

SHIFTING GEARS:  
RETRAIN BY TEETH-GRITTING

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Almost all the courses I have been teaching for the last twelve years are gone. This year I moved into a different department with a different teaching assignment. I have had some experience in computers, but having been immersed in other areas for a long time, I feel extremely out of date.

As a little girl on the farm I learned the importance of helping with the work in any way possible. I was too small to lift much but could steer the truck, standing up to peer through the steering wheel while others loaded the hay. I became my Dad's regular truck driver. One day I found myself starting up a steep incline with a full load of six or eight cows. I shifted into low gear and began the climb. Animals never stand still so there is always a shifting of the load, which complicates the driving. I remember gritting my teeth, saying my prayers, clinging to the wheel, pushing on the gas, and hoping the truck would make it to the top.

Looking back on that drive up the hill reminds me of what is happening at Ricks College. I love being here. I had taught at several universities before coming. The atmosphere, the coworkers, the environment—everything has been such a positive experience for me. Working with students has been absolutely delightful. But change is not easy.

I enjoy working with students who have no previous experience with the keyboard. Many of them are from foreign countries or parts of the United States where the opportunity to take a class and learn efficient keyboarding was not available. Here they finally had that chance. We, the students and I, would work day by day, step by step, learning the reaches, the word processing commands, the various styles, and so on. By the end of the semester, I would have a very strong sense of accomplishment as my students were successful—competent to move on to the area of their choosing. With that much background they could successfully cope.

This service class is gone. Now the assumption is that all coming to Ricks will bring this skill with them.

This is also true of the word processing applications on the computer. Again, the new assumption is that everyone coming to Ricks can already use a word processing program: students don't need instruction in this; everyone today knows how to use word processing on the computer.

I always felt that my contribution, particularly in these two areas, contained a positive double whammy. Students with good keyboard skills and knowing the word processing software would not unnecessarily tie up scarce resources. They wouldn't need to occupy hours and hours

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at the units in our computer labs because they lacked efficiency. Not only that, but placement of students gaining degrees from the office education department was extremely high. This department has been my only experience where companies actually came to a two-year school recruiting graduates. As we informed many of these companies that the program is now gone, real dismay has been expressed.

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Change occurs quickly. Technology changes rapidly. Simply keeping up is a full time job for those working in the field. The announcement that Ricks was to become a four-year school came in June. In July, less than two weeks after the announcement, I was in another department teaching a different course. My peers kept telling me that it couldn't be so because no actual changes had been made yet. I knew differently. I was already teaching and working in a different department, knowing that where I had been was gone.

No one will know the hours, the anxiety, the prayers it took, to teach a technical class where I had been in another area for so long.

I was again assigned to teach that course last fall semester. I am now starting to feel ownership of it and be comfortable with it. However, getting up to speed in the next course is already upon me. I'm scrambling with syntax, concepts, and a whole new language. Thank goodness we have faith and know we can ask help from Father in Heaven.

Some of my support system is gone. Those who worked together for so many years are now moved into other departments. I am trying to become acquainted with the strengths and talents of different people in a new area. Which of them should I ask for help? Will they be willing to work with me, or will they just think I am slow and taking from their time and not returning anything? I keep reminding myself that I am not the only faculty member going through this transition. I also know there are others on campus who are not having to make many changes at all. They may be unaware of the tremendous upheaval some of their fellows are experiencing. That seems to add my feeling of isolation.

The stress level is extremely high; a person begins to question her worth. After feeling successful, as if making a contribution in the lives of students for the past many years, suddenly all that is gone. It's not just my stress, but the sense that students this year are not getting as much from me as last year's did. Perhaps the sense of accomplishment will return at some future time, but whether it will is not yet apparent. What I was doing is no longer needed, wanted, necessary. New directions, new knowledge, new skills, new demands and requirements lie ahead.

How can I run fast enough, study hard enough, and learn quickly enough? Is it possible to once again be able to contribute? or will I again find I am in a dead end road and have to turn and make my way over

another route? Where can I find the time to become good at something new while finishing out the old? How will I fit in?

Last semester I had five preparations; this semester only three. We have heard mention of future retraining as it shall become necessary. I have been offered release time in the fall to study for a new class next winter. Would a Spanish teacher wait until fall to prepare to teach German in the winter? I'm driving to Idaho Falls now to learn Visual Basic.

Once again I am the little girl in the cattle truck, again at the bottom of a steep hill with a full load, a load that could shift at any moment. My capability of handling the load is not the question—I have to do it. My students' futures are at stake. I grit my teeth, say my prayers, cling to the wheel, push on the gas, and hope the truck will make it to the top. ☹

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