

Transcript of “Don’t Do Your Best”

So today I just was going to say something about not doing your best, which is like a really kind of weird thing to suggest and I've phrased it in other ways. I borrowed that particular formulation of it from my friend Simone Grace and she like wrote a thing about it and I thought, Oh, I love that way of putting it because I've written before, there's a blog post where I said "[do good work](#)" And I think this ties in with stuff around perfectionism and it ties in with this whole pressure on everyone to be excellent. Like all of our institutions and governments are all talking about excellence in teaching and research. And, you know, all of this kind of thing. And I have also seen somebody I follow wrote an article, so there's an article about that whole [use of excellence](#) in relation to, for example, the Research Excellence Framework in the UK, um, which I think applies to any of the uses of excellence and that one of the key things that they point out about excellence is that it tends not to be defined, so like, and it's certainly not defined in concrete terms, so it's just this vague abstract "oh we're being excellent".

So one of the things you'll notice for example, is that your institution might have all this stuff about how they value excellence in teaching, but then when it comes down to your promotion criteria or you know, actually paying people who teach ... A lot of the teaching is done by people on really crappy contracts being paid really awful salaries and not really given a lot of support. The way that you're evaluated on that tends to be with what get called student evaluation surveys but are really kind of customer satisfaction surveys. We don't really know what criteria the students are using to tick off and a lot of the questions are kind of basic customer satisfaction stuff like, you know, did the teacher turn up on time and were they available for office hours and did they get their stuff back to you quickly enough and very little has anything to do with any kind of pedagogic principles about what good teaching might be. And whenever we talk about, well we could evaluate that better and we know as well, those students satisfaction surveys are also ... There's lots of research to show they're deeply flawed in terms of biases, conscious and otherwise, affecting the results. You know, but when you talk about what we need, something that's better, it's, you know, it's gonna take so much time or it's not going to be easy. You know, these are easy, like we get numbers and then we use. Right? And so there's some places that have added in other things and people who have teaching only contracts sometimes get uh better, you know, also have like better kinds of ways of evaluating their work.

But the excellence thing, when you start to look at how it plays out, it's like, well maybe my idea of excellence and the university's ideas of excellence and what they mean when

they tell that to students. Maybe they're being vague because nobody really wants to define it because then we might actually have to say, right. So what ends up happening is that this word excellence or the word or the phrase, “doing your best” ends up being this sort of vague thing, that you don't really know what it is and therefore you never know when you've got there.

And that's the biggest problem with trying to do your best, right? Is that, doing your best, because it's abstract ... When you go into your classroom you think, I'm just going to do my best today. You might think of it as different from being perfectionist because you're not trying to like, you're not trying to be perfect, but you're thinking you can do your best. Well, what ends up happening though is if you say you're going to do your best, and then after class you're like, oh, there was this little thing. It would've been so easy to do that better. So I didn't really do my best. I'm not expecting it to be perfect, but like one little thing makes you feel like you somehow failed and it focuses your attention on how you didn't live up to this kind of abstract standard. Okay?

So that's the first problem with doing your best is that it tends to be not concrete. Right? And then it feels like all your .. suggests all you can do is say how you're not being it. Rather than being able to say, yes, I am doing excellent work, or I did do really, you know, whatever. So it's hard to say that you've achieved it. So you end up always feeling a little bit like you're not really doing a good enough job. And some days you don't do a good enough job, but most of the days you do at least a good enough and probably a really great job and yet a lot of people just feel all the time like they're not quite doing well enough. Like it just leaves you in this emotional state that I don't think is sustainable long term as a way to keep doing your work and enjoying your work and feeling like it's going well and it makes the bad days just feel that much worse. So that's one thing.

The second thing is it tends not to be very .. so it's not concrete, but it's not specific to what you're doing. So there's a kind of sense about, you know, doing your best. There's all kinds of different things that go into that and it doesn't give you any way to say, well, you know what, like the work I did do was more important. The little bit that kind of I fell down on today? The effort to fix that versus the reward for fixing that just wasn't worth it. So that's where I really wanted to talk about it because I'm helping you guys all the time, pick priorities, decide what to do, what to say no to, how to juggle all the kinds of things you're doing, Right? And, and some of the time that's really hard and fitting everything you need to do into the 24 hours of your day and including like decent sleep and um, social life and having relationships and eating good food as things you need to do. It's just really hard to fit all of that in and there's a lot of pressure to do more and more. And sometimes it's like, well I can't just chuck out this whole thing. I have to

prepare that thing for that committee or I do need to mark these student papers or I do need to, you know, turn up and and lead this seminar for my students. Right? Or, you know, I have to like make my kids some Halloween costumes because where I live, kids go out, they get dressed up, they go out for Halloween. And they really like that. And I'm trying to be a good mom. And I want that to happen.

So it's not like you're going to not do it like the whole that can get you into an all or nothing. It's like, do I have time to do this? Do I not have time to do this? What I want to by focusing on the best part, it's like, if I only have this much time to do it, what can I do in that time? And when you think about your best, that's where you end up being like, oh, I need to do better. I can't, it won't fit. And that's where things leak out of their containers.

And in thinking about how to get around that, what I realized is that doing your best is focused on you. It's all about whether you look good, whether you can say at the end of the day, oh yeah, I'm a great teacher, or I'm a great researcher, or I'm a great mom, or whatever. You know. And actually that's really not the most important question. The most important question is, did the work you do benefit the people it was supposed to benefit.

So I'm gonna take the halloween costume example for a moment because it feels trivial and therefore you don't have a lot invested in it. [Referring to a FB post.] So she had just posted partly, you know, I guess for her friends and said this year, my kids are going as a, you know, I can't remember what they were, but they were two things. She's like, I bought the costumes. They're basically big all-in-one things, you know, with a hood and whatever that looks like a Fox and a something else. It was really easy for me. The kids really like them and they're going to have a really good time. And she posted after Halloween with pictures of her kids and their friends, you know, sorting all the, all their candy and all the rest of it. Right?

So here's the thing, you can look at what some people are doing. Um, you know, and ... You can look at parenting magazines with or pinterest or anywhere about these great costumes you can make your kids. Um, I happen to sew, and uh, you know, some of the sewing groups I'm in, you should see the kind of costumes, right? And then there's the whole like, cosplay thing with uh fandoms which seems to have eked into Halloween costumes to where people actually do some pretty snazzy. I mean, they're fantastic. And the people that do them, I think, you know, go you, those are great costumes and if you really enjoy spending time, you know, sewing and making homemade costumes, blah, blah, blah, then you know, that's great. But I know a lot of moms who just feel like I don't have time for that. I don't have the skills for that. I don't have the money for that.

And you know what, it doesn't matter because the important part is that being a good mom means your kids got to participate and they had a really good time.

So on one level, when you switch from “what's the best” to “what am my kids really need here?” And how can I meet those needs in ways that work for them and they have a really good time and hey, isn't it better for your kids if their mom isn't stressed and cranky, right? Then all of a sudden it's like, oh yeah, you know what? I could buy those things and I'm not going to win any parenting awards, but my kids are happy. They like those costumes, they're going to have fun. And then the important part is that I'm happy on the day and we are there and they, you know, there's space for them to do their thing.

[10:24] So the same thing can happen with all of your other tasks, right? It's not about do I look like I'm doing my best. It's about who does this task benefit, and what do they need? And then you can do the effort and reward thing, right? You can be like what do I need to put the most effort in? Right? Since it's all about bang for your buck. So with uh teaching, I think what can sometimes happen, especially early in your career and especially because if you've been in a system with comprehensive exams and this whole focus on content ... is that you can kinda get focused on, am I covering all the content, do I look smart, do I know the answers to all the students questions. But the real purpose of teaching is not to make you look smart. The real purpose of teaching is for the students to learn things. Um, which is one of the reasons that despite any of the bureaucratic and managerial origins of being forced to write them, I still really like the idea of writing learning objectives because it really focuses your mind on what are the most important things I want to achieve here. If the purpose is for the students to learn things, that's why I'm teaching what is the most important things I want them to learn. And then you can say, this is what I'm going to do. What are the things I can do that are really focused on that? And then when you start getting into, am I doing my best and worrying about it, you've got some concrete definitions that you can measure yourself against, against, right? So, um, if you start thinking, oh, but I could spend another 20 minutes doing blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. You can stop yourself and say, is that going to help them learn this or is it going to confuse them?

[12:17] Marking? I'm going to give you an example. Grading, right? Every once in awhile I see people on twitter going, you know, especially people on casual contracts where they're like, “I'm only being paid this really small amount and my university says that I'm only supposed to take, you know, 10 minutes per essay to do this grading. That's ridiculous.” Which may be true. But one time I saw somebody say, I spend two hours on every essay and I'm like, you know, If you're being told that you should take 10 minutes,

then 10 minutes might be a short amount of time, but you shouldn't be going like so far over that you're basically spending 12 times as much on those essays. And I'm trying to think in two hours. I really, I've marked a lot of essays in my life. It's the one thing I don't miss about not being an academic, but um, I can't even imagine what you would do in two hours with an undergraduate essay. And so what I end up feeling like is you're putting so much into giving that feedback to that student that they are going to be overwhelmed. So it feels like, oh, I'm spending all this time is making you feel good about "I'm being a conscientious teacher. Look how much time I spent on these essays" And in the narrative of my institution doesn't pay me enough or doesn't give me enough time, it comes out as "The institution doesn't really care but I really care." And I get that. I get that people are really invested in being good teachers, but the fact is, you then focus on the wrong things. Taking two hours to mark an essay. Doesn't make it better.

Focusing on what would help students, I mean marking an essay you need grade tells them how they're doing right and fits into a whole bunch of certification things. You need a few comments that help them understand why they got that grade instead of another grade. Right? This is why you're in the sixties, this is why you're in the eighties and this is what right. Like it's sort of a, you did these things well but you didn't do these things very well, you need to Blah Blah Blah. And then you need to give them some feedback that helps them learn and improve and, and when we, when you think about that and it's like, well if you get a load of feedback that's just like pages and pages and lots of stuff and you know, isn't very well organized, what does it do to you, right? Like you know, when you start to think about I need to give feedback and the purpose of the feedback is not to prove that I'm a conscientious teacher, but it's to help the students learn and do better. Then sometimes less is more. Right?

So when you start to like have an objective, this is my objective, when I'm grading this, I need to give them a grade because that's kind of an institutional requirement. They need to sort of have some sense of why they got that grade. But as a teacher pedagogically, the most important thing is they get some feedback that's going to help them. And really if I give them too much, they're going to be overwhelmed and it's not going to help them. If I give them too little, right? If all I say, "Ooh great job. You're doing fine." That's not gonna help them either. Right? So there needs to be a balance between that. Once you kind of get into that rhythm, you can figure out, okay, this is what good marking looks like, right? That I'm doing these things takes me about this long. Right? And it's focused on what the students are getting out of it.

[16:16] And I think once you get out of that thing where you're not trying to do your best, you're trying to do a good job that delivers the benefits to the people that are benefiting from the work you're doing and you're clear about what that is and that you

can't do everything, right? What's reasonable to do in this seminar? What's reasonable to do at this level? Right? All of a sudden that lifts up some of the pressure on how much time you need to devote to particular activities. I mean, it's still hard, right?

And that. But then also there are some activities you do where you do really want to do a lot better than others, right? Some of them, your minimum is going to be a lot lower and some of them it's going to be a lot higher. So a lot of your research activities, right? There's, there's a lot of work there. You just really do want to spend a lot of time and effort because you really want a good quality piece. And sometimes you know, you're on a committee, you said you would do a thing and there's like you could do it in different ways, but at the end of the day what they need is this information so we can make this decision, right? We don't have to spend all day talking about it. We don't have to cover all the possible options. What we need to know is that we considered the most important ones, that we had enough information to make it. And so you don't necessarily have to make like the prettiest presentation or the prettiest document to hand round to everybody. Has have all the information in it. Needs to be set out basically, right? It doesn't have to be your best piece of writing needs to be clear, needs to be concise, needs to be able to be used to make whatever decision. Right?

[18:00] And the same with, you know, kids, parenting, dinner, right? Like cooking dinner. I keep saying to you guys, you need to eat well and you're busy and you're tired at the end of the day and it's really hard to do that. Um, so really the question is, what's important to you? Is it important to you to eat different things all the time or is it okay if like every Monday you have chicken and every Tuesday you have some sort of vegetarian thing and every Friday you have, right? Like I have a friend that did that when her kids were little. She's like, I don't really enjoy cooking. I gotta feed all these people. And she made a list and it was on a pin board in her kitchen and it basically said, you know, Monday, I, I mean, I still remember this. Our kids are now 21 or our eld... Her eldest, my only. Um, but it said, you know, like I'm, I'm pretty sure she does chicken on Monday. She says fish on Friday and there's a couple other. Right? But, and now the list is a little bit more complicated. So it's still chicken on Monday, but then she's got next to it, three different options and that has the benefit that it makes it really easy for her to shop. So she definitely has the ingredients. Everybody knows what's going on. She gets a little bit of variety. She makes sure that diet is balanced over the week, but it's minimal time making decisions and things can just happen. Right. She just makes it. Nobody argues. It's not like their kids sit down on Monday. What are we having? Oh, why are we having this? blah blah No, it's chicken. We have chicken every Monday, right? Like whatever. So that's. And that's the kind of thing I've gone over to. I eat when I'm at home on my

own at lunchtime I have crackers and cheese for lunch with one kind of vegetable thing and a piece of fruit and a glass of water. And um, sometimes there's different kinds of cheese. Mostly if there's three kinds of cheese in the fridge, I like pick one and I have six crackers with that kind of cheese on it, couple of cherry tomatoes or carrots, some carrot sticks, glass of water. Don't think. Just do. Right? Easy to shop, easy to make decisions. I can put all the energy somewhere else. Not the best lunch. Healthy. Does the job.

[20:16] Okay, so key things. Best is abstract. You don't know if you've got there, it makes you feel bad for little tiny, not-making-it bits right? And it puts the focus on you rather than on the beneficiary of the work that you're doing. So if you get rid of best and start thinking about doing good work, you focus on who benefits from this, what do they need, and then then you can kind of work on the balance between the effort you put in for the benefit they get out and make some decisions. Okay? And it means that when things are in a real crisis mode, you can just accept like what's the best I can do in these circumstances? And you've got somewhere to focus your energy, right? So you don't just panic, "I can't spend as much time as I want to." You can be like, "Okay, if I can't spend as much time as I want to, what's the most important thing I need to do to meet what they need?"