

Looking Back: Perspectives on a Graduate Seminar in the Teaching of Psychology

Andrew N. Christopher
Albion College

(This essay originally appeared as the monthly “E-xcellence in Teaching” e-column in the *PsychTeacher Electronic Discussion List* for February 2003.)

I suppose like many good things in life, I began my career as a teacher by mistake. It was only through a series of unforeseen events that I received the opportunity to teach my first course, introductory psychology, during the Summer 1995 semester, one year after I began my Ph.D. program. In that course, my primary, if not only, concern was not making any mistakes. I wanted so badly to teach the class “correctly.” After teaching this initial course, I took three graduate seminars in the teaching of psychology. Most of the students in the course were teaching introductory psychology for the first time. As I reflect back on these courses four years later, I am beginning to realize some invaluable lessons I wish to share with other teachers.

One Size Does Not Fit All

“We can take advice from others . . . we can read the philosophies of others . . . each of us, however, has our own vision . . . and although we should consider the thoughts of others, we should remember that it is our course . . .” (Griggs, 1997, p. 5). For instance, if I asked 100 introductory psychology teachers the “correct” way to teach this course might be, I would likely get 100 different answers, all of which could be equally correct. What works for one teacher may not work for other teachers, even though one teacher may be equally effective as the others. Likewise, specific methods of teaching particular material will vary in their effectiveness depending on the teacher (so much for my desired “black and white” view of how to teach). Teaching is indeed a personal endeavor and attempts to circumvent this truism are doomed to failure. I cannot imagine how difficult it must be for those teachers who teach a course without being able to choose their textbooks or determine the development of the syllabus and related concerns (such as course requirements and order of topical coverage).

Avoid Functional Fixedness

Perhaps this second lesson is simply an extension of the first. I am amazed, during only my fourth year as a college teacher, at how much “stuff” I have accumulated for many of my courses. Some of these resources came from colleagues who used them for a singular purpose. In tinkering with them, however, I have been able to take certain material intended for one purpose and use it for another purpose. For instance, I was not aware that the basic ingredients for chocolate chip cookies, used by a chemistry professor to demonstrate some principle unfamiliar to me, could also be used to demonstrate the concept of statistical interactions until I was baking such delights for the departmental picnic. To be sure, a colleague may have an idea that, although not directly applicable to a course I teach, may help me develop another idea that I can use in my courses. Ideas for teaching come from everywhere. For example,

although we should perhaps take our student evaluations with the proverbial grain of salt, one suggestion from a student may lead to a significant improvement in the teaching of our courses. As I read through my evaluations from my organizational psychology class two years ago, one student suggested that she or he wanted more activities that would help with professional development. After thinking this comment through, I was able to develop a semester-long project that not only benefited students in this regard, but that also allowed me to strengthen another major part of the course, psychometrics. Other means for gathering ideas include reading *Teaching of Psychology (ToP)* and attending teaching conferences such as the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP). I am finding that many *ToP* articles and NITOP presentations can be used to teach a variety of principles, not just the one(s) stressed in a particular article or presentation.

Research Matters (Even for “Teachers”)

There are probably few issues on which teachers all agree. If there is one such issue, however, that issue would be that it is crucial for students to develop critical thinking skills. Thus, it stands to reason that as teachers we should be actively striving to improve this ability in ourselves so that we might effectively model it for our students. One way to develop our own critical thinking activities is to remain active in scholarly activities. As Charles Brewer stated, “Research need not be detrimental to teaching. Research can improve teaching . . .” (2002, p. 1). I truly believe that teachers can improve their teaching through engaging in and presenting research at conferences and in peer-reviewed journals. Such activities certainly involve teaching, albeit a different form of teaching than formal classroom teaching. Submitting research for publication will provide evaluations from a different audience than classroom teaching. Such feedback has been invaluable in helping me learn how to communicate information, a skill at the heart of teaching.

Get Directions Before Beginning the Journey

“Be clear about your educational goals and ensure that your students are clear about them” (Brewer, 2002, p. 1). We can still be (and need to be) clear to students about what we are doing, and more importantly, why we are doing it in each individual class we teach. To a novice teacher, assigning three papers in a semester may seem more rigorous than assigning one paper. However, what matters is not the number of assignments, but rather the objectives that they are meant to accomplish, and those objectives need to be spelled out clearly for both the teacher’s and the students’ sake. I have yet to learn how to determine whether students mastered certain material or modes of thinking when I have not clearly articulated what it is they are expected to learn. How can I determine whether students have truly mastered the subject matter, when I have not been clear about what I wanted them to learn in the first place?

You’ll Never Know It All

However, as Meginnis-Payne (2002) said, we can strive for “good enough teaching.” When I first taught introductory psychology, I did not think I knew much (and I was right). Now, having taught the course more than 15 times, I feel as though I know even less than I did when I first taught it. Although this feeling is probably not accurate, I think it is a healthy sign when a teacher feels this way about a course. Striving to improve one’s teaching, by engaging in the above four “lessons,” ought to lead a teacher to realize how complex teaching really is. When a student asks a question to which I have no intelligent response (not an uncommon occurrence), it is a chance for me to learn a little more, and of course, share it with my students.

Conclusion

These are five lessons that I have only begun to learn in earnest. These lessons, like those we teach our students, are most easily realized if they can be seen as challenges and not threats. Even if we never reach the destination of knowing it all, we might as well enjoy the journey.

References

- Brewer, C. L. (2002). Reflections on teaching. In W. Buskist, V. Hevern, & G. W. Hill, IV (Eds.). *Essays from E-xcellence in Teaching, 2001-2002* (Chapter 1). Retrieved December 2, 2002 from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.lemoyne.edu/teachpsych/eit/index.html>
- Griggs, R. A. (1997). Prologue. In R. J. Sternberg (Ed.). *Teaching introductory psychology*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Meginnis-Payne, K. L. (2002). Fighting the surf: Lessons learned in my first year of college teaching. In W. Buskist, V. Hevern, & G. W. Hill, IV (Eds.). *Essays from E-xcellence in Teaching, 2001-2002* (Chapter 13). Retrieved December 2, 2002 from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.lemoyne.edu/teachpsych/eit/index.html>