

Teaching as an Unplanned Career Path

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...in teaching, you must simply work your pupil into such a state of interest of what you are going to teach him that every other object of attention is banished from his mind; then reveal it to him so impressively that he will remember the occasion to his dying day; and finally, fill him with devouring curiosity to know what the next steps in connection with the subject are.

William James (1914)

Being a professor was never something that occurred to me as a possible career. Post-secondary education was not an overly familiar concept in my family when I was growing up in Anderson, SC. My father earned a bachelor's degree after a decade of night school, my mother never finished high school, and no one in either of their families had ever gone to college as far as I know. However, most of the students in my high school classes were college bound, so I planned to go to college, too.

My career in psychology began as an intimidated undergraduate at Furman University. Furman offered me a music scholarship to play the cello. Even though I began college majoring in music, there was a fascination with animal behavior that was always close to the surface. Before I accepted the offer from Furman, I made certain I would be able to switch majors without losing my scholarship. When I examined the course catalog that first year, I wanted to enroll in every course and have a quadruple major. I still remember my heart racing when I first laid eyes on the animal behavior course in the Department of Psychology. I did not understand why this course was in psychology and not biology, but I signed up for Introductory Psychology as soon as possible. I had never paid much attention to psychology because it had a reputation at my high school of being an "easy A." At Furman, psychology had the reputation of being one of the two most difficult majors, a distinction shared with chemistry. The challenge of being a psychology major was alluring to me, and after taking a few classes with fabulous professors, I had no choice but to declare it my major. I was enthralled. It was even worth suffering my father's ridicule for majoring in something which, from his point of view, was ridiculous.

By the time I broke the news to my parents that I wanted to pursue a graduate degree in animal behavior, they had grown accustomed to the fact that I had no interest in

being practical about my career. My father thought I should be a music teacher, but my mother encouraged me to dream. She did not have specific ideas about what I should major in, but she hoped that somehow I would win the Nobel Peace Prize. Bucknell University had an interdisciplinary (psychology and biology) terminal master's program in animal behavior, and the department offered me an assistantship to study there. I explained to my father that the assistantship meant that even though I would be getting what was, in his eyes, a useless degree, at least I would not go into debt. When I decided to attend a doctoral program, I found myself back in the south at the University of Georgia (UGA). My teaching career started at UGA. While there, I received several teaching awards, including the Society for the Teaching of Psychology's McKeachie Early Career Award for teaching. Following graduate school, I worked in a teaching postdoctoral position at Northern Michigan University in Marquette, MI. I then completed a research postdoctoral position at Pennsylvania State University. While at Penn State, I conducted research in developmental psychology with Dr. Leann Birch, focusing on the development of eating behavior in children. At UGA, my research focused on the development of eating behavior in tufted capuchin monkeys, *Cebus apella*. During my postdoctoral experience at Penn State, I investigated the development of eating behavior in children. Currently, I primarily study eating behavior in children, but I also collaborate occasionally with researchers who work with nonhuman primates.

A faculty position at Appalachian State University had been my dream job during my postdoctoral years, so I was thrilled when I noticed their advertisement for a developmental psychologist. Originally I sought out Appalachian because of its location and nice balance of teaching and research. It became even more appealing during my interview, when I discovered the remarkable collegiality in the department.

My Early Development as a Teacher

My pedagogical experiences as a graduate student played a significant role in my development as a teacher. At that time, the UGA Psychology Department permitted most of the graduate students without a master's degree to teach the Research Methods laboratory. Students who had received their masters' taught the lecture part of the course. Usually the master's level students lectured 4 hours a week and the non-master's students covered the 1 hour lab. Because I started the PhD program with a master's degree from another institution, I did not have the benefit of being familiar with the course. I was daunted by the task, but also excited about teaching and I worked hard to do well.

At this point in my career as a graduate student, I did not have much support for teaching, except from the other graduate students. They were my most important mentors. I am not sure if the collegiality among the graduate students in my program was

unusual, but I am certain I took it for granted at the time. Experienced graduate teaching assistants in my program gave me an incredible amount of support and guidance the first time I taught the Research Methods and Statistics courses. Most importantly, they shared their course structure and notes with me. Although I ended up adjusting the lecture notes to fit my own classroom goals, it was initially beneficial to have them. Being organizationally challenged, it was useful for me to have everything laid out to use as a road map for the semester.

After teaching for a year or two, I received a departmental graduate teaching award. Receiving this award made me eligible to participate in a university-level Teaching Assistant (TA) Mentor Program, offered by what is now called the Center for Teaching and Learning. Participating in this program enabled me to receive high-quality teacher training. I still use this program as a model for the graduate student teaching preparation program I currently supervise in my department.

The TA Mentor Program at UGA is an interdisciplinary program designed to train departmental award-winning graduate teaching assistants to mentor other students in the department. Program administrators hoped that by providing teacher training for a few students they would then have the skills to transfer what they learned to other graduate students in their own departments. The university provided a snack and paid 12-15 graduate students to meet every 2 weeks for 2 hours. I am not sure whether the snacks or the payment was more enticing, but the snack was important for helping us make it through the 2-hour class. Although the payment was a strong motivator for participating in the program initially, in the end I felt as if I needed to pay rather than be paid because the program was so beneficial to me.

During the classes, we learned about teaching techniques, teaching philosophies, and the scholarship of teaching. In addition, the program facilitators provided much-needed information about professional development, such as *curriculum vitae* advice, interviewing skills, and job negotiation skills. Overall, this program provided numerous benefits to me. First, I have always enjoyed cross-disciplinary interaction, so I looked forward to the meetings with the other graduate students from across the university. Second, the material I learned at the meetings was invaluable and the climate of the meetings was always inspirational. The facilitators created an extremely effective collaborative and productive program. They gave us a large 3-ring notebook that by the end of the year was stuffed with articles about teaching and descriptions of demonstrations and techniques. Third, I think the facilitators made the program even more relevant by including information about professional development. There was never a problem with attendance or attention at the meetings because we all felt it was

important for us to be there. By the end of the year I had created a Web page (cutting edge at the time), a teaching dossier and teaching statement, and had presented at a regional teaching conference with another student from the TA Mentor program. I felt well-prepared for more teaching and to begin the job search.

When I decided to go to graduate school, I did not give much thought about the possibility of becoming a teacher or academician. Teaching was not part of my long-term plan at that stage, but I think it only took two weeks of teaching for me to re-structure my thinking. I immediately enjoyed teaching and felt passionate about it. At some point in my graduate career I became disenchanted with research and more focused on teaching. I think this change is common for graduate student teachers. Teaching has more immediate rewards compared to research, in which there often is a long delay between the initial interest or question and the outcome. When I first applied for jobs during my final year of graduate school, I was unsure about how I wanted to balance teaching and research. In the end, I declined offers at teaching-intensive institutions because I thought that teaching four or more classes a semester would be too much. Instead I accepted a temporary “teaching postdoctoral position” at Northern Michigan University. This position was perfect for me because it enabled me to get experience teaching several different courses and allowed me the time to write a National Institutes of Health (NIH) proposal to conduct postdoctoral research at the Penn State. Even though I still very much valued teaching, it was important for me to gain additional research experience so that I could apply to institutions that were more balanced in teaching and research.

In the end, it turns out that my love for teaching was one factor that changed the focus of my research interests. I became curious about the development of eating behavior in children after working with children in a project during my last year at UGA. While teaching in graduate school, I became more interested in pursuing a traditional academic career for the first time. It occurred to me that it might be more compatible to do research with children, rather than nonhuman primates, at an institution that is not research-intensive.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

In my department, the faculty members value a balance among teaching, research, and service and between work and life outside of work. We are equally excited about teaching and research and we find both endeavors to be both challenging and rewarding. My colleagues and I also have rich lives outside of our lovely old building, and we are involved with the community. Being in a department that shares my values helps me to integrate research and teaching without sacrificing one for the other.

In my classes I incorporate as much research as possible and feel that students become more engaged if I describe actual research studies rather than just reporting a finding from a study as fact. Incorporating my own research into my Research Methods class has been mutually beneficial for my students and me. I ask students to read peer-reviewed articles related to my research in addition to asking them to read articles about something in which they are interested. I also ask them to analyze “old” data from my studies so that I can walk them through the process of discovery. The students gain experience working with real data, and I benefit when one of these students asks to join my lab group. Students who join the lab group are well prepared for doing research with me because they have read relevant articles and are already generally familiar with the methodology and with my research. Another benefit is that I know exactly what type of research training they have had and I can work with them more effectively having this knowledge.

This interdependency teaching and research carries over into the laboratory. I have designed my research to be student-centered. I try to consider how I can incorporate student involvement when I design studies. Students learn about my specific area of research, but they also learn about research methods, statistics, developmental psychology, and biological psychology when they work in my lab. They also have the opportunity to improve their critical thinking, writing, data analysis, and oral communication skills. Another goal in my lab is for students to make some progress with their professional development. For instance, recently we discussed an article at our lab meeting about successful graduate school applications (Appleby & Appleby, 2006). I also try to create an environment conducive to collaboration, encouraging students to work on projects in small groups and to *use* one another. For example, I ask my first-year and second-year graduate students to read one another’s drafts of their thesis work. I also ask my graduate students to mentor undergraduate research projects for the purpose of improving the writing before I read it, and because it helps them gain more experience writing and thinking logically about research. I request undergraduate and graduate students to make presentations to the lab group as often as possible.

Obviously, this collaboration is very beneficial to me because the quality of the work is better before I ever lay eyes on it, but my students tell me that it is an invaluable experience for them, as well. They have the opportunity to be exposed to the thesis or grant writing process before going through it themselves.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

When I started teaching in graduate school, my first inclination was to give traditional lectures. My fellow graduate students gave me mostly lecture notes, but they

also provided me with ideas about demonstrations they had used successfully in the classroom. Knowing nothing about the scholarship of teaching at that point in my career, I decided to do something nontraditional at least once a week. I have the distinct memory of being concerned that my graduate professors might walk by when my students were working on group activities because I did not think the departmental faculty would approve. It seems unbelievable now when I think about it, but it shows how little I knew about teaching and how little dialogue there was about teaching between faculty and graduates students in my graduate department. It also explains why the TA Mentor Program was so worthwhile to me. Participating in that program validated many of my ideas about what would be effective in the classroom.

My devotion to mixed methods in the classroom has not changed. My primary aim in teaching is, as William James said so eloquently, to fill students with “devouring curiosity.” Although I may never attain this goal, I am happiest when I sense that my teaching stimulates students’ about the things we discuss in class. Although I now teach approximately 100 students each semester, compared to 20 while I was in graduate school, it is still important for me to learn every student’s name as soon as possible.

I value the use of technology in the classroom for some subjects, but I have not found those tools to be particularly useful in my own classroom. I find myself using less technology now than earlier in my career, although I feel more pressure to use it. One simple reason for my decreased use of technology is that I have found that the more of it I incorporate into my teaching and communication with students, the less I interact personally with my students. Sometimes one-on-one interactions begin with a student asking for another copy of the syllabus. If this student could simply print the syllabus from an electronic source I provide, then that is one less interaction I have with them. From my experience, it is the trivial interactions with students that sometimes lead to important conversations. I still find video clips and films to be an extremely valuable use of technology inside and outside of the classroom. For instance, I teach about teratogenic influences on development in my Human Development class and ask students to watch a Bill Moyers’ PBS special, “Kids and Chemicals” (Ablow, 2002), on their own at the library. Class discussions became much more interesting and complex after I started requiring them to see the film.

Another aspect of my identification as a teacher includes mentoring new teachers. Soon after I began my position at Appalachian State University, I started co-teaching a course for graduate teaching assistants. Working with the GTA course helps satisfy my desire to discuss pedagogy and to critique my teaching constantly with others. One advantage that I have in working with this course is that I have been able to co-teach it

with my colleague, Dr. Paul Fox. Even though Dr. Fox is a seasoned professor, he is as enthusiastic a teacher as first-time teachers. Dr. Fox and I both teach the course as an overload but co-teaching this course is well worth the extra time I spend on it. The most rewarding part of this experience has been to observe the development of our graduate students. It is a joy to watch the GTAs blossom as good teachers and to see them discover something about themselves during the process.

Advice for New Teachers

Being a relatively new teacher, I am hesitant to offer advice. There are many individual differences in teaching, and thus there are just as many paths to being successful in the classroom. One of the most important lessons I have learned is that you really do have to be confident with your own style of teaching. When I have tried to emulate too closely the style of teachers I admire, I invariably fail. I do best when I am myself.

References

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