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A Wonderful Life

Mary E. Kite
Ball State University

Save a year spent residing in the state of Texas, I have been a lifelong resident of Indiana, moving first north (in 1977) from my hometown of Clinton, Indiana to Purdue University in West Lafayette. There I earned my bachelor's, master's, and doctorate, after which I moved approximately 2 hours due west to join the faculty in the Department of Psychological Science at Ball State University. I am currently Professor of Psychological Science, but also have filled administrative roles in the Graduate School and now serve as Acting Graduate Dean. Although my current job has taken me out of the classroom, my faculty role remains an important part of my identity and, as I will discuss in more detail later, I view my administrative role as an extension of that role and believe that many of the qualities that define good teaching also define successful administration.

My research interests center on social justice issues, focusing primarily on stereotyping and prejudice, and these interests strongly inform my teaching. Because of this, people are often surprised to learn that my favorite courses to teach are Research Methods and Statistics; I will say more about this later in my story. I also find it richly rewarding to mentor students in the research process and continue to supervise at least one Master's and/or Honor's Thesis student each year. I also have interest in the scholarship of teaching and believe this scholarly pursuit is inextricably linked to excellence in the classroom. Most recently, my colleague Bernie Whitley and I (2006) co-authored a textbook, *The Psychology of Prejudice and Discrimination*, which I consider the perfect intersection between my research and teaching.

As I look back on my career, I can easily point to the significant influence of people who believed in me and gave me opportunities that shaped my career path. Kay Deaux was a mentor and role model, beginning in my undergraduate years and Alice Eagly similarly was a significant influence on my academic career. I am indebted to Deborah Balogh, who was my mentor as a new faculty member and became a friend and collaborator in both research and administration. I owe a debt to Patricia Keith-Spiegel for nominating me for the Outstanding Junior Faculty Award at Ball State University, which I received in 1991, and also for encouraging me to become involved in the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP). Both had a significant impact on my career, although in very different ways. I was named a Fellow of the American Psychological

Association, first by STP (Division Two) and later by the Society for the Psychology of Women (Division 35) and the Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Issues (Division 44) and mentors played a role in those recognitions as well.

I have contributed nationally to my profession; for example, for STP, I chaired the Task Force on Multicultural Issues, and I served as Teaching Awards Chair and as Secretary; at this writing, I am finishing my tenure as President. Also at the national level, I served as a member of the Committee on Divisions and APA Relations (CODAPAR) and was co-chair in 2001. I was a member of the Task Force on Status of Women and currently chair the Task Force on Diversity Education Resources. I have been very involved in the Midwestern Psychological Association, serving as Program Moderator and as Council Member. Next year, I will become Secretary-Treasurer of that organization. Each opportunity for service to my profession led to tangible outcomes that I am proud to have been a part of and to relationships that shaped my thinking and, indeed, my core academic identity. As I pause midcareer and consider my wonderful life, I can not help noting that the relationships, whether with mentors, colleagues, or students, are inseparable from the outcomes, be they courses taught, scholarly publications, service obligations, or administrative initiatives seen to fruition.

Early Development

As long as I can remember, I wanted to be a teacher. Early in my undergraduate career, I had planned to teach high school Spanish and, toward that end, studied one summer in Madrid. But even the pull of that rich experience was not enough to hold my attention. As is true of many psychologists, once I took introductory psychology, I was hooked. I moved from a double major in Spanish and psychology simply to psychology.

As a senior at Purdue, I served as a teaching assistant for abnormal psychology, which involved teaching my own recitation section. That is, I offered 1 hour of instruction to 30 students from the larger lecture section that met twice weekly. I did so with almost no preparation or oversight and I look back with astonishment that this practice was viewed at Purdue as acceptable. The only qualification needed was to convince the course instructor that I wanted to be a teaching assistant (TA). Even so, I enjoyed it immensely and can only hope my students learned something. This experience followed a summer spent as the Arts and Crafts Counselor at Ramapo Anchorage Camp, which served special needs children. It was at that camp that I realized my aspiration to be a clinical psychologist did not fit my temperament; after that experience, I set my sights on a doctorate in social psychology. By the end of my senior year, I was determined to become a social psychologist. I had no idea that that could mean anything

other than college teaching (and, even when I discovered this, I never seriously wavered from that goal).

During my first year as a Purdue graduate student, I was a TA for introductory psychology, which also involved teaching 1-hour recitation sections. This time, however, I was fortunate to receive formal pedagogical training. The course supervisor, Joe Rubenstein, required TAs to take both a course in the teaching of psychology and to meet with him regularly about our development. This practice is now, of course, common place, but it was fairly unique at the time. I still have the term paper on my teaching philosophy that I wrote for his course. One of my strongest memories of that experience is my peers advising me to discuss only my teaching successes in our group meetings and to not admit to failures. Although I did come to follow their advice, that perspective still puzzles me; it seems to me the best way to improve one's teaching is by seeking advice about handling difficult classroom situations. I later taught recitation sections of social psychology, but as a graduate student, I did not teach my own course. As with most doctoral programs at that time (and probably now as well), research experience was still considered the gold standard and most of my graduate career I was funded by a research assistantship. In short, when I began as an Assistant Professor, I was only somewhat (probably barely) prepared for the full-time classroom teaching.

As is true of many academics, my own teaching style was modeled after the many excellent instructors I had as an undergraduate. I have very clear memories of Elizabeth Capaldi's research methods class; her teaching style was a wonderful blend of clarity, passion for her subject, and humor. It was through her encouragement that I became involved in faculty research, first in her rat lab and later with Kay Deaux and Dick Heslin from the social psychology area. I knew I was in love with psychology when I found myself willing to pick up rats all seven days of the consecutive weeks it took to complete the experiment. I was even willing to continue after one of the rascals bit me!

Ultimately, I was drawn to college teaching by the love of the discipline and by the enormous flexibility that our profession enjoys. Ball State University offered me the opportunity to blend my love for teaching with the opportunity to continue my research program, rewarding and expecting excellence in both. I also have appreciated the many chances I have had to pursue interdisciplinary collaboration. In fact, one of the aspects of my current administrative role that I enjoy most is that, by its very nature, it is extremely interdisciplinary. I have gained an appreciation for other perspectives that I simply would not have been exposed to had I remained a faculty member.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Because I teach at a university where both research and teaching are valued, I do not believe I had to sacrifice one in service of the other. Implicit in Ball State's teacher-scholar model is the freedom to focus more on one than the other at a given point in a professor's career. I also have been richly rewarded by my work with students on research projects, both theirs and my own. Similarly, much of my service to the discipline of psychology has been an extension of my teaching. My recent role as chair of the APA Task Force on Diversity Education Resources, for example, is aimed toward pointing psychology teachers toward information that will guide them as they infuse diversity into their courses.

Each course presents a unique teaching challenge and I believe the greatest obstacle a new faculty member faces is finding the portfolio of courses that best suits her or his style. I was surprised to learn that, at least early in my career, my research interest in the psychology of women did not translate into a passion for teaching that course. What I lacked then (but believe I have now) is an ability to appreciate that students come to that topic from different backgrounds, with different sets of beliefs, and that significant time in that course must be spent addressing those differences. I can now admit to being shocked that my persuasive powers were not enough to convince them that my perspective would help them understand women's roles in society! Conversely, I could remember struggling with statistics as an undergraduate and could translate those memories into teaching strategies that helped my own students past those roadblocks. I also could compare Jim Jaccard's excellent approach to teaching that subject with a professor whose approach did not "fit my learning style." I also believe that each faculty member needs to find the blend of courses that holds her or his interest—that balance between becoming comfortable, but not bored with, teaching the topic. For some teachers, that means devoting time to one or two preparations each year, for others that means teaching a variety of courses at different levels, from beginning undergraduate to advanced graduate. It is a lucky faculty member who joins a department where such flexibility is possible—and even rewarded.

The Balanced Life of a Teacher Turned Administrator

One belief that rests at the heart of my teaching philosophy is that each section of each course is unique and the teaching schedule, assignments, and classroom experience must be adjusted, to at least some extent, to take that uniqueness into account. Every teaching assistant I have ever had has been startled to realize how different the same lecture or activity can be in two different sections of the same course. I can remember being surprised myself. The second belief at the heart of my teaching philosophy is that students remember what they have internalized—what gets at the heart of their own

experiences and interests. The trick is to find that sweet spot for each individual in the group that comprises your course. A third belief is that the best teachers come to their students as individuals. Some of the best memories in the classroom came from a shared, spontaneous event that allowed students to see me as a person, not just a professor. When *Star Wars IV* was re-released, for example, I shared with my students the experience of seeing that movie when it first came out. A student blurted out, “Wow, you’re old!”—much to the shock of her peers. I laughed until I cried. In another course, I happened to mention I was divorced. After class, a student came to my office and shared with me the students’ disbelief, saying “We see you as Mary Poppins!” Although it’s surprising that, in this day and age, someone’s divorced status would shock anyone, something changed in my classroom that day for the better; the distance between professor and student was shortened.

Many people see a sharp distinction between the roles of professor and administrator and one question I am often asked is whether I miss teaching. The answer is complex. I do occasionally teach a course, but find that doing so is a different experience compared to when I was a faculty member. It is extremely difficult to switch gears between administration and teaching. The demands of each role are quite different and many aspects of my administrative role can not be put off to prepare for teaching. Much of my job now, for example, is responding immediately to needs of students and faculty that can not wait. For this and other reasons, I personally find it nearly impossible to devote adequate time to the preparation and processing that goes hand-in-hand with teaching excellence. I also find it hard to be available for students when they need it; I am not in the psychology building for those informal interactions in the hall with either faculty or students, for example, and I can not always be available to provide extra help.

At the same time, the role of professor remains a strong part of my identity. I have not forgotten the classroom experience nor do I fail to understand (or recall) the pressures (or rewards) of that environment. Many of my administrative responsibilities are in service of the professor role. The university is a community of teachers whose ultimate purpose is the advancement of our students. My role as a facilitator of that advancement has taken a different form, but my beliefs about the importance of that goal have not changed. Nor are the qualities of a good administrator that different from the qualities of a good teacher; both must be good listeners, both must put students’ needs first and both must respond to individual needs and situations, often by using creative strategies accessed on the fly.

The best advice I can offer to new faculty is to find a mentor and, when the time is right, become a mentor. As I noted earlier, I owe an enormous debt to the many people who have shaped my career through their teaching, through the opportunities they made possible for me, with the help and support they offered as I pursued those opportunities, and by their simply by allowing me a window through which I could watch them succeed. I still have mentors and call on them regularly for advice. It has often been said that we can not begin to know the impact our teaching has on our students, nor can we know how much our mentorship and support of others have shaped others' careers. I can only hope that I have in some way repaid those who mentored me by mentoring others.

My second piece of advice for new teachers is to not be afraid to fail and to not be afraid to share failures with others, as I was advised to do as a new teaching assistant. As a new teacher, failure carries risk, especially if an entire course fails. But, by not taking the risk at all, I think the chances of failing are, paradoxically, even greater. Take chances, then, but be careful to find those people who can help turn any missteps into successes. If you do not have such a person at your home department, seek one elsewhere.

I also highly recommend that you take advantage of the opportunities for faculty teaching development that are widely available on most college campuses today. Ask for funds to support travel to teaching-related conferences. Find that group of individuals who share your passion and keep in touch with them. At the appropriate time in your career, reach out to other new faculty and guide them. Do not sell short your wisdom, even in your early career. Think how much you learned your first year and share that knowledge with others.

Finally, as you advance in your career, look carefully for opportunities and test the waters. Although I was far from dissatisfied with my teaching career, I found administration to be welcome challenge for me. There are wonderful advantages of being a midcareer faculty member, not the least of which is being settled in the discipline and therefore free to choose what interests you for the next stage of your life. I encourage anyone with an interest to pursue administration, perhaps as a department chair or perhaps in another role. In a way, pursuing an administrative role is like a sabbatical wherein time usually devoted to teaching and scholarship is shifted to a completely different set of tasks and, for those with an interest, it can provide a refreshing new perspective on one's academic career.

I began in a part-time administrative internship, which gave me the chance to explore this new role without committing to a full-time administrative position. If you have such an interest in pursuing this option, approach your dean or provost. I think most

universities offer such opportunities, although the process may be informal. When I did so, I found I had undiscovered talents and interests that could be applied to administrative service. Thus, I eventually made the decision to become a full-time administrator. I also know I would be happy to return to the classroom and can not imagine taking an administrative position where that was not an option. Despite the claims of some, I did not become a different person when I became an administrator.

My specific career path at this writing remains uncertain, but regardless of whether I return to the classroom next year or stay on as an administrator, I will always be glad I took advantage of this opportunity. I have gained many skills, learned a great deal about the structure and function of our university, and had the privilege of working with faculty and administrators across my own campus and from other institutions. Should I return to the classroom, I believe these experiences will have changed the way I approach teaching. In particular, my courses are likely to be less discipline bound and more focused on the process of learning and on the application of the course goals than on content per se.

Final Thoughts

This is the second volume of autobiographies of exemplary psychology teachers and what is striking is the uniqueness of each contribution and perspective, which solidifies for me what I have always suspected: There is no one path to excellence in teaching. Each of us charts our own course, and that course is influenced by the individual students who comprise our classrooms and make every day both a challenge and a delight. Equally striking, however, is the number of authors who refer to the community of scholars that comprise the teaching of psychology. Some of them are active members of STP, some are active in other teaching-related conferences and activities, and some are connected to the author by an individual relationship. (Of course, these categories are not mutually exclusive.) The life of a faculty member and, yes, even of an administrator, is a wonderful life. What makes it wonderful is the continuous learning that is part and parcel to the academic life and the people with whom we share our journey.

Reference

Whitley, B. E., Jr., & Kite, M. E. (2006). *The psychology of prejudice and discrimination*. Belmont, CA: Thomson-Wadsworth.