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Top Ten Reasons to Seek Professional Challenges*

Trudy Salsberry

When we first enter a new role in a profession, the challenges for growth are constant and almost overwhelming. As we gain experience and confidence, there is always a chance that what was once 'novel' becomes routine. Seeking professional challenges are the answer to remaining motivated and productive as we move from novice to expert. This past spring, I chose to take my own advice and engage in a role that was new me . . . serving as an overseas school evaluator.

For three weeks, I served as a stateside evaluator conducting school site visits at four Department of Defense Dependents Schools (DODDs) located in The Netherlands. Prior to the visits, I received intensive training from the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI) for conducting the visits as well as learning about the culture of the educational environment of families in the military and the necessary information for international travel. Those three weeks in The Netherlands were filled with forming new relationships with team members at each school site, learning about the unique needs of children who are transferred nearly every three years, and working with teachers and administrators who are living in a foreign country and experiencing very diverse contexts. I evaluated one of the smallest schools in that area of Europe (a total of 40 children in an elementary school) situated in a small rural community as well as an international elementary school of about 600 children where administrators from three countries served as a leadership team and where all children were required to learn two languages.

What I learned from my 'professional challenge' as an overseas evaluator went far beyond how to serve in that evaluator role. I decided that the top ten reasons for seeking professional challenges are for:

1. Enhancing professional development. In my case, I had just created a new course on program evaluation and I was able to develop new skills and understandings related to a specific model of evaluation I

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About the Author

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would discuss in the new course. I was able to illustrate with concrete examples the importance of evaluator training, appropriate data collection and analysis techniques, and the ethical issues involved in conducting evaluations.

2. Modeling what you believe. I always ‘preach’ to my graduate students that it is important to be a life-long learner. Through this experience I was modeling my commitment to learning something new at all stages of life.
3. Remaining humble. In the professoriate, I am generally regarded as having a certain expertise, poise, or ‘presence.’ When I took golf lessons a few years ago, I was incredibly awkward and unable to follow the instructor’s directions. I had never even been on a golf course so you can imagine how embarrassed I was to try to hit the golf ball off the tee only to have my mighty swing hit the ground with a painful ‘thud’! Many of my graduate students come to their first graduate level course nervous about their ability to handle the class or afraid to speak out because of how they might be perceived. Trying to acquire new skills or attempting new roles makes me more sensitive when working with others with varying levels of development.
4. Experiencing another culture. Culture can be broadly defined. I learned about the ‘military’ culture as much as I did about The Netherlands. The military observe a protocol that is not always familiar to those not employed in the armed forces. My role as an evaluator required me to learn more about the significance of rank, the importance of following protocol, and the conditions military families live in overseas. There was a real need to be aware of the impact of the current war as these children all had parents who might be involved in dangerous duties. In addition, each school site had high security not often experienced stateside. I had to travel with orders from the pentagon and be able to present those papers at any school entry checkpoint along with a passport and school identification. Armed guards greeted us each morning as we entered the buildings.

5. Breaking routines. Routines are helpful but by breaking routines from time to time you are able to see new perspectives. My drive from the lake to work had become monotonous until I broke that routine with three weeks overseas. When I returned, the drive was more scenic and I was excited to process new ideas with my colleagues.
6. Increasing your range of opportunities. This spring I will be traveling to Egypt to work with the Commission on International and Trans-Regional Schools (CITA) because of a recommendation from those connected to my earlier work with DODDs. I had not even considered these possibilities for travel a few years ago . . . I thought I had more to do at work than I could handle!
7. Affirming your value and credibility. There may be times when you feel a little unappreciated or you question whether you are 'current' or 'cutting edge' in your field. Stepping outside your present work place and being recognized for your contributions by other organizations reminds you of your many strengths and skills you have acquired and allows you to assess your abilities more accurately.
8. Learning about new practices. School leaders need to be aware of effective practices for a wide range of content areas. Observing other educators allowed me to affirm the behaviors of good teaching and strong leadership. In this situation, I was able to observe an international leadership team and how they negotiated when there were conflicting national standards for student achievement. I also saw classrooms where teachers modeled innovative ways to implement standards-based teaching and learning. I'll never forget viewing the 'Wax Musuem' where the elementary students researched, wrote biographies, and then dressed as famous people. When I stepped on the 'button' on the floor, the 'wax' figure came alive and told me their name and what role they played in the Victorian era.
9. Appreciating your current role. Changing your physical setting for a short while allows you to reflect on what you enjoy about your work and reminds you of the many privileges you have. I realized that while serving as an administrator or teacher overseas or acting as a consultant were all options for my employment, I did truly enjoy working closely with doctoral students to finish that dissertation or helping an advisee select the right courses so that they could land that administrative position in their district.

10. Appearing more exotic to my family and colleagues. Yes, finally, I will admit that in my case it was fun to be able to say . . . I'm off to Amsterdam next week! Or, I really enjoyed eating a Belgian waffle Sunday morning . . . in Belgium! And better yet, the chocolate from the U.S. can't begin to compare with what I brought home from Europe . . . here, have a taste!