

**The Paradoxical Tensions of Young Teachers;
Teaching in the Time of Covid**

Abstract

Junior faculty and doctoral students often face challenges specific to a lack of experience in the classroom. These challenges are amplified when instructors look young and face a perceived lack of legitimacy in both area expertise and practical experience. The ongoing pandemic also put unique pressures on the more junior teachers. Yet there have been little discussions or research about how to address these issues pertaining to young educator. This roundtable discussion aims to bridge the gap and discuss the paradoxes these young teachers face in the early years of teaching, especially with the emerging challenges brought upon by the pandemic. Through sharing stories and experiences, we aim to discuss the benefits and the challenges of young teachers.

Key Word: Young Teachers, Paradoxes, Diversity, Covid

Session Format: 60- minute Roundtable

Resources Needed: Zoom with breakout rooms and chat enabled

Unique Contribution: This session builds on last year's well attended session but has not been submitted for publication anywhere.

Introduction

Smith and Berg (1987) argued that group life is all about paradoxes. It certainly rings true for academic who try to build relationships with the students. Management education has been calling for a better understanding of faculty-to-student relationships for years (Chory & Offstein, 2017). However, what that relationship contains is ambiguous and uncertain for many. One challenge in particular is the paradoxes surrounding the different, sometimes incompatible roles (Strker & Burke, 2000) we are asked to play in relation to the students. We want to be both approachable while respected, accommodating while developmental, facilitating while empowering, to name a few. Therefore, it begs the question, how do we choose what “hat” do we wear and when?

For young educators particularly (the majority of whom are junior faculty and doctoral students), the age factor poses extra challenges. Due to young age (or simply looking young), a lot of them are not seen as “the sage on the stage,” as they may not be prototypical of “professors” (Perry, 2016). Moreover, being in an early career stage also means a lack of experience managing the classrooms as well. The ongoing pandemic certainly put a new spin on this age-old issue (no pun intended) as young teachers navigate emerging challenges related to technology and accommodations. For example, they are expected to be technology savvy while in reality not being properly trained with specific tech tools themselves or they are expected to be progressive and accommodating to a large degree, while in reality trying to balance accessibility and feasibility and preserve academic integrity. Therefore, helping young educators to effectively manage these old and new paradoxes in the classroom could provide tremendous benefit for them. Through this session, we want to 1) show that these paradoxes not only could pose threats to young educators, but potentially also provide an advantage; 2) discuss how young

educators could address the threats and leverage the advantages in the classroom; and 3), strengthen a supportive community of young educators.

This proposed session intends to cater to junior faculty members and instructors (including doctoral students who have teaching responsibilities, or those that will begin to teach in the near term), as the issues discussed relate directly to them. Nonetheless, we also welcome more experienced faculty members to join to offer their insight (we were all young once after all). Last year we hosted the roundtable session at vMOBTS on the same overarching topic. It gained tractions among faculty across age groups. We believe that offering the platform for discussion will again bring significant benefits to first-time or newer attendees, and at the same time expand and strengthen the community of young educators that was started last year. In particular, as remote or hybrid teaching is well underway now compared to last June, it is also a great time to take stock and discuss the new pandemic related teaching challenges faced by these young educators, many of whom taught for the first time or started a new position during this unprecedented time. Therefore, we believe that an expanded discussion building upon the success last year could be very timely and beneficial to young teachers and beyond and achieve broader impact overall.

Theoretical Foundation/ Teaching Implication

Academics face stereotypes that are both descriptive and prescriptive, dictating not only what faculty are like but also what faculty members should be like (Heilman, 2001). Despite decades of progress, the traditional, or prototypical image of a professor is still older, well-off males (Perry, 2006). Research on leader prototypicality suggests that being prototypical to the audience's expectation comes with extra benefits, such as getting away with subpar performance (Giessner & van Knippenberg, 2008; van Knippenberg, 2011); whereas, being non-prototypical

(e.g. a minority background) may pose extra hurdles at workplaces, as decades of research on diversity demonstrates (e.g. Eagly & Chin, 2010; Hall, Hall & Galinsky, 2019). As young faculty members often violate this stereotype held by many students, they face very different issues from the “prototypical” faculty members in building amiable yet respectful relationships with students while establishing and maintaining credibility.

However, research on homophily indicates that similarities may also breed connection (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001). In this regard, being a young educator may also bring unique advantages that result in understanding students better and forming higher quality connections with students. As young educators, we are closer to the student’s age group and we may have better understandings of their aspirations and challenges, at least on paper. Moreover, being closer in age may also help us build rapport with them, since our socialization processes are similar, and we share more common understandings of cultural references and symbols, which allows us to understand their experiences, and “speak their language.” As recent research suggests, similarity in age is still a stable predictor of association (Smith, McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 2014).

Indeed, our best days being young teachers helps us experience strong connections with our students where we really feel like we can make a difference. We are able to mentor students on not only their career aspirations and academic accomplishments, but also feel a connection to their personal issues. We feel like we have a better understanding of where our students are in their learning stages, which helps us to “scaffold” (Bliss, Askew, & Macrae, 1996). In the process, we may also leverage our understanding of technology and new media, as well as the trendy languages, in building better quality connections with students. Unfortunately, on our worst days, we also suffer from a lack of respect, authority, and expectation of expertise we have

earned and deserve. We have to deal with microaggressions from students and colleagues and we have been told they're actually compliments. Our panelists even have had experiences with students calling in parents to put them in their place. Moreover, students expect us to be friends and may push boundaries as to the leniency in the classroom and in sharing private matters, to name a few examples.

Beyond the common challenges, we also want to address the impact of intersectionality. For example, being young and female creates additional complications in the faculty-to-student relationship, where often the above-mentioned issues seem to be magnified and additional sexual harassment issues arise. Racial and social economic diversity intersects with being young as well, and we hope to address additional internal and external pressures for the affected faculty. These issues may not be young teachers specific, yet they invariably add to the list of challenges faced by young teachers who already struggle with other issues above.

It is complexities like this that prompted and inspired us to organize this roundtable session originally. Then came 2020 and the Covid-19 pandemic. Not only did it disrupt the normal routines and structures and render some tactics and remedies irrelevant, but the “new normal” also brought fresh challenges front and center. For example, in remote teaching, technology is critical. Despite our general better familiarity with technology, the training and experience in certain domain instructional technology lags behind the speed with which technical problems emerge in these tools. Yet, instead of receiving help, young teachers are expected to help others and automatically “get it”. Or, during the pandemic, young teachers may be flooded with more requests for various accommodations, since students expect the young teachers to be more progressive and understanding than more senior teachers. As a result, young teachers are under higher levels of stress, and risk being penalized more harshly for not meeting these student

expectations for accommodation. On top of these challenges, last spring or fall semester could be these young teachers' first time teaching a college level course, the start of their first job upon graduation, or they might still be students themselves as well. The extra stress and anxiety could further compound the impact of the huge disruptions. Therefore, we believe that hosting this discussion and adding this new theme into the mix of topics is very timely and could prove helpful for many who are struggling now.

Session Description

This roundtable discussion will start by allowing each panelist to introduce themselves and the issues they have faced that pertain to their age. In this part, the focus is to lay the issues out on the table and raise awareness of different aspects of being a young educator. We believe that the audience will relate to many, if not all of the issues identified by our panelists. Following the introduction, a discussion session will start with Zoom breakout rooms with certain prepared questions per room. After the breakout session, we will have a general discussion and take stock of the ideas and opinions that emerge from each room. Moreover, at this stage, questions and direction will be taken from the audience as well. Finally, in conjunction with the audience, the panel will come up with key take-aways and best practices that young educators can use to strengthen their classrooms. We will also gather everyone's email contact information so that we could send out the take-aways to everybody and potentially form a community of support among the young educators. Below is the proposed timeline:

| | |
|---------------------|------------|
| Introduction | 10 minutes |
| Breakout rooms | 20 minutes |
| General discussions | 20 minutes |

| | |
|------------------------|------------|
| Address final concerns | 10 minutes |
|------------------------|------------|

References

- Bliss, J., Askew, M., & Macrae, S. (1996). Effective Teaching and Learning: Scaffolding Revisited. *Oxford Review of Education*, 22(1):37-61.
- Chory, R.M., & Offstein, E.H. (2017). “Your Professor Will Know You as a Person”: Evaluating and Rethinking the Relational Boundaries Between Faculty and Students. *Journal of Management Education*, 41(1): 9-38.
- Eagly, A. H., & Chin, J. L. (2010). Diversity and leadership in a changing world. *American Psychologist*, 65(3), 216-224.
- Giessner, S. R., & van Knippenberg, D. (2008). “License to fail”: Goal definition, leader group prototypicality, and perceptions of leadership effectiveness after leader failure. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 105(1), 14-35.
- Hall, E. V., Hall, A. V., Galinsky, A. D., & Phillips, K. W. (2019). MOSAIC: a model of stereotyping through associated and intersectional categories. *Academy of Management Review*, 44(3), 643-672.
- Heilman, M.E. (2001) Description and prescription: How gender stereotypes prevent women's ascent up the organizational ladder. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57 (4): 657-674.
- McPherson, M., Smith-Lovin, L., & Cook, J. M. (2001). Birds of a feather: Homophily in social networks. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27(1), 415-444.
- Perry, D. (2016). Accommodations in Academia. *Chronicle of Higher Education* (p.A38).
- Smith, J. A., McPherson, M., & Smith-Lovin, L. (2014). Social distance in the United States: Sex, race, religion, age, and education homophily among confidants, 1985 to 2004. *American Sociological Review*, 79(3), 432-456.
- Smith, K.K., & Berg, D.N. (1997). *Paradoxes of Group Life: Understanding Conflict, Paralysis, and Movement in Group Dynamics*. Jossey-Bass, New York, USA.
- Stryker, S., & Burke, P. J. (2000). The past, present, and future of an identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63(4), 284-297.
- Van Knippenberg, D. (2011). Embodying who we are: Leader group prototypicality and leadership effectiveness. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 22(6), 1078-1091.