

Learning to Play a Rigged Game

Brian P. Coppola
University of Michigan
bcoppola@umich.edu

Mark Evanier works in the television and movie business. He tells this joke when he gives The Speech to some would-be creative artist.

A man arrives in a strange city. He wanders around and eventually finds his way to a local tavern where folks crowd around a roulette wheel to gamble. He pulls some cash from his pocket and joins in.

After a while, a waitress wanders up to him and whispers, "The wheel's crooked."

"Thanks," he says. But he doesn't quit.

A few minutes later, the waitress notices him still losing money at the table. She sidles back up to him and again whispers, "Didn't you hear me? The wheel's crooked!"

"I know," he says as he lays down another bet and promptly loses again.

The waitress is baffled. "Then why are you still playing?" she asks.

The man replies, "It's the only wheel in town."

Evanier has a four-point moral to The Speech. (1) The system is not fair. (2) It's never going to be fair. (3) You have two choices: Play under the system, as it is, or get out. (4) If it should happen to pay off, it pays off big.

Sound familiar? It reminds me of how limited the choices appear to be for "big pay-off" success in higher education. The roulette wheel of promotion and tenure rightly spins on the axis of scholarship, but the wheel is tilted towards discovery research as the place to make your bet. Evanier's story also reminds me of the quest to improve the status and profession of teaching in the parts of higher education dominated by research (a situation that has always been that way and has simply become more unbalanced over time, observes Larry Cuban in his recent book *How Scholars Trumped Teachers*). It reminds me, too, that those for whom a system pays off favorably are not inclined to support change. Finally, it reminds me, poking again at Evanier's metaphor, that the working of a roulette wheel (physics) and the workings of higher education (a social construction) intersect at the actions of the players.

Shifting metaphors slightly, the rulebook for success in higher education does not prescribe a particular kind of player, only the way a player can play. Consider for a moment how reporting on sports differs from reporting on education. In sports we rarely hear about the rulebook, instead we hear about what a player did with the rules. Reports about education invariably focus on the rulebook, educational policy, and so on, and rarely on something surprising that someone did within that system. Pushing on this comparison just a bit more, players who want the system to reflect a different set in values make a strategic error when they press only for a change in the rulebook. It violates Evanier's third moral: play under the system. Next year's star sports player is not one who changes rules, nor one who simply copies the moves of this year's star. Instead,

next year's star sees something in the rules that no one noticed before, something that all the other star-struck players fail to see because they are too busy playing follow the leader or listing the reasons why the game is unfair. Sound familiar?

Across higher education, a handful of faculty have managed to play under the existing rules for promotion and tenure and to be successful with cases that represent interdisciplinary studies at the interface of education (ISIE). Randy Bass did this in English at Georgetown University, and his case has received some well-deserved attention. I did this at the University of Michigan in chemistry. In our promotion documents, both Randy and I argued for the intrinsic familiarity of our work rather than its difference from what faculty in our disciplines typically put forward. That is, if the same institutional rulebook can assess and evaluate scholarship in everything from physics to English, from classics to chemistry, then those same rules could be used for our work, too. Interestingly, the failed cases I know of may have been doomed from the outset in their arguments for unfamiliarity and exception, with what was an appeal to change the rules as a condition for success.

As I examine Randy's success (and, unabashedly, my own), I can see how others can learn from what we have done as a matter of playing within the rules of the game. Broadening the educational program (the playbook) for future faculty is required to support the next players. To these ends, three different but related movements should be co-joined. First, the broadened understanding of scholarship advocated by *The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching* and its CASTL program are crucial re-readings of the faculty playbook. Transforming faculty understanding of scholarship after they begin their academic careers is too late, though, so the second movement to bring in is the Preparing Future Faculty program. A broadened understanding of scholarship will not fully exist until it is developed in the same way a more narrow understanding has been, namely, during professional development. Finally, the momentum from combining these two efforts extends to the undergraduate program, where the seeds of the future faculty are cultivated. Undergraduate peer-led teaching and learning programs, including curricular design that allows students as early as their first year to demonstrate and develop teaching skills, result in graduate students whose understanding of the discipline is integrated with its instructional design, implementation, and assessment. At a given institution, we already rely on intergenerational learning communities for the intellectual work of higher education to advance. An integrated collaborative system of faculty members, graduate and undergraduate students will mirror in the teaching program the familiar vertical integration of the research program.

Advancing of the profession of teaching is an overriding goal of programs like CASTL, in which both Randy and I participate. We may be renegades to some, but we have challenged the system according to the values that it ascribes to support, namely, improving teaching and learning and meaningfully integrating new technologies into education. Far from being the exceptions that prove the rule, we believe these are things that every faculty member can do. Remember, no one knew you could do the Thomas Flair (gymnast Kurt Thomas) or synthesize any known molecule (chemist Robert Burns Woodward) until these players re-read the rules; now, new gymnasts and chemists learn how to do these things from the outset. Here, then, is a picture of cultural change...I mean, a plan for future faculty to learn how to play the game of scholarship in a way that their progenitors did not understand. In order to take "non-traditional work" such as mine or

Randy's and make it ordinary, the system that produces faculty members (and their values) needs to reflect a broadened understanding of scholarship at each stage of professional development. Undergraduate students who learn in an integrated system of research and teaching will ask (as my students have) "where can I go to graduate school and continue in research and teaching at the same level as I have had here?" These undergraduate students need and will choose programs that will continue to support their integrated professional development. My graduate program for future faculty is modeled along the model traditionally used for Women's Studies, which maintains the centrality of one discipline (English, History, etc.) while offering work in the extracurricular area (gender, for instance). At Michigan, chemistry Ph.D. students who are interested in adding future faculty development to their program can do additional coursework in education science and then develop, implement and assess curriculum projects with some faculty members while they develop their research programs with others. If a critical number of schools that produce future faculty provide these kinds of experiences, the horizontal integration of these values will reinforce the vertical as the undergraduates from one school become the graduate students at another. Which brings me to Evanier's fourth moral: If it should happen to pay off, it will pay off big. Ultimately, these students, unlike any previous faculty members, will start their new faculty positions with a broader understanding and expectation of what can be done within the rules of the game.

Messieurs et mesdames, faites vos jeux.