

A FIGHTER FOR LIFE: Growing Professionally Amid Challenges

“Two things are constant, but one remains true. Changes and challenges are inevitable, but God is man’s hope to win them.” (Pentang, 2022)



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I am a fighter for life that overcomes challenges, champions task, wins people, produces results, creates opportunities, and aims for excellence. However, the journey was not short, not simple. It brings frustration, demotivation, and even depression. Thanks be to God, who never fails and my source of strength and wisdom. A fighter does not rely on his own; God is always with him.

Overloaded but Underpaid:

The Reality and the Challenge in My Profession

Choosing the teaching profession and working in the academe was never easy, whether basic or higher education. It requires passion and perseverance to remain in the job despite being underpaid. This constraint is even worse when teaching, including research, extension, and production, along with accreditation and administrative functions, reach beyond twice or thrice the ideal or maximum workload units. Reading this line in every assignment makes the tasks complex: “...to perform other duties that may be required...”. Nevertheless, turning these challenges into opportunities for professional growth is much better than letting them stress me out.

These challenges I experienced and have overcome are similar to some. I wrote this to urge others that challenges in the workplace are constant. Nevertheless, they are the path to growing personally and professionally. On the other hand, may this be an open letter to those in higher ranks to reconsider the sentiments and concerns of the young and new instructors like me. I want to learn with you and are not trying to complain when I speak up. I will listen and learn from you as our seniors or mentors in the field. Further, may this encourage my fellow fledgling professionals to keep on track despite the steepness of our path. More ways bring changes to our personal and professional outlooks, but let these never hinder our call to serve humanity as we serve God.

The Fledgling Me and the Numerous Challenges: Opportunities for Professional Growth

MisMATHched [*Mismatched*]. I started working as an Instructor I on August 2019. Fresh from my master's degree, I am excited to handle mathematics education courses. I finished Bachelor of Secondary Education - Mathematics and Master of Science in Education - Mathematics. Unfortunately, I received teaching loads not aligned with my academic background and interests. It was mismatched, and I have been stressed out for almost three years receiving assignments unrelated to my specialization. How could I teach a topic with boldness and confidence that I never studied nor mastered? Why was a math instructor given a teaching assignment for social studies majors? Still, I did my best for my students, knowing they deserve the quality and relevant instruction to prepare them as professional teachers and leaders in the future.

I hope the authorities act on this concern. It might be a minor one to the institution but crucial for the students receiving instruction

from one who is not an expert in what he teaches. As I look back on this constraint, this mismatch allowed me to go interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary. Teaching other courses (or subjects) that were new to me broadened my knowhow and helped me understand other fields. This pushed me to join professional groups and webinars to become acquainted while reviewing other materials. The free webinars offered during this pandemic made me knowledgeable and aware of the fundamentals of the courses I am handling.

Despite being mismatched, it provided me room to pursue further studies. This challenge has pushed me to enroll in a doctorate in educational management and finish 18 units as of this writing. Besides, I completed several online multidisciplinary courses offered by the University of California-Irvine, Universitas PGRI Semarang-Indonesia, and the Development Academy of the Philippines, to name a few. I am now even more motivated to finish my Ph.D. in Educational Management and to enroll in a Doctorate in Education majoring in Research and Evaluation and Science Education majoring in Mathematics. My drive to attend interdisciplinary activities is even more remarkable, either provided freely or not.

OverLOWded [*Overloaded*]. I observed this was a common concern to those working in the academe. In my case, I must work beyond my official time to complete my tasks. I even brought work at home and even isolated myself from other things. Just me and the numerous job I have to complete. I cannot create time for myself, my family, and my friends. For three years now, I have tried to raise my concern but have never received favorable feedback. Worst, I received more teaching and other workloads instead. In return, I remained focused on accomplishing my assignments. Unexpectedly, this challenge brought me to greater heights in my

professional career. In terms of instruction, I produced instructional materials and submitted them for copyright. I have co-authored four books, all of which are provided with ISBN and in circulation nationwide. The educational paradigm change brought about by the pandemic has even pushed me to write instructional modules. This added to my normal load, yet I enjoyed it since I could review the content of what I teach during distance learning.

In line with the task of conducting research, I published 21 research papers as primary, corresponding, and co-author that are internationally peer-reviewed, and some were indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, among others. With this accomplishment, I reached 220 citations, nine h-index, and nine i10-index in Google Scholar. Besides, I was able to present papers at national and international conferences. My background has allowed me to serve as an editorial board member and peer reviewer of national and international refereed journals, some of which are Scopus and Web of Science indexed. In addition, my research achievement brought me to several individuals and institutions where I serve as a consultant and resource speaker during research training and webinars. This engagement similarly brought me recognition from several awarding bodies for my research accomplishment and its impact on the academic, extension, and scientific community. About extension and community linkages, I was able to propose and implement Project



Math-EMATICS (Enhanced Mentoring, Assistance, and Tutorial to Indigent and Challenged Youths) and aided youths who were

mathematically needy but could not afford to attend formal schooling. With this, I was awarded an Honorary Doctorate in Humanities with Emphasis in Social and Community Development for my engagement and accomplishment in extension work.

Apart from these, there are other tasks and designations I cannot mention. I thought of myself as a “robot” automated to finish all tasks within the program of my superiors, similar to a soldier who has no right to complain but to follow all orders. Nevertheless, I accomplished these things in three years as a young and new instructor. Despite being overloaded, I turned this pressure to bring out the best in me. I just experienced a blessing in disguise. Now, I am learning to take every assignment lightly as these are measures to grow in my profession. Working overload is part of growing professionally. This is one thing that new and young instructors must understand and agree to take.

My Reflections: Lessons are Learned; Growth is Earned

There are lots of lessons as I look back and reflect. While reaching my goals, I realized that growth is earned in every exposure and experience, despite being mismatched and overloaded. My young experience is not the total of my being a mathematics instructor, researcher, and extensionist. Still, I must continually improve myself even if I can accomplish these things. I did not mention a lot, but I failed several times to overcome the challenges. I even committed mistakes, but that is where I learned some of the greatest lessons, and there I gained growth personally and professionally.

Sometimes, I doubt why I am in the middle of such changing and challenging circumstances. I even questioned the system, the people, and, worst, God. I went weary. My attitude towards others and situations even changed drastically. I even found myself alone, rejected, hated, and slandered. Yet this is where I found rest in God, faith! I am persuaded that doubting God's grace and faithfulness is not an attitude of a fighter. A fighter for life must always cling to God, openhanded to receive my fears, tiredness, tears, and madness. This I consider the greatest lesson of my young career. Where I found hope and faith in God is where I am nurtured in all aspects, even in my profession.

Learning from my Own Story: Excellence is a Fighter's Virtue

Quality and excellent service must always come first in my profession, as I serve not only my clientele but God. There will always be a hindrance in the teaching profession, it could be internal or external factors, but as a fighter, I must overcome them. Life is not long enough to whine about everything; thus, I have to take responsibility and accomplish all my tasks. At the end of the broken line, success comes to those who triumphed over trials or tests of this life. This is the virtue of a fighter for life.

I bravely fight not to excel, but I have to excel and put a premium on my work. Serving my purpose is not simply compliance but commitment. Learning from my experience, a fighter must focus more on how one task is to be accomplished, not how many tasks are to be completed. It is fundamentally concentrated on the solutions, not the problems. Despite the difficulties, braving this life, be it personally or professionally, is already an achievement that can prove God's grace in my life. The journey does not end

here; there are more challenges and opportunities. I must carry the virtue of a fighter to champion whatever mountain lies ahead.

The model below represents the learning I gained from my three years of experience in the academe (Figure 1). Professional growth is defined by perseverance (in all challenges) and excellence (in every task). Perseverance and excellence come from the strength and wisdom above, respectively. These are the two main variables to complete the equation in advancing one's career amid several obstacles, no matter how far the professional journey will be. In my case, I cannot reach my status if I only focus on perseverance or excellence alone. Like a bow and an arrow, these two are partners in targeting and achieving professional goals.



Figure 1.: Pentang's Professional Growth Model

In conclusion, a fighter for life needs perseverance and excellence too. Success can be attained when these values work together. Of course, it is not based on personal strength and wisdom but on the strength and wisdom that comes from God. Every successful fighter for life has outgrown challenges and survived difficulties through God-driven perseverance and excellence.