

# *When the Tenure Road is Rocky – Toward Integrated Selves and Institutions*

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**ABSTRACT:** Two first-person narratives explore the tenure process from the perspectives of a leadership practitioner/ scholar and a clinical counsellor. Vygotskian (1978) social constructivism contributes to analysis of one narrative as self-leadership through facilitative inner speech. Analysis of the second narrative draws on Tuckman's (2001) explanation of group dynamics as a framework for generating *curative processes*, as identified by Yalom (2005). Both narratives highlight intrapersonal challenges and strategies but joint analysis leads to recommendations for organizational development. The authors situate their stories within a hopeful vision of universities as *learning communities*, with greater integrity of purposes, expectations, and reward processes.

**RESUMÉ:** Les deux récits qui sont présentés à la première personne, explorent le processus de titularisation à partir de points de vue de dirigeants universitaire en exercice et d'un conseiller clinique. Dans le premier récit, Vygotskian (1978) ou le constructivisme social, soutient l'analyse dans un discours interne donné par un auto dirigeant. Le raisonnement du second récit s'appuie sur l'explication de Tuckman (2001) concernant la dynamique de groupe comme charpente générant les *processus curatifs*, et ce, reconnu par Yalom (2005). Les deux récits mettent en lumière les épreuves et les stratégies intra personnelles. Cependant, l'analyse commun conduit à un ensemble de conseils pour une mise au point relative à l'organisation. Les auteurs situent leur histoire sous le regard optimiste des universités en ce qui concerne les *communautés d'apprentissage*, avec une plus grande intégrité des buts à atteindre, des attentes et des méthodes de reconnaissances.

## *Introduction*

This paper began as a first-person narrative and reflection on a rocky road to tenure that was eventually successful. However, the process and risk of failure impaired my personal capacity in terms of the confidence

and energy that I bring to my university. In my teaching in the field of educational leadership, I emphasize self-leadership as a fundamental pre-condition for leading others (Manz & Neck, 2009). Thus I write this paper to articulate self-leadership efforts to restore my own confidence, as well as to provoke thought about the rationality and effectiveness of tenure processes.

My experience as a new faculty member has been markedly different from the cultures I strive to promote in classrooms and schools. Working toward greater professional integrity – a stronger match of educational philosophy and my own leadership practice – is part of my strategy to rebuild the personal capacity I have lost. However, analyzing my experience also has implications for the culture of my university and may be informative to tenure applicants and influential faculty members elsewhere. Surviving the tenure ordeal has sharpened my resolve to contribute to improved university cultures and to mentor new faculty members so that their road is smoother, their priorities focused, and their diverse contributions valued. Should the vision of universities as self-renewing and sustainable learning communities (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000) be enacted, even partially, this paper will be successful and my rocky road will have had purpose.

To build community, I do not tell my story alone. John Sherry, a counseling psychologist and new faculty member, is this paper's second author. He has provided insights into the group dynamics of institutions and has helped me to understand and articulate my intrapersonal processes. His own narrative describes his first steps on the tenure road in a precarious term appointment. As co-authors, we share our stories, understandings, and self-strengthening processes. Beyond our own self-strengthening strategies, we recommend organizational work that must be done to achieve our vision of more integrated, humane, and effective universities. A first step toward increased organizational integrity is to re-align explicit expectations for diverse faculties with the university's formal evaluation and reward processes. This means that the crucial work of developing programs and relating well to professional fields must be recognized as legitimate scholarly activity. Our hope for universities is that they may become self-aware learning communities capable of an enhanced integration of purposes, processes, and outcomes.

A brief literature review precedes our narratives. Analysis of our first narrative, my story, draws on a Vygotskian (1978) social constructivist perspective on educational learning communities/organizations and the internalization of social discourse as inner speech

for personal self-leadership. Senge's (1990) work on learning organizations described self-renewal through reflection on the complex interactions of processes and outcomes. Through five purposeful strategies, individual learning came to reside in a responsive organization that could learn by adapting to changing contexts. These *disciplines* included examining *mental models* or assumptions, as well as *personal mastery*, and *team learning*. Significantly, the fifth discipline, *systems thinking*, encouraged organizational analysts to see that new problems may be created as unintended outcomes of previous solutions.

Mitchell and Sackney (2000) described healthy schools as *learning communities*, supportive environments for professional learning and webs of capacity-building relationships. The term fused the concepts of *professional communities* of educators, made effective through collaboration, with business-oriented organizational learning. An essential component was a cultural approach to educational change with simultaneous capacity-building in three areas: *personal*, *interpersonal*, and *organizational*. Interpersonal learning was identified as a key to organizational learning; through dialogue individual learning was shared and became an aspect of organizational culture sustainable through changes in personnel.

I have interpreted Mitchell and Sackney's constructivist orientation as related to neo-Vygotskian research agendas in education (Brown, 2004; Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000). As interpreted and applied today, Vygotsky's theories offer greater understanding of metacognitive tools and processes for developing learning communities. The need to explore the transformative potential of metacognitive strategies, with particular attention to inner speech, is related to Senge's (1990) discipline of *personal mastery*. Manning and Payne (1996) identified awareness of inner speech as a basic mechanism of personal change, declaring that verbal self-regulation for teachers facing institutional challenges was "wide open for research efforts" (p. 99).

To analyze our second narrative, John's story, we use Tuckman's (2001) model of group development. Tuckman's four stages of team development and behaviour – *forming*, *storming*, *norming*, and *performing*, provide a framework for understanding the social processes in a university department. We synthesize these with stages with Yalom's (2005) curative factors, which function to enhance self-understanding and to replace isolation with belonging and despair with determination.

We propose a need for universities where all purposes, expectations, and processes are aligned and professional faculty members may trust that their institutions have cleared unrealistic barriers to tenure and promotion. With such alignment, alternate pathways to success would reflect authentic and diverse workloads, for example, a viable compensatory clause could be called upon to honour exceptional service as an alternative to research productivity. However, our experiences reveal a mismatch, or lack of coherence and integrity between recruitment for professional expertise (as well as scholarship) and the accepted criteria for tenure.

This analysis is supported by Boyer (1997), whose framework for scholarly activity recommended expanding criteria for success beyond making and publishing original scientific discoveries. Boyer proposed consideration of the scholarship of *integration*, the scholarship of *application*, and the scholarship of *teaching*. Although this work is often cited and even endorsed in policy, most universities pay only lip service to its recommendations (Janschik, 2007). However, if tenure processes were based on Boyer's vision of "the application of knowledge, the engagement of scholars with the broader world, and the way scholars teach" (Janschik, 2007, p. 4), we believe the tenure road would be smoother and faculty capacity and commitment ultimately greater.

### *Willow's Story*

To preface my story, I recall the essence of my tenure experience from the vantage point of having survived in academia, but with self-defensive disengagement and a sense that I am marked as a second-class institutional citizen. My narrative may include sufficient detail for readers to see things that I do not. I know that other interpretations are possible, particularly with a feminist lens. However, the focus of this paper is showcasing faculty strategies for personal resilience, while advocating for university policies that sustain both personal and organizational capacity.

*I begin my narrative with personal history. As the first one in my family to attend university, I interrupted my studies to have children and I did not become a kindergarten to grade twelve teacher until I was 30. After 16 rewarding years, my love of teaching, learning, and community building led me to a doctoral program in educational leadership. Before the doctorate was finished, I came to a tenure-track position at a small Canadian university barely a decade old. This institution is in a small city at the heart of a region characterized by rural and remote forest-*

*industry towns and an under-employed, educationally underserved Aboriginal population. I was attracted by the institution's mandate of in the north, for the north and a motto in the Aboriginal language of the local Carrier people, En cho huna, which, ironically, celebrates the value of many perspectives.*

*Within the first year of my appointment, I defended my dissertation and worked closely with a like-minded colleague to design a new master's program in educational leadership – the purpose for which we believed we were hired. As new professors with doctorates in progress, my colleague and I were supported by a small faculty committee, although responsibility for the implementation and success of the new program fell clearly to us. We began to offer master's programs in neighbouring small cities and soon found that the policies and administrative processes of the university inhibited the kind of accessible, flexible, and inclusive program that we envisioned and that we believed educators of northern communities deserved.*

*As well as designing new courses and building relationships with students and school districts, we were challenged by an ongoing need to advocate for our program within the university. We were constantly unsnarling red tape and redesigning administrative processes to help make each student feel welcome. Perhaps our greatest challenge was a battle against the predominant mental model of the university as an elitist sorting system (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). The alternate vision proposed in our work was for an institution that would be truly responsive to its unique constituency, ready to prepare competent professionals for communities that desperately needed them. Immersed in this vision for a learning organization (Senge, 1990), we were, on numerous occasions, surprised by the viciousness with which the status quo was defended.*

*I was deeply disappointed when my colleague accepted a position at another institution but I shouldered the burden of our program, expecting that she would be replaced. I developed new courses and shared them with sessional instructors from school districts. In response to local requests and expansion initiatives by the university president, we began new cohorts in more distant towns. Meetings, paperwork, and undergraduate teaching filled my weekdays; graduate courses and recruitment occupied evenings and weekends. I embraced this hectic life with the sense that I was helping to meet the university's mandate to serve its region.*

*Ever community-minded, I supported my colleagues and contributed to the university through committees and special events as well as working with local schools on small projects. I attended conferences, reviewed journal papers, and began to submit articles for publication. However, as my tenure application loomed, I realized that my publication record could be viewed as inadequate by committee members, particularly those unfamiliar with the demands of professional programs. To illustrate my potential, I included conference papers in my application and described my unique contributions to the university and the professional community of teachers and school administrators. I was apprehensive but confident that the sacrifices required of me would be recognized. With relief, I received news of a favourable recommendation by the college committee and also by the university committee, with the latter vote based on a clause in our faculty agreement that allowed exemplary service to compensate for research. However, my stomach turned to stone when, three days before Christmas, a letter under my door informed me that the university president had withheld my tenure due to insufficient publication. I was eligible to reapply the following year, but if that application were to be unsuccessful, my position would end.*

*Family members visiting for the holidays shielded me from feelings of inadequacy and incompetence for a time but January was dark and lonely. I did not want to see anyone but a telephone conversation with a social work professor brought light to my situation: she suggested that we sometimes experience the academy as battered wives experience an abusive husband, suffering in shame and silence. This analogy restored my sense of injustice and brought resilience. I began to speak freely about what had happened to me and I was energized when the indignation of colleagues affirmed my worth. Strengthened, I asked for a reprieve from administrative responsibilities, set up a home office where I could focus on uninterrupted writing, and began a journal to document the year.*

*My journal is a strange mix of metaphors, dark humour, and hopefulness. With resentment and a cynical view of the value of both process and product, I felt as though I had been locked in a tower and forced to spin straw into gold. Sometimes I felt safe in a cocoon of my thoughts and books. Embarrassed at my unkempt appearance after a day of writing, I made jokes about the similarities between alcoholics and academics. Later, like my childhood heroine, Pollyanna (Porter, 1913/2007), I began to play the "glad game" and look for a silver lining in the cloud. I consciously rejected negative or cynical metaphors and reframed my winter of exile as an opportunity. I imagined that I was*

*industriously rewriting the story of my academic life with every journal submission. By spring, I had submitted several papers and was eager to rejoin the world of the living and rescue the floundering graduate program.*

*Reflecting on this year, my first attempt at tenure could have ended in bitterness and disengagement to the point of leaving the university, as it has for others. To stay, I had to restore my sense of myself as someone capable of making positive contributions. Reviewing my narrative, I see that my strategy for resilience is epitomized in the way I have reframed experiences and reconstructed mental models of my social environment through language, a process that is the essence of social constructivism. Through persistent acts of self-leadership, the intentional choice of facilitative metaphors and images, I managed thoughts and feelings and rebuilt personal capacity and hopefulness. I rejected a victimized mentality for one energized by indignation at the injustice of working relentlessly for one set of goals – program building – while being evaluated solely in terms of publication, for which little time or energy remained. Switching from a personal to an organizational focus, my story attributes this unjust treatment to a disconnect between the “heavy lifting” of building a professional program in a frontier region and elitist expectations for productivity defined exclusively as publication.*

*The epilogue to my story is that I developed a series of Plans B, C, or D; exciting things that I might do should my next and final tenure application be unsuccessful. When tenure was granted at the end of this rocky road, vindication was anti-climactic. My dreams of an adventurous semi-retirement elsewhere had taken root. Remembering the names of so many academics who had come and gone in our university's short history, I visualized withdrawing my arm from a bucket of water: the hole I would leave when I left would be as easily filled. I avoided the bitterness of a phrase that replayed in my mind – the university will not love you – but used this mantra to help me choose healthier personal priorities than a life consumed by work. My capacity to contribute the strengths and talents for which I was recruited to the university is sadly diminished. However, I remain committed to facilitating the success of new colleagues. Thus we switch to John's story, narrated in his own voice.*

### *John's Story*

Yalom's (2005) curative factors have been evident throughout the stages of my socialization to a new university and the term position upon which my livelihood depends. These healing factors strengthen me as I weigh

my willingness to trust my family's fate to a university that has apparently not treated others justly, as in Willow's case. Yalom noted that curative factors include the instillation of hope, universality, altruism, catharsis, and feedback, all of which contribute to healthy group development. More specifically, an instillation of hope and the faith that I could move forward with this process in a new setting became clearer as I engaged with colleagues and developed more cohesive relationships. My relationship with Willow provided me with a sense of universality, that I was not alone on this rocky road. Altruism was displayed by Willow's ability to rise from her own difficulties to mentor me. Along with this mentoring, I experienced numerous cathartic releases as a result of casual discussions, the chance result of our neighbouring offices. The direct advice and feedback that she has given me has been instrumental in helping me move forward to hope that I will thrive at this university and my contributions will be respected.

*My move from New York City to a small Canadian city and a faculty position in the School of Education has been life altering. For the past seven years I have been fighting against discriminatory U.S. immigration laws in order to live in the U.S. with my Brazilian born partner while continuing my work in higher education. Forced to choose between the partner I love and the country of my birth, I decided to move to Canada, a country with a very different view of inclusion. As I was preparing for my move and embarking on my job search I was lucky enough to find, at least in my mind, the ideal teaching position at a university that embraces diversity. Although the institution is a long way, geographically and socially, from where I worked for the last 15 years, I was eager to come. In fact, this move fit my career objective to progress from counseling in a university center to teaching graduate counseling courses. Needless to say, adjusting to a new country, university, and position was not to be met without some challenges. Although I am very grateful to have been given this opportunity, I will address some of the more challenging times that I have experienced over the last several months.*

*As a psychologist with years of self-growth work behind him, self-reflection and introspection are the driving forces that guide me as an educator. This is especially true as I begin my academic experience as a term faculty member working toward a potential tenure-track dependent on program expansion. Whether such a position will be created and I will fill it depends on my ability to smooth a rocky road into a unique pathway for success. As I navigate my way, I relate my experience to the*



*developmental stages of a therapeutic group. Specifically, I anticipate and understand my road to tenure using Tuckman's (2001) group dynamics model.*

*In my initial period in the department, known as the forming stage, I met new colleagues, exchanged personal information, and made friends. Also, colleagues tested me as a team member, in terms of both interpersonal and task behavior (Smith, 2005). Orientation, testing, and dependence were all part of this initial period as I became familiar with the rules of the department, probed my colleagues' levels of patience and support, and assessed my relationship with the chair. An orientation session, including requirements and expectations, was provided. Support and guidance occurred through formal meetings and informal lunch gatherings with the program chair and colleagues.*

*During this initial honeymoon stage, people were on their best behaviour. Most of the difficulties I experienced resulted from my own internal process of negative, self-defeating thoughts. Fortunately, the guidance and support that I received from program leaders and colleagues overshadowed them. Conversations with Willow and others instilled hope and encouraged me to move forward on this tumultuous road in spite of any roadblocks that may lie ahead. Informal meetings were instrumental in validating my feelings, providing me with the necessary direction to move forward on my venture to achieve a tenured position.*

*The second stage that Tuckman (2001) referred to is storming, characterized by conflict and polarization around interpersonal concerns, which I experienced pointedly because of my term appointment. I recognized early that wearing the scarlet letter "T" as a term professor was a major impediment on the road to a permanent position. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's (1850) classic American novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, the "A" on Hester Prynne's gown represented adultery and was consequently a badge of shame for all to see. Reminiscent of Prynne's situation, the symbolic "T" opened me to public shaming as well, frequently limiting my ability to participate in academic endeavors that would assist me in the tenure process. For example, chairing graduate student advisory committees and serving on faculty search committees were not options for me. It is probably at this point that my path converged with Willow's. Venting my feelings was cathartic and has facilitated the progress of my academic work. Instead of holding on to anger or resentment, I was empowered by talking about my situation and expressing my feelings. Furthermore, learning from Willow's experience*

*provided me with valuable insight in terms of future planning. Mentorship has allowed me to move past this conflict ridden juncture to a norming stage characterized by cohesive membership.*

*It was also validating to meet newly appointed colleagues with similar concerns and apprehension around maintaining required research and teaching loads. I began to feel a greater sense of community and connection, primarily because I was able to identify with others who were in a similar position. Primarily, we connected around our concerns, self-doubt, and vulnerabilities. However, the power of validation while feeling connected to others far outweighed any difficulties that emerged due to our anxieties. For example, as a result of my connection with Willow, I agreed to collaborate on this paper, an important step toward a publication record related to a blend of my professional experience and scholarship.*

*Connections with organizations in this city have also added to my sense of belonging and support as I move ahead on the path to success characterized by the performing stage. Once again, the feeling of being part of a cohesive group moved me to a more empowered place; self-confidence and productivity emerged through connections with others. I have not quite entered an additional fifth stage of group development, adjourning, although part of my process of adjustment has been mourning the familiar world left behind. As a former clinician who taught as an adjunct and is now a researching and teaching professor, I discovered the need to fine tune dormant organizational and time management skills. Dealing with the new and unknown has been challenging and exciting but has also provoked anxiety. I have had to challenge myself to move out of my comfort zone and, even as I mourn the past, remain open to the new possibilities of this adventure.*

*Anticipating the tenure process has been an intriguing experience that has challenged me personally and professionally. Because of my interest in group interpersonal dynamics as a social microcosm, remaining available to students while maintaining an intensive research schedule will be an ongoing battle. However, the foundation that was established for me as a result of Willow's guidance and mentorship will make this journey a bit less rocky.*

### *Discussion*

As joint authors, we frame our narratives of seeking personal strength on the tenure road within Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist

conception of learning. Two related aspects of Vygotsky's thinking are relevant: (a) the formation of the mind of an individual within society, and (b) the notion of facilitative self-talk (Manning & Payne, 1996) and metaphorical reframing. Both tenure stories reveal a process of purposefully negotiating the system by reflecting collaboratively on experience and on exploring the development of the individual as impacted by group dynamics (Yalom, 2005). Further, the learning community perspective suggests that our responses to our situations will in turn contribute to the construction of the social environment for others. The hopefulness in our social constructivist perspective is that we believe we have some agency in the purposeful creation of a social environment conducive to individual and organizational learning. In the complex interaction of personal, interpersonal, and organizational capacities that forms our university, our individual and shared self-strengthening processes will have impact.

From a leadership perspective, we view the tenure experience as one with potential to build or diminish personal capacity, which we define as the skill and will to exert effort and remain engaged with institutional goals. We connect our reflections within a learning community framework for understanding responsiveness in educational organizations (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Senge, 1990). This framework explains how individual or personal learning becomes organizational learning – responsiveness to the demands of specific contexts or to the changing needs of society, retained in organizational cultures beyond the coming and going of personnel. This explanation provides a moral imperative for persevering in the development and practice of interpersonal capacities that include collaboration and conflict resolution.

Our narratives highlight specific challenges and strategies on the tenure road, including balancing personal and professional lives, seeking out persons and ideas that provide emotional resources, and consciously managing our self-leadership and self-counseling. We have refused to be shamed, silenced, or isolated from the affiliations that bring us courage and we have learned to draw on our areas of scholarship as a source for strengthened mental models. Specifically, we maintain a systems perspective as opposed to assuming a personalized victim or failure identity. This view shifts our thinking away from lamenting our inability, as mature professionals, to become socialized to the unfamiliar culture and value system of academia. Instead, we recognize that

universities, as complex social structures, are open to purposeful self-regeneration from within.

We reaffirm the importance of persisting in the service orientation or altruism of our teaching, leading, and counseling professions rather than focusing on career advancement as the sole basis for establishing our priorities. However, we note the value of making strategic research or writing choices, particularly those that build on our unique strengths and authentic professional activities. In a situation laden with irony, we note that there is little credit for joint intrapersonal work in a research intensive university except as framed in a publishable paper such as this one.

In the context of our own university, apparently conflicted between research and regional expansion priorities, we have described converging paths and common experiences on the rocky road to tenure. We have reflected on personal challenges that occurred for us when expectations for productivity appeared ambiguous or contradictory, frequently in conflict with the professional competencies for which we were recruited, and in opposition to our personal and professional ideals. Rather than experiencing an environment oriented to learning, our narratives portray the university context as the restrictive iron cage of bureaucracy (as cited in Baehr & Wells, 2002), a regime of external motivation mechanisms that offends our sense of ourselves as intrinsically motivated professionals. We have revealed, to the extent of our awareness and willingness to share, our resulting disengagement and diminished interpersonal and organizational capacities. And yet we persist in our pursuit of healing and reintegration, academic success and personal productivity, believing that we will, if we work carefully and strategically, eventually earn our right to belong.

To conclude, we pose a crucial question: *How can universities better align their purposes, processes, and outcomes to increase their capacity and responsiveness?* We propose that the tenure road would be less rocky if an appreciation of the diverse strengths that faculty members bring to their varied tasks were firmly embedded in university policies and cultures. Our department's tenure and promotion policy, apparently not well understood or widely valued, draws on Boyer's (1997) definition of service and responsiveness to community needs as rigorous academic scholarly work. Boyer described diverse but equally valued scholarships of *discovery, integration, application, and teaching*. However, our knowledge of organizations and of group dynamics suggests that the ability to acknowledge or even embrace difference is dependent on

specific interpersonal capacities. Without purposeful assessment and revision of isolating and competitive university cultures, we believe that interpersonal capacities such as an appreciation for diverse strengths will remain in short supply.

Writing this paper collaboratively has been an act of resistance against the oppressive if not abusive nature of an institution largely unaware of itself and of the effects of its processes on personal, interpersonal, and ultimately organizational capacities. This writing displays our determination to exercise the scholarship of integration (Boyer, 1997) in creative ways. We are striving to regain and maintain our own emotional health by integrating our research, teaching, and service action with our beliefs about collaboration within communities that provide both support and challenge (Robertson, 2008). We also dare to advocate for an integration of the practical strategies of our helping professions with the inclusive values espoused by our university. A poster remembered from an office door long ago speaks to us strongly today: *The beauty of our difference begins with our right to belong*. Ultimately our goal is to restore public faith in universities, beginning with our own.

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