

Actions speak louder than words: Are we role modelling what we hope for?

Role modelling in academic settings represents a powerful force that shapes the next generation of scholars, professionals and citizens.^[1,2] When we, as role models, demonstrate factors such as intellectual curiosity, ethical rigour and respectful communication, we create a platform for further professional development of our students.^[1,3] The implicit messages we send through our actions – what constitutes professional behaviour, what it means to be an academic, and what drives scholarship – often speak louder than our explicit teachings. Care should therefore be taken to ensure these messages are translated appropriately. Role modelling is a powerful learning device that bridges formal academic content related to such matters and highlights its authenticity. It is particularly well-suited for behavioural learning,^[3] especially when we consider the vast array of contextual factors, such as sociodynamic interactions, that are not easy to translate in a text or lecture.

However, this influence can also be negative, where harmful patterns can be perpetuated as readily as beneficial ones:^[3-5] overworking may be seen as a badge of honour; discourse may be veiled with deconstructive elements; and exclusionary disciplinary-focused practices may be emphasised more than actual inter- or transdisciplinarity. As academics, we must therefore engage in continuous self-reflection, recognising that our professional conduct serves as a blueprint that students and junior colleagues may inevitably follow, for better or worse. Unfortunately, the academic environment is complex, and often brings about a myriad of circumstances to be navigated, and that strain on our values, messages, and meanings.

In my own practice, I have experienced the tension between doing the right thing as a role model, and moving forward with my day-to-day responsibilities. I trust I'm preaching to the choir when I say that many a day has passed where emails have been sent well outside of standard working hours; where the to-do list is an ever-growing monster; and the responsibilities taken on exceed what is considered balanced because of what it may yield at the end of the day. Yet, in-between these matters, I have also been adamant in communicating to my students the importance of maintaining a work-life balance; of carefully considering opportunities to avoid overloading their plates; and of engaging in self-care to support their mental, emotional and physical health. Realistically, this creates an odd perspective of *'do as I say, not as I do'*, something that I've often joked about, or at times even failed to recognise.

An important moment in my life occurred while speaking to a postgraduate student who was approaching a breaking point in their mental health, only to realise they had been emulating my behaviour with the assumption that *'it is what an academic must be able to do'*. The unwieldy nature of my work had created an impression that the outwardly projection of my success was based on my horrid work-life

balance, and this is what it would take, what is considered normal, and what must be done. As is often mused: an academic breathes, bleeds and sweats their career. I had succumbed to this image, and it affected what I wanted my students to learn from me. This was a changing point in my behaviour: emails are schedule-sent to only occur in working hours; healthy boundaries are created where matters are attended to that also accommodate my work-life balance; emphasis is placed on improving my overall responsibilities, including reducing the overload thereof; and care is taken when communicating instructions and guidance to ensure the message aligns with my actions.

Has this been an easy process? Unfortunately not. I have struggled and failed more than I would like to admit. However, I have seen that this change has translated to students the importance of striving for balance, with a more open and honest platform for discussion now available to support one another. Additionally, they learn from the positive attributes, but also understand to heed caution from those elements that I struggle with. As stated by Mahatma Gandhi: *"We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. This is the divine mystery supreme. A wonderful thing it is and the source of our happiness. We need not wait to see what others do."*

As academics, we must aim to not only speak about what we wish to see in our next generation, but also to live it as role models. Let us strive to be better representatives of the professionals we are or hope to become, and work to break the stigma of unhealthy habits to which we often succumb to in the academic setting.

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