

*The Landscape of Excellence in Teaching*¹

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Excellent teaching doesn't happen by accident. It requires notable thought, planning, and collaboration. Being interested in teaching and wanting to excel in teaching do not equate with being effective in educating students, however. So it is worthwhile to examine what factors will help excellence to emerge. We will be well off considering excellence as a process rather than as a goal, as something we do continuously rather than as something we achieve, as something we share with our students because if their learning isn't excellent, neither is our teaching.

Over the past two years, I have directed the Office of Pre-College and Undergraduate Education at the American Psychological Association. During that time, I have had the opportunity to see the attempt toward excellence from a broader perspective than I had when my horizon stopped at the edge of my classroom. It has become obvious to me that we are more likely to excel if we labor in a community of teaching scholars than if we work alone. We may each be individually dedicated to our students and to our teaching, but we will be more effective as teachers if we recognize the forest of potential that abounds around us.

Fortunately, quite a few people in higher education have reached this same conclusion. The landscape is dotted with scholars of teaching and with organizations that may help us in our quest. The professional environment of teaching has shifted over the past few decades in ways favorable to teachers. We obviously have to balance different demands in our professional lives, like teaching and research. But there are new pressures to teach well that facilitate our work. For example, the movement toward greater accountability, which arose outside the classroom, has provided faculty with an opportunity to improve their teaching.

I will highlight some effective organizational and institutional efforts that facilitate teaching. As an academic, I have a feel for some of the important elements in teaching; as Director of Pre-College and Undergraduate Programs, I have discerned a larger picture.

First of all, it would be hard to claim that we were effective teachers if we did not have a sense of the outcomes we desire. Education is nonlinear and complex, so as we perambulate the pedagogical forest, our instincts and expertise will move us toward the outcomes we seek.

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But the path isn't direct or obvious, so we can benefit from the accomplishments of other scholars of teaching to guide us.

The Education Directorate at APA created a task force of sagacious and diverse psychologists to consider the desired competencies of undergraduate psychology majors. This task force produced a document that outlines 10 learning outcomes, 5 associated specifically with psychology and 5 with psychology as a liberal art (<http://www.apa.org/ed/pcue/reports.html>). The learning outcomes are not course-based. Rather, they focus on the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that students should have gained as psychology majors. The first five outcomes or goals involve knowledge, skills, and values consistent with the science and application of psychology.

- Goal 1. Knowledge Base of Psychology: Students will demonstrate familiarity with the major concepts, theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, and historical trends in psychology.
- Goal 2. Research Methods in Psychology: Students will understand and apply basic research methods in psychology, including research design, data analysis, and interpretation.
- Goal 3. Critical Thinking Skills in Psychology: Students will respect and use critical and creative thinking, skeptical inquiry, and, when possible, the scientific approach to solve problems related to behavior and mental processes.
- Goal 4. Application of Psychology: Students will understand and apply psychological principles to personal, social, and organizational issues.
- Goal 5. Values in Psychology: Students will be able to weigh evidence, tolerate ambiguity, act ethically, and reflect other values that are the underpinnings of psychology as a discipline.

The second set of outcomes extends beyond psychology, involving knowledge, skills, and values consistent with liberal arts education that are further developed in psychology.

- Goal 6. Information and Technological Literacy: Students will demonstrate information competence and the ability to use computers and other technology for many purposes.
- Goal 7. Communication Skills: Students will be able to communicate effectively in a variety of formats.
- Goal 8. Sociocultural and International Awareness: Students will recognize, understand, and respect the complexity of sociocultural and international diversity.
- Goal 9. Personal Development: Students will develop insight into their own and others' behavior and mental processes and apply effective strategies for self-management and self-improvement.
- Goal 10. Career Planning and Development: Students will emerge from the major with realistic ideas about how to implement their psychological knowledge, skills, and values in occupational pursuits in a variety of settings.

The next phase of the task force involves assessment—as teachers, how do we know we have achieved our desired outcomes? Although we often use test scores as measures of success,

there are myriad other options for assessment, like portfolios, behaviors in practica or on internships, and the ability to plan and complete research projects. Some assessments may be relevant only after students graduate, such as surveys of alumnae or employers about how well are former students are prepared for the workplace.

For the past half century, psychologists have been renovating the psychology curriculum; the report of the 1951 Cornell conference (Buxton, Cofer, Gustad, MacLeod, McKeachie, & Wolfle, 1952) makes vastly different recommendations than the Brewer et al. (1993) report from the St. Mary's Conference. In each consideration of the curriculum, all of these psychologists have noted the tentative nature of their guidelines. As we discover more about psychology and about learning and when we factor in cultural context, it is manifest that excellence in psychology education is provisional and dependent on more than a fixed set of principles.

Have you thought about what you hope to achieve in educating your students? If not, how do you know whether you have made a difference in the way your students approach complex issues, how they make decisions, and whether they are critical and empirical thinkers? Too often we rely on classroom test scores to validate our teaching, but memory for specific facts or theories is a very limited way to assess whether we are reaching our outcomes.

Knowledge of content is not an unimportant issue, but the content itself may be a trivial issue because facts are only provisionally true and only meaningful within a limited context. We can draw from B. F. Skinner's statement that "Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten." The most important learning is how to think, not what to think. If we are to achieve excellence, we must identify outcomes that are not essentially trivial. How can we decide on appropriate results? Luckily, we have help from the APA task force, which has outlined a useful constellation of outcomes.

Beyond the APA task force, other organizations are thinking about curricular issues in the empirical disciplines. Project Kaleidoscope (PKAL) (<http://www.pkal.org>), partially funded by the National Science Foundation, has taken an active role in consideration of science education.

For the past three years, under the aegis of PKAL, psychologists have partnered with faculty from various other sciences to discuss the renovation of the undergraduate science curriculum. Most faculty across these disciplines share the same concerns of psychologists: balancing teaching and research, creating an active learning environment, developing a collegial departmental atmosphere, coordinating departmental needs and institutional demands, and so forth.

PKAL has provided some impressive documents (available at its Web site) that will help us in recognizing and establishing our desired endpoints. It is all too easy to labor in isolation, but we don't need to. We can benefit from the shared wisdom of our colleagues in other disciplines.

It is apparent that our discipline has unique perspectives. At the PKAL Summer Institutes and its other meetings, it has become clear that psychologists recognize the research sequence as the backbone of the psychology curriculum. Psychology seems unique in its emphasis on teaching students how psychologists create and generate knowledge. Other scientific disciplines tend to focus on the tools of their trade. This emphasis isn't a dichotomy, but a continuum, and psychology occupies a unique place on that continuum.

PKAL has afforded the opportunity for psychologists to discuss how we can improve our approaches to teaching research, then to develop, implement, and report on plans for curricular and pedagogical renovation that will enhance the way our students learn about research. PKAL participants have seen how different curricular models, ranging from very flexible to very prescriptive, show the potential to lead to the same educational outcomes. The constant give and take of ideas, along with feedback from colleagues at other institutions, has let individual psychologists and entire departments assess themselves with an eye toward renovation (Beins & Marco, 2002). Again we see the role of organizations outside our immediate spheres in fostering excellence.

Connected with PKAL, the Disciplinary Society-Educational Association (DSEA) Alliance meets regularly so representatives of disciplinary and educational organizations can discuss common problems in need of solution. Regular representatives of APA, the math organizations, microbiology, chemistry, sociology, and other scientific membership organizations attend the meetings. Ideally, the discussions generate ideas that ultimately benefit the membership of the associations and provide the chance to discuss commonalities across disciplines.

Have you regularly connected your students to different disciplines? If education is a dense forest, have we persuaded our students to look at psychology as part of the overall landscape? Or is the focus on psychology in which we and our students are missing the forest for the single tree? The other scientific disciplines are related to psychology in ways that we should discover and pass on to our students. The humanities are also important in understanding psychological issues (Dunn, 2002). The DSEA Alliance tries to foster these interrelationships.

PKAL is also involved in the Faculty for the 21st Century program (F21); information is available through the PKAL Web site. This endeavor works to create leaders in educational reform across the sciences. Psychologists are active participants in this program and have provided stimulating leadership in F21. The F21 Leadership Institutes connect young academics with mentors who will create the paths that the subsequent generation will follow.

Closer to home, psychology has the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP), about which I need not say very much. Its accomplishments testify to the impact it continues to have on teachers of psychology in all environments. The Society is looking to the future with its Preparing the New Psychology Professorate (PNPP) programs.

The regional psychological conventions will feature PNPP workshops for new faculty and academically oriented graduate students. These workshops will plant the seeds of excellence

in the next generation of psychology teachers. We can only benefit when new faculty enter the professorate with the desire to excel in their teaching.

Where will all of these organizations and institutions take us? Toward excellence, we hope. One of the brightest aspects of these initiatives is that they have arisen from academics—those of us in the classroom. But we haven't restricted our focus to that part of the landscape right at our feet. Because the initiatives are organizational rather than individual, they can be more widespread in their influence and more stable because they are not dependent on a single person.

Because of the work in the Education Directorate of APA, PKAL, STP, and others, we are beginning to develop permanent, institutional support for our scholarship of teaching. As it is now, all too often we teach in isolation. This is a mistake.

As I have discovered over the past two years, we can engage in excellence by involving ourselves in the scholarship of teaching through the organizations that exist for us, that will welcome our participation, and that we can further shape. A path through the forest has been created, so the journey will be easier than if we had to blaze the trail ourselves. We are remiss if we don't join our colleagues in our march of excellence.

As I prepare to resume teaching, my perceptions on improving my teaching and my students' learning have changed. I am more aware of the advantages of, and perhaps of the need for, looking beyond my own classroom to improve my classroom. Having been involved in the administration of psychology education, I see how I can use the products of that administration.

I need to remember, though, that excellence is a process, not a product and that the journey will never end. As I strive toward excellence in my teaching, I need to remember that the moment I think I have attained it is the moment I will have lost it. So as I traverse the heavily wooded forest of teaching, I will remember Robert Frost's sylvan image:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep
But I have promises to keep
And miles to go before I sleep
And miles to go before I sleep.

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