

Let's Talk About Adjuncts

Jeffrey Keefer gives us the skinny on #AdjunctChat.

I am happy to be asked to write this piece for The Grad Caucus Chronicle. As a social scientist, I do think back fondly on my early graduate studies in the humanities, something that I am increasingly longing to bridge in my work in organizational systems and meaning making structures within social interactions. Perhaps one way this linkage may be realized is through some of the recent work I have been doing with #AdjunctChat.

What is #AdjunctChat, you may wonder? It depends on who you ask, and while it is a biweekly, interdisciplinary discussion around issues of interest for those who teach as adjuncts in higher education, perhaps it may be useful to step back a few months to when it began.

You see, years ago (before some of you may have even been in school, though let me not date myself too much!) I wanted to teach in higher education. Perhaps it was one of my earlier goals, second only to achieving my PhD (which I finally accomplished after more than one false start, though that tangent may be best left for another day). I was dissuaded from trying for a full-time HE position (the competition, lack of jobs, awful starting pay, department politics, rise in adjunct instructors, cuts in funding, etc.) and while the world of thinking thoughts about things seemed so close, it was not meant to be. After all, lots of things look rosy when seen from the outside, and while FT HE jobs are rarer now than 10 years ago, one thing remains the same--I still love the teaching and learning process, one that pushes intellectual boundaries while working within a thriving community of like-minded colleagues who collaborate and encourage and support and engage with these issues of the mind as we bring them into practice . . .

What, you don't have such a community of scholarly comrades who are only searching for truth, justice, and the American Way (or so to speak)?

Neither do I . . . and that is part of the what led to #AdjunctChat.

See, I work full-time in healthcare (something has to pay the bills to keep me here in New York City), and while I have been fortunate to teach as an adjunct in some very interesting programs for a number of years now, I am somewhat comfortable being in the middle of two very different worlds. My world of work is . . . work, while my adjunct teaching, though often focused more on practitioner instruction than ideas for their own sake, is for me the best balance I can make that allows me ongoing connection to higher education. Thankfully, I have taught some of the classes I have before, making the preparation easier each time. However, it was not always this case, and as change always comes and finds us, I imagine I will have significant new preps ahead of me at some undetermined periods in the future.

What to do? Where do I begin? Who can help? Where is that community that I examine and study in my own research, though it is not always in front of me when I need it in practice? I looked for this, and not readily locating it, thought perhaps it was something I had to develop. If I need it and it does not exist, then why not create it? Hey, why not me do something to help others; isn't that something that was part of my desire to teach—to help others face issues I have also faced, and together discover something new and exciting—from the beginning?!

#AdjunctChat started with this need, an informal forum for adjunct instructors, part-time faculty members, anybody in fact who is not explicitly tenured or tenure-track (or permanent if teaching in HE outside the US) and wants to share ideas, offer support, and interact with others in a similar situation. This occurs every other week as a live chat in Twitter following the #AdjunctChat tag, and while it is public, anybody who wants to join in is welcome. While most of us who gather are adjunct faculty (such as yours truly), we have our friends who are FT and are supportive, encouraging, and helpful in encouraging and promoting this forum. Like it or not, all indications for an increasing pool of adjuncts is closer than the horizon, so anything we can do to get

such part-time instructors supported and filled with new ideas may be valuable and beneficial to all.

In practice, I create a poll of potential topics to discuss and share a link on Twitter, promoting it a few times over a week, after which the winning topic is the one with the most votes. I then fashion a few questions to help explore it in tangible ways, and then we meet and discuss in real time using the Twitter tag #AdjunctChat. Some people continue the conversation and interaction outside of the chat itself outside of the recent Thursday at 4:00pm EDT meeting times that seem to work best for most participants, though most participants tend to follow the chat and engage in it in real time. All of this is public, much of it gets archived, and an intention to allow this to remain open in the hopes that it may help others who face similar challenges to what I experienced has thus far been realized without any costs or resources outside of the time engaged in the chat and in organizing the conversations / polls / archives on the back end.

More information about #AdjunctChat can be found on the discussion's WordPress page <http://adjunctchat.wordpress.com/> or my own blog <http://silenceandvoice.com/adjunctchat>. I hope some of you who are teaching as adjunct faculty members may realize you are not alone in facing some of the challenges you encounter with departments, disciplines, students, and professional development. Who knows, you probably already have a lot to share!