

Kurt Reynolds

College Comp II

Final Outliers Paper

I'm H. I'll take that in a Nano-Second!

This is the first year I have to (sadly) confess that I've been teaching longer than my oldest students have been alive. That is a long time. I recall two falls ago, Mr. Minder and I were coming back from a varsity football game in Dilworth. As we drove north on Highway 32, I recalled something Mr. Zutz said when he called me to tell me that they had hired Mr. Minder: "Kurt, Minder is going to be coaching 9th grade football with you. But what I really want you to do is take him under your wing and mentor him as a teacher."

And so once we ran out of football stuff to talk about, the conversation turned towards teaching. From Fertile to Thief River Falls, I shared all of the tips and tricks I had built up over 20 years.

I still remember when H. did the very same thing for me when I was a first year teacher back in 1998. He stopped by my room one afternoon and talked teaching with me for an hour or so. As H. left, *I thought, that guys is so nice. Here was a teacher, H., who had spent 20 years at LHS already and he was willing to give me all the tips and tricks he had learned!*

So when I pulled into Mr. Minder's apartment complex and dropped him off, I had a sudden realization: Minder was looking at me the way I had looked at H all those years ago! Man, I am old!

There was one key aspect Mr. Zutz wanted me to share with Mr. Minder that I haven't stated yet. I have held off on it because I happen to think it is actually the worst thing we can tell our kids when it comes to becoming successful. Mr. Zutz added, "Kurt, be sure to share your passion with Mr. Minder. It's infectious."

Truthfully, I do have a ton of passion for teaching. It's one reason I have a bumper sticker that reads, "I'd Rather Be Teaching." And it's true. Mondays are my favorite days. And Fridays are a bit of a

bummer. In fact, having passion for what I do is probably what I'm known most for. I have had school board members comment on my passion. I have had students write about my passion. I had someone leave several books on passion in my mailbox a few summers ago with a Post-It Note that said, "I heard this author speak a few months ago. His passion reminded me of your passion for teaching. Here are his books. Might make for some interesting reading with your classes." I even had a former student call me out of the blue because he was seeking some career advice. He said, "My current job just isn't what I thought it would be. So I began to think of people who loved their jobs. You were the first person I thought of. So how did you come to love your job so much?"

The apparent answer to that question: "So how did you come to love your job so much" is, I fear, the reason so many people (up to 85% of the American workforce) actually dislike their jobs so much. And that answer is "follow your passion."

I do have passion for my job - I mean, come on, I'm writing a research paper that I assigned this morning when I don't even have to write it (I mean how many other of your teachers have ever even done ONE assignment with you, let alone written a 6-10 page research paper with you?) - but I didn't always have passion for it, nor did I simply just follow my passion.

Cal Newport, author of *So Good They Can't Ignore You: Why Skills Trump Passion in the Quest for Work You Love* (we will read this soon, so think of this as a little bit of a preview), states right away that following your passion is terrible career advice. And it's true.

Sit down with any person who seems to have work they love or work that they are particularly passionate about and ask them if they just followed their passion for their current job. The answers almost universally happen to be something like: "Are you kidding? I wanted to be (insert exciting job title here). But I ended up doing (insert an opportunity that came their way). I found out that I was actually pretty good at (again insert an opportunity that came their way). Over the years I've gotten better and better at it. But when I graduated from high school, I had no idea I'd be doing this."

So much for just following their passion, right?

What people should do instead of following their passions is focus on what skills they are really good at and see where that leads them. Newport actually believes that passion is a byproduct of being really good at something. In fact, it is his third conclusion for why you shouldn't follow your passion. Newport states, "Passion is a side effect of mastery" (*So Good They Can't Ignore You* 17). His other two conclusions are "Carrier passions are rare" and "Passion takes time" (14, 15).

These conclusions help illustrate for us just how foolish the old mantra of "follow your passion and you'll find your dream job" is to young people. Our parents and grandparents never did this. In fact, coming from a person who really loves his job, I never even did this. Yes, I did enjoy English (specifically literature and writing), but what trumps that - and maybe is the very reason I liked them so much - is the fact that I had natural aptitude for reading and writing. The answer, it turns out, to having passion for your work is another old mantra that people use when it comes to being successful: hard work. When I reflect on the past 20 years of teaching, it was a lot of hard work. And if I'm being honest, I really hated my first year of teaching. I didn't know what I was doing; the kids walked all over me; I was too caught up in busy work; I wanted to be just like my college professors but ended up being more like my English teachers in high school (that's a bad thing). In fact, there was no way that I looked forward to Monday mornings of the '98/'99 school year. I dreaded them so much that I often became physically ill on Sundays, just dreading having to go back to work. And that's what it was . . . work. And I hated it.

Then something happened over the 185 school days that year. It was late in the third quarter of that year. I became better at what I was doing. Since I taught the same class five times a day, I started to finally get the material down. I began to become comfortable in front of those sophomores. I began to get to know them. Over time, I began to get better . . . I still wasn't good, but I was better. I didn't know it at the time, but I was getting in "deliberate practice," which is a "style of serious study" which involves "activity designed, typically by a teacher, for the sole purpose of effectively improving specific aspects

of an individual's performance'" (Newport 83). When I taught the same thing five times in a row every single day, I was indeed improving and tweaking and adjusting. What didn't work well for first period was fixed so it worked better with second period. By the time the sixth period rolled around, it was going over well with my students. Likewise, if I cracked a joke with my first period class, and they laughed, I kept improving it throughout the day, so that by last period, the kids in last block that it was hilarious. Malcolm Gladwell would say that I was working on my 10,000 hours. And he would be totally correct.

I'm not good at math (where are Kruta and Selvig when you need them?), but if I look back on that first year of teaching 186 school days for 6 hours a day (figuring in lunch and my prep block) that equates to approximately 1,116 hours of deliberate practice at getting better at teaching. And that doesn't include the hours on the weekend or in the evenings that I put in designing lessons and activities. It is no wonder that around 2006 - when I completed my master's degree - and found myself teaching College Composition courses that I had invested around 10,044 hours in teaching. It was at this juncture in my career when my wonderful passion for teaching began to manifest itself. Now, eleven years after teaching College Composition, passion is what everyone loves to talk about when it comes to my career. But if they could travel back in time and see the Kurt Reynolds of '98/'99 or even '02/'03, they would see something entirely different.

Looking back on my career (and you students can deem whether it's successful or not), I didn't graduate good old Lafayette High School *knowing* I'd be an English teacher. I thought that was what I would end up doing, but I wasn't sure about it. I certainly wasn't overly passionate about it. Remember, it took Dr. Drake scaring the hell out of me one day my freshman year at NCTC when I didn't bother to read Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" for class to actually motivate me to take my classwork seriously. I was lucky to befriend several of my professors at NCTC (Diane Drake, Tyrone Bergland, and John Doppler). But what I was really interested while at NCTC was staying close to home for my

girlfriend and to play football at NCTC. If I had any passions, it was about those things and not being an English teacher.

Even when I transferred to Bemidji State University in 1994, I wasn't completely set on being an English teacher. I seriously considered majoring in Social Studies. In fact, at the end of that school year, I had more Social Studies credits than English credits! However, I met more professors (Mark Christensen and Helen Bonner) who impacted me. I decided to stick with an English major, but it wasn't because I was overly passionate about the field. I just liked it, and I was good at it.

In 1997 when I graduated BSU, I was still focused not on being an English teacher. I was focused more coaching football and one day running my own high school football program as a head coach. And things began to actually fall that way for me. Coach Mumm didn't have any openings on his staff that fall, but I did get a call from the head coach at NCTC, Dan Willoughby, who had an assistant coach position open that he wanted me to fill. I did. I spent three seasons at NCTC coaching all over the place (starting as wide receivers coach, then running backs coach, and then moving over to defense to work with the linebackers). In 2001, Willoughby resigned, leaving the head coaching position open. I could have applied and started down that road - and it was a road I had been extremely passionate about for the past decade or so, but I didn't. I chose instead to take a year off from teaching and go back to BSU to earn my MA in English, particularly composition theory. You see, a much older passion, which had taken a backseat to my coaching passion, began to emerge again.

What made this new emerging passion for teaching writing and studying composition different was that I was ready for it. I was ready (thanks to Dr. Drake scaring the hell out of me at NCTC my freshman year) for the rigors of grad school. I was ready (thanks to Dr. Christensen, who was my advisor at BSU) to pour myself in teaching composition. I was ready (thanks to my three years of teaching high school English at LHS) to take all my experiences teaching high school writers and apply that to the new

theories of composition (thanks to writers like Donald Murray, William Coles, Nancy Atwell, Will Zinsser, Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, and Tom Romano) to become better at teaching writers to write.

When I returned to LHS in the fall of 2002, I was indeed following my passion. But there was a lot of hard work and suffering to go through still. I thought I was living the dream by just teaching Composition to freshman and sophomores. Then, when I finally wrote my thesis and, therefore, earned my MA, it coincided with our school's adoption of the College in the High School curriculum, where we would be offering college classes in high school. Mrs. Semanko was actually tabbed to teach these classes, but fate (or luck) intervened. The state demanded that only teachers with their master's in their content area could teach those classes. I was at the exact right place at the exact right time. So the College in the High School classes fell right into my lap. Confucius supposedly said, "Find a job you love, and you will never work a day in your life." Well, since I took over College Composition I and II, I haven't been working a single day.

Only, I did. I worked about 1, 620 of them (and over 10,000 hours too).

Man I should have only left this 'view only'! Ha ha. Oh. In that case. I'm going to spend a few pages focusing on the #1 thing I think students are told about success that is really a lie (follow your passion - and yes, I'm going to quote from *The Element* here). I'm going to explore that with the last source on the assignment document I shared with you. Then I haven't decided which aspect from Gladwell to focus on: hidden advantages, extraordinary opportunities, or cultural advantages. I kind of like them all, but I'll see which one leaps out at me.

## Works Cited

- Adams, Susan. *"Unhappy Employees Outnumber Happy Ones By Two To One Worldwide"*, Forbes, 10 Oct. 2013, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2013/10/10/unhappy-employees-outnumber-happy-ones-by-two-to-one-worldwide/#4123b563362a>. Accessed 16 Feb. 2018.
- Newport, Cal. *So Good They Can't Ignore You: Why Skills Trump Passion in the Quest for Work You Love*. New York, Grand Central Publishing, 2012.