

Teaching about Teaching

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(This essay originally appeared as the monthly “E-xcellence in Teaching” e-column in the *PsychTeacher Electronic Discussion List* for April 2000).

In a recent survey of 261 Graduate Teaching Assistants, almost one half “felt that they received either barely adequate or inadequate teacher training prior to beginning their teaching...” and about 90% “felt that training specifically relating to teaching issues should be required before assuming any teaching duties” (Branstetter & Handelsman, 2000, p. 34). Can you imagine students in clinical training, with little or no preparation, being given therapy clients? Good teaching is at least as difficult as good therapy and the outcomes are just as significant.

I can hear someone say, “well, so what? Good teachers are born, not made. You’ve taken enough courses to know what to do when you have to teach one.” Unfortunately we have only a little research to refute those claims. A few years ago I interviewed about 25 college teachers, most of whom had won teaching awards. More than half described their first teaching experiences as negative: “I was awful.” “I just wanted it to end.” But they did learn how to teach. Bill McKeachie has worked with hundreds of graduate students in teaching seminars and said that he found only two who could not become good teachers. I have seen amazing changes in many of the graduate students I have worked with and in young faculty. People can learn about teaching and there is a lot to know. I anticipate two general audiences for these words: those who are just beginning their teaching and others who are “seniors.” Together we are a community and our task is to help each other to master what Parker Palmer (1997) called, “this occult art – harder to divine than tea leaves and impossible for mortals to do even passably well!” I am going to present four approaches to teaching about teaching; two will be extremes and two seem to be more reasonable.

Minimalism

Buy McKeachie’s (2002) *Teaching Tips*. Read it. Do what it says. That’s one extreme and it’s not bad advice. Of course, someone has to tell the new teacher that books like that exist.

The Ideal

¹ Korn, J. H. (2002). Teaching about teaching. In W. Buskist, V. Hevern, & G. W. Hill, IV, (Eds.). Essays from e-xcellence in teaching, 2000-2001 (chap. 3). Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.org/resources/e-books/eit2000.php>

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At the other extreme is a complete program during graduate study. I know of only one place, the University of New Hampshire, that has done this (Benassi & Fernald, 1993). During the 5-6 years of doctoral study, students combine the learning of a specialty area and their research with course work on teaching and extensive teaching experience. A few years ago I proposed that we begin to establish post-doctoral positions in teaching. This ideal graduate program is similar to the clinical scientist-practitioner model.

Special Ed

What happens in many research doctoral programs is that one person takes on the role of champion of teachers. This person offers a course on teaching and is the one graduate students go to when they want help with their teaching. Usually it is only the Teaching Assistants (TAs) who work with this person; the Research Assistants have other things to do, even though they too may wind up taking teaching jobs. If a course is offered, it may be required only for TAs, or it may be voluntary for all graduate students, as it is in my department.

Teaching Institute

What is there for teachers who do not or did not have these special opportunities? Regional and national teaching conferences offer a way to enter the community of teachers for advice and inspiration. You always get useful hints to take home, as well as after-dinner anecdotes about the teaching life. Perhaps some big names in research will summarize a content area. All those things are valuable, but we should provide more for the person whose preparation for teaching has been “inadequate.”

Early last month Steve Davis, Tom McGovern, Barbara Nodine, and I met in St. Louis to develop a plan for a teaching institute. We wanted to provide a program that would cover most aspects of teaching with an emphasis on experiential learning, that is, not just talking about teaching but doing it and reflecting on the experience. Doing this well might take anywhere from a few days to a few weeks. Clearly there are issues of costs, logistics, and timing, but we thought these problems seemed solvable if we could meet an important need.

Rather than forging ahead with plans for a full institute, we agreed to begin by planning a shorter workshop. The staff of the APA Education Directorate and the APA graduate student association encouraged us to offer this as a pre-convention workshop this coming August. The four of us accepted the challenge of finding a way to teach about teaching in a day and a half. We will start early in the afternoon on the first day by working with participants to compose a draft of their teaching philosophy. Then we will use case study materials to examine course planning, assessment of student learning, evaluation strategies, and continuing professional development. Lecturing with demonstrations, managing discussions, and active learning methods will be modeled in the delivery of the workshop. Participants will be asked to identify the strengths and limitations of these approaches. We will begin the process of building a teaching portfolio for use in job applications and for self evaluation of development as a teacher.

The results of this workshop should show us if we are on the right track. Then we will look for opportunities to offer a more extensive institute over a five to ten day period. Eventually we hope that other experienced teachers may use our work as a model for developing their own teaching institutes.

Of course, it would be impossible to learn all about teaching in a day and a half, or five days, or five weeks. This is a life-long task. Bill McKeachie said that after more than fifty years he still is learning new things about teaching. Sometimes I think I am pretty good, but then go into the classroom and stumble around like a drunk on a trampoline. Then I ask a colleague for help. Perhaps that is the best way to teach about teaching; we should talk with each other about it as often as possible and give each other tips, resources, and, most of all, support. I have found the community of teachers to be extremely generous. If you are reading this you are part of that community and you can teach others about teaching by linking them through the PsychTeacher electronic discussion list. I also encourage you to respond with your ideas about how best to help others develop as teachers.

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