

# Serving Metropolis

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Metropolis is the fictional city depicted in Fritz Lang's epic silent film with the same name, *Metropolis* (Pommer & Lang, 1927). Set in a dystopian future, the movie begins with an army of workers descending to their jobs far beneath the earth's surface where they operate the machines that keep Metropolis running. Juxtaposed with these dark and somber images is a beautiful scene from the heights of Metropolis. The title card reads, "As deep as lay the workers' city beneath the earth, so high above it towered the complex known as 'The Club of the Sons,' with its lecture halls and libraries, its theaters and stadiums." We view the city of Metropolis as a metaphor for the academy, where the work of teacher education is divided into the familiar triad of teaching, scholarship, and service, and new faculty are advised to stay away from the "workers' city" (i.e., too much service) lest they not be admitted to "The Club of the Sons" (i.e., receive tenure). The academy places a premium on scholarly productivity in the form of research and publications; it is essential for tenure. Good teaching is important too. Service, however, usually gets short shrift—being viewed as a dangerous time-drain that should be avoided at all costs.

## Context of the Study

We are three experienced professors—Ariel, Lynn, and Jim—who have worked together in the same department at Western Michigan

University (WMU) for more than 20 years. Ariel came to WMU in 1986, Lynn arrived in 1989, and Jim was hired in 1998. All three of us have carried very high service loads throughout our careers, which has made it difficult (if not impossible) to maintain the steady stream of publications that is viewed as the premier mark of productivity in academia. Although each of us independently navigated the tenure and promotion process and attained the status of full professor, our journeys were not easy.

The purpose of our self-study is to explore the role that service has played in our lives and to understand why and how our careers progressed in this manner. Put simply, we are driven by the following question: What does it mean to live a life of service in teacher education?

The existing self-study literature on the teacher education professoriate focuses mainly on beginning faculty members, speaking primarily of the tension between teaching and scholarship (e.g., Elijah, 1996; Garbett, 2012; Guilfoyle et al., 1996; Hamilton & Guilfoyle, 1998; Kitchen, 2008). Service demands placed on teacher educators are not often addressed, except when the faculty members have assumed formal leadership roles such as department chairs or college deans (e.g., Clift, 2011; Mills et al., 2012; Ramirez & Allison, 2016). Our study is unique in that it comes from the perspectives of three late-career professors who have undertaken extensive service activities while remaining in faculty roles.

## **Method**

To answer our research question, we conducted four lengthy conversations in which we essentially shared our life stories. The conversations, although generally free-flowing, were guided by a list of specific questions that we had prepared in advance, such as the following: What motivated you to become a professor? What were your career aspirations when you started? What personal and/or

professional obstacles have you encountered in attaining your career aspirations? How have you balanced teaching, research, and service activities? There were 19 questions in all. Each conversation was audiotaped and transcribed, resulting in a total of 137 pages of single-spaced text that we then analyzed using Bogdan & Bicklen's (2003) process of analytic induction. This means that we read and discussed the textual data, looking for key ideas that defined our experiences. In order to ensure the trustworthiness of our analyses, we also served as each other's critical friends (Schuck & Russell, 2005), challenging and/or affirming our interpretations in order to reach a consensus.

## **The Academy as Metropolis**

One of the central characters of Metropolis is Fredor, the son of the city master, whose life of privilege is disrupted when he inadvertently discovers that his lifestyle is supported by a vast underground city of workers. While secretly visiting the underground city, Fredor witnesses a deadly explosion that occurs when an exhausted worker is no longer able to keep pace with his machine. Many people are killed or injured. Shocked by this carnage, Fredor imagines the machine to be Moloch, a pagan god that demands human sacrifice, and he has a vision of enslaved men being forced into its mouth by whip-wielding overseers. He then imagines an endless supply of Metropolis workers mechanically marching into the jaws of the machine where they too are devoured.

Elijah (1996) evokes an image of the academy that is strikingly similar to this scene from Metropolis. In her life history study of Katherine, a beginning tenure-track teacher educator working within a research university, Elijah quotes Katherine as saying, "The university is the beast; I don't have a metaphor, anywhere, where the university is not the antagonist; it's a sucking mall, its needs are infinite" (p. 78). In another study, Guilfoyle et al. (1998) describe academia as "a savage place... built by white males who had no familial obligations (because

their wives took care of the kids and created relationships—if there were any) and who had endless time to write and write and generate tradition” (p. 183).

Such strong feelings against the academy can be explained by the history of the teacher education professoriate. According to Cole and Knowles (2007), teacher educators have always held a precarious position regarding their status and pathways to tenure and promotion. When teacher training institutions first joined universities in the Twentieth Century, they brought with them faculty norms and traditions that focused more on pedagogy than on research. Research was narrowly defined at that time, and it did not encompass the study of teaching or professional practice. Research was the work of scientists with highly specialized skills and focused areas of expertise, and teacher educators did not belong to this group. As a result, there emerged a class system within the university, with faculty who engaged in research holding a higher status than those who prepared teachers. Efforts were made to map the epistemology of scientific research onto the field of teacher education, but the result was simply to obscure the class system without eliminating it. Today, while some education professors have gained favor within the academy by engaging in accepted forms of research, many faculty members remain burdened by the labor-intensive work of teaching large numbers of students, supervising field experiences, coordinating programs, and meeting accreditation requirements. As a result, it is easy for teacher educators to feel marginalized within the academy as they attempt to navigate a tenure and promotion process that does not value the difficulty, complexity, and importance of their work.

Kitchen (2008) describes teacher educators as standing between the tower and the field—the tower being the place of employment that is committed to the values of the academy (i.e., research and academic writing), and the field being the place of employment committed to the practice of teaching and learning. To gain tenure, teacher educators must orient themselves toward the tower, but they often

feel torn by their strong commitment to the field. Kitchen (2008) states:

As I spoke to my research partners and to pre-tenured faculty, it became evident that academic currency was given to graduate teaching, scholarly publications, and research grants. Preservice teaching and program leadership, which had been my passion for seven years, were often regarded as low in status and high in time commitment. Colleagues expressed concern that tenure and promotion were dependent on scholarly achievements, not teacher education practices” (p. 192).

In another self-study, Hamilton and Guilfoyle (1998) quote an unnamed teacher educator who wrote in her journal, “This choice between teaching and research tears me apart. In the long run, I have to do more research to survive, but my teaching always comes first” (pp. 18-19).

Identity is a recurring theme within the self-study literature, with many teacher educators talking about challenges to their sense of self as they navigate the academy (e.g., Curtis et al., 2018; McLeod & Badenhorst, 2014; Mills et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2012). Teacher educators who began their careers as K-12 teachers often experience a sense of loss or disorientation as they transition into new roles in a university setting. For example, Martin (2012) states, “Despite four years in a doctoral program, my identity was still that of teacher. So, although my teaching experience was definitely an advantage to me in (my) role of researcher, this continuing identity as teacher wreaked havoc with my efforts” (p. 206). Other teacher educators, who have shifted into leadership roles, report an erosion of their identities as teachers and researchers as their schedules become increasingly filled with administrative tasks (Mills et al., 2012). In describing his work as a dean, Mills (2010) states, “My son asked me one day, ‘Dad,

what is it that you do at the university?’ The best summary I could come up with was ‘I go to meetings all day’” (p. 170).

Drawing upon Wolcott’s (1977) moiety model for understanding educator subculture, Mills (2010) identifies two types of university employees: teachers and technocrats. According to Mills, teachers are those whose principal job assignment involves teaching, while technocrats are those whose principal job assignment does not involve teaching. In our experience, this either/or dichotomy has become blurred within the field of teacher education over the past 20 years, as the act of teaching itself has increasingly become a technocratic act. Issues involving standards-based curricula, data collection, assessment, and accreditation have steadily infiltrated our teacher education practices throughout our careers, demanding more and more of our time and attention, often at the expense of research productivity. In their review of the literature on the teacher education professoriate, Cole and Knowles (2007) state:

Teaching and supervising agenda, not to mention bureaucratic directives in the form of meetings and paperwork, simply drain many teacher educators of their energies for activities associated with research and scholarship... Colleagues in other academic disciplines would simply not tolerate the workloads endured by most teacher educators. (2007, p. 463)

## ***Ariel’s Story***

Ariel came from an intellectual family. Both of her parents were highly educated—her father being a chemistry professor, and her mother being a psychotherapist. “In my family,” she said, “you go to school, and then you go to more school and more school. It’s just what’s expected.” After graduating from high school at the age of 16, and

from the University of Michigan at the age of 20, she knew that she wanted to be a professor.

My dad was a professor at Michigan State for over 40 years, and I knew the life of a professor pretty well. I knew it was a lot of work, but I also knew you could do that work (with some flexibility).... I needed the freedom to kind of be my own boss, and I think being a professor you're about as close to that as you get without actually being your own boss.

Having majored in early childhood education as an undergraduate, and having worked as a teacher in various settings, she decided to study educational psychology in graduate school. After earning her master's degree in 1977 and her doctoral degree in 1985—both from Michigan State University—Ariel came to WMU as an assistant professor in 1986. She was hired to teach large section courses in human development, which left her little time for research. She said:

I felt very burdened by just how many students I had to handle when I came in. When I came, I was told it would be 75 students.... By the time I arrived on campus in my first year, they had raised that cap to 90.... My load then was to teach back-to-back two of those huge sections of 90, plus another class.

Ariel had difficulty navigating the tenure and promotion process at WMU. Because she was the first new tenure-track hire in 15 years, no one in the department knew how to mentor her. As a result, her tenure case was mishandled, which led to a great deal of dissension within the department. Some faculty supported her, while others did not. Ariel eventually turned to the faculty union (AAUP) for help, but

this came with a cost.

So, after the dust settled... (the) president of the union came and asked me to serve. He asked me to come and be the Contract Administrator.... He pretty much just said that I owed it to the union to serve.

This was the beginning of Ariel's 15-years of service to the AAUP, which included four years as contract administrator, four years as president, and five years as chair of the National AAUP Collective Bargaining Congress. Being heavily involved in contract negotiations at WMU, and frequently serving on university-wide committees, she was thoroughly immersed in service throughout most of her career.

Nevertheless, Ariel did enjoy this work to some extent, and she was very good at it. More than anything, however, she enjoys teaching. She still teaches the same high-enrollment sections of human development that she began with 34 years ago, and she recently won the university's top teaching award. Overall, in reflecting on her career, she said:

We have this three-legged stool that we sit on, with teaching, service, and research. You know, a three-legged stool is very unstable. It's easy to tip over, rather than one that is four-legged. It is very easy for the stool to tip if you have a short leg. I know for me that has been research. I did a lot of publishing before I even came here, and more since then, but not for a long time.... The service and the teaching—first and foremost the teaching—were my life source, my energy, my everything.

## ***Lynn's Story***

Lynn has always enjoyed school.

I am one of these people, who when I was like four and five years old, would gather the children in the neighborhood into my parents' garage and set up a little school. And, of course, I was always the teacher. I was the oldest child in my family, and the only girl, so I had this sense of propriety, being in charge, taking care of people—the types of things that lots of first children do. I loved school.

After receiving a bachelor's degree in Special Education and Elementary Education in 1974 and a master's degree in Reading in 1978—both from Brigham Young University—Lynn earned her Ph.D. from the University of California, Los Angeles in 1989. At first, she planned to work for a school district because she loved the K-12 environment, but her husband and others convinced her to try for academic positions too. She was soon hired as an assistant professor by WMU where she has remained for the past 31 years. In describing that first year at the university, she said:

I was given assigned time to get my publication record started. I think I taught three classes (per semester), and the remaining time was for writing. Then, I was gradually introduced to the service world, but I wasn't expected to chair any committees and so forth over the next couple of years.

Having taught in several public and private schools in Utah and California between 1974 and 1989, Lynn still identified strongly as a

teacher when she entered the professoriate. As a result, she explicitly requested to be placed in the field as part of her teaching load. She has maintained this connection to the field throughout her career, even though it is much more time-consuming than teaching a regular course on campus.

Over time, Lynn began to chair various departmental and university committees (e.g., Sabbatical Leave, Enrollment Management, Tenure and Promotion, etc.), coordinating academic programs, and writing state-mandated reports—until this kind of work eventually dominated her calendar. “I have tried time and time again to figure out how I got to the place where I was doing so much service,” she said. “Part of it is that I grew up in a home where you extend yourself. When you say you’ll help, you do the whole thing. You finish it, and you do it really, really well.” She then said:

I see being on a faculty as being a citizen in that community—and if everyone does their part, that community is informed. It’s thoughtful; it grows; it develops; it’s healthy. When people choose not to do that, it disrupts the fabric of that community. So, it is philosophic, and it is deeply tied to my beliefs in a lot of ways.

Although Lynn was eventually tenured and promoted at WMU, her pathway to full professor was difficult. Due to her extensive engagement in service activities, combined with her strong commitment to working with preservice teachers in schools, some administrators questioned her research productivity. It took a great deal of self-advocacy and determination on her part, as well as support from others, for her to succeed. In retrospect she said:

To engage yourself fully in service is like a dead-end

street. There might be a person here or there who recognizes it. Yet, it is so important, because when it doesn't get done well, either the department suffers, accreditation suffers, or individual people suffer because their (tenure) documents are not reviewed properly or with integrity. It's extremely important work, but the institution doesn't value it at any level. It's thankless work; you do it because you believe in helping the organization to work well, and you care about people.

### ***Jim's Story***

Jim grew up in a lower-middle-class household in Kentucky in the 1960s and 1970s. His father held an office job in the state government, while his mother worked as a clerk/typist. Strongly influenced by his high school biology teacher, Jim entered college with the intention of becoming a medical doctor but switched to education after he realized that it was actually the teacher who had inspired him, rather than the field of medicine. He earned his B.S. degree from Vanderbilt University with a double major in Special Education and Elementary Education, and he obtained his master's degree in Reading from Vanderbilt in 1985.

After teaching in public schools for several years in Kentucky and Ohio, Jim felt that he still had much to learn about teaching. He said:

I had students from families where no one could read or write. When a parent came to school to sign a form, they would write "X" because they couldn't make a signature. So, here I was, a special education teacher with a master's degree in reading, and I had no clue where to begin.

In search of answers to the challenges of teaching children in poverty, he enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Michigan. Initially, he was not thinking about becoming a professor; he simply wanted to be a better K-12 teacher. However, this orientation changed over time, as he began to develop an identity as a teacher educator and a researcher. He said, “I worked closely with several professors at Michigan and already had several publications when I came to WMU. I felt that I knew what professors did, and I understood that this was what I wanted to do.”

When Jim was hired at WMU in 1998, he found that the teacher education work culture focused so heavily on teaching and service that it was difficult for him to find the time for scholarship. He said, “Teaching three courses per semester, with one of those courses being the supervision of intern teachers, did not leave a lot of time for research and writing.” He was also deeply committed to the time-consuming work of establishing and sustaining school/university partnerships, which further impaired his research efforts. Nevertheless, he was successfully tenured and promoted—although his promotion to full professor did require him to overcome a skeptical college promotion committee that did not value the full range of his teacher education practices.

Once Jim had established himself as someone who would do service, and would take it seriously, he was called upon to assume more and more service obligations. Eventually, he found himself simultaneously chairing every standing committee in the department, plus many other service activities at the college and university levels. In reflecting on his experience, he said:

You soon find yourself in a situation like Metropolis. You're in the underground world servicing the machines, and it's like, “How did I get here?” I want to be up in the surface city doing all of the privileged stuff like writing

and publishing, but instead I'm spending all of my time down in the basement operating the machines.... You feel like you are not appreciated in this role. If you get a publication, then everybody celebrates, but if you do a great job chairing a committee, then no one notices.

Nevertheless, Jim does find satisfaction in much of the service work that he undertakes, particularly activities that help other faculty members within the department, or work that advances the university. He said: "In spite of its flaws, I do like WMU. I advocate for WMU, I promote WMU, and I generally feel good about the institution where I work. I don't think I could stay here if I did not feel that way."

## **Conclusion**

Our identities as service-minded teacher educators arose through the enactment of our personal values and beliefs in the workplace. We all came from families that valued community engagement and social responsibility, and we were drawn to the field of education because we wanted to serve others. Interestingly, we all held special education teaching positions working with vulnerable populations before becoming professors, and we have each served as caregivers for our elderly parents. In addition, we all care deeply about the proper functioning of our university, and our sense of obligation to our students and to our colleagues makes it difficult for us to say "no." It is not that we particularly enjoy the technocratic side of teacher education. We would much rather spend our time thinking, writing, and publishing. However, we recognize that someone has to do the basic service work to build and maintain the infrastructure that enables our university to function. If not us, then who? Thus, our commitment to serving Metropolis tends to be a natural extension of who we are as people. If we eschewed service in our teacher education practices, then we would be negating our basic values, beliefs, and attitudes, becoming what Whitehead (1989) would call

living contradictions.

Because we have each successfully navigated the tenure and promotion process at our university, we cannot say that our careers have been substantially harmed by our heavy focus on service, but the risk was certainly there. Time spent on service means less time for research and writing activities, which could have easily undermined our tenure and promotion cases. On the positive side, serving Metropolis has enabled us to understand the inner-workings of the university and gain a modicum of power, which we have independently used to leverage positive change. For example, as president of the faculty union, Ariel negotiated a contract that required administrators to view “working with schools” as a form of scholarship in tenure and promotion decisions, thereby providing a mechanism for recognizing teacher educators who engage in the labor-intensive activity of building school/university partnerships. Likewise, Jim and Lynn have used their positions on the Tenure and Promotion Committee to establish norms in which the work of teacher education is fully recognized and valued. Similar to the workers in Lang’s film, we consider ourselves to be working-class teacher educators, building and maintaining the infrastructure of Metropolis so that our colleagues may join “The Club of the Sons.” Overall, serving Metropolis has provided us with a sense of agency at our university, the feeling that we are active participants in our own destiny, rather than just the sad and defeated workers in Lang’s film.

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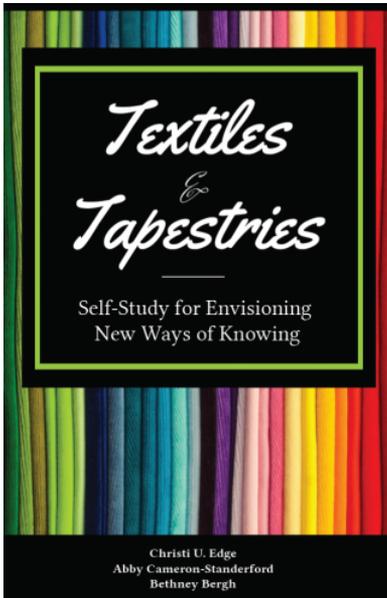
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