

Chapter 9. Unheard Voices and Unseen Faces: The Experience of Adjuncts

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Let's think about universities and colleges in the US and the world. What are these bastions of knowledge? How are these resources marketed, produced, and expressed? According to Junct Rebellion, in the United States, "state universities used to be free, or very low-cost; they used to employ full-time faculty," but today, "80% of faculty across the country are hired on 'adjunct' contracts, usually lasting one semester at a time. Classes are designed and overseen by administrators who have never taught. Administrators outnumber both faculty and students on most campuses across the U.S. In short, our academic system has been hijacked by for-profit business models . . ." ("About junctrebellion").

In this system, much of the teaching is accomplished by adjunct professors, also referred to as part-time or contingent faculty. Data supports this, and according to New Faculty Majority, "75.5 percent of U.S. college faculty are now off the tenure track...1.3 out of 1.8 million faculty members." Furthermore, of that contingent faculty, "just over 50% are . . . 'adjunct,'" which includes minimal wages, no health benefits, and no 403(b) contributions from their employer ("Facts about Adjuncts"). This presents a clear injustice and inequality between the full-time faculty and the adjunct faculty.

In "The Professional Identity of Adjunct Faculty: Exploratory Study at a Private University in the UAE," Taghreed Ibrahim Masri found through his qualitative study that adjunct faculty are in conflict about their professional selves because of "being perceived differently by their students, colleagues, administrators and themselves. Results also showed that adjuncts are vulnerable, insecure, and embarrassed to declare their identity to their students" (16). This is part of the adjunct dilemma: maintaining a professional role while feeling like a member of the underclass.

In this chapter, we will walk you through some of these adjuncts' stories. Scholars who wanted to be academics their whole lives, some of whom moved to other countries to do so and succeeded extraordinarily well, find that being an adjunct absolutely rips them to the soul. It is the insecurity of this job, which depends on semester-by-semester hiring, that renders adjuncts disposable in a department and causes them to feel like they are unseen.

Always being treated as disposable pieces in the system is extremely stressful and affects mental health, as in the case of the participants in this study. Often adjuncts operate completely on their own and do not have an office or much contact with full-time faculty; consequently, they are literally unseen in their de-

partments, although in the classroom they are fully engaged with a passion for teaching and a commitment to the field in which they specialize.

The adjuncts' stories that we weave in this article tell of a desire to participate fully, of their love for teaching, of their grit and persistence within the unfortunate insecurity of life in a subtle but persistent class system made up of full-time and part-time faculty, and of the decision-making power of administrators. Most of the time, the voices of adjunct faculty are not heard, and their faces and problems are not seen nor addressed. Therefore, our hope is that we provide them, even if only minimally, with an opportunity to share their concerns and experiences.

Hearing their Voices, Seeing their Faces

The conditions we have described illustrate why we decided to investigate more closely the professional lives and work experiences of seven adjunct professors. Andy, David, Francesca, Jesse, Ken, Sylvia, and Zoe are pseudonyms chosen to protect the identities of the participants. Collectively, the participants have been adjunct professors at various colleges and universities for 10-18 years, and their ages range from their 30s to their 70s.

We chose narrative inquiry as the basis of this qualitative research to examine through their own voices and stories these adjuncts' lived experiences (Connelly and Clandinin 277; Merriam and Tisdell). We triangulated the data by using semi-structured interviews, journal entries, and focus groups. We then analyzed the collected, recorded, and transcribed data to lead us to the main themes that emerged, which we will explore further in the following sections.

Exploitation and Unjust Systems

One of the main themes that emerged from the data was exploitation and unjust systems in higher education. Without exception, all the participants expressed an incredible amount of passion when talking about teaching and sharing their knowledge, even though the work circumstances created for them have been far from ideal. Jesse, for instance, discussed the politics that take place behind the scenes each semester: "The politics of it all is hard to stomach sometimes because these are the people who decide if they have a course for you to teach, these are the people who decide if you get a promotion, and these are people who decide if you get to be on committees. This is part of the toxic culture of academia, the huge conflict of interest."

While discussing the exploitation experienced by adjuncts, Sylvia mentioned that after more than a decade of working as an adjunct faculty, she feels "like a shell—over time the system has made me feel like a shell." Zoe touched upon this subject further, adding, "I don't get paid equally. I don't know my future, my job could disappear any moment, but I still want to do it. There is no end. It is control based on your passion. A system that is progressively getting worse."

Similar sentiments were shared by Andy: “It used to be all I cared about, my true passion and goal in life, but after more than ten years of not having any kind of job security, stability, and having debilitating student loans that keep adding interest, I think that pursuing an academic career was one of the worst decisions of my life.” This sentiment reveals the unending exploitation of deeply passionate and highly qualified experts by unfair treatment in higher education.

Identity Loss and Gains

Identity was also a significant topic when the participants explored their experiences as adjuncts. Francesca talked about the dual nature of her identity that comes with the respect and status of being called a professor but ironically being paid less than a construction worker. Sylvia examined her identity, expressing that she has lost touch with her true self as a teacher: “I feel like a puppet sometimes. I feel like being an adjunct for so many years has stolen my enthusiasm and identity.”

Jesse compared being an adjunct with being in a codependent relationship:

There’s a lot of stress as an adjunct faculty member, and we do a lot, and that’s kind of like a codependent relationship, where we let certain things happen to us because we have to, and we’re at the same time part of that relationship, agreeing and consenting to things, but we know it’s not in our best interest. So, you stay in this kind of yucky relationship, and we’re just completely codependent on each other. It would be nice at some point to just erase the codependency and be like, “Hey, you’re a valuable part of our community, and we’re going to give you stability, and security, and benefits.”

Authenticity and Autonomy

Mass standardization, inflexible curricula, and strict regulations are phenomena that have caused the authenticity and autonomy of adjunct faculty members to be threatened. Andy likened working as a contingent faculty member to “following the rules of the jungle” because of the huge power differences between adjuncts and full-time faculty:

Every now and then, they throw us a bone by inviting us to some things, but we never get paid and are not treated equally, or as if we matter anyway. In a way, sometimes I feel some of the full-time faculty like it this way because the less secure adjuncts are in their positions, the more secure and powerful they are in their full-time positions. They have less competition and more control and power over everything that happens in the department.

This control and power also translates to what can or cannot be taught during class time. With many universities offering multiple sections of the same courses each semester, the full power and control over choosing the course content and assignments go to the full-time faculty while the part-time faculty are asked to follow the materials in detail. Zoe discussed how she tries to be authentic in her instruction despite having to use materials and assignments that she would not necessarily have chosen herself; she explained she does this by not pretending to be somebody else while teaching and by telling students “anecdotes that are relevant and enable transfer through metaphor.” Sylvia also explored her difficulties with maintaining her authenticity and autonomy, saying:

I see how following syllabi that I truly don't feel passionate about affects my teaching negatively and how it affects my students' learning negatively. It is also a huge disrespect to the mind and soul of a scholar and expert because it technically strips away any kind of professionalism and individuality of a professor and researcher who has spent decades of their lives studying the field and working in all aspects of it.

Life Quality and Mental Health

Perhaps the most devastating aspects of being an adjunct faculty member are the negative effects of these uncertain jobs on life quality and mental health. Francesca talked about the stressful nature of not having consistent paychecks even though she is a highly qualified expert in her field, saying, “Being in a low income [bracket], you just live day by day. Every time you have a bill coming in, it's like, okay, how am I gonna pay it?” Jessie also highlighted this issue by discussing his constant stress, his financial uncertainties, and the fact that as a part-time faculty member, there is never a guarantee that courses will be available the following semester and, thus, the job can disappear overnight.

For some, such as Andy, the cut goes even deeper: “It has affected me in so many ways. I am in my 40s with no job security and no reliable paycheck and a mountain of debt and student loans I will never be able to pay back for the rest of my life. The way schools treat adjuncts is criminal. I hated every day of it for ten years.” David also mentioned that he has not been able to make any concrete life plans, such as pursuing marriage and building a family, due to the unsettled nature of his part-time teaching jobs.

Furthermore, Sylvia discussed that the way she has been treated by full-time faculty members and administrators over the years has had long-term effects on her mental health by contributing to her anxiety and depression. When recalling an incident that involved having her fully enrolled courses abruptly taken away a few days before the beginning of a new semester because of low enrollment in the full-time faculty's sections, she elaborated:

When I complained, the first thing they told me was, “You were never going to become full-time anyway,” which was the most condescending and irrelevant response they could possibly give. My complaint wasn’t anything about becoming full-time. It was about not putting another fellow human in such a horrible situation with no warning, when now they are jobless with no possibility to look for other courses by that time of the semester. Even more than being professionals, which they weren’t, for me it was about being decent humans, and the whole experience affected me to the extent that now even years later I can’t trust any of my colleagues.

Future Possibilities or Lack Thereof

Some areas of study and expertise, such as engineering, law, and medicine, might have other options for adjunct faculty to pursue; however, other fields are not as fortunate. Andy highlighted this point by saying, “In my field of humanities, there are not that many options with a Ph.D. There are very limited opportunities for us outside of academia.” Sylvia also echoes similar concerns: “Most of the time I am overqualified for the jobs that I could have easily taken with a B.A. or M.A., and even if I take them, I would still not be able to pay the huge amount of debt that was accumulated getting a useless terminal degree.”

For some others participants who have jobs with more security, the horizons are brighter. For Ken, who is a school administrator as his main career, being an adjunct is a way to keep in touch with university students. However, Ken still recognizes that if he did not have his full-time job, the adjunct position would not be sufficient to maintain his normal lifestyle. He explains, “For the amount of money you receive, it is not like my real work as a school administrator. Yet coming in contact with wonderful students that have varied backgrounds, who also want to make a difference in the lives of children, is rewarding in and of itself.”

Zoe also emphasizes that the best way to hold an adjunct or part time position is if a person has another source of support: “If you have another source of income, if you have a partner who is willing to support or share in the financial responsibilities, yes. But if you are a person without a partner, and you might have other people to take care of, whether it’s a child, whether it’s an adult who can’t work for themselves, whether it’s an elderly person, being an adjunct is absolutely impossible.”

Overall, none of the participants could have survived in today’s economy by solely relying on adjunct positions. The lack of possibilities, hope, and motivation that the limitations of the adjunct system impose in turn lowers the quality of educational systems, with more professors and true educators leaving the field because of the broken system that does not support its own members.

Discussion and Possible Solutions

Throughout this chapter, we aimed to pull the curtains so the faces and stories of adjunct professors, some of whom have devoted decades of their lives to their professional careers, could be seen and their voices could be heard: faces and voices that unfortunately the unjust systems of exploitation in higher education have chosen to ignore, silence, and hide by their lack of actions, care, and support. The common thread among all the stories was a narration of lives and work done out of passion and devotion, which have gone unappreciated and underpaid by those in charge of making decisions.

As documented in this chapter, the situation for adjuncts is grim not only financially but also in terms of identity and agency. Primarily, what can be seen in this systemic relationship is a lack of agency on the part of adjuncts. Why is this important? Because as Albert Bandura attests, “the capacity to exercise control over the nature and quality of one’s life is the essence of humanness” (1), and having this capacity is having agency. Lacking this agency is *de facto* reducing the humanness of an adjunct professor. Bandura refers to the “nature and quality” of life. In the stories told by the participants, one can feel the lack of control over their own agency in their teaching, in their choices of syllabi, in their teaching materials, in their very plans for their daily or weekly classes.

Additionally, all the adjuncts interviewed for this study felt a lack of agency in terms of being able to advocate for themselves, being able to fully participate in departments, and being able to have a sense of control over their own futures. In the interviews with the participants, an extreme tension was exhibited between the desire to teach and the actual situation of teaching as a part-time faculty member in a university or college setting. This tension can be seen as a type of exploitation based on desire, where the desire to teach is manipulated by sovereign power, to use Foucault’s term (Fendler 43), a hierarchical power that has control over the lives of the participants, in this case, adjunct faculty.

The hope of this chapter is that by bringing these stories to light, more doors will open for communication and transparency among the administrators and the full-time faculty in higher education to address the discrepancies that exist in hiring and treating the part-time faculty. Administrators and full-time faculty members need to see and acknowledge the selfless efforts, dedicated time, and shared personal resources adjuncts put on the line day in and day out of their professional lives with no expectations other than the hope to one day be treated fairly and equally.

The foundation of equality, community, knowledge, and justice that higher education was once built upon and promised to offer its members is absent for adjuncts, who now do the majority of teaching in higher education. Unfortunately, higher education seems to have moved into a business model, which puts cost above human treatment.

Is there a solution? Is there an end to this inequity? We’d like to provide some suggestions to administrators and other stakeholders in the university/college

system on priorities for fixing this situation. The first suggestion has to do with the financial insecurity—a living wage with security is essential, and its lack was one of the major causes of stress for the participants. Course pay and payment for preparation time for adjuncts should be equal with what is provided for the full-time faculty, and if there is curriculum work, there should be remuneration for serving on committees or attending meetings. We advocate for equal remuneration for equal load. Administrators also need to have empathy and understanding in order for them to initiate some change.

One way to get to this point could be through workshops and by providing information to increase the emotional intelligence (Goleman) of the administrators and faculty who affect the lives of adjuncts. Increased valuing and development of emotional intelligence would lead to increased empathy towards the adjuncts' experience and the stress that they face.

A comprehensive review of the adjunct faculty situation should also be accomplished across structural, political, human resource, and symbolic frames (Bolman and Deal 236) of the organization. As Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal explain, in the symbolic frame, "myth and symbols help humans make sense of the chaotic, ambiguous world in which they live" (354). In the symbolic theater piece of adjunct life, adjuncts perform perfectly in their classrooms where they pretend to be fully integrated and valued members of the community in which they teach. To illustrate, one of the participants spoke of being a "puppet." To develop identity, there should be greater inclusion of adjunct faculty members in retreats, committees, and projects. Yet, this inclusion needs to be equal and remunerated, not the typical situation of the adjunct being unpaid and powerless to say no in order to keep their job.

Furthermore, on the systemic level, more full-time positions should be opened. Adjunct faculty members should be able to fill them, or if additional classes become available, the existing adjunct faculty members should fill them. A system overhaul is needed wherein the reliance on disposable contingent faculty is replaced by equitable hiring practices. In "There is No Such Thing as an Adjunct Professor," Junct Rebellion explores the language used around adjuncts:

The label "adjunct" was applied to us by those who sought to deprofessionalize the role of the scholar, both on the campus and in the country. . . . The word means "supplemental, not essential." . . . There is nothing "adjunct" about the role we play, and nothing supplemental to our responsibilities and role in fulfilling any mission dedicated to the pursuit of higher learning. . . . There is no such thing as an "adjunct" professor. We are essential.

Our hope is that by revealing the faces and unmuting the voices of the adjunct participants who shared with us, an increased awareness of their exploitation, stress, and identity, will lead to a ripple of change in the system. Telling the par-

ticipants' personal stories can influence movement toward emergent strategies for change, "co-creating in the future more options for working with each other and embodying the things we fight for—dignity, collective power, love, generative conflict, and community" (Brown 9). This movement is fed by the deepened knowledge provided by narrative inquiry. We hope that these stories will contribute to a change in the treatment of adjunct faculty.

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