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The Teaching of Psychology in Autobiography:

Perspectives from Exemplary Psychology Teachers (Vol. 4)

Edited by:

Robert Bubb
Jeffrey Stowell
William Buskist

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Preface

A total of 90 outstanding teachers have contributed to the first three volumes of *Teaching Psychology in Autobiography: Perspectives from Exemplary Psychology Teachers*, published by the Society for the Teaching of Psychology. These stories represent the development and reflections of some of psychology’s very best teachers who provide insightful anecdotes and lessons learned for anyone seeking to improve his or her teaching.

Volume 4 of *Teaching Psychology in Autobiography: Perspectives from Exemplary Psychology Teachers* extends the mission of the first three volumes by including 16 more invited autobiographies. In keeping with the ideals of the first volume, we invited recipients of all five of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP) teaching excellence awards [Robert S. Daniel Teaching Excellence (Four-Year College or University) Award; Wayne Weiten Teaching Excellence (Two-Year College) Award; Mary Margaret Moffet Memorial Teaching Excellence (High School) Award; Jane S. Halonen Teaching Excellence (Early Career) Award; and the Wilbert J. McKeachie Teaching Excellence (Graduate Student) Award], all recipients of the American Psychological Foundation’s Teaching Excellence Award (now called the Charles L. Brewer Distinguished Teaching of Psychology Award), past and present editors of *Teaching of Psychology*, and all past-presidents of STP to contribute chapters to this volume.

To provide consistency in both content and style across all chapters and volumes of this series, each contributor responded to the following 12 questions:

- What kind of preparation for teaching did you receive in your doctoral or master’s program? If you had a course on teaching, please describe it.
- Did you have a teaching mentor or mentors? If so, please describe any unique characteristics of that relationship.
- If you did not have any formal training in teaching or teaching mentors, please describe how you “taught yourself” to become an effective teacher.
- What factors may have led to your decision to become a college and university level teacher?
• Have you faced any obstacles in your teaching? If so, how have you attempted to overcome these obstacles in your own teaching? Please describe any issues with which you continue to struggle and how you attempt to deal with them.

• Many academics see their work as a zero sum game—for example, time spent in the lab is time that necessarily cannot be spent working on teaching and so on. Have you felt that you have to sacrifice your research, service, or outreach efforts in order to become an effective teacher? Why or why not?

• What principles rest at the heart of your personal philosophy of teaching?

• In what interesting and significant ways has your approach to teaching changed over your academic career?

• What sorts of things do you find most rewarding from your teaching? What are the greatest frustrations and how do you try to overcome them?

• What methods and processes do you use to evaluate and reflect on upon your teaching? How has your view of the role of assessment of teaching changed over the course of your teaching career?

• In what efforts do you engage to continue to improve your teaching? How frequently do you engage in these efforts?

• If someone wants to become a good or even outstanding teacher, what would you advise him or her to do?

Each of the authors organized their answers to these questions under the following headings:

• My Early Development as a Teacher
• Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher
• The Examined Life of a Teacher
• Advice for New Teachers
• Final Thoughts

We thank all the authors who contributed to this volume for their wisdom and insight. Their cumulative years of experience can serve as a collective inspiration for new and veteran teachers alike. We also thank the STP leadership and Publications Committee; without their steadfast support this volume and other services like it would not exist. Finally, we would like to thank you, the reader, for taking the time to reflect on our common vocation as teachers of psychology.
As you read the chapters in this volume, we hope that you enjoy them as much as we have in preparing them for publication. In the pages to follow, you will find amusing anecdotes and quirky accidents alongside serious reflections and heartfelt recollections. Common across all the chapters is a driving passion for our discipline and an earnest desire to become a better teacher. And, at the heart of it all, exists a profound caring for our students; after all, it is for them that we have ventured along this path in the first place.

Robert Bubb
Jeffrey Stowell
William Buskist

October 2011
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Chapter 1

Becoming a Better Teacher by Helping Others Become Better Teachers

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Becoming a Better Teacher by Helping Others Become Better Teachers

I have been a faculty member at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) since 1982, where I am currently professor of psychology, professor of college teaching, and faculty director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. From 1989 to 1998, I was chairperson of the Department of Psychology. During the early 2000s, I served as vice provost for undergraduate studies. Since 1982, I have taught the Psychology Department's Practicum and Seminar in the Teaching of Psychology. Also, I have worked over the past decade to develop an online course on course design titled “Preparing to Teach a Psychology Course,” in collaboration with some colleagues (James Korn, Paul Presson, Stephen Davis, Rosemary Phelps, Loreto Prieto, Cecilia Shore, and Debbie Smith). Students have come from over 80 participating universities from across the USA and more than a dozen other countries (http://www.unh.edu/teaching-excellence/GRAD980/homeinstitutions.htm). I recently co-edited a book (William Buskist and Victor Benassi) titled Effective College and University Teaching: Strategies and Tactics for the New Professoriate (2012).

During the last two decades, I have participated in a number of scholarly collaborations on college teaching, issues related to preparing future faculty, and, most recently, on improving student learning in college and university courses. I am currently principal investigator of a Davis Educational Foundation grant--The Cognition Toolbox: Implementing Cognitive Principles and Assessing Student Learning in College Courses.

I have received several awards at UNH—Excellence in Teaching Award, Outstanding Use of Technology in Education Award, and the College of Liberal Arts’ Lindberg Outstanding Scholar/Teacher Award. In 2003, I received the American Psychological Foundation’s Charles L. Brewer Distinguished Teaching of Psychology award. Effective January 2012, I will be
president-elect of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (APA, Division 2) and I will serve as president in 2013.

My Early Development as a Teacher

As a college student, my goal was to become a high school social science teacher. During the summer before my senior year, I took a required course in educational psychology. In the classroom where the course met, there were several shelves loaded with books on psychology. I saw a book titled *Psychotherapy by Reciprocal Inhibition*, by Joseph Wolpe (1958). I borrowed the book and read it with great interest. Over the rest of the summer and during my senior year, I read other great books on psychological topics. Early in my senior year, I developed a close student-teacher relationship with William O. Hambacher, a professor of psychology. His guidance, fueled by the excitement I felt reading about psychology, inspired me to become a research psychologist. My new goal was to become a faculty member after earning a PhD in psychology. It was not the teaching aspect of being a faculty member that was my passion. Rather, it was the substance of the discipline that interested me the most.

As I was thinking about applying to PhD programs, reality stared right at me and at other males of my generation—the Vietnam War. There was a military draft, but college students usually received a deferment while they were in school. With time to my graduation winding down, I thought it was a virtual certainty that I would be drafted, so I did not apply to any doctoral programs. Surprisingly, I did not pass my physical exam and instead received a medical deferment. I entered a master’s program in psychology at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB). Although I had done a lot of reading and I had taken a few psychology courses during my senior year, I was not really well grounded in psychology. My experience at CSULB was positive on all dimensions. Among the excellent mentors I had during this time, Lyle R.
Creamer stands out. My interests became focused on the experimental analysis of behavior (now called behavior analysis) and on behavior modification. I applied to and entered the PhD program in the experimental analysis of behavior at Queens College of the City University of New York (CUNY).

The emphasis of the program was on preparing graduate students to become research psychologists. Students completed a series of courses in experimental psychology, experimental methods and instrumentation, quantitative methods, and advanced seminars on such topics as reinforcement schedules, aversive conditioning, and conditioned reinforcement. From the beginning, graduate students worked in their advisor’s laboratory. During my first year in the graduate program, I completed a couple experiments and wrote several papers. I had research mentors such as Professors Lanson, B. K. Cole, and William N. Schoenfeld as well as several more senior graduate students. The one teaching mentor I had was Professor Lanson. My first foray into teaching was as his teaching assistant (TA) in a course on behavior modification in which Fred Keller’s Personalized System of Instruction (PSI) was used. The first article that I read on teaching and learning was Keller’s classic “Good-bye, Teacher . . .” (Keller, 1968).

I did not receive any formal or informal preparation for my first solo teaching duties. Sometime during the summer between my first and second year in the graduate program, the department chair called me in to inform me that I would be teaching two sections of introductory psychology in the upcoming semester. I assumed that my TA and research supervisor recommended me to the chair because he thought I was doing well with my work and that I was ready to teach my own course. Looking back now, with a less self-serving lens, I suppose the more likely scenario was that the department chair had a mini-crisis to solve because someone scheduled to teach those sections of the course was no longer available. In a jam, I would do.
My first position after leaving CUNY was back at CSULB. In my second year there, I was appointed as coordinator of a new PSI program for the department’s introductory psychology course. My earlier work as Professor Lanson’s assistant in his PSI behavior modification course and previous experience teaching introductory psychology made me an ideal person to develop the PSI course at CSULB. In addition to teaching two large enrollment sections of the course, I trained and supervised a group of psychology majors who served as TAs in the PSI course component (see Keller, 1968, for details on how PSI courses were run). They enrolled in a course that I developed on College Teaching. Teaching this course was the start of what became a career-long interest in the scholarship of teaching and learning. This experience also led me to shift toward being as focused on teaching and student learning as much as on research and publication.

In 1982, UNH was hiring a faculty member. When I read the job ad, I learned that the department was looking for an experimental psychologist to fit into one of several specialty areas. That part was typical, but it was followed by a statement that the person hired would also fill the department’s Master Teacher role. The UNH Psychology Department had started a PhD program in the mid-1960s that had a unique emphasis on explicitly preparing graduate students as teachers of psychology as well as researchers (Benassi & Fernald, 1993). Then, as now, students completed a two-semester practicum and seminar in the teaching of psychology as they concurrently taught a section of introductory psychology. They also received preparation from faculty during the summer preceding their first teaching experience and supervision during the year after they taught the introductory course (when they taught a course in their specialty area and perhaps introductory statistics). The Master Teacher was responsible for overseeing this program, teaching introductory psychology and courses in her/his specialty area, and developing
a strong research program. There were a lot of experimental psychologists who met the requirements of the first part of the ad, but there were not many who could fit the bill on the second part. Although I was daunted by the Master Teacher phrase (I thought, “Master teacher, what’s that?”), I applied for and eventually secured the position. My teaching and supervising work with the PSI TAs at CSULB, my budding interest in all matters related to teaching and student learning at the postsecondary level, and my substantial experience teaching introductory psychology made me a strong applicant for the position.

With a few exceptions (sabbatical leaves, a stint as an academic administrator), I have coordinated the department’s college teaching component of my department’s PhD program during my career at UNH. Along with colleagues Peter Fernald, Victoria Banyard, and Kenneth Fuld, I have taught the two-semester practicum and seminar in college teaching, logged many hours observing graduate student teachers in the classroom, done thousands of hours of supervision, reviewed nearly 2,000 graduate students’ lesson plans (teaching modules; Benassi & Fuld, 2004; Benassi & Goldstein, 2012; Benassi, Jordan, & Harrison, 1994), and supervised teaching graduate students after they completed the teaching practicum year. To say that I have benefitted from these experiences as much as the graduate students have benefitted is the ultimate understatement.

When UNH began its PhD program in psychology, programs in experimental psychology across the United States had pretty much the same three missions—research, research, and research. The vision of the new program’s creators, Gene Mills and Raymond Erickson, was unique at the time. There had never been a doctoral program in psychology—or in any discipline—like the one they conceived and implemented (see Benassi and Fernald, 1993). Yes, the department faculty would prepare psychologists for academic positions based on the usual
focus on research, but they would also build into the formal curriculum preparation for teaching at the college and university level. With the relentless push towards more and more research focus at colleges and universities, including at schools which traditionally have been “teaching oriented,” I worry that programs like the one at UNH may be on the wane.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

If you are spending your time on one thing, that means you are not doing something else. Some faculty choose to spend more time on one type of activity than on others—for example, working on research. In my case, by the end of the first decade after earning my PhD, I had pretty much settled on a goal I wanted to strive toward—being a triple threat, using the baseball adage. My priorities, in order, were teaching, research, and service. As a faculty member at a small research university, I thought (and still think) that I could perform well in all three areas by working hard and smart. Not all of my work in these areas is related thematically, but a lot of it is. I teach psychology, I prepare faculty teachers of psychology, I work with faculty and graduate student teachers from across the university on their teaching, I serve on various teaching committees, and I do research and publish papers on work related to teaching and learning and on future faculty development. I do not accomplish in any of these three areas what I would if I put disproportionate emphasis on one area. However, given what I see as my role in this job, I do not worry myself with debates about whether the academic life is a zero-sum game.

The biggest obstacle that I faced as a rookie teacher was my apprehension about talking in front of a large group of students, most of whom were only several years younger than me. I was not someone who looked older than his age. Indeed, I was someone who was “carded” when buying alcohol into my 30s. My apprehension focused on whether students would take me seriously or would see me as a precocious kid. One of the first lessons that I learned as a teacher
was taught to me by students in my first introductory psychology course. Whether students take you seriously depends mainly on you. Are you knowledgeable of your subject? Do you know what you are doing? Do you treat students as you want to be treated? Do you challenge them to do their best? Do you strive to inspire them to be more thoughtful about the subject matter? Even though my students today do not ever mistake me for a kid, I continue to think about how I am doing regarding these questions.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

A benchmark against which to consider one’s teaching is the teaching philosophy statement (Korn, 2004). Teaching philosophy statements can be useful and all teachers would be wise to have one. However, these statements can be quite general. Lofty words such as “passion,” “critical thinking,” and “engagement” appear commonly in philosophy statements, sometimes with follow up text such as “I promote critical thinking in my courses by . . .”

I have become more sophisticated in thinking and writing about my research projects as I have learned more about the substance of our discipline. I have also become a better teacher of psychology as I have learned more about the science of learning, the science of instruction, the science of assessment (Mayer, 2011), group behavior, and human development. So, for example, when I write in my philosophy that I believe in promoting critical thinking, I immediately think about what I know about critical thinking. Using that knowledge base informs how I work to achieve this goal. (For an example of this type of approach to teaching critical thinking, see Benassi and Goldstein, 2006.)

Another invaluable source for my self-reflection comes from other teachers (including teaching graduate students)—their teaching behavior, the teaching issues and challenges they face, and the ways they attempt to address them. By observing and learning from others, I have
improved my own teaching in so many ways that I cannot even begin to enumerate. Before ending this section on self-examination, I should mention methods and processes that I have used to evaluate and reflect on my teaching and that I have used to assist others in doing the same.

**Student Evaluations of Teaching (SET)**

Teachers either love or hate SETs, predictably on how they fare on such measures. From my earliest days as a teacher, I carefully considered what my students were telling me in their evaluations and, especially over several offerings of a course, patterns usually emerged. From these data, I almost always learned something that led to either strengthening or changing what I did in my course. A colleague and I recently wrote a chapter on an approach we developed and have used to assist others who are interested in making the most of their SETs (Benassi & Seidel, 2006). As an aside, teachers, especially novices, need to work hard at not taking too seriously everything in their students’ assessments. I remember an engineering major once writing on the open-ended comments part of the SET form that “I get the impression he’s not very smart.” I took that comment as seriously as the student who wrote “Benassi is a brilliant guy!”

**Assessment**

I was such a big fan of the classroom assessment approach (Angelo & Cross, 1993) that I developed a graduate-level course titled Classroom Assessment and Research almost 15 years ago. We have offered this course to UNH doctoral students and faculty as well as to faculty and students from elsewhere, in both face-to-face and totally online formats.

**Assessing the Impact of Instructional Methods on Student Learning**

As I have noted, asking students or faculty colleagues to comment on your teaching can be helpful. I have become increasingly interested in designing course-based experiments in which I implement an educational intervention (based on a cognitively-based principle) and
assess (against a control condition) its educational impact. I recently began a grant-funded project, called the Cognition Toolbox, in which colleagues and I are employing this approach in courses across UNH (http://www.unh.edu/teaching-excellence/Cognitiontoolkit/CognitionToolboxnocover.pdf)

**Advice for New Teachers**

Like most skills and talents, practice (with feedback) makes perfect—well, it at least will help you to become a better teacher. At the same time, something needs to inform the practice. Teachers will benefit from careful consideration of the already large and growing body of work on the scholarship of teaching and learning in general and on the science of learning in particular. For example, if teachers want to become better at leading class discussions so that their learning outcomes are better achieved, immersing oneself in the ample scholarship on the topic could be very helpful. If teachers are not satisfied with overall student performance on major exams, they would benefit from learning about the *testing effect* (Roediger & Karpicke, 2006) and *transfer-appropriate-processing* (McDaniel & Callender, 2008). A great deal is known about how teachers can promote better student learning. Teachers from diverse fields and disciplines are fully capable of designing their courses in a manner that will promote improved student learning, perhaps with assistance from an expert associated with a teaching and learning center. I am not suggesting that being a dynamic, heart thumping teacher in class is overrated, but I am suggesting that positive results will come from applying sound principles of learning in the courses we teach. I believe, sadly, that few teachers have even a basic grounding in the science of learning.
Final Thoughts

My career did not turn out the way I thought it would. Early on, if someone had predicted that I would someday be writing chapters and papers about college teaching, I would have had a good laugh. Now, as I enter the final stretch of my academic career, I could not imagine wanting things to have turned out any other way. Helping students along their journey as learners, while also enhancing my own skill as a teacher and as a teacher of teachers, is a wonderful professional life.
References


Chapter 2

What Teaching has Taught Me: The Continuing Education of a Teacher

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What Teaching has Taught Me: The Continuing Education of a Teacher

For the past 20 years I have been a Professor of Psychology at Claremont McKenna College (CMC), a small liberal-arts college with roughly 1,000 students. Most of my classes at CMC are small – 12 to 30 students – but I have also taught introductory courses with hundreds of students at a community college and at two large public universities. I have worked with several national associations to promote excellence in teaching and mentoring. I am currently Chair of the American Psychology-Law Society’s (APLS) Teaching, Training and Careers Committee. I helped to establish, and now serve as Chief Editor of, the Teaching Techniques section of the APLS Newsletter. I have also served as Governing Council Liaison for the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues’ (SPSSI) Teaching and Mentoring Committee. For two years, I was a member of the American Psychological Association’s Task Force for incorporating the teaching of ethics into the undergraduate curriculum. I have developed several teaching techniques, some of which have been described in articles and chapters. In addition, a video I co-produced with Dan Archer – the Interpersonal Perception Task – has been used as a teaching tool at hundreds of colleges, universities, and businesses. I am also coauthor (with Dan Krauss) of a textbook, Forensic and Legal Psychology. One award begets another. I have now received outstanding teaching and mentoring awards from SPSSI, APLS, the Western Psychological Association, and the Society for the Teaching of Psychology.

My academic history is a bit unusual for a professor. Nearly all of the professors who are now my colleagues were star students. They did well in high school and were admitted to top universities where they excelled. In contrast, during high school, I was closer to being a juvenile delinquent than to being an honors student. Fortunately, I was able to enroll at my local community college because, at the time, all that was required to get in was a high school diploma and a pulse. After two years of community college I transferred to California State University, Fresno (CSUF), where I earned a bachelor’s and master’s degree. I worked for a year as an international student counselor before I
entered the PhD program in personality and social psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC). It’s not a hyperbole to say that college saved my life. During high school my teachers often described me as an underachiever with delinquent tendencies. Taking college classes with inspiring teachers ignited my passion for learning and set me on a new path.

**Early Development as a Teacher**

Serving as a TA during graduate school was my main training for a career as a teacher. While earning my master’s degree, a group of about six graduate students ran the laboratory sections for the introductory psychology course at CSUF. This was a great first teaching experience because a faculty advisor provided us with a repertoire of demonstrations, experiments, and activities to use during the labs. Serving as a TA turned out to be a lot of fun. Students seemed to like me and were appreciative of my efforts to help them learn. Later, when I entered the doctoral program at UCSC, all students who would be serving as TAs were required to take a class on teaching, which was taught by an advanced graduate student. This was mostly a group discussion course – we talked about problems encountered in our TA experience and tried to find solutions. Though informal, the class helped us to develop constructive responses to problems with students. I should note here that for more than a decade, I have taught a seminar on teaching for graduate students. My Teaching of Psychology Seminar is designed for graduate students considering careers as college teachers.

I have had marvelous mentors – Bob Levine, Dane Archer, Elliot Aronson. But, those mentors were mainly interested in making me a capable researcher and scholar. We did occasionally talk about teaching, but most of what I learned came from watching them teach. Early in my career I tried to mimic their techniques and styles. Then, through a slow, clumsy process of trial and error, I discovered what worked for me and what didn’t. Students can sense a lack of authenticity, so it is essential to create a teaching style that is congruent with who you are. You must develop your own style. Although there are some indispensable commonalities among great teachers (e.g., knowledge of and enthusiasm
for one’s discipline), there is no single optimal teaching style. It is a great advantage to have a beautiful speaking voice or a great sense of humor, but whatever strengths you have should be enlisted in the service of teaching. Use your strengths and cultivate useful skills you do not have yet. Education is about learning new skills and your continuing education as a teacher requires that you do all you can to keep improving.

Experience is the best teacher, but experience only leads to improvement if you learn from it. The trick is to create ways to learn from your experience as a teacher. Basically, you need to get performance feedback and then you need to make adjustments based on that feedback. One obvious source of feedback is you. As psychologists, we recognize that self-assessments can be biased, but self-reflection is also a crucial means of improvement. A simple technique I’ve used for two decades is to try to take five minutes after each class session to write down quick answers to three questions: “What worked well?” “What did not work?” and “What should I change next time around?” Jotting down the answers to these simple questions while the class session is still fresh in your mind can produce substantial improvements over time. If you can identify part of a lecture or example or demonstration that did not seem to work, you can usually find a way to make it more effective or you can replace it with something else next time around.

You should also occasionally have yourself videotaped while lecturing or leading a class. You are the only one who needs to watch the video, and watching yourself is typically an unpleasant experience. However, if you can try to watch the video with some detachment, you can see what you did well, what you did poorly, and think of specific ways to improve your performance. If you are comfortable enough to let a trusted colleague watch your video (or sit in on your class), their ideas and suggestions for improvement can also be very useful.

The other obvious source of feedback is your students. Instead of relying on standardized end-of-the-semester evaluations forms, it’s better to solicit feedback as you go. A simple way of doing this
is to take the last five minutes of some class sessions and ask students to write down what they learned during class that day. Of course, their responses are anonymous. This little writing exercise will give you a sense of how your lectures and explanations are actually being understood by students. Often, you will be surprised about the ways in which students have misunderstood the theories and research you tried to present so carefully. You can also create discussion groups. If you listen closely to what students say during discussions, you will get a good sense of how well they understand the class material, and about how to improve that understanding.

Finally, you should try to learn from feedback given to other teachers. Talk with colleagues at your university about what they have found effective and ineffective in their teaching. After all, they are working with the same student population and what has worked for them is likely to work for you. Beyond that, attend some teaching conferences and read through journals such as Teaching of Psychology or look through the Lessons Learned book series. These efforts will help you learn from the experience of others.

**Defining and Re-Defining Myself as a Teacher**

One of the few universal truths is that everything changes. The experience of teaching changes from class-to-class (each class has its own collective personality) and from year-to-year. When I began teaching, I was the hip, young, good-looking professor who could easily relate to college students. Now I’m not. Over the course of years or decades, you will change and your teaching style must also change. When I started teaching, I was a few years older than most of my students, and a few years younger than some of my students. I liked the music they liked, I knew about all the latest new technological gadgets, and I understood student references to pop culture. Their concerns were my concerns and I was cool (well, sort of cool). Now, I am as old as some of their parents, and my students regard me as profoundly uncool (as does my 14-year-old daughter). My jokes and examples in class need to take that change into account. Students behave differently towards you when you are 25,
35, 45, 55, or 65–years old. Because you and your students change, you will never have teaching all figured out. Be open to new techniques and possibilities so that you can adapt to change. Teaching is a skill that needs to be cultivated and modified over time.

**The Examined Life of a Teacher**

I have always thought the phrase “philosophy of teaching” was a bit highfalutin. No one ever asks me about my “philosophy of service” or my “philosophy of research.” Instead of a well-elaborated philosophy, I have some thoughts about what works to promote learning. My approach to teaching emphasizes active learning and creating an intellectually challenging (but supportive) learning environment. In addition to presenting content in psychology, my goal is to help students develop essential skills—how to think critically, how to express ideas clearly, how to work effectively with others, how to collect data, and how to act in ethically responsible ways. Any course in psychology should also convert students into critical consumers of research findings.

One significant change in my teaching is that, over time, I have come to lecture less. Lecturing can be an incredibly efficient means of transferring information. However, it risks turning students into passive learners. I have tried to reduce passivity by lecturing only in short spurts (usually about 20 minutes). Instead of extended lectures, I try to use of the full range of teaching techniques: group discussions, research projects, lectures, films, case studies, and simulations. As more human knowledge becomes accessible via the internet, we teachers need to consider the distinctive contribution of classroom instruction. I would argue that what makes the classroom uniquely valuable is a face-to-face interaction with a knowledgeable scholar in a give-and-take group environment. The primary advantage of classroom interaction is to promote deep understanding and to teach students how to think like psychological scientists.

Teaching is important and gratifying work. At its best, it is challenging, intellectually stimulating, and it offers the possibility of meaningful engagement with other humans. Not many types
of work offer that felicitous combination of attributes. Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of teaching is being able to see students learn. Every semester, you can watch some (sadly, not all) students get excited by ideas. They start to ask interesting questions, their enthusiasm bubbles out during their presentations, they begin to make comments that demonstrate real insight, and their curiosity spurs them to delve deeply into an area of research. I know from conversations with students who graduated years ago, that interests and insights developed in the classroom continue to influence students as they move through their lives after college.

**Advice for New Teachers**

I’m delighted to be asked for advice. My children do not ask for my advice often enough, and even though my students seek out my advice, they usually ignore it. So, here are a few principles and techniques (in addition to the ones already described above):

**Learning and Teaching**

Most of us have had incredibly knowledgeable professors who were not good at teaching and entertaining professors from whom we did not learn much. Your real job as a teacher is to promote learning. The activity of teaching is a means to the end. If students do not learn, you have failed. Your teaching needs to be student-centered to achieve the goal of student learning. That is, you need to pay close attention to what and how much your students are learning (that is why good assessment is critical), and then you need to structure the class to advance that learning. It is also useful to consider what students will remember from your class 10 years from now. Design your course with those considerations in mind.

**Clarity**

It might be said that clarity is the prime directive of teaching. If you can’t explain complex ideas clearly, you have no business teaching. Students are in your class because they do not know much about the subject you are teaching. If you can not bridge the knowledge divide between you and
them by clearing the path toward understanding, you will not accomplish your goals. Try out different examples, metaphors, case studies, or research studies that illustrate and illuminate the concepts you are teaching.

It is not only clarity of ideas that is essential; it is also clarity of standards. Your life as a teacher will be far more enjoyable if you eschew obfuscation of standards and expectations. Students need to know what to expect, what material you will cover, how you will grade assignments, and how each assignment will be weighted. If your syllabus is clear, and your grading system is transparent from the first day of class, you will be spared continuing disputes over grades and standards. With respect to grades, many students are like lawyers – they are constantly searching for loopholes and ambiguities. A clear grading system closes loopholes and minimizes ambiguity. It also allows you and your students to concentrate on learning. Clarity of standards is also a crucial element of being seen as fair by students. And treating students fairly is an indispensable component of good teaching.

**Enthusiasm**

There is no substitute for enthusiasm. Students who know very little about the content of psychology (and much of what they do know is wrong) will take their cues from you. If you are not enthusiastic about what you are teaching, few of them will be. Enthusiasm is infectious. So is apathy. If someone who is an expert in the field seems excited about their subject, students will instinctively assume that there must be something exciting to know. If they sense that you are tepid about your own field, they are likely to conclude that your field is not worthy of their effort.

**Students are Adults**

College students should be treated like adults. This means they are responsible for making their own decisions and dealing with the consequences of those decisions. Some of my graduate students who are teaching a course for the first time are stunned to discover that some of their students do not seem to care about doing well in their class. As teachers, we should do all we can to motivate our
students, to help them learn, and we should set high, clear expectations for performance. However, despite our best efforts, some students will set their sights low and be content with mediocre performance. As adults, they must choose their level of aspiration and we can’t take responsibility for their choice. Anyone who decides to pursue a PhD is by definition a serious, motivated student. When such students become professors, they tend to assume others are like them. Many students are not.

The now popular notion that colleges are businesses and students are consumers implies that students bear little responsibility for their own education. According to this view, students pay a fee and, in exchange, professors provide a product called education. This is nonsense. Education is a process, not a product. If there is a business-like metaphor for education it is that of a personal fitness trainer. You can buy a membership at an expensive, state-of-the-art gym and hire the Olympic champion decathlete as your personal trainer, but unless you run the laps and pump the iron, you won’t see results. Similarly, students must accept responsibility for their own learning. You can lead students to the classroom, but you can’t make them think.

Connect and Apply

Psychology is a practical science. It is relevant to everyday life, controversial social issues, and a variety of settings such as law, medicine, education, and politics. Your teaching should make explicit links between psychological research and how we live our lives. Everyday we selectively perceive the world, use our memory, influence others, make decisions, and feel emotions. If you cannot find ways to connect psychological concepts to the lives of your students, you are not trying very hard. There are thick textbooks on forensic, health, educational, organizational, and political psychology. It is easy to find examples of how psychology has been applied. Such examples make abstract concepts come alive and help students see the connections between pure and applied science.
Psychological Environment

Different classes *feel* different. Some are stuffy and constricted; others are open and free-wheeling. My goal has been to create a welcoming, informal atmosphere in my classes. If your style is upbeat, inviting, and respectful, students will feel empowered to explore new ideas. A fun, relaxed atmosphere promotes learning. Learning can be a struggle at times, but most of the time learning should feel like fun. It is pleasurable to gain insights and achieve mastery. Creating an enjoyable classroom environment serves as a motivational device that will propel your students to deeper understanding.

It also helps to personalize. Most students want to know something about you and most want you to know something about them. A bit of personal knowledge seems to enhance the learning process. One way to connect with students is to meet with them individually at least once during the semester. Another way is to use a few examples from your personal life to illustrate psychological concepts. When I was younger I used examples from my experiences in sports or from my dating life. Now most of my personal examples involve my experiences raising three daughters. Such examples humanize me and make me more approachable.

**Final Thoughts**

It is important for psychological scientists to explore teaching beyond the classroom. For more than a decade, I have tried to assume the role of “public professor.” This involves using teaching skills to communicate the important findings of psychological science to the broader public – people who have left college as well as people who never went to college. Disseminating and explaining our research findings is critical if we want to maintain the support of the public. It is also essential if we want our research to influence public policies and private practices. Some examples of my public professing include giving presentations in high schools, public libraries, book stores, law firms, churches, and community centers. I have been interviewed on many radio and television programs, and
have frequently served as an expert witness in the courtroom. Psychologists have made great strides in communicating with the public. Many have written trade books, started blogs, and made themselves available for media interviews. We need to expand these efforts.

Mentoring is another form of teaching that extends beyond the classroom. Over the course of a career as a professor, many thousands of students will pass through your courses. Once they leave your class, you will lose contact with nearly all of them. The students that you mentor outside the classroom tend to be the ones you will maintain contact with over time. The long-term process of mentoring is one of the more satisfying aspects of being a professor. It is important to identify promising students and to take the time to help them develop their skills. Some of the students you mentor will pursue a career in psychology and will later make significant contributions to our field. Some will become your friends and colleagues.
Chapter 3

My Heart is in the Work

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My Heart is in the Work

My heart is in the work.

-- Andrew Carnegie (1900)

In August, when autumn is just around the corner, my pulse quickens. I love the change of seasons and I welcome the return to campus and the classroom. I have always felt this way. So, when I went off to college in the fall of 1978, I knew—just knew—I would never leave. And I have not; I have lived and then worked at a college or university every year since that first fall semester. My Alma mater, Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), marked me for life, and the founder’s credo might as well have been my own. Although Andrew Carnegie was a ruthless robber baron and businessman, he did seek redemption through philanthropic and charitable works. In my own way, I seek purpose and meaning in the classroom (and no doubt, on occasion, redemption), working with students, and in thinking and writing about teaching and learning.

I have always known what I want (and usually still do), which may be a distinct character flaw, a minor virtue, or both. I decided I wanted to be a psychologist midway through high school and the mini-biography in my high school year book announces this fact. I went to CMU knowing I would be a psychology major (it is not a good place for the undecided), but I made certain to take many courses in English, philosophy, political science, and history. I would have been happy as either an English or a philosophy major, but chose psychology because I was struck by the elegance and explanatory power of psychological theories and supporting findings. I also knew that I wanted to be a social psychologist (I imprinted on Asch and Milgram’s research in high school) and, after CMU, I pursued a PhD in that area at the University of Virginia.
I have had good fortune in my teaching career. At present, I am a Professor of Psychology and Director of the Learning in Common Curriculum (general education) at Moravian College, a liberal arts college in Bethlehem, PA. I served as President of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP; APA Division 2) in 2010. I received Division 22’s (Rehabilitation Psychology) Harold Yuker Award for Research Excellence in 2009 and delivered the Beatrice Wright and Tamara Dembo Lecture the same year. I am a Fellow of three divisions of the American Psychological Association (APA), the Association for Psychological Science (APS), and the Eastern Psychological Association (EPA).

**My Early Development as a Teacher**

In the fifth grade in my small neighborhood school, I had the greatest teacher in the world: Mildred Funk. Admittedly, this label is hyperbole. I cannot tell you what she did, but learning from her was a joy (that is not hyperbole) and she somehow made us feel we were engaged in a cherished business. Sadly, she died suddenly and unexpectedly mid-year. I’ve never forgotten her presence or her passion, but her skill, her gift as a teacher, is a lost chord, one I wanted to find as a student (to date, there have been no other Mrs. Funks in my life) and then recreate as a teacher myself. I am still searching for it.

Although I knew I wanted to be a psychology professor, I never thought about the teaching aspect of the role until the fall of my third year in college. John R. (Dick) Hayes invited me to join his roster of teaching assistants for introductory psychology (which, in typical CMU fashion, was mostly cognitive psychology with the occasional dash of general psychology thrown in for context). I loved the course as a freshman, so I reveled
in teaching my weekly section the fall of my junior year. I did mini-lectures, a few demonstrations, and graded assignments. I was hooked. My apprenticeship with Hayes was solid preparation for various teaching posts I held at Virginia during graduate school, which sometimes involved dealing with as many as 300 students in a large lecture class or as few as 15 in a lab section. I made a few gaffes (e.g., during my maiden voyage as a TA, no one told me I had to proof the exam that I had not written or that the university’s honor code precluded me from proctoring exams—uh-oh) but survived. The June after I defended my dissertation, I taught introductory psychology as the professor of record before heading off to begin my career as an assistant professor.

When I arrived at Moravian, I had new course preparations for the first two years or so. I spent that first year staying a few classes ahead of my students, which meant my days were filled with preparation. Looking back, I realize the first year was a blur. I worked hard but enjoyed myself, and my daily routine allowed me to fit in one day a week (usually Friday) for writing and research.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

I think the nature of the college or university where you work can have a significant influence—not necessarily the deciding influence—on your attitude about the role of teaching in your career. Because I work in a liberal arts college, teaching is the main focus of my position. My colleagues in and outside of my department pride themselves on being good teachers above all else. I do not have the publish or perish pressure found at many research-oriented universities, which means I enjoy relative freedom to teach what interests me within reasonable boundaries (as the sole social psychologist I need to teach courses in that area) and to pursue my research agenda at my
own pace (incidentally, I think there is a constructive synergy between teaching and writing—one fuels the pump for the other). The corollary regarding teaching, of course, is that faculty members in small departments generally need to have broad teaching interests. Besides social psychology and personality, as well as topical seminars in those areas, I also teach history and systems, introductory psychology, psychology of adjustment, and statistics and research methods. I’ve also taught interdisciplinary courses in Western culture as well as writing courses to first-year students.

After a year or two at Moravian, I knew that I wanted to accomplish two distinct things in my scholarly life: study teaching and conduct basic research involving social psychological theories and methods. In pursuit of the former, I spent my early career focusing on ways to improve student writing and forging interdisciplinary connections to psychology (e.g., Dunn, 1993, 1994), as well as developing engaging activities aimed at bringing psychological concepts to life for students (e.g., Dunn, 1989, 1992, 1996, 2004, 2005). This groundwork helped me when the opportunity to pursue projects on psychology curricula (Dunn et al., 2010) and psychological literacy (Cranney & Dunn, in press) emerged.

The other part of my scholarly life involved conducting empirical and theoretical work in social psychology, rehabilitation psychology, and recently, positive psychology. I balance my teaching-oriented research with more traditional scholarship in these other subfields. I was never pressured to balance the two, rather I chose to pursue both lines of inquiry. I see them as complementary, not independent, and pursuing both reduces the risk of boredom.
In the late 1990s, I decided to share my teaching ideas beyond Moravian College by writing textbooks. I had been speaking at conferences and publishing pieces in *Teaching of Psychology (ToP)* when I realized that I could merge the ideas and activities into book form. My first book was about research methods, a topic I love to teach (Dunn, 2010); my second was a statistics text (Dunn, 2001), a topic I learned to enjoy teaching. After that I wrote a text on writing for psychology majors (Dunn, 2011a). A few years ago, I joined Wayne Weiten and Elizabeth Yost Hammer as a co-author on Weiten’s adjustment book (Weiten, Dunn, & Hammer, 2012), a big project that has motivated me to think even more about how best to communicate complex ideas in psychology to student audiences.

My administrative experiences and my involvement in STP encouraged me to think about ways to improve teaching and learning in more programmatic ways, including exploring educational assessment. Since 2003 or so, my collaborators and I spent time thinking about academic program review. Our approach began with psychology departments (Dunn, McCarthy, Baker, Halonen, & Hill, 2007) and recently turned to academic program review more generally (Dunn, McCarthy, Baker, & Halonen, 2011).

Since 2003, I’ve also had the privilege and pleasure of editing a series of pedagogy books on the best practices for teaching psychology for STP—the topics include assessment, introductory psychology, statistics and research methods, critical thinking, beginning and endings in psychology, and teaching with technology (to date, seven are in print and two others are in press). Reading and editing the work of teaching peers in psychology has been a revelation as well as an education. With each book, I
realize there is always something new to learn about the craft of teaching. Putting these books together, too, has helped me give back to my discipline by sharing the insights, experiences, and activities of so many talented teachers.

**The Examined Life of a Teacher**

Writing this reflective essay made me realize something important about myself as a teacher. Although I am quite linear, I do change how I do things in the classroom. This conclusion implies another: I am probably a better teacher now than when I began (or I earnestly hope so). Like many beginning teachers, I focused intently on lecturing to share what I knew while also making certain to cover the topic thoroughly. After my first decade of teaching, I realized that coverage for coverage’s sake was not good pedagogy and that, in any case, teaching is not a race. Change in the classroom is constructive, especially because as time goes by, the cohorts of students we teach are demographically and culturally distinct from one another.

In my case, I gradually moved away from lecturing to a mix of presentation and discussion. Now, most of my classes are discussion-based, particularly intermediate and advanced courses. I assign a fair amount of reading and have students write as much as possible (two factors that are linked with demonstrable learning; Arum & Roksa, 2011). Out of necessity, I do still lecture much of the time in methods and statistics, but I try to ask many questions and pose many hypothetical scenarios requiring critical thinking.

I believe that it is a good idea to play to your strengths: No one is good at everything and trying to be is foolhardy. Select those aspects of teaching that interest you most and do the best you can with them. Keep in mind that what works for one teacher may not work for another, and that there may be pedagogy trends that do not interest you,
which is fine. Aside from in-class peer writing workshops, for example, I have not had much success with small group work. Although I applaud the development of service learning opportunities in the psychology classroom, such experiences do not lend themselves to my classes and I am fairly certain I would not excel at leading them anyway. Similarly, I am a selective user of technology; to me, it is a helpful tool for teaching, but not a substitute for teaching. I prefer to emphasize critical reading, discussion, and the writing process in my classes.

I also believe strongly that good teaching requires a meaningful break from the classroom. If your institution offers sabbatical leaves, always take them. Don’t hesitate. I am also a big advocate of the now endangered non-working vacation. Years ago I read George Valliant’s (1998) wonderful book *Adaptation to Life*, which deals with the psychosocial life course of Harvard graduates from the late 30s and early 40s. One of the often-overlooked quality of life indicators that Valliant touts is the beneficial impact of two-weeks of real vacation each year. You may be laughing now, wanting to point out that most teachers at the college-level get *three months* of vacation. True enough. But most of us do other teaching-related things during that time. I believe that no matter how much one loves teaching, you need to not read, think, or engage in it for at least two weeks a year, a sacred time when you can learn something new or re-engage with the interests you have let lie fallow (I like to sketch and sometimes paint, for example, when on vacation). I have taken my annual two weeks for 20 years or so and always felt rejuvenated afterwards. It sounds like a small thing, but I think it is a big thing that pays dividends.
Advice for New Teachers

- There is strength in routine. Develop a routine, a cycle, for your teaching life. Have a plan for reading and preparing material for your classes. Work steadily on your course—a little here and there on syllabi and designing writing assignments or class activities—rather than bingeing at the last minute.

- Work ahead. There is no shame in over-preparation. Although I do believe spontaneity happens in the classroom so that departing from notes or even a day’s topic can be enlightening for you and your students (Dunn, 2009), doing so should happen naturally and not because you are unprepared for a class. When teaching a class for the first time, I abide by the two-week rule, which means you are reading and preparing lectures and discussion materials two weeks ahead of where you are in the syllabus (Dunn & Zaremba, 1997).

- Return exams and papers promptly. I never appreciated it when I was a college student and my instructors took weeks and weeks to return coursework. I vowed I would always return submitted work as quickly as possible and I have remained largely true to my word. You have to grade exams and papers anyway, why not deal with them immediately? You will be glad you did and your students will know where they stand in the course. I always return exams and papers (even those long term papers) at the subsequent class meeting.

- Adhere to deadlines. Hold students to due dates. Hold yourself to due dates. Recurring behavior leads to habit. As George Bernard Shaw (n.d.) once quipped, “Better never than late.”
• Teach a variety of classes. I get bored teaching the same courses over and over, semester in and semester out, which means I avoid doing so. Yes, it requires a little more work, but your courses are fresher and you do not hear yourself saying the same things (or telling the same jokes). And you will create fresh connections among ideas that will help your students and surprise yourself.

• Read widely. Graduate school presumably trained you in one or more areas of expertise in your subdiscipline in psychology. As a professor—as an intellectual—your job is now to focus on academic breadth so that you can connect to all kinds of students, psychology majors as well as non-majors. Certainly, you will want to keep up on some others areas of psychology, but I think that reading fiction and nonfiction that has little to do with psychology (on the face of it, anyway) is a good idea, and you may find yourself becoming more interdisciplinary in your teaching (e.g., Dunn, 2011b).

• Carve out regular time for scholarship. Teaching is important, but so is scholarship. I believe both pursuits feed one another synergistically; so do others (McCaughey, 1994). Set aside regular time to read, to write, and to think. If you are planful, your research interests will shape and improve your teaching and vice versa.

• Write often. Writing is like a muscle; it needs to be exercised. Good writing leads to clearer thinking, which can only improve how you articulate ideas in the classroom. I also feel that helping students become better writers is my duty, so I tell them how important writing is to me as a teacher and scholar. For suggestions on writing, see Lamott (1995) and Boice (1990, 2000).
• Find a collaborator or collaborators. I have been singularly blessed to have a team of close friends that I work with, write with, and share ideas with—I would be lost without them. Our team allows us to accomplish much more thinking, writing, and other professional activity than any of us could hope to do alone. Although much of what we do is teaching-related scholarship, we also share classroom triumphs and false starts with one another.

• Colleagues are your greatest resource. Ask other teachers, near and far, what they do that works in the classroom. Borrow tools, techniques, assignments, and readings. Share your own. Attend conferences on teaching. Read the journal *Teaching of Psychology*. Most of my happiest professional moments and career successes—and my dearest friends—have come from my participation in STP. I leave each STP meeting feeling that I am still learning to teach and that there is much more work to be done in my classroom and in psychology classrooms generally. And I also feel that I have to live up to the standards of excellence set by my peers. I would be embarrassed if I did not try to do so.

• Good work leads to more good work. Take pleasure in all the work you do as a teacher; do the best you can. When a course does not go as planned (and one or more will, I promise), take heart: you get to reinvent yourself the very next semester. A close friend I write with often once said to me, “The work just comes to you, doesn’t it? You just welcome it and do it.” Imagine my delight.

**Final Thoughts**

I sometimes tease my students that they are subsidizing the things I enjoy most, which are talking, arguing, reading, and writing. Not a bad life, because teaching is part
of them all. Writing to a friend, Thomas Jefferson noted that “but tho’ an old man, I am but a young gardener” (Looney, 2004). In a slightly different way, I think I know what Mr. Jefferson meant. I am now a middle-aged man, but still a very young teacher who loves his work.
References


Chapter 4

Teach With Passion (Or Do Something Else)

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Regan A. R. Gurung is the Ben J. and Joyce Rosenberg Professor of Human Development and Psychology at the University of Wisconsin, Green Bay. Regan received a BA in psychology at Carleton College (MN), and a Master’s and PhD degree in Social and Personality Psychology at the University of Washington (WA). He then spent three years at the University of California- Los Angeles (UCLA) as a National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) research fellow before moving to the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay where he has taught since 1999. He is the author, co-author, or editor of nine books including a textbook, *Health Psychology: A Cultural Approach (2e)* and books on culture (e.g., *Culture & Mental Health: Sociocultural Influences on Mental Health*) and pedagogy (e.g., *Exploring Signature Pedagogies: Approaches to Teaching Disciplinary Habits of Mind*). He has strong interests in teaching and pedagogy, has organized statewide and national teaching conferences, and is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Association for Psychological Science. He has served as President of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (2011), and as Chair of the Div. 38 (Health Psychology) Education and Training Council. Regan is very interested in enhancing faculty development and student understanding. He is a winner of the Carnegie Foundation’s Wisconsin Professor of the Year (2009), the University of Wisconsin System’s Regent’s Award for Excellence in Teaching (2011), as well a number of UW-Green Bay Awards including the Founder’s Award for Excellence in Teaching, the Founder’s Award for Scholarship, Teaching-at-its-Best, Creative Teaching, and Featured Faculty Awards.
My Early Development as a Teacher

I wanted to be a doctor. Growing up in Bombay (now Mumbai), India, I was surrounded by a culture where the men were doctors, lawyers, engineers, or businessmen. I moved to America as a college freshman and took my first psychology class my first semester. It did not go too well and although intrigued somewhat by the subject matter, the ghost of cultural expectations and a fascination for biology led me onto the pre-med route. Organic chemistry quickly killed that drive and a double biology-psychology major was next on the docket. Biology was soon left behind as I took more and more psychology, graduating with honors (not bad after that intro psych beginning). I received more than a great psychology undergraduate education: I was exposed to faculty who loved to teach.

Students do not always recognize excellent teaching when they see it. I do not think I did. I know I clearly enjoyed classes and noticed that my instructors seemed to have this deep interest (I attributed it to academic geekiness) in their material. On later reflection, that is what stood out. My teachers cared about psychology. They cared about those of us trying to learn. They worked extremely hard to find ways to help us learn. I wanted to care as much about what I did as they cared about what they did. The immediate solution was not a decision to teach but to go to graduate school in psychology to learn more about the field.

I was fortunate to go to a graduate school that had a course on how to teach. I didn’t take it until my fourth year as preparation to be a teaching assistant and even then I was not bitten by the bug to teach. I enjoyed the class. I enjoyed being a TA, but that only primed the pump for a desire to teach. Two events really got me thinking about teaching. The first took place when I was a TA for a section of introductory psychology. The instructor went through his paces with seemingly little concern for whether the students understood the course material or not. He knew
his stuff. He had an impressive research record, but he did not seem to be paying attention to whether students were learning. I thought I could do better if I were the instructor. The second event was more focused. I did a guest lecture on the social psychology of relationships to a section of introductory psychology students and I could feel the students connect with what I was doing. The feeling was electric. I felt the buzz for hours after that session. I was hooked. I knew then that I had to be a college level teacher.

I had to work hard to find opportunities to teach. In graduate school, I taught the first three weeks of a personality class as a substitute for travelling advisors. During my postdoctoral training at UCLA, I first jockeyed to teach a summer class and then canvassed the surrounding schools to find a place to teach. Finally, I got my first “Instructor of Record” gig. I taught health psychology at a nearby school once a week. My graduate school class on teaching ensured I had the basics (e.g., writing a syllabus, creating lectures, considering ways to get students engaged), but I soon realized the basics were just that. There was a world of pedagogy beyond the fundamentals. I spent most of the hour-plus commute home after teaching thinking about ways I could make the class better. But teaching that one class was something done in isolation. I did not have anyone who I felt I could talk to about teaching. My sole attempts to better my teaching consisted of critical reflection of my activities and unstructured brainstorming of what could work better. Then things changed.

I was at an APA meeting during my final years of graduate school and I ran into my Carleton College advisor, Neil Lutsky. We had kept in touch since I had graduated, but not extensively. At this particular APA meeting, Neil did something that changed my teaching career. He invited me to attend a Society for Teaching of Psychology (STP) talk he was giving. Back then, I did it because I respected him and valued his passion for teaching not because I
really thought it was something I would benefit from (ironic for someone who liked his first forays into teaching). I had been at research focused schools where teaching was not seen as important and APA was someplace to go to sessions on my area of scholarly research. I was barely cognizant there was a teaching program and somewhat reluctant to go to the STP talk. I am very glad I went. My mind was opened to a whole new world that I never knew existed at APA.

Neil showed me what it means to be a passionate teacher. He took the time to make sure I realized that it is worth it to care about teaching and introduced me to a world of wonderful passionate teachers within the Society for the Teaching of Psychology, such as Bill Hill, Bill Addison, Diane Halpern, Drew Appleby, and Jane Halonen who I worked with during my “early years” and many more that I met in the ensuing years such as Bill Buskist and Randy Smith. The STP community soon connected me to many more wonderful friends such as Eric Landrum, Beth Schwartz, Janie Wilson, Dana Dunn, and Drew Christopher (to name but a few). These teachers from the STP community and the colleagues and friends such as Georjeanna Wilson-Doenges, Kris Vespia, and Ryan Martin at my current home institution are some of the most caring teachers I know. These individuals all exemplify what it means to be a good teacher and have inspired me to work hard at being the best teacher I can be. These colleagues have been mentors and friends who shaped my development.

What started by attending an STP talk at APA soon grew in leaps and bounds. I found myself tapping into Neil’s passion for teaching more and more. Soon after that momentous APA, Neil was elected President of STP and I got more opportunities to connect with the society and many more occasions to learn about teaching. I served as associate director for APA programming and then director of programming for STP at APA and many different taskforces
and working groups. Each activity taught me more about pedagogy and teaching and helped establish my teaching identity.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

A basic enjoyment of teaching fueled by the growing involvement in STP quickly led to my decision to work at a teaching focused university. I enjoyed my years in research universities and learned a lot about the field and doing research, but I missed having opportunities to teach. When I hit the job market I aimed exclusively at teaching schools and locations where I knew I would get to teach a fair amount and be among teachers who cared. I got what I asked for in my current school.

I started my first academic job having only taught two classes (research methods and health psychology). At the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, I taught four sections of introductory psychology a year and two sections of Health Psychology the first year. For the next few years I taught a similar load switching out one of the health psychology classes for a new course I developed (Culture, Development, and Health). The upper level classes were relatively easy. I had prepared one before and knew the material for both really well. Introductory psychology was my big challenge. I had to refresh myself on a lot of material and simultaneously cope with teaching large groups of students (I started with sections of 120 and moved to teaching sections of 250). I also had research and service to fit in. Something had to give.

My solution to balancing the different elements of being an academic came about by chance. My university initiated a teaching scholars program my first year on campus where groups of faculty would be selected to meet once a month and talk about teaching. Guided by two stellar teachers and mentors, Fergus Hughes and Denise Scheberle, each class of scholars would reflect on teaching, read relevant pedagogical literature, modify their teaching, and assess
the results of the modifications: I was introduced to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Being trained as a social psychologist, SoTL came naturally to me. The whole world of social psychological phenomenon unfolded in the crucible of the classroom and I saw a wide panorama of opportunities for innovation and change. I launched into SoTL with gusto following the campus scholars program with a year term in the university system’s scholar program. The work I completed documenting my classroom assessment of learning (a study on student use of pedagogical aids) was published in the *Teaching of Psychology* and I had found a way to balance scholarship and teaching. A large part of my research agenda now focused on the classroom.

In the ensuing years I built and expanded my SoTL work and this has satisfied my university research requirement (supplementing my social and health psychology research) and given me opportunities to develop as a teacher. Each study I conducted necessitated critical reflection of my pedagogy and a thorough reading of the pedagogical literature. I complemented this reading by attending teaching conferences and earmarking time to talk to my friends and mentors. My colleagues on campus in particular proved excellent collaborators for SoTL and muses for my teaching reflections. I find talking about teaching to be one of best ways to foster development of the same, and I talk about teaching a lot. Talking and reflecting over the years fine-tuned my own teaching philosophy.

**The Examined Life of a Teacher**

I am a passionate, organized, and approachable instructor who works hard to be knowledgeable in my field and dynamic in my pedagogy. I believe that learning rarely happens automatically. The learner has to work hard. The teacher has to work hard. To some, learning comes naturally. Similarly, some are natural teachers. The way I approach teaching is driven by the basic belief that if I want learning to take place, I have to work hard at it and help my
students to work hard at it. This is a somewhat basic teaching philosophy but it forms the foundation of a robust edifice. My teaching philosophy revolves around three core ideas. To deliver quality instruction and optimize student learning, I believe that as a good teacher I should: 1) be flexible in my pedagogy, 2) focus on developing quality student-teacher interactions, and 3) be excited about my material and the craft of teaching. Different activities ensure that I stay true to each of these beliefs.

I teach four different classes, each with their own challenges. I have to use different strategies with each and this forces me to be flexible in my teaching style and knowledgeable about the effectiveness of different pedagogical options. It is important for educators to be cognizant of the effectiveness of teaching. Are my students learning? Is my teaching style working? I strive to find the style that is right for me and one that matches the level of my students. In each of my classes I provide students with numerous opportunities to evaluate my teaching and provide formative feedback, and when the need arises, I change what I do based on the feedback. This immediate feedback allows me to adjust my pacing and presentation style for the current class.

My model of teaching is based on the philosophy that quality student-faculty interactions enhance learning. I devote time and energy to establishing good rapport with students and maintaining it: I work hard to memorize student names, go to class early and stay after to talk to students, and email students who both fail and who get high grades. In this day and age, instructors bemoan the entitled attitudes of the millennial student and document a litany of classroom incivilities. I believe that if I can create positive rapport with my students and if I am approachable, incivility will decrease and engagement and learning will increase. I work hard to help students develop autonomy, essentially building their motivation and self-confidence in
themselves. Many students sell themselves short. If you ask them what the best they can do is, they often aim low. My goal as an educator is to make students realize that they can do better than what they think is their best. I then take pains to provide the structure to help students accomplish the challenging goals I set for them.

Excitement is a critical element of good teaching and I am excited about what I do. I love psychology and my passion for teaching spills into every second of my time in the classroom and in my interactions with students. I firmly believe that one should be passionate about what they are doing or they should do something else. Maintaining an active research program and staying abreast with pedagogy on teaching energizes my classroom activities. I maintain my motivation to teach well by keeping pace with recent research on teaching pedagogy and being an active participant in STP.

Over the years, my approach to teaching has changed in significant ways. I have increased my awareness and use of diverse pedagogies at an exponential level. I incorporate what I learn from attending teaching conferences to revise the structure of my courses and I make time to read the pedagogical literature. I work hard to establish collaborations with other teachers to study aspects of teaching in order to better what I do. I have also begun to devise and use new ways to get higher quality student feedback. I ask my undergraduate teaching assistants to complete weekly blogs on my teaching. They evaluate what I did that seems to work with students and what did not. I challenge them to map what I do onto the underlying pedagogical principles that suggest the technique is effective. Reading their blogs keeps me focused on my pedagogy and sometimes call for a thick skin (no punches are pulled). The blogs also provide some of my most rewarding teaching moments. The TAs report many “aha” moments when they connect what they have read (e.g., pedagogical articles and books) with what they see me do. My
favorite memory is of a TA commenting that my teaching was like the movie version of a teaching tips book.

The assessment of student learning and the empirical and systematical evaluation of my teaching methods inform every aspect of my teaching practice. My interest in SoTL is at the forefront of my scholarly agenda and represents a perfect, happy marriage of my teaching, scholarship, and service activities. I do not fully implement a new teaching tool or course component until I assess its utility. I study how my students learn and test how different course components affect learning. For example, I recently tested how students studied in an attempt to identify techniques that worked better than others. In another study, I surveyed the texting behaviors of students in my class and correlated it with exam scores to demonstrate to students the problems with distracted attention. Together with publishing from my classroom research, I have worked with other teachers and researchers on my campus, within the system, and across the country, in designing pedagogical research.

**Advice for New Teachers**

Teaching your first class can be overwhelming. My best advice for new teachers is to take it slow and focus on a few elements of their courses at a time. Start at the end—focus on developing tight learning outcomes. Then plan the assignments and lectures that will help student achieve the outcomes. Find out what works best for you and strive over time to do what has been shown to work (but that you may at first not like doing or know how to do). Make the time to talk about teaching with those you respect, admire, and are comfortable with. Although first days are important, every day is another chance to shine and when the spotlight is on you, dance.
Final Thoughts

I cannot imagine doing anything different. Being in the classroom is energizing. I draw great satisfaction from seeing students “get it.” I am gratified to hear former students using what they have learned in class. Teaching is a passion and I am grateful to my students and colleagues for making it the lodestone of my life.
Chapter 5

Those Who Can, Do; Those Who Can Do More, Teach

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Those Who Can, Do; Those Who Can Do More, Teach

I am the Social Studies Department Chairperson and the Advanced Placement Psychology teacher at Brentwood High School in Brentwood, Tennessee. I have taught social studies courses and/or coached varsity soccer at BHS since 1994, and for the past 8 years I have taught AP Psychology exclusively. Typically, half of the graduating class of seniors (approximately 180 students) can be found in my classroom at some point during the school day. So, how did a Yankee end up in Volunteer country? Kismet. I graduated from Michigan State University with a BA in secondary education. At that time, there was a dearth of available teaching jobs in Michigan and the winter weather was brutal (minus 30 degree wind chill, need I say more?), so my husband and I followed the geese and migrated south.

After 13 years of coaching women and men’s varsity soccer, I became more and more frustrated, realizing that I was spending far more time counseling players than developing set plays. Although I felt competent as the team’s coach, I did not feel adequately trained as the team’s psychologist, so I retired from coaching in order to pursue my MEd in human developmental counseling from Vanderbilt University. This program required students to engage in continuous, authentic introspection; consequently, not only did I emerge with a master’s degree, but I recommitted myself to my role as an educator. As an unintended, but delightful side effect, my renewed dedication to teaching was honored by several awards. In 1995, I was named Brentwood High School’s Teacher of the Year, and earned the American Psychological Association’s Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools’ Excellence in Teaching Award. Four years later, I received the Coca Cola Scholars Foundation Joseph B. Whitehead Educator of Distinction Award.
Most recently, in August of 2010, I was presented with the Mary Margaret Moffett Memorial Teaching Excellence Award presented by the American Psychological Association’s Society for the Teaching of Psychology. It is exhilarating to enjoy a career in which I find meaning, and an amazing honor to be commended by my peers.

**My Early Development as a Teacher**

I assume that most educators, especially those who are exemplary, were inspired by their former teachers to follow in their footsteps. I also contend that the inspirational mentors were model teachers, who cared about their students’ lives just as much (if not more) than their content matter, who were able to simplify complex concepts to facilitate student learning, who believed that their students could achieve, and who nurtured their curiosity. I, too, was motivated by my former teachers to enter education; however, they were not the role models I just described. I was moved to become a teacher by the likes of my trigonometry teacher, who gave me a zero on my semester exam because he assumed that I did not want to take the test. (Note: I was attending my grandmother’s funeral out-of-state.) I was stirred by my chemistry teacher who answered every question with his infamous phrase, “You’ll learn that in physics.” And I was inspired by my geometry teacher who called on me to answer a question and then muttered something about how he would be surprised if I came up with the right answer. (Surprise! I did.)

Conversely, I did have some wonderful teachers such as Mr. Flegal who played four-square with us and performed magic tricks at lunch, Mr. Altimore who encouraged a shy teenager to unleash her sense of humor, and Mr. Lee who told hilarious stories, challenged us to dissect the Republican Party’s economic platform, and allowed us to conduct our very own “rat lab” in psychology. However, these wonderful teachers did not
inspire me to teach; rather, they inspired me to learn, and the love of learning that they nurtured in me has become a lifelong quest to scientifically understand human behavior. For that, I am grateful. Those individuals who posed as teachers (but were really power-hungry bullies), who managed to extinguish any desire I had to learn about anything in their content areas are the ones who inspired me to try to make things better. Ironically, I will always be grateful for the role they unintentionally played in helping me find my life’s purpose.

I began my freshman year at Michigan State University with every intention of studying to become a lawyer – a decision that I made in junior high. It took one dorm-mate and one professor 4 months to undo all my preconceived plans, and reveal to me that I was born to be a teacher. By that time, I had already embarked on my coaching career, and in TE 101, Dr. Ontagook showed me that “teaching” is just another name for “coaching,” and you do not have to argue with the referees.

Once I decided to study education, I knew that I wanted to teach psychology, my favorite subject in high school taught by my favorite teacher. Regrettably, Michigan State did not permit students to major in secondary education psychology and my best friend’s mom, who was also a high school teacher, convinced me that I would make myself more marketable if I majored in something broader than just psychology. Fortunately, MSU offered a multidisciplinary social studies degree in secondary education, with a minor in health education, which became, essentially, a custom-made psychology degree.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

I often wish that teachers could have an additional planning period in order to audit classes taught by colleagues. Not only would we be exposed to brand new content areas
that would enhance our cross-curricular ventures, but we would have the opportunity to experience the effectiveness of alternate teaching techniques and strategies. Although I have not been able to convince our administration that this activity would be an invaluable learning experience for teachers, as a department chairperson I have the opportunity to observe my colleagues a few times a year. The following experience took place last fall during an informal observation:

I sat on the floor against the back wall of a darkened computer classroom in our school’s media center surrounded by 60 sophomores enrolled in Advanced Placement European History. The instructor, Mr. Adams, was going to attempt to deliver a 45-minute PowerPoint lecture about Renaissance art, while the students were inches away from fully functioning computers that tempted them to access their e-mail and Facebook accounts. A recipe for disaster, right? For any other teacher, perhaps, but not for my colleague. That day I witnessed first-hand the reason why over 200 sophomores (half of the class) register for AP Euro. As I sat, absorbed in my colleague’s animated presentation, full of personal anecdotes and real-world connections, I was inspired to pursue a master’s degree in humanities. I needed to know more! When the bell signaled the end of the lecture, I felt compelled to applaud his marvelous presentation. Instead, I waved to my colleague and trekked back to my classroom, daydreaming about earning a master’s degree in humanities. In that short walk, the spell was broken while I considered that I have neither the funds nor the time to pursue another degree and, even more
importantly, the realization that very few teachers could ever compete with my colleague. Mr. Adams is the kind of teacher who makes history come alive, whether you are 15 and learning something for the first time, or 40, and have taught the same content yourself.

I am blessed to say that Mr. Adams and I are good friends as well as colleagues, which is why he doesn’t take offense to the following observation. His lesson plan was ridiculous, and it should have failed miserably. Sixty 15-year olds, half of whom he doesn’t even teach, crammed into a dark room, sitting at computer stations, while he attempted to share a PowerPoint presentation about Renaissance art? Common sense dictates that those students should have been either sleeping or playing on the computers. Instead, Mr. Adams had them fully engaged in his presentation, hanging on his every word, laughing at his hilarious anecdotes, and desperately trying to find the answers to his questions such as, “What is wrong with this sculpture?” or “What is interesting about this painting?” By the way, I do not mean that most of the students were engaged, I mean that every single person in that room was spellbound. As I attempt to explain what makes someone an exemplary teacher, I cannot help but reflect on my experience in AP Euro. Mr. Adams is an exemplary teacher, and I believe, he was born that way.

In my opinion, you are either born with the traits and abilities to become an exemplary teacher or you are not. Professors can lecture about effective teaching, mentors can model it for you, and you can read professional journal articles about research-based strategies, but you are either a natural teacher or you are not. Certainly, I believe that you can enhance and mature what is already there – but that is the key, it was already there. Most people assume that exceptional musicians, athletes, and artists must have been
endowed with a great deal of innate ability that was sharpened by their environment. I contend that this same premise holds true for exemplary educators.

So, the question becomes – what is “it?” What is “it” that makes someone an exemplary teacher? The only thing that I am certain of is that you know “it” when you see “it.” “It” is what makes the energy shift as soon as that teacher enters the room. “It” is what can transform the most mundane topic into a lively debate or poignant tale. “It” is what students are going to remember about their favorite classes and their favorite teachers for the rest of their lives. Upon reflection, rarely do students report how well organized a teacher’s lecture on classical conditioning was or remember exactly how the action potential works because the teacher’s presentation was scientifically precise. When asked, students typically respond with comments such as, “My favorite teacher of all time:

- Truly believes that all students can succeed.
- Encourages me to extend my learning outside the classroom.
- Is constantly trying to improve him/herself as a teacher.
- Is willing to do anything to help students (e.g. stay after school).
- Is a well-rounded person who shares his/her varied interests with his/her students.
- Is committed to establishing genuine relationships with students.
- Truly understands his/her students’ needs, interests, etc.
- Is very playful and uses a lot of humor.”

How do I know? I asked them.

I attempted to identify the “it” factor during a professional development session I hosted with my colleagues entitled, “Teacher Dispositions.” A dear friend of mine, Dr. Deborah Schussler, an associate professor at Villanova University, graciously shared her
research and her colleagues’ research with me. After reading countless articles related to teacher dispositions, I began to appreciate how difficult it is to concretely define the “it” factor. The most comprehensive definition I found was composed by The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). NCATE defines teacher dispositions as follows:

“The values, commitments and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students, families, colleagues, and communities and affect student learning, motivation, and development as well as the educator’s own professional growth. Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility, and social justice. For example, they might include a belief that all students can learn, a vision of high and challenging standards, or a commitment to a safe and supportive learning environment (2000, p. 2).”

The second sentence of the NCATE’s definition confirms what I believe makes a teacher exemplary, and many educational experts agree:

- “Effective teachers are effective people” (Taylor & Wasicsko, 2000, p. 9).
- “Dispositions are a personal by-product of one’s identity and integrity. As such, they are directly linked to who people are” (Koeppen & Davison-Jenkins, 2006, p. 19).
- “To separate one’s personal and professional identities is impossible.” (Ball & Goodsen, 1985, p. 13).

I believe research on teacher dispositions indicates that the best teachers are genuinely the best people. They are compassionate, thoughtful, generous, enthusiastic, reliable, and
respectful regardless of the circumstances or audience. Take this “best person” prototype and add curiosity and an expertise in a particular subject area, and I probably just described your favorite teacher, and (hopefully) you.

**Advice for New Teachers**

This fall marks the beginning of my 18th year of teaching. Honestly, I cannot believe it has only been 18 years, and the thought of having to retire some day in the future is surreal. Sadly, some teachers might convert this measurement into how many years they have left until they can retire. A teacher I know retired a couple of years ago after decades of service. When the principal asked her for any last words to share with the faculty she said, “Thank God!” Those were her only words, and she was not joking. I am certain her students (and perhaps some coworkers) felt the same way. On the other hand, one of the best teachers I have ever known retired 5 years ago. Although she was excited to adjust to a more humane sleep schedule and continue her globetrotting, she was in our school building more days than not as a substitute teacher with celebrity status. While she retired from the day-to-day grind of teaching in a public high school, she never lost her passion for education or for working with young people. I mention these two retired teachers to illustrate the following advice: If you want to be an exemplary teacher, it cannot be just a job; rather, it should be a core component of your life’s purpose. You cannot just have a passion for your subject matter; rather, you must combine that passion with a desire to share your subject matter with your students. An exemplary teacher can change history and make the world a better place by inspiring the next generation to identify their passions, explore the unknown, create innovations, and find solutions to
problems that have plagued society for centuries. What could be a more noble life’s purpose?

In conclusion, the wisest guidance I can offer new teachers is to authentically and consistently engage in the process of introspection. Honestly assess your strengths and ensure that you are engaging them daily, especially in the classroom. Sincerely consider your weaknesses, both inside and outside of the classroom, and challenge yourself to improve. Read, travel, learn new skills, and meet new people, particularly people who are significantly different from you. Reexamine what you believe is your life’s purpose. In reference to your career path, the question to be asked is not “What can I live with?” but rather, “What can’t I live without?” Do you merely tolerate student questions or do they energize you? When a former student seeks your guidance do you consider it a burden or an honor? The answers to those questions indicate if you have “it”—the capacity to become an exemplary teacher. If my assertion regarding teacher disposition is correct, whatever you do to improve yourself as a person will have a positive impact on your role as a teacher, and the greater your intrapersonal intelligence, the more effective you will be as an educator.
References


Chapter 6

On Luck and Opportunity

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On Luck and Opportunity

I have always wanted to be a teacher. While others were playing dress-up and “house,” I was forcing my friends to play “school” (they really did not like being assigned homework, but it was the only way for me to verify that they had learned the “lesson” I presented). Perhaps this deep-rooted desire to teach came from my mother who was a high school teacher (who recently retired). My mother is inspirational in many ways, but perhaps especially as it relates to teaching, with her dedication to students and high regard for the profession.

After completing a double honors BA in Psychology and French at the University of Windsor, I entered Wayne State University’s Cognitive, Developmental and Social Psychology doctoral program, where I have taught since 2005. Now, 6 years later, I have taught introductory psychology labs, stand-alone writing-intensive labs (cognitive labs and perception labs) and introductory lectures. As a graduate student instructor at Wayne State University, I was awarded many teaching awards: at the departmental level (Psychology Teaching Award 2008), at the university level (Wayne State University’s Garret T. Heberlein Endowed Award for Excellence in Teaching for Graduate Students 2008) and most recently at the national level (Society for the Teaching of Psychology’s Wilbert J. McKeachie Teaching Excellence Award 2011). In addition to these teaching-specific awards, I also received a departmental service award (2009), for the many contributions I made to the department and university, included giving pedagogical university-wide workshops to incoming graduate teaching assistants. Although I have worked very hard for these accomplishments, I was also a little bit lucky and received some great opportunities along the way.
My Early Development as a Teacher

I have always loved helping others to learn or understand things in general. As a good student in high school at École Secondaire l’Essor, I would often find myself helping other students with their homework after school or clarifying lessons. After I graduated, I also worked there as an official (i.e., paid) tutor, and later as a substitute teacher. These experiences strengthened my resolve to become an educator. Although I was accepted into the Faculty of Education at the University of Windsor after my BA degree, I felt constrained by the Ontario curriculum, as well as the accompanying discipline responsibilities. I also knew that I would not be able to teach the topics that interested me. And so, I decided to accept Wayne State University’s offer instead and began my journey as a teacher in higher education.

There were many opportunities to teach at Wayne State. In fact, graduate students typically teach an introductory lab both semesters in the first year of the program. The introductory course curriculum, including the lab component, is already planned out and standardized across sections, which is especially beneficial for first-time instructors. It was through this teaching opportunity that I met my mentor, Dr. Margo Bowman. Margo was in charge of ensuring our success as graduate student instructors and that we felt adequately prepared to teach the lab sections. At least a week before each scheduled lab, she would review the course material and experiments with us, give pointers on how to teach difficult-to-grasp concepts, and answer our teaching related questions. She was an invaluable resource to new graduate student teachers. Margo continues to be a very nurturing and knowledgeable teaching mentor and is partly responsible for my success today.

Later, I took a course from Margo on the teaching of psychology. New faculty are expected to be good instructors and demonstrate evidence of this (for an interesting report on the
desirable characteristics of new faculty, refer to Adams, 2002). The teaching of psychology
course was the first time that I was exposed to the pedagogical principles of teaching. Although I
had already implemented many of the topics in my classroom (e.g., levels of assessment), this
was the first time that these principles had been labeled for me. This may seem like a small
detail, but it was instrumental in leading me to seek published readings on pedagogical topics. In
addition to this course, I also attended most of the workshops offered by Wayne State’s Office of
Teaching and Learning (5-10 workshops per year) and attended most of the brownbags for
graduate teaching assistants.

In addition to teaching students, I had the unique opportunity to help train incoming
graduate students on how to become effective instructors. Through Margo, I was given the
opportunity to lead workshops at the graduate student teaching orientation (organized by the
Office for Teaching and Learning), which is required for all new graduate student instructors. I
led workshops for the last three years and thoroughly enjoyed imparting my knowledge and
experience onto others who are just like I was when I started graduate school.

All of these people and experiences (whether encountered through hard work, luck or
opportunity) have helped develop my interest in pedagogical topics and improve my teaching
(and, of course, Svinicki & McKeachie’s (2011) McKeachie’s Teaching Tips book!)

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

Although I’m still very early in my development, I have long defined myself as a teacher
and have progressed in this definition: from playing “school,” to tutoring, to being a lab
instructor to being an instructor of record.

Although I enjoy being a teacher, it does not come without struggle. My ongoing struggle
involves improving student learning and motivation to learn. I say this is an ongoing struggle
because I’m not convinced that it will ever be completely resolved, but that’s not to say that I passively accept this. Instead, I study the issues faced by students and attempt to improve motivation in the ways I deliver material (e.g., using the television show Dexter to illustrate research on serial killers) or the assignments I use in the classroom (e.g., using MythBusters clips to assess the identification of independent and dependent variables). The use of new technologies or research-substantiated techniques has also improved my teaching and led to improved student learning outcomes.

Teaching is very demanding (when done well), so I have had to sacrifice non-pedagogical research in order to become (what I consider to be) a successful teacher. It’s important to balance a number of different, but equally important areas: research, teaching and service. My order of priority might just differ from some others, as I have focused more on teaching and service than research (though, of course, progress in all three areas are necessary). After attending almost all of the workshops offered by the Office for Teaching and Learning (and earning a Certificate of Teaching Development), I made the decision to lead my own educational experience in the area of pedagogy by engaging in pedagogical research. This pedagogical engagement, including the reading of Teaching of Psychology journal articles, has supplemented my research portfolio and has helped guide my research questions (and sometimes, even provided me with answers!).

The Examined Life of a Teacher

My approach to teaching has changed over my career in higher education. As a new teacher, I focused more on delivering content to students. Now, I’m more interested in student learning outcomes and how to maximize student success.

My teaching revolves around student learning. In addition to developing a genuine interest in the subject matter, I want students to feel empowered, successful, and proud of their
accomplishments (regardless of the grade they receive in my course). Although I require a lot of work from students, I also feel that they get a lot in return. Yes, they learn academic material, but they also develop and improve other important skills such as computing, leadership, and an appreciation for the application of psychological topics to everyday encounters.

Although students often feel that grades are the most important products of a course, I believe that the learning experience (i.e., the growth and knowledge gained during the semester) is paramount. Students benefit from a variety of learning experiences: working alone, collaboratively in small groups, one-on-one with me and as an entire class. I always provide detailed feedback on every assignment submitted by students so that they can improve their thinking skills for subsequent assignments. Further, I provide students with a variety of assignments (individual homework assignments, group projects, pair-share tasks, papers, etc.) to capitalize on their strengths but also to push them to succeed in their weaker areas. In my cognitive laboratory class, a practical exam (where students enter data, generate statistics and interpret their results) at the end of the semester allows students to see the progress in their own abilities over the semester; in other classes this progress is monitored through a self-reflection assignment. These ideas are not new, and in fact, have been suggested by others in the past (e.g., Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

The most rewarding experiences for me are witnessing student learning: seeing an “aha” moment when they finally understand the distinction between an independent and dependant variable or the progress they have made over the semester (e.g., the ability to form hypotheses based on research). Seeing the progression in students and knowing you were an integral part of it, is incredibly rewarding. I also make sure that students reflect on their progress (e.g., with an assignment for bonus points at the end of the semester) so that the reward is not only for me!
Although I thoroughly enjoy my role as an instructor, no career comes without at least some frustrating moments. The most frustrating part of teaching (for me) is a mismatch in effort: when I work so hard to try to secure student success and the student exhibits low motivation or a sense of entitlement. It is a challenge not to become discouraged. In order to reduce and overcome this discouragement, I try to look at the bright side of every situation. For example, I am always careful not to pass judgment on students or commit the fundamental attribution error (attributing behaviors to personal characteristics or attributes and failing to consider the role of situational characteristics). If a student is late on the first day of an 8 a.m. class it would be easy to get discouraged and suppose that they are lazy or irresponsible, but this is potentially committing the fundamental attribution error. Instead, I always look for the good in people and give them the benefit of the doubt in such situations: maybe they left very early for class, but there was an accident on the highway or maybe their child was up sick all night and had to be taken to the doctor. As such, I find my hope renewed and feel my excitement for teaching return.

Another area that has changed though my teaching career is my approach to teaching evaluations. The standardized Student Evaluation of Teaching forms filled out at the end of the semester used to be simply a number and set of comments that I read through. As I became more interested in pedagogical questions, I began to include additional questions on these evaluations because I wanted to evaluate specific things about my course that semester. For example, did students enjoy a new assignment (e.g., did they like my use of MythBusters clips to illustrate experimental variables)? As such, the addition of these course-specific questions to the standardized evaluations required by the university has now become an integral part of my development as a teacher. The comments provided by students help to guide my reflection as to what I am doing well and what I need to improve. Student comments also help me to revise my
course to improve student outcomes for subsequent semesters. In addition to considering students’ comments, I have also sought improvement and inspiration in teaching by attending workshops and looking for cutting-edge research at conferences and in published materials.

**Advice for New Teachers**

The learning environment should be a reciprocal one, so you should also expect to learn from your students. It’s important to recognize, if you want to be taken seriously, that you do not know everything about everything and that you need to be approachable while demonstrating authority and knowledge. It’s a fine balance, but before long you will get the hang of this juggling act.

It is never too early to start training as a teacher. Perhaps the most important advice I have to share is to never stop learning. There are many avenues available to learn more about teaching and to become a more competent instructor, such as your institution’s equivalent of the Office for Teaching and Learning. Additionally, you should seek a teaching mentor (who will likely be different from your academic advisor), keeping in mind that this might also be an advanced graduate student or non-tenured instructor. You should also seek any and all resources to help in your quest to become a more competent instructor. For example, joining pedagogical societies (APA Division 2: Society for the Teaching of Psychology is a great start!) and reading journals devoted to pedagogy (e.g., *Teaching of Psychology*). Additionally, the STP website has a multitude of resources, including a mentorship service. Finally, you should consider attending pedagogical conferences and conducting pedagogical research in your classroom. In addition to the opportunity to present at pedagogical conferences, you will be able to measure the changes you have made in the classroom (which you hope will improve students’ learning!).
Final Thoughts

I am excited for the future and I look forward to a long career as an instructor. I hope you will continue to seek to improve your abilities as an instructor keeping in mind the ultimate goal of teaching: learning. With some hard work, a little luck and some great opportunities, you can become an excellent teacher. I can only hope that you will get lucky enough to come across great role models along the way as I have (like my mother and Margo) and are afforded the opportunities to grow as an instructor.
References


Chapter 7

Reflections on Teaching

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Reflections on Teaching

Who would have ever guessed that Phil McClung, the shy little fellow in the middle of the classroom, would one day be confidently standing in front of large groups of students and the community as an award winning Professor of Psychology at West Virginia University at Parkersburg (WVUP). As I near retirement, the university that granted my bachelor’s degree in psychology remains my only full-time employer. Using my minor in chemistry as a supplemental employment talent, I was first employed as a research technologist for the Coal Research Bureau at West Virginia University. As a research technologist I was commissioned to investigate beneficial ways to utilize coal waste by-products. I designed the world’s first 40 percent fly ash brick and applied for a patent. I pursued and earned a masters degree and Certificate of Advanced Study while continuing to work as a research technologist. I began my teaching career 5 years later at West Virginia University at Parkersburg, working both as a counselor and adjunct faculty member until becoming a full-time faculty member. While teaching, I earned my doctorate in counseling. I’ve also taught for both West Virginia University and Marshall University graduate schools.

Students at WVUP selected me as faculty of the year twice and I was runner-up for Professor of the Year in West Virginia twice by the National Merit Foundation. I was selected as recipient of the Wayne Weiten Teaching Excellence Award by the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (Division Two of the American Psychological Association), and the NISOD Teaching Excellence Award. In addition I was selected as the 2011 West Virginia Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching which recognizes professors for their influence on teaching and their commitment to undergraduate students. I am listed in Who’s Who Among America’s Teachers seven times and Who’s Who in America three
times. In addition I was also selected Outstanding Staff member as a counselor by the WVUP student body three times.

As a professor at WVUP I have been involved in a number of firsts. For example, I have accomplished the following:

- Developed the institutions emphasis in psychology for the West Virginia Regents Bachelor of Arts Program
- Created and taught the first upper level psychology classes
- Developed the first outcomes assessment plan
- Organized the first social fraternity and the first social sorority
- Taught the first fiber optics class
- Moderated the first state-wide webcast
- Taught one of the first distance learning courses via satellite
- Taught some of the first online and satellite courses
- Created an acclaimed, highly recognized Applied Environmental Psychology course
- Organized the first College Transfer Day
- Organized the first Health Careers Day
- Organized the first Career Planning and Placement Center
- Organized the first Career Center
- Organized and coached the first intercollegiate volleyball and table tennis teams
- Organized and coached in the counties first recreational volleyball league
- Organized, directed and coached in the counties first statewide Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) volleyball league
In addition, March 21 was dedicated as Dr. Phil Day on the WVUP campus by the college administration.

Being very active with professional state organizations has been very important to me, serving as an officer with the West Virginia Association for the Mentally Ill (WVAMI), serving as a Board of Directors member with Sharpe Hospital, and numerous affiliates of the West Virginia Counseling Association, including being president of the West Virginia Career Development Association. I am also very proud to have been selected to represent WVUP as a Fulbright and educational delegate to Bulgaria. Spending 30 days touring Bulgaria with 12 other university colleagues was an eye opening experience.

The lesson I emphasize to those aspiring to become great teachers is to become involved, not only in teaching but in every aspect of academia and your community in servant leadership. I cannot remember a boring minute in my career or worrying about burnout. My career has been filled with learning, excitement and thrilling life experiences, from climbing to the top of Seneca Rocks to completing the West Virginia University challenge course with my students in my applied environmental psychology course.

**My Early Development as a Teacher**

Although I did not receive any specific preparation for teaching at the master’s level, I did have an excellent course in my doctoral program. The course was taught by a professor skilled in group work, Ed Jacobs (West Virginia University) who was recognized nationwide for his talents. We covered everything from organizing a course, preparing lesson plans and getting ready for class, double checking room assignments and equipment, logistics, handling disruptive students, handling absenteeism, the first day of class, classroom assessment, warm-up activities, closing exercises and just about anything that could occur in the classroom. He constantly
introduced us to questions such as, “Do you teach to the upper 20%, middle 60% or lower 20%” to arouse our curiosity and challenge our thinking about teaching and learning. The final project was an actual presentation with critiques from the instructor and classmates. It was an incredible class and I’m thankful to this day for this experience.

I had two notable teaching mentors. They gave me ideas ranging from how to handle make-up assessments, new teaching strategies, handling difficult students, preparing for promotion, tenure and annual evaluations, but most importantly, they were available for support and confidence building. I could never lose my confidence with those two in the background. One was a Carnegie Foundation West Virginia professor of the year who still sends me encouragement after being retired for over 10 years.

Even though I had great preparation for teaching, I think it remains the individual professor’s task to develop a teaching style and philosophy. No matter how good my teaching models were, I could not easily teach the way they taught. One was very dramatic and confronting; the other was more of an academy award-winning actor and was able to dazzle his students. I relied more on learning new techniques that fit my personality. Any time I could attend a seminar or workshop related to teaching, I did. I tried almost everything with the thought, “Can students effectively learn with this strategy or technique?” My focus was more on lifelong learning and meaning as opposed to traditional content. My idea was students could retain learning better if they understood its connection to everyday life. I attempt to relate every lesson to the real world in some application or critical thinking exercise.

There were a number of factors related to my decision to become a university professor. I was lucky to begin slowly and work my way into full-time teaching. I began as a counselor and taught classes as an adjunct. I wanted to make a difference in people’s lives, and gradually, over
time, I realized that I could help more people and make more of a difference in the classroom. When I was younger I never dreamed I would ever be comfortable in front of a group of people but now I enjoy every minute of it. Teaching is an art and a learned skill. The major factors motivating me to pursue teaching were interest, desire, an aptitude and thirst for learning, a concern for others, and a willingness to take risks.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

The type of obstacles teachers encounter is related to their personality, the size and location of their institution, and the university administration. In our state we experience low salaries and because we are a small college, heavy workloads. Low salaries and heavy workloads can be a curse or a blessing depending on the individual. I have been able to attempt many things at our institution I would not have been given the opportunity to try at a larger university. At small colleges it is not unusual to teach five classes and have little time for research. Over the years, budgets were also a problem. To be effective at teaching and keeping up to date with new equipment and resources, it has been necessary to seek outside grants and other outside sources of funding. We have also been challenged by lack of technological support. Overcoming this issue often meant learning computer applications and online teaching strategies from other sources, trial and error, or utilizing outside community supports that were available. Being involved in one’s community is good for the individual, the university and the community.

Research is something I have always wanted to be more involved with but I have had little time to devote to it. I have been able to do a little research, make some presentations at conferences, and talk with other colleagues, all of which I have thoroughly enjoyed. I believe it is possible to be good at research and also be an excellent teacher, but it can be difficult to serve two masters.
The Examined Life of a Teacher

The principles resting at the heart of my personal philosophy of teaching are very simple. I think our job as professors is to stimulate students to be curious, then to show them a few basic tools so they can go out and find answers for themselves. A significant theme in my philosophy is that learning is better served if it facilitates lifelong learning. Lifelong learning has been compared to lifelong breathing, once the breathing or learning stops, so does the life. I believe there is a connectedness to what we teach and what occurs in life and that it is important to bring everyday life into the classroom. Continuous learners see both the forest and the trees. They continue to relate learning to the challenges and opportunities that occur in other parts of their life and environment.

As I began my academic career, I knew I wanted to be different as well as make a difference. I mentioned before that I think teaching is an art and I have tried throughout my career to learn more sophisticated art strokes. Initially though, my career was simply survival. New lesson plans and keeping ahead of the students were challenging introductory tasks. As I gained experience I learned the techniques that worked for me. I learned the concepts and areas that were difficult for students to grasp and the ones that were easy. Learning Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development was also a big plus. I think in the beginning I felt it was my responsibility to cover everything in the text. To enhance the classroom experience I facilitate learning by encouraging students to learn on their own through group work, service learning, self-paced study, and presentations. Learning how to teach in groups was also a giant step forward. Learning how to effectively use Stern’s interactive discussion and Kaplan’s multiple intelligence approaches was also significant. Both approaches promoted students’ unique personal strengths and abilities to increase their ability to learn. Stern’s strategy provided an organized discussion
format and Kaplan’s strategy provided structure for group participation and utilized different student learning styles.

Rewards from teaching come intrinsically and extrinsically. Nothing is more rewarding than having a student report you made a difference in his or her life. Statements such as, “your courses gave me so much direction with my life” or “your course changed my life forever” cannot be matched by any other type of reward. The looks of admiration and praise from throughout the community are also constant reinforcers. I’m also motivated and rewarded by researching and investigating information related to my interests. Making a living doing what you enjoy is an old notion but true one. I think it was Confucius who said, “Choose a career you love and you will never have to work a day in your life.” I cannot say teaching is not work, but for me, teaching is a work of love.

It is critical to assess if you want to become more effective as a teacher. This notion actually applies both to teaching and learning. I recommend every faculty member volunteer to serve on a teaching effectiveness or outcomes assessment committee. Personally, I try to assess each of my lectures with classroom assessment techniques such as “muddiest point” or “the 1-minute paper” (Angelo & Cross, 1993). I also use rubrics and have an assessment built in to every unit I teach, including my handouts. I try to keep current regarding teaching objectives at the institutional, local, state, and national levels. In this day and age, it’s equally important to know what is being taught globally. I also use a number of assessment methods in the classroom including techniques from Spencer and Laurie Kagan’s (1998) “Multiple Intelligences.”

Attending workshops have significant improved my teaching effectiveness. I also try to keep pace with the American Psychological Association recommendations for teaching. I also assess local employment needs to help students gain employment.
I think the secret to my success as a college professor is directly related to never being satisfied with my effectiveness and having a curiosity to seek new techniques and try them in the classroom. I believe Adler and Vygotsky had the right idea long ago when they advocated constructive approaches, making teaching meaningful and using the social context as a framework for a developing teacher. I continually seek new methods of delivery; attend as many professional development workshops and conferences as possible and read as much about effective teaching as possible. Becoming a member of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology, Division Two of the American Psychological Association and reading its official journal, *Teaching of Psychology* has been of great value. In recent years, keeping in touch with all the new technological advances involved in online delivery, using clickers, the world wide web, publishers advances and ancillaries/supports and colleagues both at our institution and throughout the United States has been helpful in improving my teaching. The key is to constantly plan and rewrite lesson plans. I review my lesson plan each semester to incorporate any new techniques I have learned.

**Advice for New Teachers**

If someone asked my advice regarding how to become a good or outstanding teacher, I would say the following:

- Investigate new and best practices and teaching methods through interaction with mentors, master teachers, and professional development conferences.
- Shift away from teaching students to memorize. Move towards helping students to evaluate and synthesize content.
- Encourage students to become designers and users of learning and to share knowledge with others while promoting lifelong learning.
• Create an interactive and sensory environment. Classes are the learning laboratory of the future with enormous possibilities.

• Collaborate and form partnerships and advisory boards with local organizations and other colleges to develop relevant curriculum and learning experiences.

• Utilize groups, problem solving, teamwork, critical thinking, dilemma analysis, experiential opportunities, news bulletins, public service announcements, debates, quiz bowls, service learning, field trips, focused interaction, or any other bold or innovative teaching strategy that matches your style of teaching.

• Promote research. Discovery is the essence of effective learning.

• Employ action plans, encourage grant writing and innovative wonderings.

• Engage students in hands-on projects and activities. Identify community needs and link students to volunteer learning services.

• Incorporate the real world in your teaching. Utilize debates, political forums, public speakers, case studies, class related interviews, and work cooperatives.

• Encourage letters to the editor, student forums, focus groups, political involvement, citizenship opportunities, advocacy efforts, and environmental awareness in course lessons.

• Serve your students as coach, mentor, consultant and mediator.

• Role-model lifelong learning. In a very real sense, the notion of life-long learning is much like the notion of life-long breathing; once the learning (or the breathing) stops, so does the life.
Learning is what teaching is all about. How a professor fosters lifelong learning involves many things, especially the individual professor's inspiration and desire to learn and to share that inspiration with others.

**Final Thoughts**

Perhaps the biggest and most dramatic changes in teaching and learning are in the uses of technology, the internet and online classes. It's imperative we develop a sense of comfort with our students in the use of Web 2.0, Prezi, blogs, Twitter, social networks, Skype, and future high technological aids and teaching strategies without losing the art of face-to-face discussion and discovery that are symbolic of the traditional classroom. Across America, college faculty is an aging group. I believe as educators we need to recruit and prepare capable, new replacements. Unlike in the primary and secondary teaching levels, graduate teaching assistants are given little instruction in the art of effective teaching. More master’s and doctoral level teaching classes need to be added to the curriculum to fill this void. This becomes even more essential as accrediting bodies such as the North Central Association increase standards. Accreditation will never get easier as the accrediting bodies develop more sophisticated and complex review processes to address the student learning outcomes and processes that support them. New college teachers will need better orientation programs and institutions of higher education will need new programs committed to the retention of quality faculty. All of these changes indicate an exciting and bright future for professionals involved in higher education.
References


Chapter 8

It is Hard to Improve if People Only Tell You Good Things

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It is Hard to Improve if People Only Tell You Good Things

I am currently an associate professor of psychology at Converse College where I also serve as department chair. Prior to arriving at Converse, I earned a BA in psychology from Grove City College in 1990, an MS in experimental psychology from Villanova University in 1993, and a PhD in experimental psychology (with an emphasis on psychology and the law and a minor in statistics) from the University of Wyoming in 1997. Although some people say that teachers do not receive enough praise, I have been lucky enough to work for extremely supportive mentors who were generous with positive feedback. As a graduate student, I was awarded the Ellbogen Outstanding Graduate Teaching Assistant Award, the Outstanding Psychology Graduate Student Award, and the Paul Stock Academic Achievement Award in 1995, and the Statistic's Minor Award in 1997. As a professor, I was chosen as the recipient of the Katherine Amelia Brown Award in 1999 to recognize excellence in the classroom. The next year, I was nominated by Converse College for the Governor’s Professor of the Year Award. In 2004, I was honored to receive the O’Herron Award for Faculty Excellence (this award is given to one faculty member per year to recognize exceptional teaching effectiveness, creativity, mentoring and advising, curriculum development, involvement in student-related activities and achievement in research and publication). Along with my departmental colleagues, I was one of the recipients of the Curriculum Innovation Award given by Converse College in 2008 for improvement to the departmental curriculum. I was selected for the South Carolina Governor’s Distinguished Professor of the Year Award in 2009, and as the South Carolina Professor of the Year by the Council for Advancement
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and Support of Education and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 2010.

**My Early Development as a Teacher**

If you had asked me when I was a child what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would not have said that I wanted to be a teacher. For many years, I wanted to be an actress. My poor parents spent countless hours driving me to rehearsals, auditions, and drama classes (including a very memorable one on stage combat that left me covered in bruises). It was a play, in fact, that first sparked my interest in psychology. I was performing the role of Sandra in *David and Lisa*—a play about adolescents with psychological problems who are living in a residential treatment home. While this role shifted my focus from acting to psychology, I had not yet envisioned myself as a teacher; my new goal was to be a clinician. It was not until I took my first full-time job as a counselor in a residential treatment center, that I realized counseling was not for me. I was frustrated by the lack of progress made by most clients; I missed discussing ideas with educated peers; and every day I stumbled across research questions that begged to be solved. Over a miserable year, I came to realize that I belonged in academe. The knowledge that I would be happiest as a teacher would come later.

During my master’s program, I had no training in teaching, unless you count “trial by fire.” In my second year, I had an assistantship that required me to teach the laboratory portion of an undergraduate course in sensation and perception. The professor of the course told me the activity I should do in the laboratory, but I was never given any direction about how to teach the material to the students. In the first semester of my doctoral program, I had a one credit, pass/fail class entitled Practicum in College
Teaching in the Fall of 1993, so I have to admit that my memory of the class is not overly
detailed. I recall, though, that we learned about logistics such as how to work the
classroom computer, where to have copies made, and how to use scantrons. I do not think
we got any information on how actually to convey what we knew to the students.
Strangely enough, my best preparation for being a teacher probably came from my
training in theater. There I learned to project, to keep my audiences’ attention, and to
convey information with my voice, my facial expressions, and my body language.

I did not decide I wanted to be a professor until after I started teaching classes
during my PhD program. I loved being in front of a class and sharing my passion for
psychology. Although I had not thought much about how to teach before I started doing
it, I fell in love with the job, and I wanted to be the best professor I could possibly be. I
started to pay more attention to how my professors taught, which led to my making
deliberate decisions about what techniques I wanted to emulate and what I wanted to
avoid. I began to search for excellent professors. I paid attention to who students raved
about and who won teaching awards. Then, I asked these professors if I could come and
watch them teach. Every one of these expert teachers invited me to observe them
whenever I chose, and made time to talk to me about teaching. I learned quickly that
great teachers love to talk about teaching and I was lucky to have these mentors who
were so willing and eager to share their knowledge with me. Their subject matter was
important to them, but how they convey that information to others was also extremely
important. In fact, I learned a great deal about teaching by observing a math professor. I
thought, “If he can make math fun and understandable, he must be amazing!” These
relationships were unique in that each of them was willing to give with no expectation of
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payback. As I mature as a teacher, I feel it is important that I “pay it forward” by helping new teachers.

I also wanted to improve my teaching by taking feedback from my students. Although I was initially pleased with course evaluations that described me as awesome or perfect, I quickly realized that I learned nothing from such comments. As a dramatic and often funny professor my students tend to like me. Knowing that students are fond of me is wonderful, I like them too! However, I learned that students do not want to say anything negative about a professor or their teaching techniques if they like the professor as a person. So, I started to give my students permission and encouragement to tell me what they did not like, or what might have made it easier to learn the material. I told them that criticism was not a bad thing, particularly if it was concrete. While “this course sucked” would be hurtful, and not helpful, a comment like, “The professor jumped too quickly into the new material. I need a quick reminder of where we were last time and where we are going,” can be instructive. When I received this comment early on, I took it to heart and surveyed my students about my approach. I hate to waste a minute of class time, so I did tend to jump right into the topic of the day. There was a general consensus that a few minutes spent orienting the class would be well worth the time, so I agreed to experiment with it. For 4 weeks, I alternated my strategy—either spending time reviewing/looking ahead or not (1 week on/1 week off), and I collected feedback from the students. I learned two important things from this project. First, students benefit from my using a few minutes at the beginning and end of class to tie the current topic to the overall course content. Second, I found that students love to help you improve your teaching. They like to be part of the process and they truly appreciate that you are making
efforts to be better for them. I have become very open with my classes about when I am trying something new, and I encourage feedback at any time. After all, if students wait to complain until the end of the term, any changes I might make will not benefit them.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

The greatest obstacle I have faced as a teacher is working with students who try hard to succeed but still struggle. As with many of us who become professors, school was easy for me. If I went to class and did the assignments, an “A” grade was the outcome. When I started teaching, I literally had no advice for students who cried tears of frustration in my office. I must admit that early on, I was a bit suspicious of these students—assuming that they were not actually putting in the work. As I came to know some of these students better, I realized that they were trying, it just was not working for a variety of reasons (e.g., poor preparation, learning disabilities, test anxiety). I worked with professionals in our Academic Success Center and our Counseling Center to learn what questions to ask students and what resources were available to students depending on the nature of their struggle to learn. Although I think I am better at this now, it is an area where I am still struggling to improve.

There are definite sacrifices that must be made in order to become, and remain, a good teacher. Coming from a research-oriented PhD program, I struggled with the many demands of my students intruding on my ability to do research. Then, I came across this quote by Professor and Assistant Dean, William Graves Perry Jr., “I used to resent the interruptions to my work, until I realized the interruptions were my work” (Memorial, 1999, p.1). This remark struck me as being profoundly insightful. I wanted to be a teacher; this meant I had to be available to my students. In many ways, I think students
learn the most in our unscheduled one-on-one discussions. Gradually, I learned to incorporate students into my research so that my teaching and research could progress together.

**The Examined Life of a Teacher**

Three things lay at the heart of my teaching philosophy. First, I think that learning should be interesting and fun. According to cognitive psychologists, children have a natural, passionate desire to learn. I want learning in my classes to be something that students want to do, which does not mean they will not have to work hard, but I want the work to be engaging. Second, students should be able to apply what they learn. Memorizing facts will not serve anyone well beyond a game of *Trivial Pursuit*. It is not enough to know things; you must be able to use them. Finally, I believe that the most valuable thing I can teach my students is to think critically. All of my courses, not just those on research design, focus on how data are obtained and how it can be evaluated. Critical evaluation, while important in all fields, is especially relevant in psychology, which is so often misrepresented in the popular press.

Over the years, my teaching has changed in many ways. I have become better at communicating my expectations to my students. I have learned to tell the students that while my classes may be fun, my exams will be challenging. I have also developed better examples and learned that instead of trying to touch on every important concept in a course, I need to encourage (force) my students to read about the easier concepts on their own so that I can focus my class time on a more in-depth explanation of the harder concepts.
For me, teaching is an amazingly rewarding career. I love to see a spark of excitement ignite in students’ eyes when they get intrigued by an idea. Sometimes you can almost feel a shift from, “Will this be on the test?” to “We WANT to know this!” I also find it extremely rewarding when students let me know that they have been able to use what they learned in my classes in their jobs, when taking professional exams, in other classes, or in their personal lives. I teach a course called Child Abuse and Neglect, and when former students tell me, “Because of your class I knew how to help a child who was being maltreated,” I feel like I have made a real difference. Likewise, when students let me know that they feel they were better prepared for graduate school than students from other programs, I cannot help but feel proud of the work my colleagues and I do.

On the other hand, being a professor comes with its fair share of frustrations from too many demands on your time, endless meetings, and budgetary restraints. However, my biggest frustration has always been students who are academically dishonest and/or lazy. I try to use my training in psychology to understand what might cause these sorts of behaviors, but I find working with such students unpleasant. I have to fight the urge to tell them that they should leave the college (The retention committee would likely not appreciate this approach!). I have not yet overcome this problem, but I have developed some plans for dealing with issues like it. First, I lay out (in every class), my expectations and a clear description of what constitutes academic dishonesty, especially plagiarism. I tell my students that ignorance will not work as an excuse. Then, I force myself to check all papers for plagiarism and confront any students who submit work that is not their own. This task is not pleasant, but I feel it is necessary. Letting students get away with academic dishonesty hurts them in the long run and is not fair to those students who did
the work. For the students who are not academically dishonest, but who seem unwilling to work hard enough to succeed, I start with an individual meeting. I make my expectations crystal clear and tell them that I will not accept unreasonable excuses. Having the flu (and a doctor’s note) is an acceptable excuse; oversleeping is not. Then, I ask them to show me evidence of their work. If they say they study 30 hours for my exams and still fail, I ask them how they study. For students who say they outline the chapters, I ask them to bring the outline of the next chapter we are covering so we can go over it together (only about 1 in 20 ever do so). Sometimes I ask students to keep a strict log of their study time. They are instructed to record when they begin to study and when they stop; noting any breaks or interruptions. Many students are shocked to learn that 3 hours they spent “studying” included a 30-minute phone call, 15 minutes of texting, a 15-minute bathroom break, 30 minutes for a snack, and 20 minutes of talking to their roommate. I have to accept that I cannot force unmotivated students to work, but I can make them confront the fact that they are not actually doing what they need to be doing in order to succeed.

My development as a teacher is an ongoing process. As I mentioned earlier, I take the comments on my students’ evaluations seriously. However, because I recognize the limitations of student evaluations, I also solicit feedback from my peers and from my supervisors. My classroom is open to anyone who wants to come and observe at any time. I have even had fellow faculty members take my classes, so they were able to provide feedback about the entire course. One of the biggest hurdles I faced was getting people to believe that I wanted to know what could be improved—everyone tended to want to be nice. Finally, I made up a short evaluation form that included the questions
designed to solicit critical comments: (a) What could have been done to make this lecture better? (b) How could the professor have made better use of the class time? and (c) Of the material presented, what was the most difficult to comprehend?

In addition, I continue to seek out information about being a strong teacher. I read about teaching techniques and philosophies in publications like this e-book and about research on teaching in journals such as *The Teaching of Psychology*. My general goal is to read at least two articles about teaching each month. I continue to stalk great teachers. I ask to observe them, and I talk to them about what works and what doesn’t.

**Advice for New Teachers**

I have had the pleasure of mentoring several new professors in my department and throughout the college. The energy and passion they bring to their new position is contagious. I advise them not to be afraid of trying new techniques or of being evaluated. You will not know if a teaching technique works for you unless you try it, so give it a shot. Let your students know you are trying something new. If it works, that is wonderful. If it bombs, you have learned something, and you and your class may have had a good laugh about it. Invite others to watch you teach. I know observation makes some people nervous, but it gets easier with practice. Also, your short term discomfort will likely be outweighed by what you can gain from the feedback you get. Realize that your department chair, your colleagues, and your dean are rooting for you. The department would not have hired you if it did not want you to succeed! We all share the goal of providing our students with the best education we can.
Final Thoughts

I can not imagine any greater privilege than to work with young people as they develop their life goals. Although I did not know early on that I wanted to be a professor, I cannot imagine having any other life.
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Chapter 9
Learning from the Sushi Masters

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Learning from the Sushi Masters

Marianne Miserandino, Ph.D. Professor of Psychology, Arcadia University, received her BA in psychology from the University of Rochester and a PhD in social-personality psychology from Cornell University. Dr. Miserandino came to Arcadia University after a post-doctoral fellowship in human motivation at the University of Rochester. Her commitment to teaching is evidenced by her work as reviewer and frequent contributor to the APA journal *Teaching of Psychology*. She has won awards for her teaching, mentoring, and scholarship on the teaching of psychology including the American Psychological Association Society for the Teaching of Psychology William S. Daniel Teaching Excellence Award (2010); the Carnegie Foundation Arcadia University Professor of the Year Award (2009); and the Lindback Foundation Award for Distinguished Teaching (2000). Her research interests include the impact of perceived competence and autonomy on the motivation of elementary school children and their teachers. She currently maintains the Personality Pedagogy wiki website for teachers of personality psychology (see http://personalitypedagogy.arcadia.edu) which was sponsored by a grant from the Association for Psychological Science (APS) Fund for Teaching and Public Understanding of Psychological Science and an Arcadia University Faculty Development Grant. She is the author of the research-based undergraduate personality textbook *Personality Psychology: Foundations and Findings*, Pearson Education, 2012.

In Japan, when one wishes to learn how to make sushi, he first finds a sushi master who is willing to teach him. Then, he closely watches every move the sushi master makes for a period of years without ever touching a knife. Finally, when the master decides the
apprentice is ready, the chef leaves the restaurant and goes out on his own to ply his
trade. This is how I learned to teach.

I come from long line of storytellers and teachers. In my family, we are adept at
holding and shining in the spotlight. As much as I was determined not to be a teacher like
my grandfather, two uncles, and all four siblings and three siblings-in-law, I found that I
had a natural talent for it. From a young age, I had a real stage presence and was able to
tell a good story, hold an audience in rapt attention, and deliver a punch line – all skills
that I have regularly put to use in my teaching career.

My Early Development as a Teacher

When I was in graduate school, teaching was practically a dirty word in the R1
institution I attended. A graduate seminar on teaching was offered in another department
for the first time ever during my second or third year, but alas, I did not have the chance
to take the class. Despite the overt emphasis in the program on research — and not on
teaching — I managed to be a teaching assistant (TA) for some excellent lecturers and
learned from them how to make a good lecture, build and grade exams, and manage large
classes. I also learned how to tutor and conduct small group reviews, as the
undergraduates of the day were often too intimidated to directly ask the professors
questions and sought out TAs instead. My dissertation committee and I soon noticed that
I was spending more time in office hours with students than I was in the lab doing
research. This observation, combined with a broad interest in a variety of interesting
questions made me realize that my heart was really in teaching at a small liberal arts
college.
In fact, the lack of emphasis on teaching was so extreme that I was actually afraid to
tell anyone that I had landed a job at a local community college when I was ABD. I was
well into a semester of teaching introductory psychology before my advisor even knew
what I was up to. I imagine that faculty in the department were puzzling over a series of
curious events: videos, brain specimens, personality tests, optical illusions, and the like
were mysteriously disappearing from their labs and reappearing a week later. Finally, my
advisor confronted me in a gruff manner, “You’re teaching intro somewhere, aren’t
you?” Given that I managed to balance all of my other research and departmental
responsibilities without anyone finding out, he had to admit that I was obviously doing
quite well. With a knowing smile, he reluctantly agreed to let me continue. He also made
me promise not to tell the other faculty what I was up to, much like Yentl’s father when
Yentl was secretly learning to read Hebrew: “Because I trust God will understand. I’m not
so sure about the neighbors” (DeWaay, Lemorande, & Streisand, 1983).

In 1992, I finally landed in a psychology department that emphasized teaching in
Beaver College (now Arcadia University). Not only was teaching valued, but my
colleagues were masters of their craft, enthusiastic supporters of their students and each
other, and loved talking about pedagogy. Barbara Nodine was chair of the department
and Sam Cameron was still running his NSF summer workshops to train high school
teachers to teach AP Psychology at the time. Often, people would share their successes,
relay interesting anecdotes from class, and even brainstorm about how to handle problem
students to improve their teaching. Numerous times Barbara would say “What can we do
to make this a learning experience?” when a student had gotten into trouble. Eventually, I
came to realize she may have meant that I was the one who needed to learn something
about teaching and not that the students who needed to learn something about my classroom policies. And yes, we even had a legendary debate in the hallway — in front of students who were astounded that their faculty could care so much — about what nuances of APA format to require of our students.

Even though I did not have formal training in teaching or a teaching mentor while in graduate school, I taught myself. Like a sushi chef, I learned by observing the masters around me. I learned by example, and I was lucky enough to have lots of good examples to learn from: high school math and English teachers, undergraduate professors, graduate school professors, and colleagues at Arcadia, both in and outside of the psychology department. I also learned by reading books on teaching (e.g., Wilbert J. McKeachie’s *Teaching Tips*; John Darley et al.’s *The Compleat Academic*; the APA’s *Teaching Activities* series), instructor’s manuals (e.g., Martin Bolt’s manual for Myers’s *Social Psychology* is legendary), articles in the journal *Teaching of Psychology*, and by attending professional workshops and teaching conferences.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

I do not recall facing any particular obstacles in my teaching. I do continually struggle with how much to challenge a class while helping them achieve mastery over the material. I remember a course evaluation from my first class at Arcadia University “What does she think she is, still at Cornell?” Some days I see that as very high praise and other days I feel very sorry and somewhat abashed for that first class of mine.

I also continually struggle with what to do in the classroom. Should I just repeat what the textbook says? Go further? Unpack? I do not think that students should be able to merely read the book and pass a class. Class ought to make the material come alive for
students and provide value added beyond the textbook. Ultimately, I combine these strategies depending on the difficulty of the material and my own interest in the topic.

When I was a first-year undergraduate student I thought it was great that I could cut class and nobody would call my mom to find out why I was not in school that day, like they did at my high school. It took a wizened senior to sit me down with my calculator to figure out exactly how much that extra hour of sleep was wasting my hard-earned tuition, room, and board money. I never cut a class after that!

One could make the same argument as a faculty member. Have I truly provided students with their money’s worth in a given class period? Was it better than that extra hour of sleep? I try to provide students with a valuable experience that makes them want to come to class.

When I was a new faculty member, I did have trouble balancing teaching and research and saw that the time I spent on one took me away from the other. However, now I see that my teaching, research, university service, and even personal hobbies have all fed off and enhanced each other.

For example, I find that I often get my best research ideas after presenting old material to new students. Though I may have taught the Milgram obedience-to-authority studies or cognitive dissonance theory a million times, when I present these to a new class I try to see the material through fresh eyes. Students come to the material without the preconceived notions that I have as an experienced scholar, which is refreshing and inspiring.
The Examined Life of a Teacher

When it comes to my teaching philosophy, I see myself as a bridge between where learners are and where they wish to be. Whether it is a high school student, a community college student, a psychology major, a graduate counseling student, or a colleague in another discipline, I first try to figure out where the person is. Then I try to communicate with that person in a way that engages him or her and helps further his or her own goals, develop a skill, or obtain knowledge, and eventually become an independent learner. I believe that knowledge is power and that intelligence is a skill that can be developed and fostered by a teacher who is challenging, knowledgeable, creative, supportive, and enthusiastic. I try to be that teacher.

Since my primary area of research is the self-determination theory of Rich Ryan and Edward Deci, I try to structure my courses and create a classroom environment to foster students’ intrinsic motivation by helping them meet the three psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Basically, I want students to develop competence with the material, their autonomy as critical thinkers, project managers, and independent learners, and to feel valued and supported by me and by their peers. The last thing I want is for students to do something or to believe something “because I said so.”

Against this backdrop, I teach both social and personality psychology by focusing on theory and research. Because both of the classes are laboratory classes, I try to teach students to think like good scientists. I foster critical thinking in my students by presenting contradictory theories, helping students to derive predictions from theories, encouraging students to think about real-world applications of a theory, and walking them through the theoretical implications of experimental results.
My classes are a combination of lecture and discussion and there are plenty of topics and ideas for students to discuss in social and personality psychology. I do not shy away from controversial topics, popular press articles, news items, or just-published research, using these to spark students’ interest even as they critically apply what they have learned. I am open to students’ own interests in the material and I especially enjoy fostering their curiosity by taking the occasional detour from my planned material. Some of my best classes were inspired by students’ own questions on topics such as sexual orientation, torture, love and relationships, terrorism and gender differences in personality.

In addition I do a lot of active learning exercises lasting anywhere from a minute or two to a whole class period. I find that students learn the material better once they have experienced it for themselves and have the opportunity to process it through discussions and writing assignments.

Over the course of my career, I have definitely made the shift from “sage on the stage” to “guide on the side.” I am more willing to depart from my planned lecture and detailed lecture notes to explore side questions that interest my students.

The most rewarding part of teaching is still the same for me after all these years: seeing the light bulb go off over students’ heads when they finally understand a concept. The most frustrating is when I see a bright student not apply him- or herself or one who must spend more time earning money to go to college than taking advantage of that college education.

When it comes to course improvement, I mostly rely on students’ reaction in class, what students say to each other and to the other faculty in the department, and my own
gut feelings when something seems amiss. I also talk directly to a class if I feel there is a question about an assignment or confusion over a difficult concept. For example, I might say something like “Wow, everybody just got quiet” or “I see a lot of blank stares, out there. What’s going on?”

How do I keep the material and myself fresh after many years of teaching the same classes? Every semester I make a conscious effort to revamp the weakest lectures from the last time I taught the class. In the course of many years of teaching, all of my lectures have been updated and reworked at some time.

**Advice for New Teachers**

First, I would say, never stop learning. I regularly take ballet, dance, and art classes which constantly make me aware of how scary it is to try something new or to demonstrate a new skill in front of others. Being in touch with and overcoming my own trepidation has helped me to be more sympathetic to the plight of my students as they struggle to learn new concepts. It has also helped me to be creative and try more than one way to reach my students.

A friend of mine who was studying to be a gym teacher told me that part of her training involved teaching herself how to play tennis and golf with her left hand. This made her more aware of how she moved so that she could identify and articulate the individual steps and then teach the process to her students. For me, taking new classes is the equivalent of learning a new sport with your non-dominant hand; it has made me a more sensitive and patient teacher.

Second, network with others who are interested in teaching, whether it be in your department, school, the Internet, or conferences. There is no need to work in isolation
when the APA, APS and the Society for the Teaching of Psychology have made it very easy for teachers to share their work and support each other. There are some very interesting and caring people out there!

Finally, be efficient and combine your research interests, teaching, and committee work wherever possible. For example, you might have students conduct pilot studies in your classes, you might serve on a committee to explore campus issues that involve evaluating data (e.g., the impact of fraternities and sororities on campus, assessment of learning), present in faculty development programs on pedagogy at your school, or even serve on your school’s Institutional Review Board for research with human participants.

**Final Thoughts**

In closing, I would advise a person who wants to be a great teacher to be bold. One of the findings from social psychology suggests that we regret things we have not done more than the things we have done. Step out of the role of teacher every once in a while to participate in campus activities. Be willing to experiment with new topics, techniques, and technology in the classroom. Students appreciate the honest effort at trying something new, they come to see their professor as human, and they see what it means to be an educated, thoughtful, and engaged life-long learner in the world.
References

Chapter 10
How Things Have Changed
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How Things Have Changed

I am currently an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Georgia Southern University, and I am truly honored to have received the Jane S. Halonen Award for Excellence in Teaching. As an undergraduate, I never imagined saying those words. Nearly ten years ago, my pervasive fear of public speaking dampened my desire to become a teacher, and I felt that having a successful career in education was highly unlikely. Instead, I entered the Experimental Psychology PhD program at the University of Arkansas with an alternative goal in mind: to work in the private sector to design and evaluate protocols that would enhance the quality of life for others.

Although my early graduate activities involved research and teaching, I pursued additional activities to strengthen my marketability in jobs more consistent with my (then) career goals. I completed coursework that emphasized analytical work and sought out experiences that reinforced health-related applications of psychological theory. However, when I obtained my PhD in 2007, I had changed. I had transitioned from fearing teaching to loving it. In fact, I declined an opportunity to work in the private sector, my once dream job, in favor of my new dream, to teach psychology at the college level.

I cannot pinpoint the single event that ignited my passion for teaching. Instead, my teaching style has resulted from a happenstance mixture of several events—events that occurred as a result of pursuing a goal other than teaching. In this chapter, I describe my transformation into the role of teacher, and I discuss how my initial fears and alternative goals shaped me into the teacher that I am today.

My Early Development as a Teacher

Some of my first encounters with teaching actually occurred outside of the classroom setting. During my first semester of graduate school, I was privileged to work as a research and
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statistical consultant for a large, local hospital. In this position, I evaluated the effectiveness of hospital protocols and reported the findings to administrators, physicians, and other staff. My reports took the form of the written word or small group interaction, allowing me to avoid the adversity of public speaking. However, I faced another challenge: my audience varied drastically in their research and statistical expertise. I could not simply say, “The mixed-model ANOVA revealed a significant interaction” and expect my colleagues to understand. Instead, I had to learn how to translate research verbiage into meaningful information for all audiences. I felt tremendous pride when my work influenced important developments for the hospital, many of which improved the lives of others.

That non-academic position gave me the first taste of the rewards of teaching. As both a research consultant and teacher, I endeavor to communicate scientific information in an understandable manner. Also in both roles, I aim for the audience to make meaningful use of my communication. In short, this consulting position opened my eyes to the possibilities of teaching, and it expanded how I defined what teaching really was. Teaching is about sharing knowledge with others.

My academic work also expanded my definition of teaching. In my first semester of graduate school, my dissertation mentor, Denise Beike, taught a one-hour course concerning professional development. Though the course covered many topics, the lectures pertaining to effective teaching were the ones I found most interesting. One such lecture pertained to the ethics of teaching. She posed a question for the class, “What should you do if a student finds an assignment objectionable?” My initial reaction, “It’s college, get over it,” was superficial. Instead, seemingly harmless assignments may pose undue ethical conflict. For example, I remember discussing if an instructor could require students to go to Alcoholics Anonymous as
part of a Substance Abuse class. At first, the class endorsed the assignment, provided that an alternative was offered, because the activity was clearly linked to course content. However, Denise pointed out how the ethical dilemma extended beyond student discomfort. That is, the patrons of the meetings may find the non-members’ presence offensive, perhaps hindering the progression of the meeting. Likewise, a student may actually be a member of Alcoholics Anonymous and thus lose privacy when classmates attend.

During my time in graduate school, Denise and I continued to discuss a variety of teaching approaches and conundrums. Through informal office chats, we discussed the importance of upholding ethical teaching principles, remaining current in the content area being taught, and maintaining student-teacher rapport. The topics varied, but her main points tended to parallel the Golden Rule: Do not ask of students what you will not do yourself. In short, Denise imparted me with an understanding that teaching is an ethical process, an expansion upon scientific inquiry, and fostered through positive connections with students.

During my third year of graduate school, I had the chance teach my first course. My omnipresent fear of public speaking juxtaposed my excitement to practice all that I had learned from Denise. My worries were assuaged when our teaching seminar, led by Dave Schroeder, met about a month prior to the first day of class. In this seminar, Dave offered advice on syllabus construction, classroom management, and practical teaching tips. I will never forget one of his most useful tips: practice writing on the board before the first day of class. This piece of sage advice is something that I had never thought about, and I am so glad that I followed—writing legibly on a large grease board was much harder than I had imagined.

Dave’s teaching seminar was informal after that initial meeting. Rather than having scheduled meeting times, Dave encouraged us to stop by his office with questions. I took
advantage of Dave’s always-open-door policy, and we often discussed the administrative aspects of classroom management. Like Denise’s messages, Dave’s words of wisdom varied in content. Some of his words focused on the technical aspects of teaching effectively (e.g., use Powerpoint sparingly). Other lessons related to generating course content (e.g., It takes practices to generate that perfect example). Essentially, Dave conveyed to me that teaching encompassed many things, not just lecturing.

Prior to graduate school, I had seen the act of teaching simply as “public speaking.” These misinformed perceptions fed into my avoidance of adopting teaching as a goal. Yet, my work experiences and mentors helped me clarify this distorted definition of teaching. I learned that teaching involved far more than public speaking. Instead, teaching is a rewarding synthesis of communicating, role modeling, creating, inspiring, and fairness.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

As I transitioned into the role of teacher, I had to overcome the fear of public speaking. The fear was not just of me merely standing up and speaking in front of others, but it was also that of being evaluated. I panicked at the thought of reading student evaluations that said I was ineffective. I also feared that any display of nervousness, including a slight waver in my voice, would cue students into my lack of confidence, and I would ultimately lose their respect.

This fear did not cripple my teaching abilities. Much to my surprise, it fueled my motivation to teach well. As I had learned from my mentors, the best way to seem prepared was to be prepared. So, I overzealously prepped every lecture, memorizing sources and references, anticipating questions, generating possible answers, and pre-testing all in-class activities for effectiveness. Much to my roommate’s dismay, I even practiced delivering lectures aloud, ensuring that the organization and transitions were clear. My goal was to have the perfectly
organized lecture with the perfectly on-key delivery and the perfectly salient activity. In my mind, that would lead to perfect evaluations.

My efforts did not result in perfect lectures or evaluations, but they did help me cope with the distress of public speaking. When over-prepared, I could enter that classroom with a wide smile rather than anxiety-frozen muscles. I could also allow my enthusiasm for teaching to overpower my nervous, quivering voice. My students noticed my enthusiasm (and preparedness) on their evaluation forms, often leaving me far more praises regarding my passion than condemnations of my angst. Their praises were highly rewarding, reinforcing my prepping habits.

Yet my solution for one problem led to another problem, being flexible. For instance, during my very first class, a student asked me, “How do the structuralist and functionalist perspectives relate to the changing cultural worldviews resulting from the Industrial Revolution?” The neophyte teacher in me panicked, and a gush self-doubting questions streamed through my mind: Was I supposed to have planned for this? Would the class think that I was insensitive or dumb for not understanding this question? How should I respond? I remember feeling my anxiety augment for two reasons: 1) I did not know the answer and, 2) I had not planned on not knowing the answer. In this particular circumstance, my preparation for the “perfect” lecture seemed to undermine any flexibility for unexpected incidents. As a result, my poor students experienced a deafening prolonged silence as I thought about what to do next.

That incident taught me that effective teachers need to be amenable to change. Indeed, since that incident, I have encountered numerous unexpected events that impede the flow of class. Technology malfunctions, in-class activities backfire, or natural disasters interrupt class. Although these deviations from “the master plan” flustered me at first, they also tweaked my
problem-solving skills. Essentially, I have learned that imperfections do not wreck a class, provided that the instructor is prepared to correct the mishap. Practice has helped me handle such events the most. However, I still encounter that seemingly unsolvable problem, for which I seek the input from colleagues.

My prep time, too, has ebbed with repetitive practice, resulting in more time to create content-appropriate activities or grade assignments. In other words, I still devote time to teaching activities. Prior to transitioning into my role of professor, my mentors forewarned me that such devotion can potentially detract from scholarly, service, and even personal responsibilities. I could definitely understand this advice. When I became a professor, I felt all responsibilities spike. I was hired not just to teach a single a class, but to teach multiple classes well. Additionally, my service and research responsibilities superseded any that I had previously had. I faced the common conundrum of academia: effort in teaching will detract from efforts in other areas.

Indeed, the more classes I teach, the less research and service I can do. A person who spends 10 hours a week in the classroom has physically less time than a person who spends 6 hours in the classroom. But, I typically feel that my teaching activities nourish my research activities rather than hinder them. As I scour the library for articles that will intrigue my students, I often find articles that intrigue me, inspiring new research ideas, methodologies, and projects. Assigned projects, too, often rouse a student’s interest in the topic matter, prompting them to approach me with possible research collaboration. Even grading has enhanced my scholarly activity. My editing, praising, and critiquing student work often encourages me to reevaluate my own writing style.
One semester, I reduced my teaching efforts per the advice of my then supervisor. He, concerned that I may burn out, suggested that I coast on previously prepped lectures and ease up on the amount of writing I require in my courses. My teaching evaluations turned out fine, but I was surprised by how much my scholarship suffered. Upon reflection, I realized I had not encountered that one “unique” article for a class that provoked me to formulate new research questions. I had not had the student who, after completing the required course project, stop by and say, “You know, that project made me think about a possible study…” Essentially, I had lacked the eureka moments that typically invigorate my research pursuits.

I continue to work on balancing my teaching and research. However, when tempted to slack on my teaching in favor of research, I remind myself of the intellectual numbness I once felt. That recollection prompts me to persevere through the reading, prepping, and grading, in order to discover that creative research question.

**The Examined Life of a Teacher**

My initial goals to work within the private sector ironically guided my current teaching style. My “real world” work exposed me to several challenges. First, I sometimes encountered resistance to scientific information, especially when it contradicted salient anecdotal evidence. In other words, the use of “it feels like this would work” sometimes overshadowed “research suggests that this works.”

Second, my private sector work exposed me to the stereotypes of academics. I still feel the sting of my friend’s words: “People view [academics] as bookworms who know nothing about the real world.” Unfortunately, some of my personal experiences confirmed that people view professors as permanent residents of the Ivory Tower, unable to come down to translate scientific “book-learning” into applicable, useful information.
I soon learned that a university setting did not negate these biased thoughts and stereotypes. In fact, much of social and cognitive psychology suggests that all people, including students, may grapple with overcoming such beliefs. So, I established a teaching practice that would attempt to counter these beliefs, perhaps even before they developed. At the heart of my teaching philosophy thus emerged these three goals for students:

1) Understand and appreciate how psychology is a science.

2) Apply scientific findings to their daily lives.

3) Discuss these findings with others.

At first, I focused primarily on only having students follow these goals. Therefore, students understood psychology as a science by creating their own research projects or evaluating scientific literature. Students applied their knowledge by finding their own examples of concepts or engaging in service-learning. Students discussed their applications with other classmates or friends as part of assignments. Students did the work, and I was the proverbial “Guide on the Side” that assisted students whenever I could.

My most drastic change in my approach to teaching resulted from Denise Beike’s primary advice, “Don’t ask of students what you won’t do yourself.” Though I had strenuously prepped for lectures, I have not always incorporated empirically-validated activities into the classroom. Instead, the rookie instructor in me often relied on my own biased intuition to judge if a technique would enhance learning or not. Now, I realize the irony in requesting students to think scientifically and then to not do so myself. I have thus transformed my approach, basing a course’s structure, content, and assignments around scientifically-supported techniques.

In order to achieve this endeavor, I must continue to learn how to teach. This means that I attend both teaching and scholarly conferences frequently (at least twice per year), search for
relevant, peer-reviewed literature, and engage in scholarly activity myself. If I find what seems to be the “perfect” in-class activity, but no scientific theory supports its effectiveness, I now enjoy the challenge of evaluating the effectiveness myself.

I also uphold Denise’s advice by continuing to apply psychological theory. I attempt to improve my teaching through my ongoing work in the private sector, although I minimize my consultation work to just a few hours a year. Instead, I apply my psychological knowledge to a wide array of activities, such as volunteering for diversity or wellness events, assisting business friends with their marketing strategies, or speaking as a guest at community club meetings. Working within these non-academic structures has improved my teaching considerably, perhaps because these experiences preserve my interest in psychology, or perhaps because students can easily connect to these everyday examples.

My student evaluations of instruction did not suddenly increase as a result of my new anti-hypocrisy approach, nor did they decline. Instead, I saw evidence of effectiveness of this approach in another way, students requesting more information about articles, scientists, or volunteer opportunities related to course content—even after the semester’s end.

These communications following a semester’s end are truly the most rewarding aspects of teaching. Just this summer, two former students emailed me. One student told me that my Research Methods and Health Psychology course prompted her to apply to graduate school, and she is now using her knowledge as she works with disadvantaged children. The other student informed me that a course project inspired her to pursue a career in public health. A sheepish sense of joy crept upon me as I read the final lines, as both of them thanked me for inspiring their current career choices. They are going to live out my dream, to improve the quality of lives of others.
Advice to New Teachers

I am a mere four years beyond graduate school, and I consider myself a new teacher as well. Therefore, do not take these words as true words of wisdom, but rather as suggestions based on what has worked for me. First, I pass along the suggestion to prepare the course yourself, rather than relying solely on someone else’s lectures, activities, and notes. Such preparation has helped me in so many ways, such as overcoming public-speaking anxiety, answering students’ questions, and inspiring activities and research ideas. For me personally, it has also bolstered my excitement for teaching.

Second, I pass along the suggestion to seek out applicable experiences outside of the university setting. My experiences in the applied setting have inspired more examples, activities, and ideas than any academic conference or symposia. Anecdotally, my students seem to respond to the applied use of scientific information better than the presentation of such information alone. As a former student once told me, “I finally get why I need to know this stuff.”

Final Thoughts

Change has been an enduring component to my development as a teacher. I have changed my definition of teaching, my confidence, and approach. As I continue to learn how to teach, I am certain that my teaching style will once again change. Despite these changes, I still feel that one constant, the rewarding feeling when a student applies what I taught.
Chapter 11

Worthy Risks: People Matter

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Worthy Risks: People Matter

Tidewater Community College (TCC) enrolls 46,000 students from the cities of Norfolk, Portsmouth, Chesapeake and Virginia Beach. We have a very diverse student population. Some students have just earned their GEDs and others are eligible for America’s finest undergraduate institutions, some have Master’s or professional degrees and others are just beginning their career path, some are wealthy and some sleep in their cars with their children. Every class – every student – is a new challenge; TCC is an exciting place to teach psychology!

I was named 2010 Virginia Professor of the Year by the “U.S. Professors of the Year” Awards Program of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education. You can find more biographical details below and in Marquis’ *Who’s Who in America* (2011).

My Early Development as a Teacher

I was 12 when I got my first paid teaching job. I was helping my mother teach Red Cross swimming lessons when she was approached by parents who requested private lessons for their 9-year-old son. Their child suffered from a severe spinal deformity and they worried that group lessons would bring him unwanted attention or even ridicule from his peers. Mom thought I would be perfect for the job.

He quickly achieved putting his face in the water and holding his breath, but his upper body distorted his buoyancy for most strokes. How could he move through deep water? Most importantly, if he was in trouble, how could he survive in the water for a long period of time until help came?

Together, we set out to discover what would work for him. He mastered the side stroke for mobility, and he could calmly bob up and down for hours, if he had to, in order to survive.
You can imagine the impression this brave little boy made on me! I saw fear, embarrassment, and inadequacy replaced with competence and confidence. It was exhilarating!

From this experience, I learned three things that make teaching so rewarding. First, teaching is personal; individualize the learning process as much possible. Second, collaborate with your students; become each other’s resource in learning. Third, a fundamentally human characteristic is sharing one’s expertise; don’t take your knowledge and skills for granted, someone needs what you know.

I make the last point because when we are young we doubt we have much to contribute. Viet Nam changed that for me. I was just a cadet trainer in ROTC assisting Army personnel; they made it clear that I was part of a team preparing people for combat and I had work to do. Ever since, I have approached all of my classes with a sense of urgency. I get a brief period out of someone’s life to prepare them for whatever lies ahead … I’d better not screw it up!

Years later, I would see these two occasions as pivotal; life-saving became teaching, and teaching became life-saving.

If you are like me and start with no formal classes in teaching, you can make so many mistakes that teaching becomes just another professional chore ... unless, of course, you have good mentors or at least good examples of teaching. I was lucky. My parents, Polly and Bob, were my earliest and most important models. I knew as a child they were amazing, but you never fully appreciate your parents until you have raised children of your own.

For the five of us kids, life centered on family, church, and school. Like my parents, adult volunteers in sports, the 4-H, and the Red Cross modeled selfless leadership and valued our development and the vitality of our community. The daily examples of nuns, priests and ordinary folks reminded us that we were a part of something more important than ourselves. I was struck
by how these busy, accomplished adults treated me, as if I was worth their time, energy, effort, and affection. Now, I try to be that inspirational source for my students.

As a scientist, I was fortunate to begin my observations, inquiries, stewardship, and love of Nature in tangibly personal relationships. I learned about people from our newspaper customers, swimming students, and co-workers. Lessons, often as metaphors for life in general, sprung from the strawberry fields and the patches of wild blackberry bushes; from corn harvests and raising livestock, from preserving poultry and fish for the winter; and from the streams and woods near our home. By the time I graduated from high school, without realizing it, I was uniquely prepared to become a scientist – a student of Nature – and a research psychologist, in particular.

Upon entering the University of Richmond (UR), I was an average undergraduate looking for a career. Campus life was formative; more mature and wiser Phi Delta Theta brothers shepherded me, and student government and ROTC taught me much about working with colleagues for shared goals. Later, I would find the same kinds of opportunities for accomplishment, mutual growth, and fellowship in several professional organizations. I owe much to my colleagues in the Virginia Academy of Science, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society, the Virginia Community College System and the Virginia Psychological Association.

As a pre-dental chemistry major, I took Austin Grigg’s PSYCH 201-202 as electives in my junior year. Like other UR faculty he was a person of stature in his discipline who had dedicated his life to the formation of his students. Dr. Grigg gave us a guided tour of the discipline and its applications accompanied by videos of research studies, examples from his research and practice, and punctuated with a wry, subtle humor. Details were important and
standards were high. He expected us to speak up, as if our thoughts and actions mattered. I was intrigued. I changed my major to psychology and managed to cram in enough coursework in summer school and senior year to graduate with my class.

Still, I was not committed to a life of research and teaching in psychology, and my interests in public service took me to law school. I studied law for a year, but I felt something was missing. So I finished that summer with a graduate psychology course. The old feelings returned: of wanting more, the passion to study and learn, the thrill of discovering something important and useful, and a sense of potential competence. In September 1967, I needed two improbable events to happen immediately: an extension of my active-duty deferment and an acceptance into a graduate program in psychology.

My Commandant at UR was infantry veteran Col. William Cox. He pointed out the obvious, deferments could not be amended; but he had faith in my plan for a career as an Army psychologist. He would convince the “civilians at the Pentagon” to extend the remaining two years of my deferment for graduate work in psychology.

People like Col. Cox influence the course of our lives in unexpected ways; they exert themselves on our behalf, simply because it is in their character to do so. I think of Solomon Asch recalling his childhood in Poland: “I was brought up at a time of great anxieties, big fears, great dangers.” … “In that setting man is very important, not just to himself, he's important in the scheme of things…” (Ceraso, Gruber & Rock, 1990, p. 3). People matter, and I want to be that person who is important in the lives of my students.

Another critical person was Charlie Thomas, department chair at Richmond Professional Institute, now Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). Dr. Thomas was accustomed to taking charge and summed things up matter-of-factly: “We don’t have your transcripts or test
scores and it’s the last day of registration. So, we’ll admit you to graduate studies on probation.
You’re only allowed to take 9 credits but we’ll let you take 12 which is almost a full load.”

Interesting, isn’t it? We make our plans, set a course, and launch ourselves. Yet, often our lives are shaped by people and forces we never anticipate.

After completing 15 graduate credits, I had two or three VCU teaching assistantships each semester. My very first class was the proverbial baptism by fire. I was responsible for all aspects of a course in the Evening School except for two lectures by the professor! I prepared notes for the first class and bookmarked important pages in a dozen or so books so I could refer to them over the 3-hour period. Sixty students greeted me; they were businessmen, juniors and seniors taking an elective for their major, and a nun recertifying for teaching. When I finished my material, I was shocked to find I had used only 25 minutes of class time! ... We took a break! Now what?!

I needed to do something that would help me make everything I was supposed to know come to mind and make psychology relevant to these students. I had to find out about them. In the next two hours, we talked about what was important to them such as their jobs and businesses, their majors, and their children. They cued my memory, and we discussed the principles we would explore in the course to make them better teachers, managers, parents, nurses, and students. That first course clarified my obligations to my students, and I found I could collaborate with them in our mutual growth.

Dr. Robert Gibby, Jr., my VCU thesis chair, encouraged me to pursue a doctorate in Human-Experimental-Applied Psychology at Catholic University of America (CUA). It fit all of my interests at the time; I wanted to study human behavior with empirical precision and put new knowledge to use in solving problems. The acceptance letter was a little strange. After noting an
assistantship that would pay tuition and a small stipend, the letter stated that they had changed the program’s name to Human Factors (HF) Psychology.

I needed to know more about HF. In the halls of VCU I saw a flyer “University of Michigan Human Factors Engineering Summer Conferences;” but I didn’t have the $1700 tuition. I wrote to program head Dick Pew and asked if I could come and run their slide projectors, run errands, or get coffee in lieu of tuition. Dr. Pew would allow me to enroll as a regular student if I sent them $50. I wrote the check, caught a plane to Detroit, and stayed in my fraternity house in Ann Arbor where I lived on cereal and popcorn.

It was an awesome two weeks! The students were from NASA, Lockheed, Boeing, IBM, military labs, Chrysler and GM. I loved the variety of problems these HF professionals were solving and I heard about the work of leaders in the field. It was July 1969, we watched Neil Armstrong step on the moon to the cheers of the NASA students and everyone else. Before I left Richmond for CUA, Dr. Pew sent me a letter with a check for $50. He considered my attendance at the Michigan conferences “a professional courtesy” I was hooked!

CUA’s program was led by John Townsend, a consummate experimentalist, and I was a teaching assistant in Dick Wunderlich’s experimental courses. Each week, our team designed a new experiment, graded the previous week’s reports, and I tried to teach like Austin Grigg. CUA had great professors including the Piagetian Hans Furth, developmentalists Dick and Jim Youniss, and Gibsonian Horace Reynolds. I have one piece of advice for graduate students: take good notes and keep them. These notes will serve as rich sources for your teaching.

Dr. Townsend got me a research assistantship at Cybernetics Research Institute; it had been established by Haig Kafafian and other retired scientists to apply their electronics experience in military systems to communication systems for the handicapped. I supported Dr.
Reynold’s work on telecommunications for the deaf and Dr. Townsend’s work on prostheses and spent much of my time in the shop of Julian Bigelow, formerly John von Neumann’s chief engineer; it was heady experience for a novice.

Washington DC is a great place to do graduate work; great libraries, research facilities, university consortium, museums, media, and all your friends are working in labs, agencies, or on “The Hill.” It’s easy to feel connected to the issues and movements of America and the world. I was elected president of the Graduate Student Association. The position came with a scholarship and an office, where, for some time, I slept on the carpet, cooked the canned stew my mother sent me in a popcorn popper, and tried to do my small part in the national nightmares of war, racism, poverty, and sexism that centered on DC in the early 1970s.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

When I came to TCC in 1972, I was just “passing through” on my way to a university position, an HF lab in the military or the aerospace industry. I wanted to finish the dissertation research and start living my life in HF, but I fell in love with teaching. Students at TCC are decent, hard-working people pursuing the American Dream and finding their meaning in life. Classes seldom exceed 35 students, much like the wonderful undergraduate experience I had enjoyed at UR. The diversity of our students is a challenge, but it’s also an opportunity and an adventure as you try to make your discipline meaningful to each student’s life in the midst of all that variety. You are forced to be unconventional, test ideas for sharing what you know, and never give up on your students.

I intersperse lectures and Socratic discussions with video clips and examples. Because our students are commuters, I use small group topical tasks to build a sense of shared scholarly purpose and community. We have built rodent mazes and models of the Ames Room to see if we
could make a ball roll “uphill” or demonstrated conservation tasks with our children. We do “Scavenger Hunts” to find the errors in texts and on-line supplements; close study is required to locate and correct them. Because of my background in HF military and civilian applications, I have found simulations particularly useful and often necessary. For example, most students cannot believe that textbook descriptions or even videos of Milgram’s (1974) work say anything about them. A mild simulation (e.g., O’Brien, 2001) raises the question in their minds that psychology may give insight to their own mental and behavioral processes.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

Anyone who earns a doctorate has an urge to apply their skills and contribute something substantive to their discipline. A teaching load of 15-18 credits imposes obvious constraints. Since professional and civic service are expected of TCC faculty, much of my early career involved pro bono personnel selection and the development of training programs for the college, professional societies, churches, and civic organizations. I was also able to test some of my ideas about pedagogy and student research.

I missed HF research though. So, in the early 1980s, I took a part-time job with A.E. McMichael and Associates. Mac had been a frogman in World War II, clearing beaches with underwater demolitions before troops landed and would later direct government and corporate HF labs. We won a DoD contract; the Army wanted us to determine all of the chemical, physical, biological, psychological, and social factors that could impact the effectiveness of individual soldiers and soldier units in combat. Their scenario for World War III was a massive Soviet Pact tank invasion through Central Europe’s Fulda Gap with theater nuclear weapons; whoever was left after two weeks would be the victor. Three years and five volumes later, we finished a
comprehensive review of the research and military literature to help guide Army R&D projects, and I had hundreds of examples to bring to my TCC students.

In the late 1980s, several students expressed their enthusiasm for “more psychology!” They didn’t just want courses, they wanted to “do” psychology as a science. Support for undergraduate research was gaining momentum nationally and, coincidentally, TCC initiated its Honors Program. I would teach a two-semester course, “Research Methods in the Behavioral Sciences” for the next 16 years.

The objective of this research methods course was to complete every phase of the research process from problem definition to formal presentation of results to a professional society. To sustain students through the rigors of any research project, they chose their team’s project and, therefore, we wound up studying some topics no one else had yet addressed! In 1998, in spite of my warnings, my students committed themselves to a replication of the Asch (1951, 1952a, 1952b, 1955, 1956) paradigm. We obtained results contradictory to a vast empirical literature and I have been studying Asch ever since. TCC and the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) have supported my oral history projects and archival research. Results of our empirical tests, with close to 1,000 participants so far, challenge the assumption of universal stimulus clarity and current explanations of the sex difference in conformity. Now, I have to find time to publish in the standard literature! You never know where your students will take you.

**Advice for New Teachers**

It would be redundant to be particular at this point, so I will briefly summarize. I think anyone who wants to be a successful teacher should be motivated by the ideal of servant leadership. It would be a hollow thing to get to the end of your life and realize you benefitted
only yourself. Humanity demands more of us; so does personal satisfaction. The people touched by your life matter and what you do matters to them. Invest in your gifts, know your discipline, teach with integrity, embrace life’s challenges and blessings, and take risks worthy of you.

**Final Thoughts**

You and I know scores of remarkable educators who have graciously and enduringly exceeded our accomplishments. To all those who thought I was worth their time, effort, expertise, and love; my sincere appreciation, especially Mary Louise, Chris, Andrew, Marquis, Mom and Dad.
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Chapter 12
Relax, Let Go, and Roll
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Relax, Let Go, and Roll

Now in my twentieth year of teaching psychology at Dalton State College, I have traveled quite a bit presenting conference keynotes and faculty development workshops at institutions across the United States and Canada. These presentations have allowed me to share my research on engaging Millennial learners. What has surprised me most is how faculty resist change. On one occasion I heard a man tell a story of how he was peacefully riding along on his motorcycle when suddenly collision was imminent! In a split second he fought against his instincts to hang on and ride things out. Instead, he decided to relax, let go, and roll. He was separated from his ride at 40 miles per hour, but his motorcycle was crushed such that he would have died had he held on. So it is with many faculty who are dying as they grip on and cling tightly to their old ways of teaching. I contend that if we are going to meet the needs of Millennial learners in our current technological age, we are going to have to relax, let go, and roll with the changes. For those readers who have not yet achieved Piaget’s stage of formal operations let me be clear that I am in no way suggesting you should hop off a moving motorcycle, but instead reflect on the methods that would effectively assist modern learners to achieve the outcomes of the courses we teach.

My Early Development as a Teacher

Like so many others, I did not plan to become a teacher and therefore, had no formal training on how to effectively assist students in achieving learning outcomes. I had several mentors over the years, many of whom were excellent teachers. However like most, I probably learned more about effective teaching from my worst professors. I vowed not to be like them! Yet my biggest mistake in learning how to teach was to
simply observe a colleague. He was well meaning, a decent lecturer, but not the ideal cutting edge role model. At that point in time I worked among many sages on the stage disseminating information to the somewhat disengaged masses. When I found myself in the awkward position of having to teach with no formal training, I frantically sought out all available resources. Praise to David Myers and the Instructor’s manual that comes along with his Exploring Psychology text! Luckily I was also influenced positively by the following forces.

A Solid System of Support

Two of the most beneficial resources available to me were our state-wide and regional conferences. As luck would have it, my institution was in close proximity to people like Dr. Bill Hill and Dr. Linda Noble who are icons in both the teaching of psychology and the teaching and learning in higher education in general. They sponsored annual conferences related to effective college teaching and specifically to the teaching of psychology. In addition, I work within a system at a campus that is very supportive of faculty efforts to improve teaching. As a result, I was able to participate in activities such as system-wide teaching and learning summits and the Alverno College Summer Institute on Teaching. Eventually, I pursued post-doctoral course work in educational psychology to learn all I could about effective teaching and improving student learning.

Scour the Literature

Although we did not have a Center for Teaching and Learning until fairly recently, early in my career I connected with those dedicated to that movement in our system and our region. As a result, I learned about several career changing resources such as McKeachie’s classic *Teaching Tips*, Fink’s book *Creating Significant Learning*
Relax, let go, and roll.

Experiences, Bain’s *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Weimer’s *Learner-Centered Teaching*, Svinicki’s *Learning and Motivation in the Postsecondary Classroom*, and Brookfield’s *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*.

**Defining Myself as a Teacher**

Fairly early on in my teaching career, I was approached by another professor while I prepared for class. He seemed quite surprised to find me engaged in the process of preparing class activities and quipped, “Prepare? There is no need to prepare! I just pull the string and out comes the lecture!” Even more recently I came across a young assistant professor, fresh from a PhD program and new to teaching. She was lamenting about students’ inability to take notes. Comments such as these suggest many professors young and old, still feel their sole purpose is to disseminate information or simply cover content while students write diligently until their hands hurt! I think the greatest obstacles in effective teaching are our own attitudes and antiquated notions about the teaching and learning process. The following additional forces have served to influence my further development as a teacher.

**The Binge-Purge of Bulimic Learning in Higher Education**

A pivotal moment occurred in my teaching while collecting my Millennial learner data. I heard students describing their agonizing survival through courses in which they senselessly memorized insignificant details in order to regurgitate them on a test only to immediately forget them! From that point on, I vowed to structure my courses in a way that they would have a lasting meaningful impact on those who experienced them. I have applied what I have learned from my Millennial student research by completely overhauling the courses I teach. I now allow students to make course contributions via
social media and I utilize a classroom response system in all of my courses. I completely restructured all of my courses to include more active learning and frequent formative assessment, but even more importantly, as a result of gathering student’s perceptions, I provide my students with more regular feedback to show I care about them and their learning.

**Good Teaching is more about Who We Are than What We Know**

It may sound hokey and trite, but most of us probably learned this lesson early on from our own educational experiences, only to perhaps forget when we ourselves became teachers. Ask yourself which teachers influenced you the most and inevitably you will choose those who took a personal interest in you and your future. I experienced this with several committed elementary school teachers. I realized the most lifelong impact a teacher can have on our character, drive, and direction was when my high school leadership teacher challenged me to contemplate what I might eventually offer and contribute to the world. This challenge resulted in a desire to truly make a difference in the lives of others. Our greatest gift as college professors is the opportunity to pay such deeds forward by mentoring our own students and having a profound impact on their lives.

**Building a Mystery**

In order to employ a scholarly approach to teaching, I apply the latest applicable research in both cognitive and educational psychology. This research suggests that learning and memory processing is facilitated by beginning with a question, mystery, or problem to solve. I actually learned this many years before being introduced to the literature as I had the fortunate opportunity to take an undergraduate archeology elective
course 25 years ago with Dr. William Fash. Dr. Fash was in his first year or two of teaching. He was a perfect example of how professors can have a profound impact on their students and never realize it. Now a full professor at Harvard, Fash drew in undergraduates of all majors with no interest in archaeology. His secret was the case method. To us, Fash was a real life Indiana Jones! He showed slides from his summer digs and we grappled to solve the mysteries of ancient cultures based on the artifacts he revealed. Fash’s case method can be applied to any discipline, particularly psychology as there are so many mysteries of human behavior to explore. For example, although men have opposable thumbs, why is it they never seem to be able to use them when it is time to change the toilet paper roll?

At any rate, I apply these principles in planning my courses by utilizing problem-based learning strategies and fascinating real life cases, which require students to engage in authentic application. For example, when the learning outcomes involve identifying symptoms of psychological disorders, I utilize authentic video cases of those suffering from disorders. When exploring the influence of nature and nurture on development, we analyze a case of a male child who was raised as a female after having his penis burned off in a bizarre circumcision accident. In identifying the factors that influence prenatal development, we watch a real life case of a prostitute who is addicted to crack-cocaine and is pregnant with her sixth child. When constructing all the factors that influence a young person to commit violence, we watch the real life case of Kip Kinkel who was one of the first young people in our culture to orchestrate a school shooting. In the Psychology of Adjustment course, one of our outcomes is to be able to identify productive versus non-productive conflict management strategies. We do this by
analyzing digitized video clips of real couples, some of whom are my colleagues, who have bravely volunteered to discuss their relationships for the sake of student learning. Finally, much to his horror and dismay, I also use digitized home video of my own child in order to display certain aspects of development in the Lifespan course.

**Trekking up the Taxonomy**

Because most students do not take high school psychology courses, they enter our 1000/2000 level courses with limited background knowledge. I think this situation makes many professors feel they need to focus their student learning outcomes on the lower level of Bloom’s Taxonomy. I have found that I can provide mini-lectures, outlines, and scaffolding so that we can focus our learning outcomes and class activities at the higher levels of learning such as application and analysis by focusing on real world problems. In this way, learning outcomes, even at the introductory level, can have a lasting and even life altering impact as students learn to think more critically, analyze issues, and evaluate research evidence.

**Building a Bonfire**

Engaged in family fun while dragging ourselves up the side of the ridge near our house, through baited breath I asked my then 5-year-old if he might like to go hiking on an overnight camping trip at some point. He paused looking up the side of the ridge and said, “Well maybe if we could build a big bonfire and roast marshmallows.” So it is with our students. They are most willing to climb the ridge when we entice them with marshmallows and the thrill of a bonfire. Once again, for those of you who are slow to capture analogies I am not suggesting we take our students camping! However, emphasizing the idea that knowledge of human behavior can only be to their benefit and
enticing them with intriguing cases will go a long way toward motivating them. Who among us could resist the fascination of fighting couples, prostitutes on crack, and boys raised as girls after circumcisions gone wrong? Invite them to engage, and they will come.

**It Takes a Village**

I think one of the most difficult tasks of our profession is to find an appropriate work-life balance. A few years back, I was working feverishly to meet a deadline on a grant proposal. Our youngest child was about four-years-old at the time and he approached me asking me to play with him. I frustratingly explained to him that the proposal I was working on would be worth a lot of money so I needed to continue to work on it. A few minutes later he reappeared with his piggy bank on the verge of tears and asked, “If I give you my money, then can you play with me?”

Being an effective teacher is time consuming! It requires constant reflection and tweaking of course content, materials, and methodology. In addition, I teach at an institution in which we maintain a 5-4 teaching load. The load makes it very difficult to find time for research, presentations, and other professional development activities like writing boring teaching autobiographies! Thankfully, once students are engaged, they gladly become co-constructers of course content posting videos of documentaries about men with love doll fetishes, articles and new stories related to Charlie Sheen’s most recent manic rant, etc.

In addition, I have been fortunate to have more recently encountered an influx of next generation colleagues in a variety of disciplines on our campus and across the country, who lend themselves to collaboration.
Finally, I am most supported by my own personal family team who has accepted that good teaching is not really a job, but a lifestyle. Therefore, my mother, my siblings, my partner of fifteen years, our two grown boys, and daughter-in-laws have all provided me with TED talks, news stories, cartoons, and personal examples. Even our late-in-life baby who is now eight-years-old has served as a human guinea pig allowing me to video tape him throughout his early childhood to display varying aspects of development, I assure him being the child of a psychology professor is nothing that 20 years of therapy won’t cure!

The Examined Life of a Teacher

As a result of numerous camping trips during my youth, I learned a valuable life lesson that has guided me both personally and professionally. The basic rule, in addition to always wearing bug spray, was to always leave the campground looking better than when we found it. The bigger picture here of course, is the planet, and those on it should be better off as a result of the contributions we make. If we truly wish to make a significant difference, we are most likely to achieve such aspirations with an underlying philosophy of continuous improvement. I believe this is the philosophical foundation that has most influenced my teaching. Although our most obvious directive as professors is to assist students in achieving learning outcomes, I believe the true measure of a teacher’s effectiveness is the transformative impact he or she has on his or her students’ lives and learning. I also believe the courses I teach and the interactions I have with students should inspire them to be better citizens who strive to have a positive impact on social change and issues of global importance such as finding a cure for cancer (and creating low calorie chocolate).
Facilitating the Educational Experience

Research from the literature on effective teaching and learning suggests that we facilitate an educational experience in which learning is active, not passive; therefore, I utilize a variety of methods and engage students with techniques such as brief digitized video clips, application exercises, case studies, group activities, demonstrations, role plays, computer simulations, online review games, and utilization of a classroom response system. I have also contemplated the use of a dunk tank, aversive shock, and mild hallucinogens, but have yet to have these techniques approved by my administration.

Educational Floaties

I have presented faculty development workshops at over 40 institutions and have encountered many memorable professors. One in particular became upset when I advocated the use of scaffolding and providing rubrics for assignments. He was the positive type who surely walked to school uphill in the snow there and back. Although he did not intend to be humorous, he provided an interesting analogy saying that in his day they “tossed you into the pool and you learned how to swim!” Continuing on he bemoaned, “Nowadays, they’ve got those little floaties on!” In these days of open access college is the new high school, everyone’s going! It is difficult for professors to maintain a standard of excellence, while still providing the support that a diverse group of students need to achieve learning outcomes. I hope students would say that there are no mysteries as to how to be successful in the courses I teach. If our main objective is to have students achieve the learning outcomes in our courses, then I think we should provide information and criteria which assists students in being successful. This means that we must provide
both clear expectations and clear explanations for students. The summer workshop I attended at Alverno College truly altered my teaching. The focus at Alverno was on use of alternative and authentic assessments. At the time, they were at the forefront of the movement to use peer and learner self-assessment, along with a variety of rubrics to guide students toward success.

Engaging in reflective practice, each semester I improve upon the courses I teach by gathering student feedback and assessing student achievement of learning outcomes. One of the things I do that is perhaps atypical, is use of an extraordinary amount of formative assessment methods in the form of weekly in-class exercises and classroom response system or online quizzes.

**Advice for New Teachers**

The first thing that of course comes to mind for this particular section is… get out while you still can! Seriously, if I had to summarize my advice in a short list it would be as follows:

- Learn all you can about effective teaching and learning through available resources such as books, journals, the teaching of psychology listserve and web page, and teaching conferences.
- Truly care about student learning and promote student success by providing clear expectations and clear explanations.
- Lecture less and involve students in the learning process more utilizing relevant authentic cases and other engaging methods.
- Provide a lot of low stakes formative assessment opportunities such that assessments become learning tools.
• Be open to using innovative methods and new technologies such as social media in order to allow students to be co-constructors of the curriculum.

Final Thoughts

My experience with teaching is such that we truly do get back what we put into the endeavor and I have yet to meet a colleague who has regretted any to improve his or her teaching. Therefore, in closing, I hope what you have gleaned here will inspire you to relax, let go, and roll …with the changes.
Chapter 13

Sink is to Swim as Survive is to…? A Perspective on Teaching

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Sink is to Swim as Survive is to…? A Perspective on Teaching

Although it seems as if I have traveled many roads riddled with twists and turns, I find that the journey has led me to—dare I say—my calling. Presently, I am about to begin my first year as a tenured professor of psychology at Metropolitan State College of Denver (Metro). After graduating from the University of Nevada, Reno with a PhD in educational psychology, I accepted a position at Metro. Previously, I taught at the University of Nevada, Reno; University of Montana, Western (where I completed my undergraduate degree); Montana Tech of the University of Montana; and Montana State University (where I completed my Master’s in Applied Psychology) both as an adjunct instructor and a graduate teaching assistant. Yet, my job skills have not always been academic. In the past, I was a ranch hand, K-12 teacher, store clerk, professional rodeo athlete, construction worker, AmeriCorps member, and farrier (i.e., specialist in equine hoof care). Consequently, some have said I am a Jack of all trades, Master of…well a few. It is, however, my belief that these—at times—juxtaposed experiences, has provided an incredibly diverse perspective which has afforded me the ability to personally and academically connect with my students.

I am honored to have received several teaching and research awards from both my colleagues and students. These include the 2011 Society of Teaching of Psychology Jane S. Halonen Excellence in Teaching Award, the 2008 Metropolitan State College of Denver Faculty Senate Excellence in Teaching and Psi Chi Honor Society-Metropolitan State College of Denver Chapter Excellence in Teaching Award, and the 2005 University of Nevada Excellence in Teaching Recognition in addition to the 2010 Rocky Mountain Psychological Association Early Career Award.
My Early Development as a Teacher

A True Iron Necessity: Preparing Graduate Students to Teach

Having only had a brief cursory course on teaching college students (with virtually no benefit), I can easily say that contrary to Nietzsche’s belief regarding iron and necessities, this is an area in the training of graduate students that is woefully neglected. For example, during this cursory course, one of the guest lecturers said to me that if I did not wear a suit and tie, I would not be a good teacher. At the time, I said to myself, “A suit and tie makes you a good teacher?” Hence, there needs to be a massive initiative from the American Psychological Association on training graduate students on how to teach—not just to do research. Subsequently, absent of formal training, I sought out exemplar teachers for advice and consulted with my mentor.

Survive or Thrive: What a Mentor Truly Means to Me

In preparation for this chapter, I was asked whether I had a teaching mentor. Simply put, I had a profound and impactful mentor: Dr. Mark Krank at the University of Montana, Western. I was 24 years old, having changed majors numerous times, dropped out of school and then back in school on academic probation. I decided to take his dubious teaching assistant course. On the first day of class (Mark would only meet one-on-one) he asked “What chapter do you want to teach?” I looked at him with incredulity and stammered the words “Uhhh….I dun know.” As the conversation progressed he expressed his expectations that by the end of the semester, I was to solely teach an entire chapter to 50 introductory psychology students. After shadowing him for some time and debriefing him after each class on his choice of teaching techniques, gleaning as much information as I could get, it was my turn. On my first day Mark sat at the end of the auditorium and within 2 minutes left the room. I immediately thought to myself, “That can only mean one of two things: You just flopped and he was so embarrassed he had to leave or—
maybe—you just rocked it.” Afterwards, I went to Dr. Krank and asked him why he left. He looked at me with utter sincerity, kind eyes, and with a heartfelt voice said “Because Aaron, that is what you were meant to do. You were not merely surviving, you were thriving.” From that day on, I was hooked and to this day, Dr. Krank mentors me through all facets and stages of my career. Words cannot express my gratitude and tremendous debt I owe to Dr. Krank because of his tutelage, I found myself and who I wanted to become—a psychology professor who is a damn good teacher and scholar.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

**Obstacles, Pitfalls, and Oh Yes—Reality Check**

Having taught part-time at several institutions while in graduate school, I thought that I had codified in my mind a philosophy of teaching and for that matter, had it, as “they” unequivocally say “down.” Welcome to reality. At the end of my first full-time year of teaching, I abruptly came to the realization that the philosophy of mine was premature, naïve, and containing an ample dose of hubris. Nevertheless, when reflecting on this experience, I quickly came to the conclusion that not only do I love and have a passion for teaching but teaching was quickly becoming a part of who I am. Although humbling, this realization bolstered my desire to become an effective and inspiring college professor through the processes of reflection, assessment, evaluation, and adaptation.

**Teaching as a zero sum game… really?** In writing this chapter, I was asked to comment on this question “Many academics see their work as a zero sum game—for example, time spent in the lab is time that necessarily cannot be spent working on teaching….Have you felt that you have to sacrifice your research, service, or outreach efforts in order to become an effective teacher?” I mulled this question over for quite some time because I found, not the question, but
the idea so absurdly foreign and contradictory to my philosophy/pedagogy that it was extremely
difficult to answer. The long and short of it is absolutely not! If I were to think of it as a “zero
sum game” then that would be my signal to make a career move.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

Acting as a catalyst, I reflected on my experience during the first year at Metro which
allowed me to develop a distinct yet ever evolving teaching philosophy. Hence, I have derived
several fundamental teaching tenets from which I base my instruction.

Student Centered—Not Student Marginal Instruction

I have learned that one of the singular most effective methods to impart knowledge to my
students is through student-centered, active learning instruction. Frankly, students bring a wealth
of personal experiences, knowledge, and personal theories to the classroom and if I can relate
new information to their experiences through an active learning method their learning is greatly
enhanced (e.g., Poirier & Feldman, 2007; Richmond & Hagan, 2011; Warren, 2006). Whether
students are non-traditional students or traditional students, I have found that if you can connect
on a personal level, support your teaching with research and honesty, and engage them in active
learning, students will greatly respect you as a teacher, retain and understand concepts at a
higher-level, and they will deeply consider what you have to say.

Hey You…Stop Texting and Help Me Teach or Do Research

I strongly believe that involving and mentoring undergraduate teaching and research
assistants is incumbent for exemplar professors. One of the reasons I became a college professor
was because of this very experience. Mentoring teaching and research assistants provides the
opportunity to mold, shape and discover my future replacement. I truly believe that we—as
professors of psychology—should embrace this process. The lessons that are learned from this
amazing experiential learning situation create memories and passion in and for the field of psychology, which will not only sustain our field, but compel it to flourish.

**Socrates vs. The Simpsons**

As Jane S. Halonen (2005) suggested, I too believe that it is important to engage rather that entertain. Far too often, our students expect us to entertain them rather than engage them to critically evaluate the information we present. This is a fine line that needs to be demarcated.

This sentiment goes both ways. Additionally, far too often professors confuse entertainment with engagement. In every class, I try to engage my students by presenting puzzling results or discussing controversial issues. This allows my students to become motivated, engaged, and actively construct their knowledge about psychology and if I am lucky, about the process of thinking holistically. This does not mean that you can only use Socrates in your classroom, you may also use *The Simpsons* but not for entertainment, rather to engage students to process information at deeper level. Thus I pose two engaging quotes that to me embody the same important sentiment. “Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel.” Socrates (n.d.). “This year, I'd like to nominate my teacher- Ms. Krabappel [for teacher of the year]. She may not be glamorous or entertaining. She's just a normal teacher who's always there. And, she's never given up on me.” Bart Simpson (Vitti, 1989).

**Depth vs. Breadth**

Again, as the esteemed Jane S. Halonen (2005) suggested, I too believe that as instructors we need to go deep rather than broad in course content. Students are most likely to learn best when they engage in deeper-level processing because they are trying to problem-solve, answer their own questions that they believe to be significant, captivating, or beautiful (Bain & Zimmerman, 2009). As someone rooted in cognitive and developmental theory, I understand the
asymptotic level of students’ knowledge retention and the effect of deep processing versus surface level processing (see Craik & Lockhart, 1972). I truly attempt to limit the information I expect my students to learn so that they may master the information rather than have a cursory set of facts from which they will retain very little. I am amazed by the persistent push of instructors to cover all of the material, at what I believe, the cost of student learning. Indeed, Halonen (2005) commenting on Ericksen (1983) said it best:

Stanford Ericksen (1983) likened the process of exposing students to the light of the discipline by trying to cover the field to a good sunburn. It is uncomfortable in acquisition and decidedly temporary in its impact. Unless the content of a course has personal relevance or the course provides opportunities that facilitate meaningful connections, the minutiae of what we teach will fade away like a suntan. (p. 130)

I Don’t Need No Stinkin’ Higher-Level Thinking!

Shell and Kleen (1992) and Dalai (1994) both argue that higher-level learning promotes critical thinking skills which allow students to be creative, analytical, and evaluative and thus should be infused into higher education curricula. As such, not only do I teach content, but I specifically target skills (e.g., metacognition and teaching memory and learning strategies) which promote higher-level learning (e.g., Carney & Levin, 2003, Richmond, Carney, & Levin, 2011). Using these methods and teaching these skills not only helps my students understand the class material at a higher-level, it allows a skill set that they may use in other classes. Essentially, this tenet embodies my belief that we should teach in a holistic principled manner, not just for the sake of our own class.
Adapt or Die!

The adage “adapt or die” truly exemplifies my belief about classroom instruction. Even though I have been touting a few instructional methods, I will often change my instructional methods in order to reach students. This might be through the use of technology, the Socratic Method, direct teaching or even one-on-one personal tutoring. Personally, being mired in one method of teaching hinders the learning process and students ultimately pay the price. Being able and willing to adapt makes me a far more resourceful and effective teacher.

The Ultimate Compliment: Disequilibrium

When I successfully employ these tenets I truly believe that my students learn at a higher-level and more importantly are compelled and challenged to learn. For instance, when one of my student’s was asked what was it like to be in my class she said “Being in Dr. Richmond’s class is like being in a constant state of disequilibrium” (the inability to incorporate events into existing schema, Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). Initially, I thought she always felt confused. On the contrary, she explained to me that students in my class feel that they are constantly challenged, motivated, and seek to obtain a higher-level of learning because of my teaching methods and expectations. This was a true compliment that I carry with me to constantly remind myself to improve, challenge my students, and be the most effective teacher and mentor that I can possibly become.

Sinking and Swimming

To start, let me say that no matter how low your experience in teaching may go this pales in comparison to how high it can go. I have two major frustrations (when I’m sinking): the occasional lack of self-regulation on students’ behalf and poor teaching. I find it very difficult when a student lacks self-regulation skills (e.g., planning, attention control, metacognition, or self-evaluation). However, I also find this to be a challenge and opportunity to help the student.
Similarly, I come across instructors who have lost their passion for imparting knowledge and as a result have become complacent. I have attempted many things to help the instructor out (e.g., provided materials and different activities on how to teach a specific topic) but ultimately it is up to the instructor to pull-themselves out of this funk (i.e., self-regulation).

The high (I’m swimming) is the pure act of teaching. Whether it is witnessing the “Aha!” moment in a student, watching a student personally and academically grow into an outstanding scholar and human being, or even to the simplest of things such as the gleam of passion in my students eyes—it is all rewarding. This is my stimulant and is the very reason why I teach.

Assessing Your Students and Yourself: Concocting the Precise Recipe

I am a true believer that in order to be a successful and effective teacher there needs to be an equal dose of assessment of your students and of yourself. For my students, I assess their learning through both formal and informal assessments (see Ormrod, 2008). Formally, I assess students through traditional means (e.g., quizzes, exams, labs, etc.). Additionally, on a daily basis, I employ informal assessments by simply asking students to reword a portion of the lecture, asking probative questions, or by creating a classroom activity that requires students to analyze and synthesize the information discussed.

In addition to assessing my students, I assess myself both formally and informally. Every semester I partake in peer evaluations, and have sought out a number of award winning instructors to observe in addition to having them conduct observations on my teaching. Furthermore, I receive feedback from my students on how activities were perceived (informal), conduct a mid-term instructional assessment (formal) and end-of-term assessment (formal). Finally, one of the best ways to assess your teaching is to video tape yourself (see Frederiksen,
Sipusi, Sherin, & Wolfe, 1998). This singular process probably has improved my instruction tenfold.

From my experience, many instructors rarely assess outside of summative and formal methods nor do they regularly assess themselves. With a well crafted recipe, I find that these varied assessments provide a more accurate measure of student learning and also provide an invaluable tool to gauge my teaching abilities and improve.

**Advice for New Teachers**

**There is no ‘I’ in Team**

It is extremely difficult to go it alone. I suggest that to be a successful teacher, you should surround yourself with successful teachers. Find those teachers who are effective and ask for advice, critiques, and for any help that will make you better. Do not be afraid to ask for help from others and in turn be willing to share your knowledge. I have been blessed to have known exemplar teachers such as Dr. Mark Krank, Dr. Mitch Handelsmen, and Dr. Doug Woody who have shared their wisdom of teaching, which inevitably compels me to become a more effective teacher.

**Perfect (Im)balance**

We all live an incredibly busy, hectic, and at sometimes stressful life, but it is important to attempt to stay balanced at work and at home. If not, there are serious health and psychological effects (e.g., sleep disorders, drug dependencies, anger). Thus at work, seek to balance teaching, research and service by managing your time effectively, aligning yourself with exemplar colleagues, and conducting scholarship of teaching and learning research to both improve your teaching and to create scholarly work. If you do these things at work, it will be easier to have balance at home.
Complacency is the Death of Teaching

Having been in academia, in one capacity or another, for 15 years, I have seen many professors (both new and old) become complacent. As a result, their students suffer. I think many academics went into this field because they love to learn, solve problems and engage in scholarly activities. Therefore, with this same motive and necessity, we should always strive to continue learning effective ways to impart knowledge. Thomas Edison (n.d.) once said “We shall have no better conditions in the future if we are satisfied with all those which we have at present.”

Final Thoughts

Homage to ‘The Last Lecture’

Inspired by ‘The Last Lecture’ by Randy Paush and subsequent book by Paush and Zaslow (2008), I truly believe that you need to dream like a child and make those dreams come true as an adult. In teaching, the dream of becoming an inspiring and effective teacher is not only plausible, but completely achievable. And, enabling the dreams of others should be at the core of what we do. As a teacher, if you are kind and sensitive, supportive, creative, reflective, persistent, prepared, and passionate, then you will undoubtedly enable the dreams of your students.

Finally, the answer to my chapter title is: In teaching, sink is to swim as survive is to thrive! Please, please do more than sink and survive, swim and thrive as a college professor.
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Chapter 14

A Teaching-Centered Career for the Aspiring Intellectual

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A Teaching-Centered Career for the Aspiring Intellectual

I am currently a professor of psychology at Montgomery College, a community college with three campuses in Montgomery County, Maryland, near Washington DC. After completing my bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees in psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, I went on to post-doctoral research positions, first for 2 years at the University of Chicago and then 1 year at the University of Illinois at Chicago. I subsequently took a visiting faculty position for one year at George Washington University, after which I was a visiting faculty member for 3 years at Georgetown University before coming to Montgomery College in 2002. My honors include a Faculty Outstanding Service Award and the On Her Shoulders We Stand award from Montgomery College and a National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) Excellence Award. I was named the 2010 Maryland Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE).

My Early Development as a Teacher

Although my graduate program emphasized research, the department also clearly cared about quality undergraduate education and the faculty roster included a number of excellent teachers. When I attended the program, there was no formal coursework for teacher training, but teaching assistantships were a required part of the doctoral program, giving us the opportunity to learn some of the nuts and bolts of teaching through working with individual faculty. Of course, the educational quality of being a TA varied, depending on the particular faculty member, but I ran a discussion section and gave a lecture or two as well as doing the usual grading and student meetings in my various TA positions. I also absorbed a good deal about teaching just by virtue of seeing the backstage work of teaching and having discussions with the faculty about the nitty-
gritty of preparation and how our choices related to pedagogy. Although I did not have an official teaching mentor, my teaching was shaped by the dedicated and talented faculty with whom I worked. Henry Gleitman's superb lecturing skills and breadth of knowledge was inspirational. His love of teaching emerged so clearly, not only in the classroom but in the extra "coffee hours" he held for students, a practice that I emulated while at Georgetown and that formed the basis of the Psychology Brown Bag series I founded at Montgomery College (graduate school also confirmed my belief that conversations go better with food). John Sabini, my graduate advisor, was certainly a consummate lecturer and humorist, but he also taught me the value of critical thinking, especially questioning and challenging assumptions, which became one of my main pedagogical goals as a teacher. Paul Rozin's honors class taught me not to shy away from challenging assignments, and to think beyond lectures and exams (finding time to grade such assignments as a faculty member can be difficult, and I recall the pile of untouched student papers sitting on his desk when I see a similar stack on my desk). Alan Fiske encouraged me to make interdisciplinary connections and to teach about the human experience from a cross-cultural perspective, a practice that was also reinforced in my post-doctoral training.

I learned quite a bit about teaching from those assistantships. I learned that teaching is often messy and unpredictable, even for experienced teachers. I learned that test items that seem clear can be open to multiple interpretations, and that what students glean from a lecture is not always what the instructor intended to convey. In other words, I got my first hints that students are actively involved in making sense of the information they are given. It would take some years, though, before I was able to give up the idea that I was the primary force in my students' learning.
In addition to the required teaching assistantships, we were also given the opportunity to teach our own courses as we advanced in the program. At first, I taught with another graduate student or adjunct faculty member, an excellent way to begin teaching. Not only was it less daunting (I only had to write half of the lectures), but we could share our teaching strategies. I am naturally drawn toward collaboration, so this format suited me very well. Although I rarely team-teach now, I still seek out my colleagues to discuss teaching practices and pedagogy. In some ways, teaching can feel like a solitary endeavor—we are constantly interacting with students, but as the sole instructor, the classroom typically lacks a community of other teachers, of peers. In this kind of isolation, doubts may begin to creep in: Am I doing this right? Are there better ways to convey the material to facilitate student learning? How could I improve this assignment? My early teaching experience would have been much more terrifying without the support of the other teachers with whom I worked. They provided feedback and support, assuaged my fears, and encouraged me to try new approaches.

Adjunct teaching was very much a part of my early career and I taught at a variety of institutions. These experiences helped me refine my teaching with diverse student populations and equipped me to teach a number of different courses. It takes practice to find one's own teaching style and to become comfortable in the classroom; regular adjunct teaching provided me with the chance to practice in different settings. It was through this combination of apprenticeship, collaboration, and practice that I crafted my teaching style.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

I entered graduate school with the goal of becoming an academic psychologist. I enjoyed the intellectual environment of college and I wanted to be in a place where I could explore ideas and live the life of the mind. In fact, as I tell my students, I loved college so much that I never
left. I wanted to keep having the great conversations I had as a student for the rest of my life. Though challenging and anxiety-provoking, teaching afforded me the chance to engage in intellectually stimulating discussions that I often found quite rewarding. I envisioned myself in a position that would include teaching and scholarship, perhaps at some liberal arts college, where teaching would be valued but I could continue to pursue scholarship without the pressures to get major grant funding. The job market was tough, though, and I spent many years unsuccessfully trying to find a tenure-track position that would also accommodate my partner's career needs. I went from one temporary position to another, trying to balance research, teaching, and an active job search. It was stressful and tiring at times.

After my visiting position at Georgetown ended, I found myself unemployed and disheartened. My dream of an intellectual haven seemed unattainable and I felt like a failure. My partner and I wanted to stay in the Washington, DC area, so I applied for every position I seemed even remotely qualified for, both academic and nonacademic. I was even willing to redefine myself and leave academia, but I received no nonacademic offers. Instead, I was interviewed by two local community colleges, and got offers from both for a faculty position. I knew almost nothing about community colleges, but after being groomed for a research-intensive faculty position, this position seemed like a step down. Not only would it be a less prestigious job (in the eyes of most academics), it would mean giving up research because I would not have the necessary resources or time, given the higher teaching load. I worried that taking the job would foreclose faculty positions at 4-year schools, as I would not be able to keep up the scholarship that those positions expected. It seemed like accepting a position at the community college would be a permanent commitment. Was I really ready to give up my dream of the liberal arts college forever? And what would it be like to teach at a community college? Would
I have to bring my teaching to a more basic level? Would I find the intellectual stimulation I needed?

In the end, after much soul-searching, I took the position at Montgomery College. My father (a celebrated historian) reassured me that it was possible to have a very rewarding career at a community college and I figured that if it really was not a good fit for me, I could leave.

It turned out to be a great decision. I consider myself enormously fortunate to work in a supportive and convivial institution where I can make a real difference in my students' lives. Working at Montgomery College has been instrumental in my growth and development as a teacher. I am surrounded by dedicated and impassioned teachers who are amazingly collegial and who are always willing to share their knowledge and expertise. The college offers an array of professional development opportunities and we are encouraged and expected to expand our teaching skills. For example, I am currently part of a Smithsonian Faculty Fellowship program that connects us with museum curators so that we can design assignments that engage our students with the Smithsonian museums. I also work with the Writing in the Disciplines program to help faculty from a variety of disciplines implement effective writing assignments. Our small class sizes and diverse student body make for terrific classroom discussions, and I generally enjoy the time I spend with my students, inside and outside of the classroom. And, of course, teaching five classes a semester really gives me a lot of opportunities for practice!

Working at Montgomery College has also given me a better understanding of the opportunities for teaching outside of the classroom. I've seen the profound influence of extracurricular involvement on my students' lives; they grow as individuals, take on leadership roles, and develop social connections, all of which can improve their ability to reach their goals and succeed academically. I have come to recognize the power of the relationship between
instructor and student in the educational process, particularly for students who may be underprepared, less fully engaged, or lacking in confidence. A caring and enthusiastic professor can inspire these students to greater (and more effective) effort as well as serving as a role model. In my work with student clubs and creating educational events outside of the classroom, I have come to see the breadth of a teacher's influence. Even seemingly casual conversations in the cafeteria can become a "teachable moment" that might positively influence a student. In this sense, teaching need not require sacrificing service or research activities, because these can be seen as part of the teaching mission. My research projects offer students the opportunity to become involved in research. My fundraising work supports student scholarships. In short, most of my academic work helps students in some way.

The most significant obstacles I have found in my teaching are time and fear. Early on in my teaching career, I struggled with how to find guidance and support in improving my teaching, particularly as there is often little mentoring offered for adjunct and visiting faculty. But in recent years, I have found an abundance of guidance available, through teaching publications, workshops, conferences, and colleagues. However, the time to read the publications and attend the workshops is in decreasing supply. As I have taken on more and more service responsibilities at the college, I have less time to devote to honing my teaching skills and engaging in scholarship. The other barrier is fear. I might hesitate to try out that class activity for fear that it will bomb. Anxious about the ensuing reaction, I might avoid confronting a student about some disruptive behavior. I dread reading student evaluations and have a horror of RateMyProfessor.com, as the inevitable criticism can send me into spirals of anxious worrying that I have somehow screwed up in my teaching. I have no definitive solution to either problem, but I have ways of managing. Time will always be a limited resource, so I try to make sure that I
am using my time to meet my priorities as best as I can. Rather than overhauling all of my courses (a time-consuming task), I work on smaller and more manageable revisions for a few courses each semester. I do not know that the anxiety of teaching ever really disappears, but I find that consulting with my colleagues helps reduce my fear. They can provide reassurance that my teaching practices are reasonably sound as well as give suggestions for how to minimize risky or uncertain outcomes. There is always a risk that an assignment will flop or a lecture will fall flat, but with experience, we can recover from these moments and learn from them.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

When I work with a colleague to design a writing assignment, the first question I ask is, “What is the purpose of the assignment?” I believe that it is vitally important for teachers to identify their pedagogical goals and to focus the class activities and assignments toward these goals. All too often, we use assignments or activities without reflecting on whether they help students develop the skills and knowledge we want them to have. Broadly speaking, I want my students to develop critical thinking skills, to recognize the value of empirical research, and to use what they learn to improve the quality of their lives and make the world a better place (of course, each class involves more specific goals, as well). These goals have been the center of my teaching from the very beginning.

The biggest change in my approach to teaching has been the way I see my role. When I first began teaching, I saw myself as the primary force in my students' learning; it was my job to instill knowledge in my students. Over time, I came to realize that students have to do the learning—I cannot make them learn. I can be a resource for my students, but they need to do the work of learning. My role is not to enact learning, but instead, to support learning. Rather than pushing knowledge into my students, I needed to help them learn the material. I have to think of
activities and assignments that will help the students develop the skills involved. I provide opportunities for them to practice and get feedback as we go along, rather than leaving them to learn the material on their own and testing them at the end. I was also freed from the impossible task of covering everything in class. Instead of trying to be the source of all information, I need to think about the most effective use of class time to facilitate student learning. Increasingly, I have students write or take self-tests on the reading so that we can spend our class time in discussions.

My interactions with students are the most rewarding, and the most frustrating, part of teaching. A vibrant class discussion exhilarates me. Helping a student restructure a paper or explore an idea is tremendously fulfilling. However, it is very difficult to work with students who have given up or disengaged from the class. Passivity and hopelessness are almost impenetrable barriers to learning, and I cannot help such students unless I can re-energize them and convince them to try. I offer concrete suggestions and support, as well as identifying the student's strengths and successes. For a student who is depressed about getting a "C" on an exam, I remind them that learning more than 70% of challenging material is a significant accomplishment and then discuss study strategies that will further enhance their learning.

I want my students to succeed academically. My course policies and practices are designed to help my students master the course content and I work with students individually as well. I am perennially tweaking my courses, introducing new elements, revising or eliminating what isn't working. I primarily work through trial-and-error, although I also solicit suggestions from colleagues and find new ideas from workshops or teaching publications. I use my own experience and feedback from students to assess the effectiveness of my teaching practices. While I recognize the value of more systematic approaches to assessment, and I do occasionally
use student surveys, I have found it difficult to design structured assessments for measuring teaching efficacy.

**Advice for New Teachers**

The main advice I have for new teachers is to be mindful and make use of available resources. Mindfulness means thinking carefully about your pedagogical goals and crafting your teaching to meet these goals. This ongoing practice of reflection means that teachers should be prepared to change their teaching choices as they go along. Exploration is part of good teaching; feel free to try something new, but only if you think it will fit within your own pedagogical goals. Change can help keep teaching fresh, so that we can maintain the enthusiasm that inspires our students. Be open to teaching opportunities outside of the classroom, as well. Undergraduate education is more than the classroom experience, and faculty involvement in extracurricular activities, such as student clubs, brown bag talks or other events, can be a way to carry your teaching pedagogy into the broader college community.

It is vitally important to find or create a supportive environment to develop your teaching skills. Try to surround yourself with people who care about good teaching. You can solicit help from colleagues who are passionate and skilled teachers. If your institution offers workshops on teaching, take them. You can get new ideas from the many publications about teaching. In short, you do not need to teach alone.

**Final Thoughts**

I wish I had known earlier about the rewards of a community college career. I had so little knowledge of what community colleges do, and had such distorted stereotypes of community college students and faculty, that I never even considered it as a career option. Yet it
is here that I found the support necessary to fully develop my teaching skills. And it is here that I found my intellectual haven.
Chapter 15

Rumlin’, Bumlin’, Stumlin’: My Life in Academia

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Rumblin’, Bumblin’, Stumblin’: My Life in Academia

I was born and raised in San Francisco, and really only left that wonderful city to pursue the teaching and research opportunities described in this chapter. I earned a BA in psychology from the University of San Francisco in 1985, and a PhD in social psychology from the University of Texas at Austin in 1989. I am currently Chair and Professor of Psychology at St. Edward’s University in Austin, Texas, where I have taught since 1994.

I have been fortunate to receive numerous teaching, research, and advising awards from St. Ed’s and other institutions. I was also honored to be named the 2010 Texas Professor of the Year by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

My Early Development as a Teacher

Many readers will identify the title of this chapter as Chris Berman’s tagline from ESPN’s NFL PrimeTime. It’s used to describe a football player who inexplicably finds the ball in his hands, and staggers toward the end zone to fame and glory. The movement is purposeful and goal-directed, but at the same time capitalizes both on skill and no small measure of luck. It is an apt summary of my professional development.

I stumbled into my academic interests as an undergraduate at the University of San Francisco. I was an undeclared major, curious about lots of things but nothing in particular. Like many liberal arts universities, USF had philosophy as a requirement, so I gravitated toward the big questions that the discipline asked by dint of having to take those courses. But frankly, I was looking for a greater challenge in all my coursework. I decided to enroll in 18 hours crammed into a three-day-a-week schedule, and I selected both general psychology and abnormal
psychology courses because they sounded cool and mysterious, although I honestly had no idea what the subject matter was.

I soon found out, and enthusiastically rumbled through the major. Having exhausted my university requirements, I was able to take all psychology, all the time, accented with enough philosophy courses that they eventually became a second major. It was a powerful combination: I found that those big questions about the mind and behavior that attracted me to philosophy were addressed by the rigorous investigations of psychology, and I was eager to contribute to that process.

My true mentor in psychology, Maureen O’Sullivan, helped me immeasurably. She was a wonderful teacher – intelligent, engaging, on top of her material, funny – and I have modeled my own teaching style on her example. More importantly, she enlisted me as her teaching and research assistant, which showed me there was a great deal of learning outside of the classroom. I had thought that an undergraduate education simply consisted of studying hard and doing well on exams, but Maureen gave me the opportunity to contribute to her research program on nonverbal communication and lie detection. Through her good auspices, I worked for a year in Paul Ekman’s lab at UC San Francisco, attended graduate seminars on emotion, coded and analyzed data, designed and presented my own research at professional conferences—activities that I commonly engage in with my own students, but that were not so common “back in my day.” Maureen taught me how to be a good teacher in the classroom, but she also taught me how to be a good professor in a liberal-arts setting: through collaborating with students on programmatic research, through effective advising, and through genuine care for bright, dedicated students who want to learn more. Her untimely death in 2010 was a loss to countless students who will be deprived of her mentorship.
When it came time to leave the undergraduate nest, I was both excited and nervous about the prospects of graduate school. I was not sure what program to pursue; there were not many training opportunities that combined the blend of psychology, ethology, anthropology, and sociology I had been exposed to by Ekman’s group. I was advised to apply to social psychology programs, as that was “probably the closest thing to what you like.” In my semi-bumbling way, I had never taken an undergraduate course in social psychology, but it sounded all right to me. Like many undergraduates, though, I had my doubts – was this the path for me? Was I smart enough? No one in my family had gone to college. Should I even go to graduate school? In her inimitable style, Maureen asked me over lunch one day, “Well, what else would you do?” and the issue was decided!

The social psychology program at the University of Texas at Austin (UT) was enamored of social cognition at that time, offering an odd fit for a person trained in emotion and nonverbal behavior. Although I learned a great deal about the research process, it was through my many teaching assistantships that I came to realize my strengths in the classroom. UT customarily split employment across courses, so I often found myself assisting two different professors in two different classes during the same semester. What sounds like a hardship was actually a benefit, as these experiences exposed me to a variety of teaching styles in a variety of settings. In particular, the late Dev Singh introduced me to a conversational style of teaching that I have adapted. I was fascinated by the way he strolled into a classroom carrying nothing whatsoever – no notes, no chalk, no gimmicks – yet held the attention of everyone in the room as he wove compelling stories of science. The secret of his success was that he invited his students to join him on a journey of intellectual exploration, investing them with a stake in the learning process as he guided their discoveries. It’s a powerful strategy, and one that accords students the respect
they deserve as learners. Rather than “teaching to” students, Dev taught me to “share with” them an appreciation of the subject matter.

I was excited, then, by the prospect of teaching my own course at UT. A visiting professor backed out of a section of social psychology, so I stumbled into the job by virtue of my greater experience (i.e., having TA’d slightly more courses than anybody else). Luckily, I previously had taken the required “teaching course,” although I can safely say I learned almost nothing from it about how to teach. Nonetheless, I faced down a class of 150 students who seemed to like what I was doing as much as I did. I had found my niche: research was fine, and a crucial part of being an academic, but sharing knowledge with others was where my true strengths lie. I finished my graduate work and looked for a job that would allow me to do just that.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

Circumstances brought me to Los Angeles, but with no job. I sent my vita to every relevant institution from Ventura to Riverside looking for any full- or part-time teaching work. I spent a year teaching as an adjunct at UCLA, California School of Professional Psychology, and any place that needed a class or two filled. One of those places was Loyola Marymount University (LMU), where I taught a 3-hour night class (after teaching all day elsewhere) that proved to be the start of a beautiful relationship.

There was an opening the following year for a full-time visiting professor, and the Chair of the department, Mike Mills, encouraged me to apply. That was a great offer, given that each of the subsequent 3 years someone was either on sabbatical or had grant money, allowing me to parlay my 1-year position into a 4-year visitation. The tenure-track faculty taught a 3/3 load, but the trade-off for not having other obligations – committee work, advisees – was that I picked up
an extra course each semester. Some might substitute “penalty” for “trade-off” in that previous sentence, but I always saw it as an opportunity rather than a burden. Being responsible for lots of different course preparations gave me the chance to immerse myself in areas outside of my expertise, to investigate best practices in teaching different kinds of material, and to develop a sizeable repertoire of courses that I was prepared to teach with short notice.

More than anywhere else, my time at LMU defined me as a teacher in three important ways. First, I realized I could learn to teach undergraduate courses in many areas of psychology. Some were more enjoyable than others, some required more preparation, but necessity trumped reluctance in every case; I lost the hesitation to embrace areas beyond my primary training. Second, I learned to develop a stockpile of teaching styles. Teaching general psychology to first-year students, advanced research methods to graduating seniors, and cognitive psychology to sophomores meant that I could not rely on the tried-and-true lecture approach across the board; different material and different audiences dictated different methods. Third, I got my first experience teaching to a national audience. I contracted with Prentice Hall Publishers to develop ancillaries for their textbooks, a relationship that’s still going strong two decades later (and has since included Worth, Brooks/Cole, Wadsworth, and others). What started as authoring instructors’ manuals grew into creating video packages, writing website content, developing test banks and study guides, making dynamic reviews, even creating those much-missed transparencies on plastic sheets, and my roles expanded from author to editor to team supervisor. If you have used anything from a Pearson Education Introductory Psychology supplement during the last 20 years, there is a good chance I had something to do with producing it! And that’s the point: I have been afforded a wonderful opportunity to share learning strategies and teaching tips
with students and instructors well beyond the physical confines of a university campus. That has inspired me to put forth my best work, both in print and in my own classroom.

With virtually no intention on my part, I had stumbled into a very desirable position. I had taught large classes at research-focused institutions, small sections in a liberal arts setting, graduate level courses within and outside social psychology, and courses within the semester and quarter systems (often simultaneously). I was pretty sure there was not a major teaching situation I had not encountered. I was supported by great colleagues at LMU – Mike Mills, Larry Bernard, Trish Walsh – who made my position that much more enjoyable. Despite a heavy teaching load, I got considerable research done (e.g., Swinkels, 2002; Swinkels & Giuliano, 1995), often related to classroom instruction (e.g., Swinkels, 2003). I had contacts in the publishing world and steady consulting work that helped inform my teaching. But my fortuitous position – Visiting Professor – was just that, and eventually my visit was over.

When circumstances pointed me back to Austin, my strategy was to again send my vita to any and every educational institution within a 100-mile radius. No one was hiring, but my Los Angeles experiences had taught me the benefits of perseverance and good fortune. Good fortune – or perhaps dumb luck – struck when St. Edward’s University sent a postcard thanking me for applying to their tenure track position in Psychology… a position I had never seen announced. Although I would question the wisdom of advertising for only one week in the Chronicle of Higher Education, in this case it seems to have turned out all right, especially for me! I have been at St. Edward’s since 1994, and like LMU, there’s been a remarkably good fit between employee and institution.

Then, as now, tenure-track faculty at St. Ed’s taught a 4/4 load. When that was raised in my job interview, I did not bat an eye; it is all I have ever known. In fact, until my friends Dan
Wegner and Dan Gilbert invited me to spend a sabbatical semester at Harvard University in 2001, I had taught at least 4 sections every semester since 1989 (adding summers, overloads, and doubled-up adjunct work, the mathematics of that kind of career are something I would rather not compute). Despite those constraints, the St. Edward’s Psychology Department has done remarkable things. We have grown from a full-time faculty of three to our current group of nine, with a corresponding jump in enrollment from 120 majors to more than 400. My talented colleagues and I have garnered more awards for teaching, research, and advising than any other unit on campus. We secured a federal grant to fund much-needed laboratory facilities. Our top students routinely win competitive awards and scholarships. We have been recognized nationally with fellowships and teaching awards. Teaching a lot has hardly been a deterrent for getting other things done; if anything, doing our best work in the classroom has helped bring about those other benefits.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

Laypeople often equate “professor” with “teacher,” reasoning that after our few hours in the classroom are done, we revert to a life of idle mischief. We in the business know this is far from correct, but we may not always realize the extent to which teaching permeates all that we do. For example, early in my career I mentally separated teaching and research, thinking that one involved students and the other did not. I grew from cautiously including one or two students on my studies, to now not starting any project without a team of capable and interested undergraduate collaborators. My students have earned numerous awards for their efforts, and been accepted to top-flight graduate programs on the strength of their contributions. My mentees now include a sizeable number of honors students and those enrolled in our McNair Scholars program. My university acknowledges the importance of research, offering grants for summer
research and awards for outstanding research programs, both of which I have been honored to receive. Good teaching is good teaching, but good research is also good teaching.

Similarly, I once saw my advising load – 30 to 40 students during our department’s growth spurt – as a drain on my other commitments, but I’ve come to realize that advising sessions are an opportunity to teach. It’s often a lesson in socialization; how to structure class loads, where to find internships, ways to approach a career in psychology. As the largest major on campus, we have integrated teaching techniques into our advising period to be more efficient, such as having group sessions, peer advising, or electronically-mediated communications. Nonetheless, advising sessions offer an opportunity to provide the ultimate one-on-one instruction in our discipline. The advising awards received by myself and my colleagues are a nice recognition that good advising can also be good teaching.

Finally, I have been fortunate to extend my expertise beyond the classroom. As mentioned above, this primarily takes place through my work with various publishers. It also takes place within the larger campus community, and the community as a whole. For example, many times my role on a committee will involve being “the methodology guy,” who can bring special knowledge of data collection, item analysis, or survey construction to a project. I welcome the chance to teach my colleagues in other disciplines a little about the quantitative methods of psychology. Volunteering at local science fairs and giving talks to elementary school children are other ways to teach outside the college classroom. Through these and other avenues, I have come to appreciate that good service can also involve good teaching.

Advice for New Teachers

A careful reading of the trajectory of my professional development reveals the advice I would give to new teachers. First, be willing to teach a lot. That might be through the necessity
of cobbiling together adjunct work to make ends meet, or it might be through volunteering to
teach a summer course or picking up an occasional overload. But like most behaviors, practice
will make you better. To improve your kickball game, you would play a lot of kickball; why not
adopt the same approach to improving your teaching?

Second, do not be afraid to teach something you are not completely familiar with; you
will learn more about the subject, and more importantly, you will learn more about how to teach
effectively as you rise to the challenge. In a liberal arts setting, this advice might be so obvious
as to seem useless; many professors are called upon to be utility players, and that’s somewhat to
be expected. For example, anyone with an advanced degree in psychological science should be
able to teach a course in statistics or research methods; that’s the foundation of what you have
been trained to do, so you should be able to tell undergraduates the basics of what they need to
know. Teaching statistics may not sound all that fun, but you will probably stumble upon new
teaching strategies that you can adapt in your other, preferred courses.

Third, do not be discouraged if you do not land your dream job immediately – the one
that has the exact blend of teaching, research, and service opportunities you want. Following the
first two suggestions puts you in a better position for making this third one come true. It’s
difficult to argue with a track record of exemplary teaching across a broad range of subject
matter, so positioning yourself that way can only be a plus. Bear in mind, though, that dream
jobs more often evolve over time than land at your feet fully hatched.

Final Thoughts

Writing this chapter has afforded me the luxury of reflection, across a long view of over
20 years in this profession. In many ways my story is uncommon; it is a rare blend of bumbling
into a major, stumbling across fortuitous employment opportunities, and rumbling through a
successful career doing what I love. But in other ways my story is unremarkable. Many teachers have to stumble a bit before they find their strengths in the classroom, and many students bumble through coursework before discovering their passion. I hope some aspects of my professional life might resonate with you, and spur you to meet your teaching goals.
References


Chapter 16

Nothing in the World I’d Rather be Doing: A Reflection on Teaching as My Chosen Career

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Nothing in the World I’d Rather be Doing: A Reflection on Teaching as My Chosen Career

There is truth in Albert Einstein’s words, “All that is valuable in human society depends upon the opportunity for development accorded the individual” (Gravity Research Foundation, 2011). For some, opportunities might be known early and efforts are purposeful. However, for others like me, academic opportunities might be fortuitous accidents. I grew up in a family where “college” was not part of the regular dialogue. I wonder what I might be doing today had I not gone with a friend to take her college placement tests. It was that day that I discovered that this college had a cheerleading squad and they were in the middle of teaching routines for upcoming tryouts. To spare the details, I will just say that my friend and I made the team, but that meant I had to enroll in college and hold 12 units each semester. This experience was the first of a set of fortunate accidents that paved the way for me to have the most amazing career at Irvine Valley College that I could ever imagine.

I am a first generation college graduate, which might help to explain why my path toward my PhD from the University of California at Riverside took a number of turns. As a college student, I was interested in most subjects, but I never entertained a connection with a career. After finally discovering that there were academic counselors and a set of courses to be completed, I eventually transferred to the University of Southern California. I loved my physics class, and even better that it was taught by relatable professor wearing what looked like beach attire. However, after getting worn down by the commute and the daunting reality that I could not pay the high price of tuition, I left USC to become a hair stylist (another accidental opportunity). I quickly built a clientele—which offered flexibility and the necessary income to pursue my education, earning a Bachelor’s degree in psychology from California State
University at Fullerton and a Master’s degree from Pepperdine University while working full-time in a salon.

In college, I developed an appreciation for psychological theories and their applications, but two lucky events set the spark for my eventual pursuit of becoming a college professor. The first event occurred just before graduation from Pepperdine. I decided to join a friend at a Western Psychological Association Conference—this experience greatly inspired my interest in research! It amazed me that students tested their own hypotheses! The second event took place just after earning my master’s degree. I was given my first opportunity to teach a statistics course at Fullerton College. I will forever be grateful to Dr. Joanne Brannock who had every good reason to deny me this opportunity. Because a professor had to take a leave of absence, Dr. Brannock had the last-minute choice of moving forward with me teaching the class or cancelling it—thank goodness she chose me to teach the course! These two events were critical in directing my path toward my doctoral degree and current position as a professor.

My Early Development as a Teacher

While an undergraduate student, I remember a conversation I had with a friend about the opportunities given in competitive graduate programs. I was in disbelief that they would fund students. I loved the idea of being a teaching assistant (even though being a research assistant was more widely desired). After building my research experiences and developing a focused research interest, I gained admissions to several amazing programs. I chose the University of California at Riverside (UCR) because I would have the opportunity to work with Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky, who was a new professor (at the time) with an incredible academic background and whose research interests and experiences were perfectly aligned with mine. I was fortunate to receive a California Regents Distinguished Fellowship and guaranteed funding as a teaching
assistant. As a teaching assistant, I attended the Teaching Assistant (TA) Development program which helped prepare all TAs who taught at the university. There was an orientation that I do not remember and information to which I never paid much attention. I think the most useful components of this program were the invaluable information gained by the student evaluations that they organized and reported to each graduate student. Not only were each of my student’s comments typed, but I also received information from several rating scales regarding the quality of my performance and how those ratings compared to other psychology and campus-wide teaching assistants.

I took seriously the student feedback and enjoyed the mostly positive ratings. I looked forward to reading them at the end of each quarter. I felt honored that students said that I made a difference to them, and that they liked my teaching style (which surprised me because I was still developing my teaching style). The hardest hit to me, however, came from those few negative comments. It did not matter how unreasonable the comment (e.g., “she should have given us answers to the exam”), I would ruminate over those comments the most. In my discouragement, I spoke to one of my advisors, Dr. Daniel Ozer, and he said something to me that has stuck with me all these years. He told me that he did not trust evaluations that were only glowing. Looking at the normal distribution of behavior, one should expect at least a few lower scores and that all positive comments might even suggest “bribery” he jokingly told me. So, his words helped me accept the negative comments as “normal,” and to not be too discouraged by them. All student feedback is useful for understanding students’ expectations (reasonable or not) and experiences, and for gaining information toward becoming a more effective teacher.

There was not a logical set of factors that contributed toward my desire of becoming a college professor. Rather, it was a series of accidents strung together that had tremendous
consequences that led me in the direction of teaching. Getting that first class to teach was fortuitous, and it became clear to me that I absolutely loved teaching and it was the single endeavor that made me feel like I made a difference in the world. However, needing a job, I stumbled on an opening and was hired as a market researcher after earning my PhD. This job had all the features of a highly desirable job, but it did not come close to giving me the satisfaction that I had felt in the classroom. I regretted letting go of my part-time teaching positions, but felt encouraged to hear my former chairs/deans would hire me back the following semester. It was during this time that my husband, Nick, told me about a “little community college” in the area and that I should “check it out.” This casual suggestion led to an accidental meeting with Dr. Jerry Rudmann who was a full-time professor and who was just as passionate about teaching as he was research. What a stimulating discussion we had! After that first meeting with him (and the amazingly supportive dean of Social Sciences, Susan Corum), I was determined to pursue a full-time teaching position at a college with professors who were passionate about research and effective teaching!

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

After working less than a year at the market research company, I applied for and secured a full-time teaching position at my top choice—Irvine Valley College. Beginning a full-time teaching position brought a number of challenges. It was the first time that I had faced teaching five classes at one time (with no TAs!). When I taught one class at a time, I would easily remember details regarding paper assignments, extra credit, and last lecture points even weeks back. With five classes at one time, remembering these details was more difficult. Approaches to overcoming these challenges were easy and obvious—take good notes and refer to the syllabus when discussing specifics with students. Less easy, however, was coming to the understanding
that effective teaching is not done in isolation of other factors. That is, effective teaching is not simply about me as the instructor and what I do in the classroom. It entails dynamic interplay among the instructor, the students as individuals and as a group, and the social context in which learning takes place. One group of students can be quite different from another. In one semester, I might be teaching a group of students who are talkative, inquisitive, and assertive in asking questions, whereas in another class, I might need to implement strategies for bringing out these qualities in a group that is seemingly different.

It became clear to me how outside factors may have an influence on any one class session. I will never forget teaching my first semester at Irvine Valley College when the events of 9/11 occurred. It was a day I’ll never forget. The topic of “perception” seemed so mundane, so unimportant compared to the events that occurred that morning. Our college moved forward with classes that day, and I remember feeling “out of it.” However, it was one of the best set of discussions that I have had with students, as we weaved the discussions of these perplexing events around the lecture topics for the course. I discovered how important it is to include relatable stories in my lectures (including personal as well as local, regional, and world events) because they highlight the connection between psychological principles and everyday life, and they make for much more interesting discussions with students.

It might be said that some academics see their work as a “zero-sum game.” That is, time spent in one area (e.g., in the laboratory or committee work) is time that cannot be spent on teaching and thus one must sacrifice work in these areas to be an effective teacher. I could not disagree more, at least with the “zero-sum” idea. Although I realize that time in one area reduces the amount of time spent in another area, I believe that all of my efforts positively sum toward
the betterment of students one way or another and each are important. I am lucky to work in an institution where I see these gains, even in these challenging economic times.

**The Examined Life of a Teacher**

My teaching philosophy has remained consistent since I started teaching. In order to be an effective facilitator of learning, I believe (and research confirms; e.g., Keeley, Smith, & Buskist, 2006; Smith & Lammers 2008; Wotruba, & Wright, 1975) it is important to maintain good organization and planning of lecture materials, speak clearly, make good use of class time, create fair yet challenging exams, and, above all, show respect to all students. I believe (and research supports; e.g., Betoret, 2007) it is important to facilitate learning by incorporating individual writing assignments that provide flexibility for students to explore their personal interests within the context of the course, and to implement collaborative projects that provide unique opportunities for students to share and develop their ideas with others who share a common goal.

With many years of experience in the classroom, I have come to realize that effective teaching is an on-going process that involves many dynamic factors (e.g., Keri, 2002). However, I have most control over the qualities that I bring to the classroom, and thus that is where I tend to focus my attention. In the beginning, I did not realize the extent of my potential influence on students in and beyond the one course. Studies show that characteristics of the professor may be one of the most important factors that influence in students’ ratings of their courses or instructor, and influence students’ motivation, learning, absence rates, and overall retention in the course (e.g., Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Hilligoss, 1992; Legg & Wilson, 2009; Lei, Cohen, & Russler, 2010; Patrick, Hisley, Kempler, & College, 2000; Smith & Lammers, 2008; Weinstein, 2010). Hearing students’ comments such as “That’s interesting,” “I’ll remember that example for the rest of my life,” or “I want to become a psychology major because of this course” means
NOTHING IN THE WORLD I’D RATHER BE DOING

everything to me. While only meant to be casual comments, they resonate so deeply with the primary objective that I have in each class meeting—that is, to be mindful of my role in enhancing students’ interest, motivation, and learning.

Studies show that professors have an impact on students’ college experiences such as the degree of connection they have with other students or resources on campus, and more serious decisions such as whether to drop out of college (e.g., Astin, 1999; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Hearing comments from students such as “I’ve made friendships that will last forever after taking this class,” “I had never seen myself as a ‘school-person’ until now,” and “You’ve inspired me to pursue my PhD” are rewarding to me as a professor beyond words. Although I do not believe that my contribution is anything other than small in the moment, I now realize that a simple comment of encouragement, perhaps one interesting lecture point or exercise, or a single opportunity to connect with students may help to set off a chain of events that could impact students’ lives in great ways in the future. Thus, being an effective teacher means to me that I remain mindful of the power of these “small” moments in each class session, and give great effort to create as many of these moments throughout the semester. I am extremely thankful that I have opportunities to make small differences in students’ lives today, and witness how these moments can lead to great things in their futures!

Although I am personally rewarded by students’ positive comments, I realize that these comments are not a testament to their overall learning in the course. My view of the role of assessment of my teaching has changed dramatically since I taught my first course. In teaching my first course, I struggled to “get by.” I was more concerned with myself to be truthful. For example, I questioned whether I could teach them effectively, whether I should even have that role in the first place, and that students would not take me seriously as the professor (surely my empty briefcase used as a “prop” would help them see me as a professor!). However, I quickly adopted a more
productive attitude—to be mindful of what I want students to learn each class period. My focus should not be about me and whether I appear to be a fit for the role—it is about students’ learning and how I am going to make that happen for them.

In addition to student evaluations (as an indirect measure of their learning) and running item analyses on my exams when relevant, I regularly assess course content, emphasizing authentic assessments. Each course has different objectives that must be met, and I have greatly improved as an instructor over the years by being mindful of these objectives and creating relevant assessments. Even in courses where I believed I “had it down,” I have been humbled to discover that when I removed a particular approach in my teaching (thinking it was “overkill”), students’ learning decreased as compared to students’ learning in previous semesters. Thus, I believe to be an effective teacher, one must objectively know whether their practices are effective, and this knowledge can only be achieved with the aid of relevant on-going assessments.

**Advice for New Teachers**

If someone wants to become an outstanding teacher, my advice is simple yet perhaps difficult to achieve at times. First, truly care about every student—look each in the eyes, try to learn names, and focus on specific content that you want each student to learn. I believe that when professors care about their students, students will detect this attitude and respond positively, and professors will act in ways that is in students’ best interest. Caring about students creates a positive classroom environment where students want to be, and is characteristic of an attitude that I believe leads to other positive attitudes and behaviors in the classroom—being on time to lectures (or posting assignments and materials on time in online classes), giving prompt feedback to students, staying organized in your work, being firm on the standards of the course, being fair to all students, and seeking resources to make lectures (or course content in online
courses) interesting, engaging, and fun. Second, demonstrate your passion for what you are teaching. Psychology is a most interesting subject and it has far-reaching applications. As I tell my students, “If people think it, do it, or feel it, then psychologists study it,” and the information gained by research in psychology benefits individuals in many fields, including those in the health care industry, business, politics, education, personal growth and happiness, and much more. Lastly, it is important to remember that students make choices to be in a specific classroom to learn so make it your duty as a professor to sincerely try to make each class worth your students’ time. Professors cannot captivate every student and guarantee their learning of all the material because professors are only one part of the dynamic relationship that involves learning, but the key is to try.

**Final Thoughts**

For me, teaching means so many things—teaching is a passion, a joy, a quest, and the ultimate challenge to find solutions to specific problems. I love that I see payoffs that amount to greater student learning when I make the effort to try. I love that I can be my “quirky” self that somehow helps students learn (so they say in my evaluations). I love that I might have even a small role in helping students “shoot to the moon” to achieve their highest goals. I love working with colleagues such as Jerry Rudmann, Yemmy Taylor, Mike Cassens, Bari Rudmann, and Netta Schroer who love teaching and being with students, and who inspire me to be a great department member. But mostly I love that teaching at Irvine Valley College is the first time I truly felt “at home.” As my career or “calling,” there is nothing in the world that I would rather be doing.
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