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Blog: [Technology and Learning](#) ^[1]



The University of Wisconsin-Madison's Thomas J. Tobin generously agreed to answer my questions about his career path and scholarship.

Q1: [Tom](#) ^[2], okay, you have co-authored [Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education](#) ^[3] (2018) with Kirsten Behling, created [The Copyright Ninja: Rise of the Ninja](#) ^[4] (2017), and co-wrote [Evaluating Online Teaching: Implementing Best Practices](#) ^[5] (2015) with Jean Mandernach and Ann H. Taylor. You also have a new book coming out later in 2019, tentatively called [Going Alt-Ac: A Guide to Alternative Academic Careers](#) with Katie Linder and Kevin Kelly.

My question to you is to please explain how you are able to pursue this scholarship? What sort of academic are you?

Well, Josh, I have actually been two different kinds of academic person, as well as an industry-based practitioner, over the course of my career. All of the books and resources I've created have been in response to challenges that I've seen in the academy or the industry around me. My path has been anything but that of a traditional faculty member, but that is certainly where it began.

I started out earning a Ph.D. in English literature, where I specialized in scholarly bibliography. I was the researcher who went into the dusty library stacks in order to resurrect, examine, and annotate primary resources so that other scholars can make good use of them. In the late 1990s, my dissertation work focused on the reception of the Pre-Raphaelite poets and painters in the nineteenth-century press worldwide, and my first book^[6] and first edited collection^[7] are in this area of scholarship. Throughout my master's and doctoral studies, I was trained for the role of a tenure-line English professor.

My wife^[8] and I recognized in the mid-1990s that the replace-the-retiring-faculty-members jobs for which we had been trained simply didn't exist^[9] in our field of Victorian literary studies. The few available positions each year in our narrow slice of the field were so hyper-competitive as to be unobtainable by candidates from second-tier universities^[10] with limited grad-school publications^[11] and grant-getting experience.

So we pivoted. That's the concise way of saying that we changed fields entirely. My wife became an expert in outcomes-based curriculum and assessment^[12]. Because my first full-time academic job was to help a community college to create its very first online courses (I think I was hired based on my ability to hand-code HTML^[13] and manage databases), I went back to school for a second master's degree in library science, specializing in what was, in the late 1990s, the exciting frontier of online education. It was definitely "early days" in the field. In 1999, I helped the college to adopt version 1.0 of the Blackboard LMS^[14].

At that time, I was really an English professor who happened to know some coding thanks to the needs of my dissertation work, rather than a proper faculty developer. My career path changed to what it is today with just one conversation with a colleague. Marty was a professor in our business department, and he asked me if I would help him to put his Labor Relations course fully online. This was a challenge because Marty had lost his sight in his 40s due to complications from undiagnosed and untreated diabetes. I was a 27-year-old practitioner in a field that I didn't know much about, so, of course I said "sure, I'll help you," and then went to find the scholarly literature on how

to design online interactions with colleagues who have disability barriers. There was no literature.

I was fortunate to get connected by e-mail with [Norm Coombs](#)^[15], a blind professor of history at the Rochester Institute of Technology, whose advice was succinct: he acknowledged that I had a pretty good challenge on my hands, and would I please let him know how it turned out? Norm also told me about other resources and people whom I could rely on to help my colleague. The end of this story is that we were successful in offering Marty's course for three semesters. We used graduate students from a nearby university to act as Marty's surrogate eyes and typing hands ([voice-recognition software](#)^[16] wasn't yet a viable option), until we realized we were violating student-privacy laws in several different ways, and we had to stop.

That failure caused me to [take a hard look](#)^[17] at the work I was doing. If it was so challenging to help just one colleague, I thought, who else are we not serving well, or perhaps even missing all together. Along with learners with ability-based barriers, I started to "see" people with work commitments, family responsibilities, military deployments, and rural learners who just lived too far away from campus. All of these are populations of learners whom distance-education could reach, and we have indeed reached the point where the major challenge for college and university learners is no longer distance, but [time](#)^[18].

That interest in how we create learning interactions for remote learners led me to work in the learning and design arm of a [large health-insurance company](#)^[19] (this decision was driven by the two-body problem: see below). Working in industry helped me to learn real teamwork, and my colleagues encouraged me to obtain my [Project Management Professional](#)^[20] (PMP) certification, something that benefits my work to this day.

I brought that industry experience back into higher education when I joined the Center for Teaching and Learning staff at a regional university in Chicago. The biggest challenges in the early- to mid-2010s were [scaling up programs](#)^[21], overcoming faculty resistance to [changing ideas](#)^[22] about what [effective teaching](#)^[23] looks like, and how to [reach out to learners](#)^[24] whom we were serving poorly—or not at all.

My books, articles, speaking, and consulting grew out of these big questions, and I'm grateful to have had such varied experiences and connected with so many people whose ideas and stories helped me to make sense of those challenges. For instance, the *[Evaluating Online Teaching](#)* ^[25] book grew out of a [three-day seminar](#) ^[26] on the topic that [Jean Mandernach](#) ^[27], [Annie Taylor](#) ^[28], and I created for a faculty-development company. As we were collecting resources for the seminar, we noticed that there weren't any book-length studies or guidance to which we could point our participants. We decided to write that book.

The [Copyright Ninja](#) ^[4] comic book also came out of a direct need. In my work as an instructional designer and teaching-center staff member, I found that few people beyond our university's librarians and lawyer knew much about how best to copy materials for course use, and that people often got into trouble with mistaken notions about what is and isn't permitted.

Once again, I had the good fortune to talk with experts in the field like [Linda Enghagen](#) ^[29], a lawyer and academic who presents regularly on copyright basics for academics. My approach differed significantly from Linda's, since I am a non-lawyer diving into what is often a thicket of case citations and unique circumstances. With the comic-book artist [Mike Watson](#) ^[30] and his team, I put together a simpler version of what academics need to know, knowing fully that it applies only about 90% of the time. The comic book was the result of trying to share that information in a way that was story-based, engaging, and not another two-page handout.

[Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone](#) ^[31] is another book born out of a perceived need for guidance. Our colleagues in the K-12 world have known about the framework called Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and it has been guiding policy and practice in that arena since the early 1990s. Higher education was less quick to catch on to the benefits for students and instructors.

My co-author Kirsten Behling and I come from very different backgrounds: she is the director of the [Student Accessibility Services](#) ^[32] office at Tufts University, while I have been a faculty member and administrator in colleges, universities, and professional-learning organizations. Our book came about because [UDL](#)

is such a timely topic [33] as part of the larger need to recognize diversity, equity, and inclusion [34] as key elements of the learning process. In writing the book, Kirsten and I learned so much from a wide range of people and teams throughout higher education about how they were trying to re-frame UDL to be a mission-critical business driver in the eyes of presidents, provosts, and chancellors everywhere.

It was thanks to making connections with others in the field of distance-education and faculty development that our lead author, Katie Linder [35], asked me to be part of the forthcoming *Going Alt-Ac* book. Along with our co-author, Kevin Kelly [36], we represent a wide range of alt-ac experiences in our own lives and careers, and we are fortunate to be able to share more than a dozen other alt-ac's' stories in the book, too, alongside practical advice for exploring careers, getting started, addressing challenges, building a career, and the alt-ac life cycle.

Q2: I want to dig down a bit more into your role as conference programming chair and faculty associate in the Learning Design, Development & Innovation department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Can you tell us more about your job?

I've attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Distance Teaching & Learning [37] conference for many years, and in 2016, some of my friends who run the conference asked me to do them a favor: find invited speakers and panelists in the area of accessibility and UDL. I happily contacted colleagues in the field, and at the 2017 conference, I came up on stage, told two corny jokes, and sat back down. I had no idea that I was applying for a job.

The long-time director at UW-Madison retired after the conference, and the new director asked me to come on board under a temporary 25%-time appointment, in order to find the keynote and invited speakers for the conference and be the emcee for the 2018 conference. I gladly accepted; the new work allowed me to be associated with a big Research-1 university while still affording me the chance to speak, consult, and write.

Fast forward a few retirements, internal consolidations, and budget challenges, and my role expanded to 50%, 80%, and finally 100% as of November 2018. Along the way, I've taken on a larger role on the conference planning team, and I am now also doing project management and curriculum development for a re-design of our professional-development certificate programs ^[38].

My current role is the kind of engaging work that I envisioned all those years ago: I get to do a lot of different things, and our team has a direct and meaningful impact on the quality of teaching, design, and administration in colleges and universities around the world. We even act as an affordable alternative for faculty-development offices at other colleges and universities whose resources are small or already taxed. The Wisconsin Idea ^[39] that "education should influence people's lives beyond the boundaries of the classroom" resonates with my personal sense of mission, and I'm really enjoying being able to put all of my experiences to good use here.

And when I say "here," I mean . . . central Pennsylvania. One of the great benefits of working for UW-Madison is that I am a fully remote employee, working from my home office and wherever my speaking and consulting travels take me. My being remote allowed my wife to accept a faculty position at Penn State without too much heartburn about which of us was giving up something of value in our careers.

Q3: You work remotely, and are married to an educational developer. How have you and your partner navigated the two-body problem of alt-ac life?

I met Mary Ann ^[40] when we were students in an English-literature master's degree program in Indiana; over our first year of study, we became committed partners. We knew that we would eventually face the two-body problem, since we were not only in the same field, but in the same sub-field (Mary Ann studied the works of Charles Dickens ^[40], as well as how women were prepared for the marriage market ^[41] in 18th and 19th-century culture).

Even when we were in graduate school, we adopted a "one working, one studying" way of life. Thanks to my wife's work helping to manage our

university's bookstore, I was able to take a full load of PhD courses and complete the degree in four years. Just before I graduated, I found that first professional job with the community college, and my wife was able to resume full-time study.

We have been trading the primary-earner role for more than 20 years, now, and only as recently as 2011 were we both employed in full-time roles with colleges or universities. An interesting note about both of us is that neither of us has ever had a tenure-line faculty position. We have been alt-acs all the way through. Each of us teaches, does research, and performs service work—these are all fulfilling part of our academic identities.

Our roles don't define us, though. I know too many colleagues who were crushed when all of their preparation to become history professors or biology professors ended up in a series of adjunct-faculty gigs or having to “settle” for being an alt-ac practitioner. Neither Mary Ann nor I ever felt “less than” in our choices and paths. Would it have been splendid for me to become an English professor and follow that career? You bet. Would I trade where I am now for that opportunity? Not in a million years.

Q4: I'm sure we will talk again when your *Going Alt-Ac: A Guide to Alternative Academic Careers* book comes out. Until we can read your book, what advice would you offer to someone who is considering an alt-ac career out of grad school, or thinking about making the transition mid-career?

I hope that one thing readers will take away from everything that I've shared is a sense of connection to other people—in my field of study, in my research, in my professional work, and in my personal life. I am grateful to the hundreds of people who helped me with advice, examples, and collaboration when I was starting out as a faculty developer and online designer, and I am honored to be able to pay that forward, now, with the newest crop of colleagues who are doing amazing work by building on and surpassing the work that I and my cohort have done.

My advice to everyone working on a Ph.D. or other terminal degree: look beyond the department walls. Ask after people who studied in your field and

landed successfully in other areas of higher education. Find out what they did to get prepared *not* to be a faculty member—things like taking courses in the business school as electives or interning with an academic press. Spending even twenty minutes at a time talking with colleagues and exploring options can pay big dividends after the excitement of getting your doctoral hood turns into “what comes next?”

For those of you who have established careers and are looking to make a wise move to something bigger, more stable, or more engaging: you’re in luck. Consider trying out various alt-ac roles, such as speaking, consulting, writing, and publishing. Work through whether you want to move up by rising through the ranks at one institution or by looking in a separate but related field, institution, or location. And consider joining one of the many professional organizations devoted to alt-ac work, such as the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network ^[42].

For everyone who is now, or is considering becoming, an alt-ac practitioner, know that there is a huge network of people who are engaged in meaningful and fulfilling (and well-paying) work in this space, and we are here to help you join us.

Thank you again, Josh, for the opportunity to share my experiences and ideas with your readers. I always enjoy hearing other people’s stories, and I’d encourage anyone to connect with me via dr.tobin@att.net ^[43] if you’d like to spend 20 minutes exploring what might come next.

What do you want to ask Tom?

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Links

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[2] <http://thomasjtobin.com/>

[3] https://www.amazon.com/Reach-Everyone-Teach-Universal-Education-ebook/dp/B07KJMB5JV/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1549654906&sr=8-1&keywords=Thomas+J.+Tobin

[4] <https://squareup.com/store/thomasjtobin>

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