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The Two Faces of the “Ocean”

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Introduction

Growing up in a tiny seaside town in Kōchi, I always had an ambivalent relationship with the ocean. The sounds and smells of the waves, the rocky beaches, and the sea breezes could make me feel tranquil or uneasy. Once I left my hometown, I thought I had lost touch with the sea. Yet as I contemplate my journey—from my arrival in the United States, through my public high school—teaching days, summer teacher-training programs, and graduate school, and to my current academic life as a professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (“Illinois” hereafter)—I realize that the ocean has always been an important part of my life and shaped me into who I am now. The “ocean” I’m referring to here is rather metaphorical. It comes and goes with different voices and in different forms or shapes, just like each type of ocean wave is distinct. Sometimes it appears as my grad school advisor or a faculty mentor, and sometimes as a challenge such as the constant struggle of balancing the multiple roles I play—researcher, teacher, and administrator. This essay describes how a rather timid and introverted person looked beyond what she thought was the horizon, and how this metaphorical “ocean” has been instrumental in my continuing professional journey.

Journey to My Current Position: Leaving My Sanctuary

My acquaintances are often mildly surprised to learn that I am a shy person, and a homebody. I thrive on routine and prefer to stay in my comfort zone. During the current pandemic, unlike many of my colleagues and students, I’ve enjoyed working from home. Nevertheless, my current comfort zone is quite different from the one I inhabited when I started my job as an assistant professor at Illinois eighteen years ago, which consisted of teaching Japanese, coordinating the Japanese language program, and supervising and training graduate student teachers (GSTs). That was the



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place I felt safe and confident; it was where I knew I could make a contribution and could tell what worked and what did not. During my pre-tenure days, however, this safe space was often threatened by the raging ocean waves of the pressure to publish and teach courses outside of my expertise, as well as constant worries that Japanese-language classes would be cut due to chronic shortages of GSTs and funding. Each angry wave attacked my self-confidence and tried to pull me down. Yet even in the midst of such difficult moments, I found I could still hear the calm voice of a peaceful sea—especially when I listened to the guidance of others such as my husband, my research mentor, my department head, and my friends—which encouraged me and kept me sane and healthy.

It was a great relief when I finally got tenure after six long, agonizing years; it was one of my happiest moments, and my stress levels decreased significantly. Once again, I felt quite safe and cozy, and I thought, “Now I can do the things I always wanted to do!” Then *it* happened; *it* was something I hadn’t expected or prepared for. I lost all my motivation and passion for teaching, researching, or, really, doing anything. Even the things I used to do for fun weren’t fun anymore, as waves of mental exhaustion battered me. It took some time for me to realize that I was experiencing a classic case of the *post-tenure slump*. Looking back now, I understand that I needed a break, which is the point of sabbaticals—however, for a variety of reasons, a sabbatical was not possible for me at that time.

During my post-tenure blues, I desperately sought a way to regain my confidence, energy, and enthusiasm. After some trial and error, I eventually bestirred myself to make some changes. I, Misumi Sadler, who loved to be in my regular groove, decided to tackle something new—something I had never done before. I first dove into the unfamiliar territory of research outside of my field, beginning a study on the intercultural competence of first-year Japanese-language students and newly appointed GSTs of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean language programs. My new research project required me to read different sorts of books and articles, learn new methodologies, and attend workshops to become certified as a tester for intercultural competence.

I also signed up for a project on the professional development of GSTs aided by the reflective teaching framework of “Exploratory Practice” developed by Dick Allwright in the early 1990s (2003, 2006). Exploratory practice has seven main principles:

1. Put “quality of life” first.
2. Work primarily to understand language classroom life.
3. Involve everybody.
4. Work to bring people together.
5. Work also for mutual development.
6. Integrate the work for understanding into classroom practice.
7. Make the work a continuous enterprise. (Allwright 2003:128–130)

These guiding principles bring attention to “the *quality of classroom life* and *mutual understanding* between teachers and learners,” and underscore “educational values of inclusivity, collegiality, and sustainability” (Crane, Sadler, Ha, and Ojiambo 2011:110; my italics). The principles didn’t fully resonate with me at the time, but as I discuss in the next section, my sense of their relevance and significance has grown during my current leadership role, and they have become my core values of life in general.

This project also allowed me to work closely with foreign language coordinators, supervisors, and GSTs from other departments, which was rather a drastic change for me because I had always preferred to work alone, whether doing research or teaching. Not having full control has always scared me, and I felt easily lost in a group. So I was a little apprehensive, but it soon became apparent that this was exactly the kind of experience I needed to break free from the “port of safety” I had become trapped in. I learned the importance of collaboration, and of recognizing and valuing diverse voices and opinions. In addition, the interaction with other foreign language coordinators and GSTs on campus led me to reflect on and improve not just my own language program but myself, as a language educator and human being.

Around the same time, I was tackling these new projects, other waves surged in when I took on a new administrative duty as departmental undergraduate advisor. I was reluctant to take the position, thinking that I wasn’t qualified or competent enough, but I didn’t know how to say no, and I unwillingly ended up accepting it. It was a struggle to learn the new job, from advising students and monitoring their progress toward degree completion to understanding the related policies, regulations, graduation requirements, course articulation system, study-abroad course approvals, and so on, and it brought an endless sea of paperwork. So many emails from students, so many meetings with them, and so many days without time to eat lunch. The first year was quite bumpy, but by the end of the year, I had started enjoying the work; I particularly relished the time interacting with undergraduate majors and minors, listening to their life

stories and dreams, hearing about their study abroad experiences, and sharing my personal experiences of learning English. Over my seven years as the undergraduate advisor, I learned to listen carefully to each student's needs and to become more compassionate and patient.

All these experiences during my post-tenure slump days helped me go beyond the horizon, pushed me from my cozy safe place, and shaped me into the person I am now. It was a time for self-rediscovery and self-reflection on my own passions, motivations, strengths, limits, and fears.

Challenges and Triumphs in My Current Position

My role as the Director of the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies (CEAPS) at Illinois came about rather unexpectedly, though I arrived at it gradually through what I refer to as a “slide, step, and jump” process. The first time I was asked if I would be interested in the position, the idea terrified me due to my self-perceived lack of competence and confidence, and the five-year commitment. I declined, happily choosing to serve another year as my department's undergraduate advisor instead. A year later, I was asked to serve as the *acting* director of CEAPS for one academic year while the current director was on leave. “I can do it for just one year,” I thought, and decided to slide just one toe into this new ocean. It turned out to be the most mentally and physically exhausting year I had ever had.

In retrospect, I still can hardly believe that I accepted the position. I lacked pretty much everything required to be a successful director of an area-studies center; I didn't have much institutional knowledge beyond what I had gained in my capacity as my department's undergraduate advisor, and I knew little of fields other than linguistics and pedagogy, or of the people beyond my own department. I felt I had no leadership skills, no vision, no charisma, and no skill at communication. I suppose I thought I could get by without any of this as merely the “acting” director, but I was wrong. Whether you're a substitute or the real thing, people expect you to be the director, and you have to act accordingly; I had a lot to learn.

Many of the challenges I faced that year were largely because I had underestimated the scope of my role as the acting director. The number of emails I received and sent increased dramatically. The number of events and meetings was overwhelming; I constantly felt tossed around by the waves of my public engagements. And as soon as one event was over, we would start preparing for the next, with no time to feel relieved or reflect on what had gone well and what had not. I was also running around

campus, crossing from one meeting at building A, to another—which would start in five minutes!—at building B, and then back to building A to teach a class or attend yet another meeting.

The *tsunami* of emails, events, and meetings crashed over me and nearly pushed me out to sea all semester long, but the biggest and strongest *tsunami* was, without a doubt, the process of writing CEAPS's Title VI grant proposal. The Title VI International Educational Programs, a key component of the congressional Higher Education Act, are intended to enhance and promote the instruction of area studies and modern foreign languages to create and maintain a pool of international and area studies experts who can fulfill national needs. These eight grant programs are housed in the U. S. Department of Education. CEAPS, along with other area centers, focuses on the National Resource Center and Foreign Language and Area Studies fellowship grant programs. This once-every-four-year competition is the primary source of funding for area centers' research, teaching, programming, and outreach activities. CEAPS and its consortium partner, the East Asian Studies Center at Indiana University, had been jointly awarded Title VI funding for the last three cycles (twelve years). The pressure of expectations created enormous waves that crashed around me through many sleepless nights. I literally knew nothing about this type of grant proposal writing and had to learn everything from scratch. Not knowing what to do terrified me, and I asked myself over and over why I had taken on this task and how I could possibly do it all alone.

In what was undoubtedly my most challenging year yet, Allwright's exploratory practice (EP) suddenly became much more relevant to me. Although EP was proposed to support ongoing teacher reflection and avoid teacher burnout, I found it incredibly useful in my role as acting director, particularly as we prepared the grant proposal. In fact, at my worst moment, when I thought I was about to be pushed into unknown depths by raging waters, reflecting on the EP principles helped me understand that my most important job was to develop a community where each of us—center director, associate director, office manager, and graduate assistants—could trust and understand each other, work together to maintain healthy, constructive, and harmonious lives, and become active participants in our mutual development and success. I learned that I could listen to, trust, and respect my highly competent co-workers' decisions and opinions. Realizing that I didn't have to do it all alone was a tremendous relief. The energy, tenacity, and resilience of my team were so contagious that I eventually became eager and enthusiastic myself.

On a daily basis, we held bootcamp-like sessions to develop our proposal. We would carefully read the Center's previous proposal and the reviewers' comments side-by-side to identify its strengths and weaknesses, color-coding and taking meticulous notes as we went along. We also read other institutes' successful past proposals to learn about their programming and projects, as well as the campus-level, regional, national, and international impacts. We visited our faculty members in their offices to ensure we understood their needs. We met with faculty who had requested Title VI funding to learn about their proposed projects and to discuss ways in which the Center could help them achieve their goals. We also visited our consortium partner at Indiana University for a Title VI session to discuss possible joint activities such as the National Dissertation Workshop and the Illinois-Indiana Faculty Exchange Talk Series. As the deadline came closer and closer, our "bootcamp" sessions got longer and longer. We literally wrote the proposal together word-by-word while discussing things such as how each initiative requested by a group of faculty members was aligned with our goals and how effectively our quantitative and qualitative data supported these goals. We listened to and supported each other as we exchanged ideas and concerns. We worked hard, but our daily sessions were also full of laughter and human connection, and occasional personal stories we all could identify with—about conflicts with friends and co-workers, successful and unsuccessful job interviews, hits and misses in our foreign language learning experiences, and so on.

In the end, our proposal was successful, and we were awarded four more years of funding (2018–2022). Despite the frenzy of that year and the loss of research time, I was truly content, and I appreciated all the experiences the acting directorship had brought me. I had no hesitation then to take the next "step," when I was again asked to take the interim director position for the academic year of 2019–2020. The following year, I took the final "jump" when I formally accepted the position of the Director of CEAPS, and I am now in the second year of my five-year term, still working closely with the same Center staff as well as new members, and still working hard for mutual understanding and development. We are now preparing our Title VI grant proposal for 2022–2026.

Advice to Future Leaders

My advice to future leaders is quite simple. First, don't be afraid of looking beyond the horizon. I must admit that new things can still be scary and daunting for me. As described throughout this essay, sometimes changes in my life have been my own choice, and at other times I have felt tossed

around by the waves of the unknown. All things considered, however, I now always try to think about how a little “slide” will push me to my current limit and perhaps help me depart from my norm, and how that could lead me to take the next “step,” which might turn into a “jump” down the road. That first little slide can be something easy, like attending a talk on a subject that is not within your expertise, having a chat with someone sitting next to you during the talk, or reaching out to a newly hired faculty member in your department. Second, make time for self-discovery and self-reflection. Most of us are so busy with day-to-day service and teaching that we hardly ever take the time to step back and contemplate what’s going on in our lives and our work. A few minutes a day of reflection can do the trick. Even noting down your thoughts and feelings at the end of the week can help you evaluate if you are happy with what happened that week and if you see a need for modifications moving forward. In my case, such self-reflection during the most demanding year of my academic life steered me to Allwright’s (2003, 2006) guiding principles.

As I close this essay, I ask myself: Am I a good leader? I don’t know, but I can say this: as an active participant in the CEAPS community, I am proud of my efforts to maintain a healthy, harmonious, and constructive community, and to continue to involve everyone as we work together toward mutual goals and development. Although my relationship with the “ocean” has had its ups and downs, these are the experiences that have led me to who I am now.

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