliens from another galaxy had snatched him away though the effect on the college was about the same. They knew where he was, which wasn't where they thought he was going to be, since he was an adjunct instructor who had finally secured a coveted permanent position.

This is a big deal. If an adjunct instructor wants to make enough money to live, as you probably know, he flies the freeways from one campus to another to make ends meet since an adjunct cannot teach a full load at any given college and is only paid for the number of hours he appears in class, not for the number of hours he spends preparing for class and grading assignments and tests.

While the rule of thumb for college students is that they should expect to spend two hours doing homework for each hour in class, the reality for an instructor -- there are no thumbs involved in any way, ruled or otherwise -- is that he must take as much time as required to prepare for his classes and grade his papers. And the odd thing is that the longer it takes for an instructor to prepare, because the material is new or super interesting or more difficult to understand, the more fun an instructor probably has.



Which is to say, I suppose, that the more engaged an adjunct instructor is in his material and the work his students are doing, the less he gets paid. Unless, of course, he's a lot more efficient than I am, which is probably a pretty good bet since I haven't been teaching all that long, even though I'm an old guy, and tend to get carried away without keeping my eye on the clock.

But don't get me wrong. I'm not complaining about my situation. As a post-physics retirement activity, getting a graduate degree in English so that I could teach composition and literature is just about the greatest thing that could have happened to me save for winning the lottery, which is unlikely, I think you'll agree, since I never buy a ticket, or becoming a grandparent, which can happen anytime our boys and daughters-in-law are ready, not that my wife and I are applying any pressure.

No, I'm not telling you this to complain, but to give you a sense of how reasonable it was for the astronomy instructor at College of Alameda to take a permanent position at the last possible minute. Finally he would be paid for more than his hours in class; finally he could give up his freeway flying; finally he would have enough money for a life beyond driving, prepping, presenting and grading.

Congratulations and good luck to him, I thought, as I read the email.

I also thought about how short the time would be before I would have to teach, about the difficulty I'd have getting up to speed in astronomy since I hadn't taught it before and hadn't really thought much about since I decided to get my Ph.D. in elementary particles rather than in my first love, astrophysics, which was longer ago than I care to admit. I thought about the time I'd have to prepare for my interview, reading an astronomy text in a day or two, about the high probability that I would embarrass myself in front of the hiring committee, and about the reality that when I was supposed to be preparing my English lessons, I was studying astronomy instead.

But something unanticipated happened: the hiring committee

decided to give me a chance.

For a week or two Kepler and Newton fought for space in my brain with checkmark story structures and rhetorical forms. But now we're finishing our fourth week. I've learned my students' names and better understand their weaknesses and strengths. The path of the courses is becoming clearer, and the astronomical ideas that every once in a while pop up in my English classes are now more often than not there for a reason.

While I'm doing a little freeway flying myself, traveling between Solano College and College of Alameda, the feeling I always seem to have by this point in the semester is returning: my students are fantastic and the future looks bright, for when you get to know our young people, living right here right now is an encouraging place to be.

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