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Teaching Psychology in Autobiography:
Perspectives from Exemplary Psychology Teachers

Edited by:
Jared Keeley
Jeffrey Stowell
Bernard Beins
William Buskist

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Preface

A total of 72 outstanding teachers have contributed to the first two volumes of *Teaching Psychology in Autobiography: Perspectives from Exemplary Psychology Teachers*, published by the Society for the Teaching of Psychology. These stories represent the development and reflections of some of psychology’s very best teachers who provide insightful anecdotes and lessons learned for anyone seeking to improve his or her teaching.

Volume 3 of *Teaching Psychology in Autobiography: Perspectives from Exemplary Psychology Teachers* extends the mission of the first two volumes by including 18 more invited autobiographies. In keeping with the ideals of the first volume, we invited recipients of all five of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP) teaching excellence awards [Robert S. Daniel Teaching Excellence (Four-Year College or University) Award; Wayne Weiten Teaching Excellence (Two-Year College) Award; Mary Margaret Moffet Memorial Teaching Excellence (High School) Award; Jane S. Halonen Teaching Excellence (Early Career) Award; and the Wilbert J. McKeachie Teaching Excellence (Graduate Student) Award], all recipients of the American Psychological Foundation’s Teaching Excellence Award (now called the Charles L. Brewer Distinguished Teaching of Psychology Award), past and present editors of *Teaching of Psychology*, and all past-presidents of STP to contribute chapters to this volume.

To provide consistency in both content and style across all chapters and volumes of this series, each contributor responded to the following 12 questions:

- What kind of preparation for teaching did you receive in your doctoral or master’s program? If you had a course on teaching, please describe it.
- Did you have a teaching mentor or mentors? If so, please describe any unique characteristics of that relationship.
- If you did not have any formal training in teaching or teaching mentors, please describe how you “taught yourself” to become an effective teacher.
- What factors may have led to your decision to become a college and university level teacher?
• Have you faced any obstacles in your teaching? If so, how have you attempted to overcome these obstacles in your own teaching? Please describe any issues with which you continue to struggle and how you attempt to deal with them.
• Many academics see their work as a zero sum game—for example, time spent in the lab is time that necessarily cannot be spent working on teaching and so on. Have you felt that you have to sacrifice your research, service, or outreach efforts in order to become an effective teacher? Why or why not?
• What principles rest at the heart of your personal philosophy of teaching?
• In what interesting and significant ways has your approach to teaching changed over your academic career?
• What sorts of things do you find most rewarding from your teaching? What are the greatest frustrations and how do you try to overcome them?
• What methods and processes do you use to evaluate and reflect on upon your teaching? How has your view of the role of assessment of teaching changed over the course of your teaching career?
• In what efforts do you engage to continue to improve your teaching? How frequently do you engage in these efforts?
• If someone wants to become a good or even outstanding teacher, what would you advise him or her to do?

Each of the authors organized their answers to these questions under the following headings:

• My Early Development as a Teacher
• Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher
• The Examined Life of a Teacher
• Advice for New Teachers
• Final Thoughts

We thank all the authors who contributed to this volume for their wisdom and insight. Their cumulative years of experience can serve as a collective inspiration for new and veteran teachers alike. We also thank the STP leadership and Publications Committee; without their steadfast support this volume and other services like it would not exist. Finally, we would like to thank you, the reader, for taking the time to reflect on our common vocation as teachers of psychology.
As you read the chapters in this volume, we hope that you enjoy them as much as we have in preparing them for publication. In the pages to follow, you will find amusing anecdotes and quirky accidents alongside serious reflections and heartfelt recollections. Common across all the chapters is a driving passion for our discipline and an earnest desire to become a better teacher. And, at the heart of it all, exists a profound caring for our students; after all, it is for them that we have ventured along this path in the first place.

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April 2010
Lessons Learned from a Career as a Student of Teaching

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Lessons Learned from a Career as a Student of Teaching

Although it is difficult for me, at this point in my career I must face the cruel truth that I am undoubtedly considered a member of the “old guard” by my colleagues. This distinction is based on my 27 years of college teaching, 5 years at Saint Peter’s College (SPC) in New Jersey, and the last 22 at Eastern Illinois University (EIU). But to me, it seems like just a few years ago that I was a junior faculty member, seeking advice from my seasoned colleagues on such issues as effective teaching techniques; the proper balance among teaching, research and service; and the appropriate response to the student who asks, “I wasn’t in class today—did I miss anything important?” Now that I am one of the “veteran” faculty members frequently asked to respond to similar queries, I find myself reflecting on the lessons I’ve learned about teaching over my 30-plus years as a student and teacher of psychology.

The educational history that helped prepare me for my career as a psychology teacher began in 1971 at Shippensburg State College—now Shippensburg University—in Pennsylvania. After receiving my bachelor’s degree in psychology, I went on to earn a master’s degree in general/experimental psychology from Marshall University, and a doctoral degree in experimental psychology from the Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. A major step in my development as a serious psychology teacher occurred when I joined the American Psychological Association (APA) shortly after I took my first teaching job at SPC in 1982. As someone who enjoyed virtually all aspects of teaching, I was pleased to discover that there was a division of APA (i.e., Division 2) devoted to the teaching of psychology, and that this division even published a journal on the subject.

When my wife Jayne and I moved from New Jersey to Illinois in 1987, I found the Midwest to be a hotbed of teaching-related activity, thanks in large part to Joe Palladino’s Mid-
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America Conference for Teachers of Psychology (MACTOP). I attended my first MACTOP in 1988, and I returned every year through 2002, the final year of the conference. Perhaps the most important lesson I learned from my 14 years of MACTOP attendance was the value of developing relationships with like-minded colleagues. The individuals I met at MACTOP, particularly in my first few years, became mentors and friends, and they opened doors for me that led to countless opportunities to further develop my interests in teaching, as well as to sharpen my own skills as a teacher. My associations with these individuals led directly or indirectly to the professional credentials of which I am most proud, including, President of Division 2, the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP); consulting editor for the journal *Teaching of Psychology*; faculty consultant for the annual Advanced Placement Exam in Psychology; participant in the National Forum on Psychology Partnerships, sponsored by APA; participant in the National Conference on Undergraduate Education in Psychology: A Blueprint for the Future, also sponsored by APA; and multiple university teaching awards.

**My Early Development as a Teacher**

The idea of pursuing a teaching career first occurred to me during my second or third year as an undergraduate student. As a naïve 20-year-old, my notion of the job description for a college teacher was something like this:

- Hang out with groups of bright, motivated, young people
- No tie or jacket required; sneakers preferred
- Have complete autonomy; plan your own schedule
- Work no more than 12 hours per week, with summers off

Obviously, I was extremely naïve about the job of a college teacher; such phrases as “class preparation,” “scholarly activity,” and “university service” were completely unfamiliar to me.
What I knew about being a college teacher was what I observed as a student, which I presume is true of most undergraduates. It was some years before I learned about the amount of work involved in college teaching, as well as the potential for reward.

It was probably not until my final year as an undergraduate that I truly became serious about the discipline of psychology. The person who was key in this development was Dr. Ralph Payne, who taught the “dreaded” sequence in statistics and experimental psychology. Although neither Dr. Payne nor I realized it at the time, he was my first teaching mentor. The attributes that he demonstrated in the classroom on a regular basis—enthusiasm for the material, concern for his students’ success, the use of appropriate humor, and his clearly organized presentation—not only stimulated my interest in learning, but also formed the foundation for my views of effective teaching practices.

Many of the dedicated teachers I have met over the years can name the specific point in time when they just knew the teaching profession was right for them. For me, this “aha experience” occurred the first time I had responsibility for my own class, as a graduate teaching assistant at Marshall University. Although I was never very comfortable giving speeches, the training that I received in Steve Mewaldt’s teaching seminar thoroughly prepared me for my first actual teaching experience. The weekly meetings included, among other things, discussions of class preparation, participation in the selection of a textbook for the introductory course, and feedback on videotaped teaching sessions with a small group of students. As a result of this training, I felt composed and confident in front of my own class of about 40 introductory psychology students. The experience of presenting material about which I was passionate in a manner that I thought would stimulate the students’ interest instilled in me a surety of purpose that I continue to experience on a daily basis.
Due mainly to the guidance and encouragement provided by Elaine Baker, my thesis advisor at Marshall, I continued my graduate career in the doctoral program at Miami University. At Miami, I took my second teaching seminar, this one taught by Ed Simmel, my graduate advisor. The ostensible purpose of the seminar was to introduce prospective TAs to the “nuts and bolts” of teaching the undergraduate statistics lab for majors, but in actuality it accomplished so much more. Simmel viewed the seminar as all-inclusive career preparation for future academic psychologists. The course included coverage of all the responsibilities of a typical college professor, including teaching, research, and service. We discussed the kinds of activities in which most professors routinely engage, but that are generally not included in the job description; for example, writing letters of recommendation, serving on search committees for faculty positions, and providing academic advising for psychology majors. There was even a session devoted to the discussion of what to expect when we interviewed for an academic position. Given the excellent instruction I received in the two teaching seminars combined with my on-the-job training as a TA, I considered myself fairly well-prepared for my first teaching position.

Although I had yet to finish my dissertation, I left Miami University in 1982 when I was offered a position in the Psychology Department at SPC in Jersey City, New Jersey. Because the department was relatively small—it consisted of five full-time faculty members, every member of the department taught a wide variety of courses. By the time I left SPC 5 years later, I had taught a total of 12 different courses! In addition to broadening my teaching experience (which made me much more “marketable” for another position), my time at SPC contributed to my development as a college teacher in another respect. SPC and Jersey City were (and probably
still are) remarkably diverse, and I learned firsthand lessons on the importance of cultural diversity in human behavior.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

I tend to define myself as a teacher in the broadest sense, as a *scholar* of teaching rather than simply a classroom teacher. Consistent with this definition, I see myself as a psychologist who applies the methodological principles of our discipline to the study of teaching, with the ultimate goal of maximizing my effectiveness as a teacher. That is, I subscribe to the scientist-educator model of teaching outlined by Dan Bernstein and his colleagues (2010) in the second chapter from the book, *Undergraduate Education in Psychology: A Blueprint for the Future*. As Bernstein and colleagues suggest, the central theme of this model is “the systematic collection of evidence regarding the effectiveness of teaching and use of these data to guide the development and refinement of both the conceptual understanding of teaching and its practice in an iterative, recursive fashion” (p. 30).

Not surprisingly, as I have applied this approach over the years I have found that my most rewarding research activities generally involve teaching. Consequently, most of the articles I have published and the presentations I have made at professional conferences over the past 20 years have been related to teaching. And based on my experience, it seems that pedagogical research is more acceptable as a “legitimate” area of research than it was 20 years ago. Two decades ago, when I met someone for the first time at a professional conference, I was often asked, “What’s your research area?” My reply of “teaching” was typically met with a quizzical look and a follow-up question that went something like this: “I understand that you’re interested in teaching, but what’s your *research* area?” More recently, I find that a declaration that I do research on teaching is less likely to be met with the dismissive follow-up questions;
unfortunately, the quizzical looks are still fairly common. Overall, I take this development as a sign that the scholarship of teaching is becoming more widely accepted as a valid area of research among academic psychologists, at least those employed at teaching-oriented institutions. Although this view is less likely to be accepted by faculty at research-oriented institutions, I am optimistic that even these folks will eventually come around. Hopefully, it will not take another 20 years.

Although the scientist-educator model has served me well over the years, I continue to struggle with the balance between providing fundamental information to students, and encouraging them to develop the critical thinking skills that will help them to make the most of their post-graduate opportunities. Thanks to the work of Diane Halpern and others, we are all well aware of the importance of critical thinking in our students’ future success. But as one of my statistics students told me recently, “Thinking is hard, Dr. Addison.” Like most people, many of our students would prefer to take the easy way out; they would rather record and memorize the key terms from the PowerPoint slides than make the effort to consider the conceptual bases for these terms, and to apply them to other situations and examples. And unfortunately, this mechanistic approach to learning has worked for them in the past. If grades are a measure of academic success, then these students have “succeeded” in many of their high school and college classes by simply recording and memorizing information.

Thus, the challenge for me has been to get students to use and develop their thinking skills even though they have been successful in the past without having done so. And because thinking is hard, these attempts are frequently met with resistance. My approach to this challenge has been to emphasize repeatedly to students the importance of these skills to their success as
future graduate students, employees, and citizens. Although there will always be a few holdouts, the lesson I have learned is that most students respond favorably to this approach.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

My philosophy of teaching is derived mainly from three sources: (a) my own experiences as a student, (b) observations of colleagues recognized as outstanding teachers, and (c) my research on student evaluations of teaching. My 10 years as a college student provided me with numerous opportunities to observe effective teaching as well as ineffective teaching. For example, during my second year in college my American government professor decided my final course grade by flipping a coin! The lesson I learned from that incident was that fairness is an essential characteristic of a good teacher, and that flipping a coin is not a fair way to determine a student’s grade.

As a result of my regular attendance at various teaching conferences, and my long-time association with STP and the Advanced Placement program, I have had the good fortune to observe and learn from the best and brightest teachers in the discipline. For example, from the inimitable Charles Brewer, I learned about the importance of communicating clearly with one’s students. To paraphrase from “Brewer’s Ten Commandments of Teaching,” effective teachers communicate with clarity and conciseness; it is a simple task to make things complex, but a complex task to make things simple (Brewer, 2002, pp. 503-506).

Over the years I have conducted a number of studies on student evaluations of teaching. In reviewing the vast literature in this area (e.g., see Frey, 1978; Isaacson et al., 1964; and Marsh, 1991), two general factors tend to emerge as key characteristics of effective teachers: skill in the presentation of material, and the ability to establish and maintain rapport with students. The main lesson here is that good teachers concern themselves not only with the practicalities of teaching
(e.g., organization and presentation of material), but that they also emphasize the relationship-building element of teaching. As a number of recognized authorities on teaching have reminded us, teaching that includes such qualities as respect for students, helpfulness, and openness to questions is not only good practice because it is the right thing to do, but also because students will respond positively to such behaviors, likely resulting in an increased motivation for learning (e.g., Buskist, Sikorski, Buckley, & Saville, 2002; Lowman, 1995; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2005).

Perhaps the cardinal principle in my philosophy of teaching is an emphasis on assessing my teaching through the eyes of my students. I regularly ask myself such questions as: “If I were a student, what attributes would I value in a teacher?” “What examples would help me understand these concepts?” “What type of feedback would be the most helpful to me?” It was relatively easy for me to answer these questions when I began my teaching career; after all, I had recently been a student myself. But as I grew older and my students stayed the same age, I found it more difficult to relate to them based on my own experiences as a student. Their backgrounds were different than mine. They listened to different music, enjoyed different films and television shows. They were natives in the use of technology, whereas I was an immigrant. Clearly, I was a victim of the maturation effect.

Fortunately, as I was getting older, so were our children; as they approached college age, I discovered that I began to understand my students better. Now that two of our three children are in college, I find myself relating to my students not because they are similar to me, but because they are similar to my children.

Establishing working relationships with students is one of the more enjoyable aspects of my job. Throughout my career, I have found the greatest satisfaction in supervising students
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conducting independent research projects. Working closely with small groups of bright, motivated students on research questions of mutual interest is a stimulating experience; and in my view, it is the ideal setting for teaching and learning to occur. To those “veteran” teachers who feel that they are just going through the motions in their teaching, I would strongly suggest that they seek out opportunities to mentor a small group of motivated students in the conduct of independent research.

Additionally, I have learned much about teaching from formal and informal conversations with colleagues. The formal “conversations” may take the form of presentations on teaching at professional conferences, sessions sponsored by the University’s Office of Faculty Development, or “brown bag” sessions with department colleagues. The informal conversations are usually of the “water-cooler” variety in which one or two of my colleagues and I discuss some specific teaching-related issue we happen to be dealing with at the moment. In recent years, my colleagues and I have discussed such issues as approaches for dealing with a disruptive student, limits in the amount of course material we make available to students online, and techniques for improving students’ writing. Although we typically do not resolve these issues in a 20-minute discussion, it is generally helpful to hear the perspective of colleagues who have experience with the same issues.

As I continue to work on improving my teaching, I find that regularly attending teaching conferences is an excellent way to learn about new developments in the use of technology in teaching, see compelling demonstrations of active learning exercises, and cultivate and maintain relationships with colleagues who share my views on the importance of teaching. In addition to attending annual meetings of the Midwest Institute for Students and Teachers of Psychology (MISTOP), the professional “offspring” of MACTOP, I frequently attend teaching-related
sessions at the annual meetings of APA, MPA, and APS. Although I have been attending such meetings for years, I invariably come away from them with new ideas about teaching, and a rejuvenation of my enthusiasm for the teaching enterprise.

**Advice for New Teachers**

In extrapolating from the lessons I have learned about teaching during my career, I offer the following pieces of advice to new teachers, or experienced teachers who are interested in improving their teaching:

1. Attend a regional or national teaching conference, even if teaching is not your “research area.” If you have not done so, I guarantee that you will find the experience to be informative and invigorating.

2. Talk to your colleagues about teaching issues, particularly those colleagues who are recognized among peers and students as exceptional teachers. You can learn a great deal about effective teaching strategies from these informal conversations.

3. Take the feedback from student evaluations seriously. Despite the psychometric limitations of student ratings, I believe they can be useful for gauging students’ satisfaction with aspects of your teaching. Encourage your students to make written suggestions about ways to improve the course. Consider administering informal student evaluations at about mid-semester; the feedback provided could be for your own formative use.

4. Reflect on your teaching. Assess the results of your teaching (e.g., student learning, student satisfaction) the way you would the results of your research. That is, apply the principles of the scientist-educator model to your teaching.
And finally, try to examine your teaching through the eyes of your students. In doing so, you should ask yourself, “What kind of a teacher would I like to have?” The answer to this question might surprise you, but it will undoubtedly make you a better teacher.
References


Enormous Flywheel: Teaching Psychological Science

Scott C. Bates, Ph.D.

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Enormous Flywheel: Teaching Psychological Science

My name is Scott C. Bates and I am an associate professor of psychology at Utah State University. I earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Whitman College, a Master’s degree in general experimental psychology from Western Washington University, and a doctorate in experimental (social) psychology from Colorado State University. I was the recipient of the 2008 Early Career Teaching Excellence Award from the American Psychological Association, Division 2, Society for the Teaching of Psychology. I was also awarded the 2007 Teacher of the Year award from the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education & Human Services at Utah State University.

After graduate school I worked in industry, where I was tasked with teaching problem-behavior prevention specialists and sales representatives the “best practices” of prevention science. However, my primary career goal was always to enter academia and in 2003, I took a tenure-track position in the department of psychology at Utah State University. In 2009, I was promoted and tenured.

At the undergraduate level, I have taught introduction to psychology, research methods in psychology, and orientation to psychology as a major and career. I have also taught a graduate level social psychology course and conducted graduate-level seminars.

Finally, I have also been very involved in providing mentorship to new teachers (both graduate students and new faculty) and have been involved in many other teaching-oriented service activities at the department, university, and national levels.

My Early Development as a Teacher

I attended a liberal arts college and strongly believed in the idea of education for its own sake. This belief, coupled with a passion for psychology, led me to one conclusion: I
was interested in an academic career in psychology. Partly because of the setting I was in, I saw teaching as a fundamental element to the life of a scholar.

In graduate school, I received a measure of more formal training in college teaching. Drs. Frank Vattano and Jack Avens at Colorado State University had established a cross-disciplinary course for graduate students who were interested in becoming teachers. The course was not required. In that class, I found 25 other graduate students who were “from my tribe” (i.e., people who both wanted to be effective teachers and wanted to talk about teaching as much as I did). The course included some of the fundamental operations of being a college-level teacher (e.g., constructing a syllabus, assessment design), along with professional training in skills and strategies for effective lecturing and classroom management. Some of those experiences (e.g., video-taping a lecture and then reviewing it with rest of the class) were very important to me and set a foundation for thinking about teaching as a scholarly activity.

I would say, however, that my informal training as a teacher has been more substantial. Early on, as a graduate student at Western Washington University, I was awarded a teaching assistantship position for an undergraduate statistics course. The format of the course included two lectures per week and a one-hour lab session per week. I was assigned complete control of a lab section. As I remember, I was provided with little instruction, little training, and little guidance, but there were senior teaching assistants—my first teaching colleagues. I learned much from watching them (we shared a large office): how to use lab-time, how to interact with students, and how to say “I’m not sure, let me find out.” Ultimately, from those peers, I learned to seek other teachers and to learn from them.
My first experience of having sole responsibility for a course was at Front Range Community College, in Fort Collins, Colorado. There, I taught introductory psychology to a few dozen students. The nature of those students, particularly the variance in their motivation, skills, and preparation, was very important to my development as an instructor. In every one of those classes, there were highly motivated students, students who apparently lacked all motivation except to sleep, students in high school, students who were in their 50s, students who spoke English as a second language, and students with tumultuous backgrounds. It was this diversity of students that set the stage for my growth as an instructor; I had to work hard to make connections with students and to have students make connections with course material. Certainly I walked into those classrooms with raw skills and plenty of content knowledge, but after a few semesters, I walked out of those classrooms a more fully formed and skilled teacher. Over time, I grew more capable of explaining content, I became better at designing course activities (i.e., lectures, assignments, etc.), and I became much better at intentionally structuring a classroom discussion. To this day, I believe that it was the diversity of the students in those early courses that provided the best training in classroom instruction.

I have had many teaching mentors along my way. Some of them are aware of their impact on my development, others perhaps not. Drs. Eacker, Rubin, and DuNann-Winter at Whitman College, Drs. Dinnel and Trimble at Western Washington University, and Drs. Loomis and Bell at Colorado State University all provided mentorship through conversation and, more importantly, through modeling what it meant to be a good teacher. In each of them I saw an engaged scholar who cared about student learning. To this day, I’ve never seen a college teacher work as hard, be as creative, or be as effortlessly engaged as these
mentors. In each of them, I observed intellectual rigor and above all commitment to the field and to their students.

I am dedicated to teaching today because I was fortunate to have these sorts of mentors.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

A few years ago, my then six year-old daughter asked me what I did at work. I did not hesitate. I did not say that I was a “psychologist” or “professor,” though that would have been accurate. Likewise, I did not say anything about social psychology, environmental psychology, or hint at my work in the field of problem behavior prevention. Those identities, for me, are secondary. I told her, simply, “I am a teacher.“ My professional identity as a teacher of psychology is reflected in my research and service activities, professional affiliations, and in the classroom. Luckily, I was fortunate enough to find an academic position that played to my interests in this regard.

Many of the formal contingencies of reinforcement are not well aligned for teachers at research-oriented institutions. Promotion, tenure, and merit are formally and informally more closely related to research productivity than difficult-to-define teaching productivity. I have colleagues who have said that they do not assign writing to students because “Having students write would require more work on my part. I need to publish, not grade essays.” While teaching is theoretically valued, it is less often observably valued.

I believe that I am a good instructor because I love to learn. These days, with the advent and wide availability of blogs, podcasts and listservs, as well as electronic dissemination of scholarly journals, I am able to sift through a tremendous amount of information about what is happening across the landscape of psychology. I monitor these
sources consistently, trolling for new findings and new approaches to answering questions. By doing this, which I very much enjoy, I feel capable of conversing across a wide variety of sub-domains in psychology. This love of learning is, of course, useful in research and service activities too. I do not believe that academic work is a zero-sum game and would argue that the skills that I have in a classroom also make me a good collaborator and committee member. On the other hand, I have sacrificed the sort of razor-focus that I believe is required of tenure-track faculty at many research-oriented universities. I tend to live up to the saying: he is a jack-of-all-trades, while a master of none.

Besides this structural obstacle, I have faced personal obstacles that have limited my potential as a teacher. Until a few years ago, I had never been particularly well organized. For most of my life, I found success by relying on my brain, which was apparently of sufficient firepower to keep tasks appropriately juggled. Then, in my second year of the tenure process, the juggled-balls began to fall, everywhere. I was teaching three classes (Intro, Methods, and our Careers course), trying to get a fledgling research program off the ground, and trying to be a good departmental citizen. My old ways of dealing with work and productivity were no longer appropriate for that situation. I needed to adapt. For me, the catalyst for adaptation was a book: David Allen’s (2001) book Getting Things Done. Implementing the strategies outlined therein was a literal life changer for me. It allowed me to capture the inexhaustible requests for my attention, prioritize them, and then never fall too far behind in responding.

**The Examined Life of a Teacher**

I find time spent in a classroom to be very rewarding. I also find interacting with individual students, outside the classroom, very rewarding. Helping a student who is
struggling accomplish a goal—be it large (e.g., to graduate) or small (e.g., to pass an exam)—is very fulfilling for me. Similarly, providing an avenue for conversation to a student who is keenly interested in some part of the field or who is seeking deeper knowledge is very fulfilling for me. I also find thinking about teaching very rewarding; I think about teaching constantly. Indeed, I have found that my teaching role tends to expand to fill every available nook and cranny of my attention. Over time, thinking about teaching has led to the development a philosophy of teaching, which provides me an excellent vantage-point from which to answer questions like: How should I spend class-time? Which course should I teach? How can I find out if students are learning anything? How should I approach a new course? How can I improve a course?

Four principles form the foundation of my teaching philosophy. Every decision that I make and everything I do as an instructor is influenced by these principles. First, I try to engage every learner, to capture and hold his or her attention. Second, I try to develop and support critical thinking skills among students. Third, I am interested in helping every learner translate knowledge into action—to help him or her build personally and professionally relevant skills. Finally, I believe that high quality evaluation and assessment of teaching and learning are central tools in achieving high quality teaching and learning.

The first principle in my philosophy of teaching is about engaging students. I teach large sections (often over 250 students) of introductory psychology and keeping them engaged over the course of a single lecture is critical for their learning. I think that every college teacher is simultaneously a storyteller and comedian. Over time I have developed a better sense of pacing, a better sense of how to lead learners through a narrative, and a better sense of the importance of my personal style. I have also learned how to deliver a
punch line, be it for humor or for drama, in order to serve this principle of engagement. I also think that a well-delivered and successful lecture is akin to a well-delivered and successful play, except that the instructor serves as director, stagehand, and most of the actors! I have improved at these skills too, though mostly through brute-force practice and experience.

The second (critical thinking) and third (personal/professional skill building) skill-oriented principles are also very important. A positive learning environment obviously nurtures the development of these skills in a classroom. The recipe for creating a good learning environment, in my mind, includes one-part parenting skill and one-part lawyering skill. That is to say, I also think that every college teacher is a parent of sorts and I have become a better “parent” over time. A good parent establishes a relationship with a child that includes fairness, consistency, empathy, and warmth. I believe that these are also fundamental to good teaching. A teacher that provides fairness and consistency creates a structured, predictable learning environment that encourages students to flourish. Likewise, a teacher that establishes a relationship with students that includes empathy and warmth creates a positive learning environment. But every college teacher is simultaneously a lawyer and I have become a better lawyer over time. A syllabus is a contract between a teacher and his or her students. My skills in both writing and negotiating that contract have improved over time.

The fourth principle of my teaching philosophy is focused on continual assessment and, hopefully, improvement. I ask for feedback frequently and consistently. I get feedback from students, from peers, and from any other source. I also do my best to take feedback to heart and mind. For instance, in reviewing the American Psychological Association’s (2007)
published guidelines for the psychology major, and attempting to align them with my introductory psychology course, I realized that most of my assessment activities were focused on knowledge acquisition or application. As a result, I started to make adjustments so that I could better assess growth in critical thinking skills, including using critical-thinking oriented writing assignment and classroom discussions.

**Advice for New Teachers**

I have two broad suggestions for people who are looking to become good teachers. First, find your colleagues—find your tribe. There are so many great instructors. Seek them out in your department, in your institution, and outside of your institution. Specifically, I would suggest that new teachers attend teaching conferences like National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP), where teaching-oriented academics can be found at an alarmingly high-density. NITOP, despite being a national conference, exudes all of the best things about small conferences: sharing and collaboration. Including participant idea exchanges, poster sessions, and social events, activities that encourage and engage attendee interaction are the norm. Generally speaking, I am not a person who walks up and says “hello” to people that I do not know. At most conferences, and as a closeted introvert, I prefer context for new introductions. However, at teaching conferences, the breaks, meals, social and professional events provide that sort of context. It is rare to go to a place where so many people of “like minds” and (as a fellow-attendee at my first NITOP noted) “like hearts” gather in one place. There are times, I think, that being on the “dedicated” end of the “teacher dedication” distribution gets lonely. At NITOP, we were everywhere. I have been attending professional conferences for somewhere near 15 years and NITOP ranks
among my favorite. It is special and it ought not to be missed by anybody who is interested in growing as a teacher-scholar.

My second suggestion for new teachers is to take time to capture, consume, and digest content from books, blogs, journals, conferences, YouTube, Twitter, conversations with students, and conversations with colleagues, as this content provides both material for class and material for your continued development as an instructor. Capturing this material is important. I use software (e.g., DEVONthink, http://www.devon-technologies.com) that allows me easily to store and broadly to organize this material for later consumption. However, capturing this sort of content is the easiest of the steps. Consuming and digesting information, thinking about how it can work in your classroom, or your future classroom, is of even greater importance. Provide yourself a place and time to think about what you are going to do with this captured content. If you see an interesting blog-post, YouTube video, listserv post, or TV show, take time to consider how it works (or does not): Does it belong in a class discussion? A lecture? Is it a good example? Does it change your teaching style or approach? Should it?

Examples of information to be consumed and digested are everywhere. They should be captured, nurtured, processed, used, evaluated, modified, and used again. Consume and digest the science of teaching. And, if you can, create it as you go. Consume and digest your own experiences as a teacher. If you leave class in a state of psychological flow, spend the few minutes on the way back to your office examining what sparked the state of flow. I can remember coming out of a class session feeling like I could teaching anything to anybody. Upon further thought, it was because students were deeply engaged in the topic of discussion. The same advice for reflection holds if you feel as though your students left the
classroom with fewer IQ points than they had when they arrived. Consume and digest the feedback that students provide you at the end of every semester, but also on a minute-by-minute basis with their faces, which are telling us everything that we need to know about our teaching.

**Final Thoughts**

My teaching autobiography is not complete because I have not retired (if, indeed, that is the end of one’s teaching career). Actually, I’m not even sure that I have arrived at the mid-point yet! So, over then next few decades, I hope to accomplish a lot. I will continue to be mentor of new teachers and I also hope to be continually mentored by new teachers. I intend to be a good colleague to other university teachers at every level and will continue to be an advocate for college teaching. Teaching at the college level is in need of advocates these days. Critically, I will contribute to the empirical literature on college teaching. One of the great weaknesses in college teaching is that we tend to say one thing “psychology is obsessed with observable, replicable, data!” and do another “I think that I’ll try this, this semester, just because.” So, I will continue to support an evidence-based practice of teaching in an effort to create and nurture observable, and replicable, data that can impact the field. Through all of these things, I intend to improve—certainly myself, and hopefully my profession.
References


Work in Progress

When people begin to engage one another, they often depend on some kind of introduction ritual – be it a handshake, high five, fist bump, smile, verbal greeting, or some other way of establishing an acquaintance. Academics tend to present their academic “pedigrees,” as I am about to do. Feel free to skip ahead to the next section! I am currently a Research Professor at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln (UNL) in the Buros Center for Testing. My most recent teaching experiences have been at the graduate level at UNL, where I have taught courses in assessment, ethics, counseling theories, and clinical supervision for the Counseling Psychology program. I completed my PhD in clinical psychology at Fordham University and began a full-time academic career thereafter. Prior to my appointment at UNL, I held faculty appointments at Fordham University, Fairfield University, Le Moyne College, State University of New York at Oswego, and Texas A&M University at Galveston. At SUNY – Oswego, I served as Admissions Coordinator for the graduate programs in the Department of Counseling and Psychological Services from 1993 – 1998; Acting Chair during the summers of 1994, 1995, and 1998; and as Associate Dean of Education from 1998 – 2001. For 4 years at Texas A&M University at Galveston, I was Department Head for an eclectic department of about 25 full-time and about 20 part-time faculty members from far-flung disciplines housed in an academic unit known as the Department of General Academics. In 2003, I was elected a Fellow of the American Psychological Association through Division 2 (Society for the Teaching of Psychology) and also received the Leo D. Doherty Award for Service and Leadership from the Northeastern Educational Research Association. In 2006, I received a Distinguished Reviewer Award from the Buros Institute of Mental Measurements as well as an
Outstanding Service Award from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology for completing a 5-year term as Director of the Office of Teaching Resources in Psychology. In 2008, I was elected a Fellow of the American Educational Research Association. I am currently a licensed psychologist in Nebraska and New York State, and a certified school psychologist in New York State.

**My Early Development as a Teacher**

Unfortunately, the message that permeated my graduate school experience about teaching suggested that it was not a central identity for clinicians. It could be an incidental one, where one gave short shrift to teaching a few mornings each week and then rushed off to one’s real job—often in private practice. Teaching fit the bill for several clinical faculty members in the department in precisely this manner. But it did not work this way for me. Teaching has been my *primary* identity and served as a constant for me across my various positions at diverse institutions. Although I sought licensure as a psychologist in New York, Texas, and Nebraska, I have never used my licenses to establish practices. Rather, I sought licensure in order to bring greater credibility to my teaching as when, for example, I supervise students in fieldwork courses, practica, and internship experiences.

Not surprisingly, in graduate school I had no one whom I considered a teaching mentor. As an undergraduate, however, I valued greatly my relationship with one professor in particular, C. William Huntley. Under his direction I completed my senior honors thesis and under his guidance I first put my toe in the water of academe. My senior research project involved verbal learning of serial lists of nonsense syllables. I presented this work at a regional student research conference. At Dr. Huntley’s urging, I
submitted it to the New York State Psychological Association’s competition for undergraduate research, where it won an award for a paper judged to be “meritorious for its originality and its contribution to the field of psychology.” These experiences cracked the façade of the professoriate and I began to think of teaching as a noble endeavor when done well, and began to visualize it as a possibility in my future.

Although I did not have specific training or mentoring to guide my development, I still wanted to learn to teach effectively. I relied on three things: trial and error, observational learning, and introspection. In trying out new material, I looked for positive student reactions. In some cases, student behaviors indicated their engagement or interest in the new material. These reactions reinforced my efforts. At times, student behaviors suggested confusion or boredom with the new material. These reactions punished my efforts. Observational learning also has played a large role in my development as an effective teacher. At virtually every lecture or presentation that I attend, I notice the process as well as specific techniques used and evaluate their effectiveness. Then I consider whether I could use similar techniques in my classroom.

Finally, I used introspection to examine my strengths and weaknesses and developed teaching strategies that capitalize on my strengths. For example, I am a well-organized person in nearly every aspect of my life. In teaching, I know that I can bring a well-developed plan for each class and each semester. Student evaluations consistently rate my organization and preparation extremely high. That said, I often wish I could fly by the seat of my pants from time to time. But spontaneity is not one of my strengths and I have stopped trying to pretend that I can navigate it.
Across the span of my own education, I had a few teachers who, for me, were truly exceptional. They differed from one another on a variety of dimensions, yet they shared a passion for their work that was awe-inspiring. Bundled with their enthusiasm was an appreciation of student differences and a respect for students as learners. Like most everyone, I also experienced a few lackluster teachers. From them I learned a few—possibly unintended—things as well, including the importance of self-reliance and the role of the learner in the teaching/learning equation. I came to believe that I could do good or even very good work in the classroom. Not every class I teach is a winner, by any stretch, but I am thrilled when a class meeting has that special panache wherein even I must admit it went well.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

Thankfully, I have not felt that I needed to sacrifice research or service efforts in order to develop as a teacher. I view teaching as an interpersonal relationship. Activities such as advising students, preparing syllabi, and writing letters of recommendation are extensions of that relationship and I do not construe them as service or scholarship (even broadly defined!). Fortunately, I have found it possible to use teaching as a cornerstone for my own writing and service. For example, I have taken advantage of several opportunities for service that exist within the Society for the Teaching of Psychology. The Society also sponsors several publication outlets including its top-notch journal, *Teaching of Psychology*, which allows one to develop ideas that may have originated within the classroom and bring them to the broader stage of scholarship. In fact, my first sole authored publication appeared in *Teaching of Psychology*. Shortly thereafter, I applied to become a manuscript reviewer. A few years
after that, I was invited to become a Consulting Editor. I believe it is fair to say that teaching promoted my scholarship and opened the door for vital professional service activities.

The down side of viewing teaching as predicated on interpersonal relationships is the extent to which a lack of connection feels like personal failure. I dare say all teachers have experienced sullen students whose recalcitrance is legion. Somehow, these same students seem to create something like a pedagogical magnetic field that draws us towards them. Parker Palmer uses a particularly amusing anecdote to make this point, as he describes a guest lecture he provided, during which he experienced a “Student from Hell” (Palmer, 1998, pp. 43-44). This student sat slouched in the back of the classroom, completely disengaged and disinterested. Like a moth to the proverbial flame, Palmer reports how he was inexplicably drawn to this student, to the exclusion of the other students in the class. When I find myself in similar situations, I have tried to use my head more than my heart. I have met with limited success. Cognitively, I realize that there are some unreachable students. In my communications with non-engaged students, I leave the door open and the light on in case one of these students decides to join us. In my head at least, I realize that I am doing a disservice to the other students if I devote too much energy to wayward ones.

**The Examined Life of a Teacher**

As a clinician, I have sometimes worked with clients who were mandated to receive therapy. Yet in my view, effective therapy rests on voluntariness—a willingness of the client to confront painful or confusing aspects of one’s experiences and to do so within a safe relationship. Even *mandated* clients cannot be forced to *benefit* from
therapy. Clients retain their autonomy. Some clients choose to participate fully and some do not. The clinician’s role remains constant, however, whether the client arrived on his or her own or by legal decree. The same philosophy guides my teaching, because I see both teaching and therapy as being all about interpersonal relationships. The relationship is critical in bringing about positive changes mostly in one member of the dyad—the student or the client. According to several counseling theories, part of the actual work of therapy depends upon the use of empathy to demonstrate “that the therapist has been personally impacted by the experiences of the client” (Hetzel & Kroll, 2006, p. 23). I believe the same can be said of teaching.

It took me a while, but I finally came to realize that teaching and learning are mutual responsibilities in my classroom, too. Teachers teach and learn; students learn and teach. When I started teaching, I tended to assume responsibility for everything that happened in the classroom, including students’ achievement in the class. I regarded student failures as my failures. Realistically, of course, one cannot expect to reach all students in every class. Some poor performing students will not respond to any—of many—entreaties. Students have a measure of responsibility for what occurs in their learning, too. Beyond one’s own class, some students arrive at college for inexplicable reasons. They may be there at the urging of others. They may be there because they had nothing better to do or because it seemed like the next logical step in their lives. All such persons may become excellent students, inclined to work towards self-improvement. I try to enter every teaching relationship with the idea that this relationship is going to work even though I do not know its nature precisely at the outset. Until I see evidence to the contrary, I assume that students are capable of succeeding in my courses.
As in therapy, much of the work in teaching proceeds on faith. It requires a belief in one’s work even when supporting evidence may be sparse or unavailable (Carlson, 2009a; Perlman, McCann, & McFadden, 2008). Even with a steady faith, however, I am buoyed by contacts from former students. It is especially gratifying when a student contacts me many years later and tells me something concrete about the impact of my teaching on his or her life.

Of course, there are numerous frustrations in teaching. I may be my own greatest frustration. When I make a clerical error, such as failing to hit the “submit” button on Blackboard so the e-mail to students never goes out, it is maddening and often has untoward consequences. Some might say that it is these kinds of actions that can make us appear more human to our students, but in my experience it also frustrates or annoys students. I do not doubt that, at some level, they understand and do not believe my actions were intended to create an obstacle for them. Still, an obstacle that could have been avoided is now in their path. It seems that all one can do is attempt to learn from such mistakes and avoid repeating them.

While teaching, I attempt to be both a participant in the process and an observer of the process. As an observer, I take note of such things as levels of student engagement and curiosity. If I hear students sighing a great deal or see them burying their heads in their notebooks taking an abundance of notes, I conclude that they are not especially interested or drawn in by whatever is going on at the time. Nevertheless, many appear to be trying to slog through the session and to avoid missing the key points. At these junctures, I regroup and consider how I can change my approach.
After every class meeting I replay the session in my head and consider what went well and how one or more aspects of the meeting could have been better. I think about what students said, did, or asked at various points and evaluate whether the students’ input was handled well. If not, I typically make a note to revisit the concern at the next class meeting, often by relating it to the ongoing content. Sometimes I contact students directly, usually by e-mail, to see whether their concerns received sufficient attention.

Cognitively, I understand formal teaching evaluations very well. Emotionally, however, it is quite another story! On the intellectual side, I view formal assessment of teaching as both formative and summative. Although student evaluations frequently comprise the primary means by which teaching effectiveness is documented officially, one can use these data in more formative ways. I identify the “lowlights” in my evaluations and consider how I might improve student perceptions in those areas. I also do a kind of self-assessment, wherein I answer each of the survey questions and reflect upon the areas in which I might grow. Emotional issues creep in as I scrutinize my evaluations on a more molecular level in the form of individual student responses (anonymous, of course). Even after 20-something years of teaching and uniformly above average ratings, I am wounded by a single student’s negative appraisal of my work, for which I know I have given my all. It is part of my ruminative nature to re-process events of the semester and to identify where something may have gone poorly for even one student.

I regard teaching as a never-ending work in progress. With practice, I strive to increase my teaching effectiveness and, so far, I always seem to find some way to try to
do it better next time. Teaching a course for a second or third time is considerably easier than teaching it the first time, but it does not mean there is no preparation needed. I think students would be extremely surprised to learn how much I value and use their input, formal and informal, in making revisions to a course that some teachers might view as already prepped. My revisions frequently involve finding current examples, expanding coverage of a topic, adding a new component, or developing more hands-on learning activities. I continue to learn and to take great comfort in the words of other teachers and find many good ideas in works presented or published by other teachers, usually other teachers of psychology. As I read or re-read their works, I often appreciate their wisdom in novel ways. Another way that I attempt to improve my teaching is to review every issue of the journal, *Teaching of Psychology*, for articles relevant to my teaching and my role as a teacher.

**Advice for New Teachers**

Bring your “A” game each and every time you teach. Bring your passion, too. Hold the bar high for yourself and your students. Let students know that you believe in their abilities to meet your high expectations. Capitalize on your strengths. Use your sense of humor, especially by laughing at yourself when circumstances call for it.

In their summary of 15 years of teaching tips, Perlman, McCann, and McFadden (2008) stressed the need to be intentional in one’s teaching. “Good teachers plan and are mindful of the decisions they make regarding what they do, and do not do, in their teaching” (p. 31). I believe this idea, too, is critical to becoming a good teacher. One must have a plan for each class session as well as for the entire semester. After all, one would not embark on a journey without a map and a plan for navigating the terrain.
Even with a plan, one might choose or be forced to take an alternate route. Yet one still works towards arriving at the original destination. In teaching, too, we sometimes choose or are forced to modify our plans, but we should not lose sight of the final goal, commonly articulated in our course description and course objectives.

Finally, I would advise new teachers to do their part to preserve academic integrity. Quite possibly, this task is one of the most loathsome responsibilities faculty members must shoulder. It becomes less onerous for me when I frame it more as an advocacy effort. I view the preservation of academic integrity as offering protection for honest, law-abiding students, which accounts for the vast majority of them. Through no fault of their own, good students are placed at a disadvantage when wrongdoers are not held accountable (Carlson, 2009b).

**Final Thoughts**

Teaching provides many opportunities for all sorts of things to happen—good, bad, and in-between. It comes with its own “restart” button, thanks to the semester structure within which most of us teach. Coupled with the work-in-progress nature of teaching, I feel I have the chance to maximize the good (and minimize the bad) outcomes of teaching. There are not many professions that offer this kind of structure. Fortunately, teaching is one of them!
References


A Career Lived Forward, Understood Backward

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A Career Lived Forward, Understood Backward

I received my undergraduate degree in economics and finance from Stetson University in DeLand, Florida in 1992, after which I completed an M.B.A. with a specialization in organizational behavior from Southern Methodist University in Dallas. I received my Ph.D. in 1999 with a specialization in social/personality psychology from the University of Florida under the guidance of Barry Schlenker. While at Florida, I also worked extensively with Richard Griggs conducting research on the introductory psychology course. After graduating from Florida, I taught for two years at Anderson College in South Carolina, where I was named Teacher of the Year in my first year there. Since coming to Albion in 2001, I have taught Introductory Psychology, Organizational Psychology, Research Design and Analysis, Social Psychology, Research in Social Psychology, Senior Research Seminar, a first-year seminar titled Social Psychology in Cinema, and a college-wide seminar titled Black Swans and Everyday Life. In 2003, I was named Teacher of the Year. In 2003 and 2009, I was named Phi Beta Kappa Scholar of the Year. My current research interests include ideological predictors of sexism, belief in a just world and risk taking tendencies, the imposter phenomenon, and the Protestant work ethic. In addition, I continue to conduct research on the teaching of psychology, with a particular interest in issues related to introductory psychology, statistics, and research methods. I am the current editor of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology’s journal, Teaching of Psychology. My research has appeared in journals such as Teaching of Psychology, Personality and Individual Differences, Learning and Individual Differences, Journal of Applied Social Psychology, and Psychology of Women Quarterly.

My Early Development as a Teacher
I think that life should be defined as the process of adjusting or not adjusting to one’s circumstances. As an undergraduate at Stetson University, I was an economics and finance major. In fact, I only minored in psychology because a data entry clerk mis-entered my second semester first-year course schedule. I wanted to take Introduction to Philosophy (PY 101), but instead, likely because of my egregiously poor handwriting, got registered for PSY 101 (Introduction to Psychology). As a stereotypical first-year college student, I did not bother to check the hard copy of my spring schedule when it arrived via intracampus mail during registration. So, on my first day of classes that spring, when I checked my schedule to remind myself what I was taking, I was surprised to see that Introduction to Psychology course on my schedule. I tried to get into the philosophy course, but it was closed. No other interesting classes were still open, naturally, so I was stuck in a psychology class. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. My teacher, Richard Kindred, was clearly obsessed with the field, and I caught his enthusiasm. The following semester, I took his personality course, and sure enough, I found it fascinating, especially that “stuff” about conscientiousness and emotional stability. Still, I was an economics major and continued on that path into my senior year. One evening during our senior year, my roommate, Alex Farquharson, and I were playing hallway baseball, when seemingly out of nowhere, he asked me why I was an economics major. I told him that I liked it, to which he asked me another, life-changing question, “If you like econ so much, why do you spend so much time studying and talking about your psychology classes?” Hearing that question, I knew pursuing a career in psychology was my calling.

Of course, graduate work in psychology can lead one to many different places. I started my Ph.D. program at the University of Florida with the aim of doing research in government or private industry. Then, on the night of Saturday, June 4, 1995, after having just completed my
first year of graduate work, I received a phone call from Winnifred (Winnie) Cooke, who was the Chair of the Teaching Center. She asked if I would be able and willing to teach a section of “Introduction to College” for provisionally-admitted first-year students. At this point, I had no idea who Winnie was, nor did I know how she knew me. However, I was a graduate student (i.e., I needed experiences and of course, money), so I said “yes,” after which I learned that the class started two days later. Winnie and I met on Sunday to prepare me to teach my first-ever class. At that meeting, she told me that another teacher had to back out of teaching another section of the course, and she wanted to know if I could teach it in addition to the section I was already scheduled to teach. I figured two sections of the same course, how much extra work could it be? Little did I know it then, but that weekend was the foundation for my career.

To this day, I cannot articulate why I enjoyed teaching these classes so much. Maybe it was helping people find their strengths; indeed, self-confidence was in short supply with some of these students. Maybe it was meeting twice each week with teachers of the other course sections and discussing issues we were facing. As exhausting as that summer was (I was also responsible for research, of course), I knew after the class was complete that I wanted to teach for a career. Having graduated from a small school, and having had wonderful teaching role models there such as Richard Kindred, Susan Wilson, Dan Hale, and Larry Belcher to name but a few, I decided that a small liberal arts college was my professional calling.

Admittedly, “socially adept” is not a term many people would use to describe me, particularly early in my career. For instance, at a research-intensive school such as Florida, a graduate student probably should not advertise his career goal is to teach at a small liberal arts college. Of course as soon as I knew this was my calling, I told my advisor, Barry Schlenker, about this revelation, never stopping for a second to think such a goal may not be congruent with
my current professional station. However, as was the case throughout my time at Florida, Barry was most receptive and supportive of my goals (indeed, in retrospect, I was lucky, as such disclosures aren’t always welcomed so warmly). In fact, he even went so far as to encourage me to contact Richard Griggs, a cognitive professor at Florida, who was and continues to be extensively involved in pedagogical research. It would be too simplistic to say that Barry was my “dissertation mentor” and that Rich was my “teaching mentor.” In reality, Barry and Rich each contributed greatly to my successes in both teaching and research. Working with them allowed me to learn not only how to formulate ideas and test them, but perhaps more importantly, how to make sure projects are completed. As Barry once said, it’s better to have three projects completed than to have six projects half-baked. Neither man was shy about scheduling tasks for completion, and from their habits, I learned how to juggle multiple tasks and complete them in a timely, quality fashion.

My desire to pursue a college teaching career was solidified during the Fall semester in 1996, when I taught Introductory Psychology for the first time. As terrified as I was that summer preparing to teach it, I really enjoyed the opportunity to explore different areas of psychology that I never dealt with in my daily social/personality research. One factor that enhanced my enjoyment of teaching this class was taking a teaching seminar from Rich Griggs. In this seminar, graduate students who were teaching the introductory course read and discussed issues of textbook selection consideration, syllabus development, designing valid assessments of student learning, teaching philosophies, and dealing with various classroom management considerations. Fourteen years later, one of my fondest professional memories continues to be those discussions with other neophyte teachers as we made our way through the introductory course, most of us for the first time.
Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Mark Leary, a former student of Barry Schlenker, told me during my second year of graduate work that the best thing about academia is also the worst thing about academia. Specifically, you get to do work you love to do, but because you love it, you keep seeking out more and more of it to do. No one will stop you from taking on more tasks. I’ve subsequently learned certain people will even “encourage” you to take on more work, especially if your prior work was good. As my career rolls on, I seem to think back to Mark’s sage words more frequently. Indeed, without question, finding balance between my teaching, research, and service, to say nothing of integrating a personal life, is my most persistent struggle.

The good news is that I have developed a method to assuage this struggle. At Albion, the tenure requirements, though not explicitly stated as such, are assumed to be 50% teaching, 40% research, and 10% service. Balancing these three areas of work is challenging, assuming one can easily distinguish between them. As an example of this challenge, it might be assumed that time devoted to teaching is not time devoted to research or service. Perhaps it is simply a cognitive coping mechanism on my part, but I am unable to so easily distinguish between these three areas of work, particularly teaching and research.

With respect to presenting research at a conference, in a journal, or serving in an editorial capacity, when teachers write papers for publication, they are in fact teaching information. Clearly, it is a far different type of teaching than what most people think of when they hear the word “teaching,” the prototype of which likely involves verbally disseminating and discussing information with 18-22 year-old undergraduates. When attempting to publish papers, I am simply explaining why I conducted a particular study, how I conducted it, what I found, and what those findings mean to the discipline and perhaps other disciplines. To accomplish these
goals, I find I need to engage in the same processes needed to teach my students. Specifically, I need to organize information and present it in as concise a manner as possible so that my audience can easily comprehend my message. Whether it is a conference presentation or a manuscript to be reviewed for publication, such endeavors only strengthen my classroom teaching. Because so much of my research involves collaborating with my students, I am forced to teach them how to publish a study and present it at a conference. Of course, my classroom teaching only strengthens my ability to conceptualize, conduct, and communicate research findings to different audiences.

Regarding service, being a member of the departmental curriculum committee was extremely helpful with academic advising, a very basic teaching responsibility. I learned a great deal of information about other majors and how they contribute to a liberal arts education, which is the core mission of my college. Serving on the Institutional Review Board is a perfect manifestation of my desire to stay involved and involve my students in research. Without question, discerning synergies in one’s different professional responsibilities is essential to maintaining some perception of balance that Mark Leary warned me would be difficult to find. Teachers need to undertake those service activities that most interest them (toward this end, having tenure helps).

**The Examined Life of a Teacher**

One of my colleagues at Albion, Jacque Carlson, once said that “research is mesearch.” Indeed, as I reflect on my own research presentations, they are on topics in which I can see some of my own cognitive and behavioral tendencies. We all, I hope, teach classes that interest us. However, sometimes it is possible to get too “into” a course we are teaching by focusing on our own interests, not on our students’ needs and interests. For example, I find students are never as
enthusiastic about learning statistics as I am about teaching statistics. Particularly early in my career, I had to hold back tears in class because it was obvious students did not share my exuberance for that subject matter. I now understand that I felt that way because I was entertaining myself more than teaching my students. Unlike research perhaps, teaching cannot be about oneself; it must always be about the students.

Sometimes the material we love the most is the material we might teach least well because we put our own interests and passion ahead of the students’ collective interest and passion for that material. Indeed, when I teach Introductory Psychology, students indicate their favorite part of the class, without fail, is the neuroscience section, which is the material I know least well in that course. Early in my career, I was hurt that the personality/social part of the course was not their favorite material. After all, it is what I know the best, so therefore it must be what I teach the best. After reflecting on this recurring theme and discussing it with colleagues both at Albion and elsewhere, such as the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology and the APS Teaching Institute, I slowly made an important realization. Specifically, teaching material I was relatively uncomfortable with forced me to relinquish control over class meetings to some extent. Barry and Rich always taught me the importance of preparation in one’s professional endeavors; however, I’ve come to realize that although class preparation is critical, a teacher must not be so rigid as to stifle student interest in particular topics. Material that teachers know “too well” may in fact be more difficult to teach because that material is almost too much a part of us. This is not to say teachers shouldn’t prepare for class, but I do think that there is an optimal, not maximal, level of preparation that most effectively facilitates student learning. When I can confidently discern what this optimal level of preparation is, I will report back at that time. Until then, I will continue to seek it out.
Advice for New Teachers

One of the best parts about teaching, especially teaching psychology, is that there is almost nothing one does in a daily routine that cannot be used in teaching. For instance, mundane tasks such as cooking dinner provide a smorgasbord of ideas for material related to cognitive psychology. For example, some meals I cook require use of implicit memory, whereas others (i.e., those I make rarely) require the use of explicit memory. As a social psychologist, I cannot watch movies for pleasure. No matter the movie, I take notes on it for clips to use as the basis for class discussions. Indeed, it is easy to get overwhelmed by the ubiquitous class discussion material around us. Staying open to learning is perhaps the most critical thing one must to do be an effective teacher. If the teacher doesn’t seem interested in learning, why should his or her students want to learn?

There are formalized ways to stay open to learning, particularly learning specific to improving one’s teaching. I’ve attended the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NIToP) 10 of the past 12 years. Every year, I walk away with new ideas to take into the classroom upon returning to Albion. Likewise, there are several excellent teaching-focused conferences held throughout the year in different parts of the country. The Association for Psychological Science Teaching Institute is another great formal mechanism to keep one’s teaching updated and to learn from colleagues with similar teaching interests. Because all of the venues provide numerous opportunities to interact with other attendees outside of formal presentations, these informal interactions are often every bit as valuable as the formal presentations. I try to remind myself of something Charles Brewer espouses, that is, to keep in contact with colleagues of all experience levels. Your more experienced colleagues can serve as role models of both what to do and what not to do and provide sage counsel. Colleagues with
experience comparable to you can be wonderful sounding boards for ideas and provide empathy as you progress through your career. Finally, your less-experienced colleagues are excellent sources of the “latest and greatest” information and methods in the field and are full of wonderful ideas and energy. In the 11 years since completing my dissertation, I am realizing just how insightful Charles was in this regard (then again, when has Charles ever been wrong?).

As I reflect on my time as a college teacher, I often wonder who made that call to Winnie Cooke to recommend me as a teacher during the Summer 1995 semester. I still don’t know. Then again, during my first year of college, had my handwriting been legible, had my roommate not been an astute observer of my behavior, had….well, the list of “had only’s” could go on. When it is said that life is lived forward and understood backward, that describes my professional journey perfectly. When I am having a bad day, I do sometimes wonder what my career would have been like had I pursued a career in finance. I realize such bad days are ubiquitous no matter one’s career (and my performance in day-trading stocks confirms this belief). Being well-versed in the law of small numbers, I know bad days are transitory, almost necessary to truly enjoy all the good days that keep me in this career. Whether you are preparing to teach your first class this fall or you are a master teacher such as Bill McKeachie, author of the famous book Teaching Tips, now in its 13th edition, staying open to changing circumstances, regardless of whether they appear desirable or undesirable at first glance, is essential to success as a teacher, or in my case, even becoming a teacher in the first place.
Reference

In Pursuit of Becoming Extraneous

Well, it happened again! The first day of school came and I was up at 3:00 a.m. No, the problem was not nightmares, night terrors, a bitty bladder, or the neighbor’s cat. My issue was anticipatory enthusiasm! After 38 years of teaching, I still cannot sleep the night before school starts. I am never able to appear blasé at the prospect of a new beginning. Given my philosophy of education, one would think that I would be able to relax at some point, for my goal as a teacher is to become non-essential in the lives of my students. I agree with Montessori that experiential education is in the best interests of the student. The teacher’s task should be to arrange those experiences that impel the student to act. In short, students must be the primary catalysts in their own education. When students enter my AP Psychology classes, this philosophy is posted on the bulletin board.

Most people do not wish to become extraneous at their jobs. After all, they need a paycheck! I seek eventual obsolescence for my desire is that my students become life-long learners and self educators. To that end, the first day of class I invite all students to partake of the multi-colored Skittles that I spoon into their little cups, and then, I tell them that today is the last time I will spoon feed them. Henceforth, they are in charge of their own learning. They will get out of it what they put into it. There has been some initial resistance to this philosophy in my classes at Kellam High School in Virginia Beach, Virginia, as you might imagine.

My Early Development as a Teacher

It was my 3rd day of student teaching. My cooperating teacher was a nice person, I think, and I gladly arrived at school early in anticipation of learning what he could teach me. The principal met me at the door. “Mr. ___ has scheduled foot surgery for today. He will be out for the next 3 months. He said you would prepare the lessons and teach all of his classes. We will
have to hire a substitute for liability purposes, but you are now in charge of these 8th graders.” Talk about trial by fire! I was on my own and with absolutely no warning. I have, perhaps, rationalized the experience, but, in retrospect, I feel this experience was a fabulous opportunity to test my mettle. If my choices were to sink or swim, I intended to swim.

After swimming through 38 years of teaching, I have much for which to be grateful. The 4 months spent teaching kindergarten in a private school in Atlanta taught me that those child development classes had it right! Who knew? The year I spent teaching American Government in Durham, N.C. to special education students taught me to see the world from an entirely different perspective. The time I spent in a one-on-one tutorial private secondary environment in Midland, Texas teaching English to at-risk teens showed me the value of alternative education. Teaching Western Civilization, US Government, and US History in a community college setting, first in Durham and then in Midland, prepared me for the joys and challenges of teaching in a higher education venue. Teaching retirees at our local Institute for Learning in Retirement gave me hope that my own mind does not have to be constrained with the passage of a particular calendar date. I have taught History and English in middle school, and Geography, Sociology, World History, Government, Humanities, US History, European History, Psychology, AP Psychology, and Criminal Psychology on the secondary level. Having one of those wonderfully marketable Social Science undergraduate degrees from Baylor University has come in very handy.

Working to Define Myself as a Teacher

Although my MAT (Master of Arts in Teaching) from Duke University provided me with an exemplary foundation of teaching techniques and helped me to complete an English minor, there has been nothing quite like experience to refine and redefine my strengths as a
In Pursuit of Becoming Extraneous

After moving to Virginia Beach, my sole focus became the teaching of psychology at Kellam High School. Additional course work at the College of William and Mary, the University of Virginia, Old Dominion University, Texas A&M, and Norfolk State helped me to round out my professional skills.

In 1993, I became aware of the College Board AP Psychology Exam, and I knew I needed more training if I wanted to implement the program at my school. I began the course work toward gifted certification and was soon selected by Dr. Ludy Benjamin, mentor par excellence at Texas A&M to participate in his NSF-funded AP Psychology Teacher Training Institute. This month-long workshop and return retrospective 2 years later brought together some of the best minds in psychology to serve as our instructors, and Ben managed to collect thousands of dollars worth of materials to send home with us. The impact of this institute on my skills and enthusiasm for AP Psychology was tremendous and resonates to this day.

Additionally, 12 of Division 2’s Moffett award winners since 1994 have been graduates of Ben’s institute. We were all inspired by his efforts. Later, when Ben directed the APA Summer Science Institute at Johns Hopkins which gave rising college sophomores the chance to explore psychology as a discipline and potential career, I was given the opportunity to serve on the staff. Our collaborative article, “Academic Challenge: A Review Activity” (Cole, Fuqua, Kopacz, Self, & Weiss, 1999) appeared in Dr. Benjamin’s Activities Handbook for the Teaching of Psychology, Volume 4 (Benjamin, Blair-Broeker, Ernst, & Nodine, 1999), and was featured in the city-wide AP Psychology Quiz Bowl which I initiated in 1994. The Psychology Teacher Network also published my “Significant Moment in Teaching” contribution (Cole, 2008).

I have taught brand new teachers at our new teacher’s institute, career switchers moving into education from the military or business world, and at district, state, and regional
conferences. I was thrilled to present a favorite teaching activity in front of our textbook author, David Myers, at the Eastern Conference on the Teaching of Psychology in June 2009 hosted by James Madison University. I initiated the teaching of criminal psychology in 2000 to gifted students throughout our city, and was awarded the Henry C. Lee Award by the Virginia Institute of Forensic Science and Medicine in 2003 for having the best high school course in Virginia related to criminal science. Today, with the generous support of my school administration, this course has been moved into our regular high school curriculum. My school has honored me with a Distinguished Educator Award and as Teacher of the Year 2010. But the loveliest surprise was being selected as a Moffett Memorial Teacher of Excellence by the Society for the Teaching of Psychology in 2008. Upon hearing this news, the Virginia General Assembly honored me with a Senate Joint Resolution 482 Commendation for my teaching efforts.

**The Examined Life of a Teacher**

I learned early on that teaching can be all consuming. Balancing the demands of teaching and family life is tough. After bringing work home for years only to have it languish in my briefcase while I saw to dinner, baths, homework and bedtime stories, I decided I would stay at school until my work was done so that family time remained sacrosanct. Although the demands of being a soccer mom, piano lesson attendee, and chauffeuring band parent often cut into my after school professional life, and grading research papers sometimes encroached on my vow, in general, I was able to keep that commitment. Now that my children are prospering young adults, I’m able to use my evenings for professional growth endeavors and personal interests. Being there for your students is a necessity, but being good to yourself is also vital. You must draw from a deep personal and professional well if you want to provide sustenance for your students. We must all be our own best friends.
Our second best friends are fellow teachers! Building up a plethora of activities, ideas, lessons, and technology tools to support my teaching has been a result of brainstorming with colleagues, combing all manner of support sites, attending and learning from conferences and workshops, and trying to stay current with the young adult world in order to motivate students. Listening to and learning from my students has also been paramount. They quickly let me know what works and what needs to be tossed.

Those internal and external files of institutional memory help me to stay flexible when power outages, computer crashes, the occasional mouse, inebriated students, impending hurricanes, or recalcitrant students spice up my teaching days. Flexibility is key for a teacher. I have taught all manner of social sciences in five different states. Meeting the various certification demands of those states, the varying philosophies of individual school districts and principals, and the varied socio-economic levels of my students has helped me to embrace diversity. Rolling with each new “salvation” of educational theory that has come down the pike as the ultimate answer to solving the problems of public schools has also been quite a ride.

However, I find that I still relish new challenges, never want to get stale, and actually want to practice what I try to teach my students. I love a day when I learn something new and rarely does a day pass that it does not happen. The young girl I was at age 7 who started reading encyclopedias for fun really hasn’t lost that drive for knowledge. Yet, in the knowing, I am constantly being transformed. Isn’t education wonderful?

I remember the early days of teaching when I thought I had to be the source of all knowledge for my students. I would tell them all they needed to know. Lecturing, therefore, was a skill to be carefully nurtured so I could become the most interesting object on their horizons. My teaching incorporated music, art, and culture into whatever subject I was teaching, and my
story telling became a raison d’etre. Students would remember the concept because they remembered the story. I loved the feeling of telling a story to illustrate a concept, looking around the room, and seeing that I had the undivided attention of every one of my students, or so I thought at the time. It can be quite a rush when you think students are hanging on your every word. Motivation and memorization were, of course, the point, weren’t they? The greatest teachers I have personally ever known were also the greatest lecturers I have ever heard. They truly inspired me.

However, with the problem solving demands of today’s workplace, I felt that I needed to extend my teaching arm to incorporate more strategies to help pass the power for self-education on to my students. Perhaps by focusing on analysis and synthesis, I could move from being the “sage on the stage” to the “guide on the side.” I discovered that I was not the most important player in the educational equation; my students were. They might be better able to take this wonderful content of psychology into their own lives and make personal changes if they had more ownership of the process. They could fly higher, stronger, and farther if they became the primary agents in their own education.

It can be frustrating when you insist that students redefine their concept of what constitutes a teacher and their own roles as students. When you encourage students to look for support first from their peers, each is reinforced in their knowledge base. When you ask students to search and find answers for themselves, they become more curious and retain what they learn longer. When you ask them to see their teacher as a later resort, they grow as learners. I have had so many students return to visit from college who told me that they learned a lot of psychology in my classes, but they learned even more about how to be a college student which
they defined as being an independent learner. Whatever the method, students should be able to leave high school knowing what will work for them in terms of assimilating knowledge.

I want to produce critical thinkers for the workplace, but I also want to have a hand in helping to foster and nurture those concepts in psychology that can simply help to make life better for someone. Students don’t have to make an A on my tests if what they have learned in child development helps them to become better parents. If they learn enough about disorders to recognize a possible undiagnosed learning disability in a sibling and point it out to their parents, my time is well spent. Making a difference in the lives of my students is a valuable and eminently attainable goal.

I am sometimes able to assess both my effectiveness as a teacher and my students’ progress toward accepting their role as life-long learners through a couple of evaluation strategies. This year’s students write letters anonymously to next year’s students at the end of the course giving advice on how to be successful in the course. They discuss assignments, the methods of preparation, what they liked, what they didn’t, and, of course, my role as instructor. They also fill out a course evaluation for which I compute the data to help me in my preparation for next year. The object of this constructive criticism is to help me to help others, and I must be open to it.

I cannot ask only that my students grow as learners. I must continue to grow as a teacher. God forbid I should ever think I have arrived. If one has arrived, one has no place else to go. I want this journey into self revelation to continue. I want more than to finish a professional teaching career saying that “I survived”. “Playing school” when I was 6 years old has not only been a destination, it has become a way of life.

Advice for New Teachers
New teachers might be helped by the following thoughts:

- Be prepared every day. Know your content and plan wisely to get it across to your students.
- Be firm but fair. Don’t hesitate to admit when you have made a mistake.
- Go to your students’ school events. If you want them to be excited about your class, they want you to be excited about their lives outside on your classroom.
- Your librarian’s budget can extend your department’s budget. Always value the extent to which your librarians can assist your course.
- Be a team player. Support your colleagues and administration to the best of your ability. They can make life easier or harder for you.
- Never ever stop learning. Your discipline will pass you by as will your students.
- Never underestimate the impact of your words and actions. You touch lives daily.

**Final Thoughts**

Teaching is not what I do. ‘Teacher’ is what I am. This career has turned into a lifelong love affair with gathering, using, and disseminating not just knowledge but those experiences that can speak personally to my students and to me. As I seek broadening, strengthening, and engaging in my students, I seek the same in myself. Is that, then, the real secret of teaching? Do we seek to teach psychology to others not only for the altruistic betterment of humankind, but also for the elucidation of our own lives? Is teaching, like life, all about giving and getting? I would like to think so.
References


Passing the Torch to Others: The Importance of Mentoring

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Passing the Torch to Others

Growing up, I witnessed many adults having a midlife crisis and I was determined to avoid that by ensuring that I chose a career that I loved. I was always attracted to the idea of teaching and being in an office surrounded by books (that I had read)! During college, when people would say, “Wait until you get into the real world,” I realized that for me the “real world” was academia. Interestingly, my high school grades and intense fear of public speaking would never have led me to predict that I would one day be an educator. Thanks to the support and modeling of family, friends, colleagues and, importantly, students, I continue to develop as a teacher.

I am currently an associate professor of psychology at Cerritos Community College in southern California. I have been at Cerritos for 10 years—ever since I completed my PhD in 1999 at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) in social psychology. I began my education at a community college before transferring to the University of California at Santa Barbara where I received a BA in 1991, with a year abroad at York University in England. In my current position, I regularly teach five classes a semester including Introductory Psychology, Research Methods, Social Psychology, and Critical Thinking. I have served as department chair and advisor to the Psychology Club and Psi Beta, the National Honor’s Society in Psychology for Community Colleges. I mentor students in the research process and annually accompany students to regional and national conferences. I continue to conduct research, but my areas of investigation have shifted from basic social cognition research on stereotyping to research on teaching issues and mentoring. I received the Harry Upshaw Teaching Award.
at UIC, the Outstanding Faculty Award at Cerritos College, and I was recently honored by APA’s Division Two with the Wayne Weiten Teaching Excellence Award.

**My Early Development as a Teacher**

Like many teachers before me, I did not really receive any direct training before being “thrown into the classroom.” I remember on my arrival to my graduate program, another first-year student and I were asked if we would like to teach a section of a psychology course. Although I was terrified and completely unprepared, at the urging of my future best friend and colleague, Amy Blickenstaff, I jumped right in. I’m not sure how effective I was that first semester, but I knew that even though I was nervous to be in front of a class, I loved the experience of sharing in the learning process.

My graduate program was a research program, and I had many great mentors and role models in my research endeavors. Without the support and advice of my graduate school mentor, Len Newman, I would not have developed the courage to pursue my teaching ambitions. Although he was primarily my mentor in the research process, sitting in on his classes taught me how to incorporate the love of research into teaching. Other faculty members like Bette Bottoms and Linda Skitka were also instrumental as role models. Their support provided me with the confidence to pursue my passion. While I was a graduate student, I sat in on a teaching workshop by Dr. Phil Zimbardo on our campus and then attended an intimate dinner with him, reminding me that good food and animated conversation are, thankfully, part of an academic life. To say that he was a dynamic lecturer is an understatement. Although I understood the importance of engaging students, until I saw him “teach” that day, I thought that the role of the teacher was to remain at the front of the room and (albeit engagingly) lecture on one’s expertise to the
class. His workshop was a turning point for me as a novice teacher; he showed me how to have fun with teaching and to take risks in the classroom by trying new approaches to actively engage students in the learning process.

At UIC, students could complete a minor in teaching, with one of the requirements being a seminar in teaching. With the support of other faculty, I petitioned the department chair to allow me to teach the course, and the subsequent semester, I found myself trying to impart my undeveloped teaching philosophy to new graduate students. I also learned that our university had a Council for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. Under the mentorship of Dr. Susan Peverly, I became involved in campus-wide graduate teacher training meetings and workshops. I credit her with developing an environment that facilitated discussions about the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Unfortunately as a graduate student, I was not aware of all of the great teaching resources that were available, which was partly due to the fact that I was primarily engaged in research activities. I had no idea that there were teaching resources available, let alone evaluation tools with established reliability and validity! However, today with the Internet, it is a lot easier to find out what resources are available and to connect electronically with other faculty and potential mentors.

Once I left graduate school, my first few years of teaching were spent trying to model the “good” teachers (i.e., the ones whose classes I most enjoyed attending and from whom I learned the most) and to avoid the teaching style of “bad” teachers. It was during these early years that I realized I could also learn from my students (and I continue to learn from them today). Students come up with contemporary examples of psychological concepts and often see applications of psychological material in areas that
professional psychologists overlook. I’ve also come to rely on my senior students to share their experiences (academic and personal) with newer students, and many of these students develop mentoring relationships that last after the students leave the college.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

When I first arrived at Cerritos College, I assumed that I would teach my five classes, grade papers, and maybe participate in some campus committee work. However, what has kept me at Cerritos College are the inspirational teachers across disciplines who have developed programs like a Global Studies program where students teleconference with individuals at other American and non-American universities, a certificate in Women’s Studies, and the ability to work with faculty around the country on scholarship of learning projects. I never would have imagined that on a daily basis I would be working closely with economists, philosophers, and many others on curricula; conducting research on the scholarship of teaching; and being involved in many other professional activities across disciplines. I have been fortunate to benefit from so many wonderful role models and mentors outside of my own discipline on my own campus. Observing what other faculty have been able to accomplish has continued to fuel my excitement for new projects. During my first couple of years at Cerritos I was so overwhelmed with my teaching responsibilities that my lectures were my main focus. Since then, however, I have found a happy balance between teaching and research: I simply conduct research with my students on pedagogical issues. I am interested in assessing the effectiveness of teaching techniques and investigating how students learn. And of course, teaching a research methods laboratory course always keeps me on my toes!

Because I work at a community college, I have been able to devote time to
committees and projects that focus on interdisciplinary teaching. Much of what I have learned about effective teaching has come from faculty outside of my own discipline. For example, Randy Bass (an American Studies Professor from Georgetown University) worked with faculty from our college on a nationwide project called the “Visual Knowledge Project” and the “New Media Classroom,” which encouraged faculty, through discussions and research, to examine the impact of using technology in the classroom. I benefited immensely from Randy’s insight into great teaching and his enthusiasm. Randy was a great role model because he dared to take risks in his teaching by regularly trying out new activities in the classroom, implementing cutting edge technology, and most importantly, assessing the effectiveness of his new practices.

**The Examined Life of a Teacher**

When I began teaching, I couldn’t imagine undergraduate students visiting my house, let alone inviting multiple students over for a relaxing dinner. However, because I have created a network of former students with whom I regularly stay in touch, once a year I invite over 30 former teaching and research assistants for a get together to which my whole family looks forward. These continued relationships with former students, who are now becoming colleagues, have been one of the most rewarding aspects of my tenure at Cerritos College. Remarkably, most of my students are first generation students and only stay at the college for a couple of years. However, there is a sense of community that we’ve built with them, and many of our alumni continue to return to campus to mentor new students.

Due to my continued relationship with former students, I have had the opportunity to develop a successful program of mentoring for psychology majors. Using students as
my best resource, I developed a Web site called “Mentoring through Alumni in Psychology” (www.cerritos.edu/kduff/map). This Web site is a compendium of resources for students interested in psychological science, including biographies of former students who can be contacted through e-mail to serve as mentors. Because most of our students are first-generation college students, this resource has been very useful and students report that it is inspiring to read about the successes of former students. For me, seeing my former students serve as academic mentors for new, first-generation students is the epitome of higher education.

Although my goals for teaching remain consistent, the methods that I use to accomplish them have changed over the years, and I expect them to continue changing. The heart of my teaching philosophy is to show students that learning is applicable to their own lives. Toward this end, I ask students to bring real life examples of psychological concepts to class, such as how they use the operant conditioning principle of shaping to modify their loved ones’ behaviors. Or I ask students to try out a persuasion technique, like the foot-in-the-door technique, to get something that they want from their friends. If I can show students that psychology has relevance in their lives, then they are more likely to devote the time to studying the course material, and actually use the psychological concepts from class.

One of my other classroom goals is for students to have fun with the material so that it engages them. The best compliment that I get from students is when they tell me that my enthusiasm inspired them to learn more about psychology. When I began teaching, I structured my lectures very closely to the outline of the textbook. Now I modify all of my lectures by thinking about presenting each chapter as a best “last
lecture”; if I only had one chance to present information about a particular concept, what would be the most interesting method of presentation? For instance, if you attended a guest lecture about memory, would it just be a discussion of key terms or would there be a compelling story about memory loss or biases that drew in the audience before discussing the concepts in more detail? After watching many great presentations in psychology and other disciplines, I realized that if I thought of my lecture for the day as a presentation, I would devote more time to the structure and organization of the material. Some great resources for cross disciplinary presentations include the TED Talks (http://www.ted.com) and the Skeptics Society (http://www.skeptics.com).

Of course, when we watch a guest lecture, the presenter does not cover all subjects in detail and that is how my teaching has changed over the years, too. I used to feel a heavy burden to cover every concept in every chapter. However, based on interactions with my students and colleagues, I have found it actually more informative to cover less material, covering it in more detail, and showing how material across chapters is related. For example, I do not cover a whole chapter on developmental psychology in my introductory psychology course. However, while teaching about neural cells in the brain, I talk in detail about embryonic and newborn brain development and how that is affected by environmental factors. Or when I cover social psychology, I talk about developmental research on stereotyping and how that influences how information is stored in the brain.

One of my other main goals, regardless of which class I teach, is to illustrate to students that psychology is a scientific discipline. To enliven my lectures, I present demonstrations that are replications of actual experiments so that I can show students
psychological science in action. Ask anyone what they remember best from a class, and
they will recall participating in some type of active learning exercise. After conducting a
demonstration with my students, we spend time as a class discussing the logistics and
purpose of the demonstration to ensure they understand the concept that was illustrated.

To determine if my method of teaching facilitates student learning, I regularly
assess whether I meet my classroom goals. In addition to end of the term evaluations, I
provide students with evaluation forms mid-semester to determine if our classroom
format is working or if it needs to be modified. I ask students to report on what aids in
their learning and what activities or assignments have best contributed to their
understanding of a concept. Because each course has different goals, evaluation forms are
individually tailored to each class. For example, the goal in one course might be to
develop the ability to be a wise consumer of research (e.g., an introductory psychology
course), whereas the goal of a more advanced course might be to develop producers of
research or strong methodological skills (e.g., a research methods course). The
evaluations that I provide students focus on the particular goals or learning outcomes
specific to each course.

To maintain currency in teaching methods and in the discipline, I regularly attend
regional and national conferences. Some of them, like the National Institute on the
Teaching of Psychology, are in the field of psychology, but others are multidisciplinary,
lake Technology in Education. Even if I do not have institutional funding, I still attend
these conferences for professional development, because the information I learn and the
connections that I make at conferences are what motivate me and perpetually stimulate
me to try new techniques in the classroom.
Advice for New Teachers

It is hard to develop any skill without a mentor or role model. Therefore, my first piece of advice is to seek out individuals who are great teachers and extract as much as you can from them. Contact them, read their work on the scholarship of teaching, and if you can, watch them present or teach a class. I think sitting in on a class is a great way to “feel what it is like to be a student,” which may enhance your own teaching. If you can’t find a mentor on your campus, reach out to the teaching community at large, both in psychology and across other disciplines. I have found that attending teaching conferences is a great way to connect with teaching colleagues. The connections that I have made with faculty at regional and national conferences have often led to great working relationships that are renewed each year when we meet up at the conference site. Joining the Society for the Teaching of Psychology and Psychology Teachers at Community Colleges (PT@CC) has also allowed me to reach out to colleagues at other campuses. Finally, being an advisor for our local chapter of Psi Beta has provided me with a network of psychology teachers that I can connect with at Psi Beta sponsored events around the country.

Treasure the support you receive from friends and family. I could not have worked so hard, faced so many challenges, and celebrated accomplishments without them.

Stay involved and connected with your students. The most rewarding aspect of my job is getting to know my students, who come into my classroom with such unique cultural backgrounds, and staying in contact with them over the years. Additionally, my
students have taught me to be a more effective teacher and mentor—I am more patient, less judgmental, and better educated because of my interactions with them.

Go to teaching conferences, not just in psychology, but interdisciplinary conferences where you will have a chance to connect with other faculty and maybe collaborate on a project together. Read *Teaching of Psychology* and the *Teaching Tips* in the Association for Psychological Science’s *Observer* (www.psychologicalscience.org/teaching/tips/) to learn about new teaching techniques and stay current in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Be the consummate academic: continue to learn more about our wonderful field and stay current in the discipline. Be willing to try out new teaching techniques. Develop interdisciplinary connections with faculty on your campus and around the globe. Assess the effectiveness of your teaching methods and contribute to the research on the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Surround yourself with positive individuals who are doing what you would like to do and who support your endeavors. Always remember the passion that initially led you to teach and nurture it. Finally, share this passion by mentoring your students; it will facilitate their academic success and the relationships that you develop will continue to remind you why you became a teacher of psychology.
References


Like many children of the pre-Wii era, my days consisted of hard-fought backyard wiffle ball battles with my younger brother and friends in the neighborhood. When we were out of objects that resembled baseballs, either by confiscation or loss, we took the game indoors and even swung textbooks at ping pong balls. Many hours of my adolescent period were spent in my backyard batting cage. Needless to say, baseball was my life throughout high school and directly influenced my choice of college.

I entered the University of La Verne (ULV) in Fall 1996 a double major: English and “Kinesiology,” which I interpreted as “majoring in baseball.” The plan was to get on the mound and log some innings for the La Verne Leopards, who had won the NCAA Division III national championship the year prior. I believed that if I wasn’t in a position to be drafted or sign a minor league contract, I could always fall back on teaching English and serving as a pitching coach somewhere. Those plans quickly did not come to fruition. The ligaments in my right shoulder and rotator cuff didn’t allow it. I spent my freshman season a medical redshirt to lengthen my sports eligibility another season, but I never returned to baseball. In the process of having one of the largest aspects of my identity taken from me, I was introduced to another path: the wonderful world of teaching in a college environment.

Because I found my niche, experimental psychology, in my last year of undergraduate study at ULV, I entered the General Experimental MA program at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). I expected to gain the necessary research experience, preparation for doctoral coursework, and eventually some teaching. What I didn’t expect to
feel was the strong call to teach. In the process of handling Sprague Dawley rats, putting them in mazes, and putting students in the tip-of-the-tongue state, I fell unabashedly in love with teaching psychology. I knew teaching was the life for me.

After I finished my MA in General Experimental Psychology, I applied to a variety of doctoral programs. Some of the schools supported my developing identity as a teacher, but most did not. The University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) was my choice for this reason in particular: I could teach Introduction to Psychology in my first semester there. Now, nearly 5 years later, I have taught 21 sections as an instructor of record, 6 laboratory sections, and am in the final days as a doctoral candidate in Experimental Psychology. I have been extremely humbled by the recognition of my teaching efforts. These awards include CSUSB’s Outstanding Graduate Student Teaching Award (2004); the UNLV Teaching and Learning Center’s GA Excellence in Teaching Award (2007); Part-Time Instructor of the Year, School of Liberal Arts & Sciences, Nevada State College (2008); and most recently the Society for the Teaching of Psychology’s (2009) Wilbert J. McKeachie Teaching Excellence award.

My Early Development as a Teacher

Looking back, I can say that I was always a teacher of some sort, or I at least tried to be. My first teaching assignment at age 14 was on my father’s Little League team of 9 to 12-year-olds. I enjoyed working with the pitchers especially, and reveled in the camaraderie of being on a team. I took that same enthusiasm to the classroom every time I had to do a presentation in my junior high and high school classes. There were many teachers who appreciated my irreverent humor and puerile attempts to get a rise out of the audience, but most didn’t. I would be remiss not to acknowledge Cindy Wetzel, Barry Gannon, and Eric Malstrom (Serrano Junior High School, Montclair High School) who all gave me an early
taste of what it was like to stand in front of a classroom, for better or worse. By my senior year of high school I knew that if baseball wasn’t my life’s work, I would teach something.

After I started coming to terms with the noodle that was my right arm and that my baseball days were over, I became involved in student life. My short stint with student government gave way to deeper involvement in my fraternity. My fraternity advisor, Bob Rivera, had a reputation as both a silver-tongued orator and a kindhearted teacher. He knew how to have a good time in the classroom without sacrificing content. As I was taking Bob’s classes, I was maturing a great deal personally and intellectually. Soon I knew that I wanted to teach at the university level to give students what was given to me. The question became “what subject?”

Another ULV professor I greatly admired was Glenn Gamst, but in distinct ways from Bob. Glenn’s wry humor, attention to detail, and intellectual rigor are what stuck with me from his Cognitive Psychology and Experimental Psychology courses. I found that the basic theories in cognitive psychology he taught resonated with me, but I found myself continually thinking about direct applications of those theories to improve student learning. As I was finishing Glenn’s Experimental Psychology course I began to realize that the something I wanted to teach at the university level was scientific psychology. One class demonstration of Craik and Lockhart’s (1972) levels of processing theory was all it took! This a simple manipulation of deep processing (i.e., “think of how the word relates to money”), shallow processing (i.e., “cross out the vowels”), and a free recall task led me down a new path. At least where I was at the time, it seemed that the profession focused on helping people in a clinical sense. I looked past the literal class demonstration and realized that one could also
help students learn more effectively. Who knows where I would be today if Glenn had chosen the Stroop Task instead?

I brought this interest in becoming a teaching coach to California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) as a Master’s student. I received my first formal training in teaching through a Teaching of Psychology seminar at CSUSB. As a requirement of that course, I had to film my psychology lessons in a video studio and submit them to the instructor. Talking to an empty room was a bit disconcerting, as I derive a great deal from my students such as the glazed looks, the light bulb going on, and especially the back and forth of classroom banter. After numerous takes and “do-overs,” I also developed a lecturing pattern with varying intonations, rate of speech, and volume. Of course, lecturing shouldn’t be all about theatrics and style, but enthusiasm and variety engages the student audience. I was able to practice these techniques under the auspices of a master teacher, Allen Butt. My first lecture was an especially memorable one.

Allen’s Introductory Psychology course was housed in a large auditorium. My assignment was to teach the social psychology unit. As to be expected, I was a bit nervous out of wanting to prove my mettle to an instructor whom I admired, and represent my research lab (Robert Cramer’s Social Learning & Evolutionary Research Group) well. Allen had an uncanny ability to weave in and out of formal lecturing and infuse class sessions with course-relevant humor. He also had an original way of utilizing PowerPoint. During that time, most instructors I had come into contact with were filling their slides full of text. Allen would use minimal text and instead use a photo, image, or diagram. I tried to emulate this technique in my first lesson on persuasion. Some of the slides and topics in my initial lecture went over well. The audience was quite respectful. In fact, they were so respectful that they
didn’t tell me that I had a black streak across my forehead for the first half of the lecture. After noticing the streak from the back of the auditorium, Allen came up to the stage and alerted me to my faux pas. I felt the blood immediately rush to my face. My cheeks became beet red and I playfully chastised the audience for not alerting me to the black streak on my forehead for the last 20 minutes.

After that experience, I went on to teach junior high and high school SAT test preparation and writing courses at the Advanced California Innovative (ACI) Institute in San Marino, California. ACI was my proving ground. ACI Director, Simon Kuo, allowed me a great deal of latitude in how I presented the core content, and so I frequently experimented with class activities, discussions, and class formats. I figured that if I could gain the attention of preoccupied, hormonal adolescents, I might do fine with more focused and serious undergraduates.

At UNLV I took another Teaching of Psychology seminar with Wayne Weiten. Because I had amassed a few years of teaching experience at CSUSB and ACI, I had already committed my rookie mistakes. I had become comfortable in my own skin while in front of a class. Our discussion of topics in *McKeachie’s Teaching Tips* (2006) and *Teaching of Psychology* journal articles was what I needed at the time. I was wrestling with my identity as a budding teacher-researcher, and I was relieved to find out about others like me. Soon after, I attended my first National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP) and felt further validated. Wayne’s seminar was instrumental in cultivating my interest in the scholarship of teaching and learning, and exposing me to the teaching of psychology world—for that I will always be grateful.
I continued to take courses on teaching and learning within the realm of psychology, and outside of it. After meeting Victor Benassi at a NITOP meeting, I learned more about the University of New Hampshire’s Teaching Excellence Program and enrolled in the popular online GRAD 980 course. My professor, Stephen F. Davis, taught me about the importance of reflection upon my teaching practices. At UNLV, I worked as an intern at the Teaching and Learning Center under Leora Baron, a savvy administrator who exemplified how teaching and leadership can be one and the same.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

As much as my current teaching practices and philosophy were shaped by my early experiences at the University of La Verne and all those great teachers with whom I crossed paths in graduate school, I have embarked on a path of defining myself as a teacher – not a professor. Teaching is my foremost priority, and what I think about every morning as I drive to campus. Teaching students in the classroom and in the laboratory is a passion that I hope to realize in the next year as a newly appointed assistant professor. I am truly fortunate to have been given a taste of this role as a part-time instructor at Nevada State College with Tony Scinta. Being in the company of Tony and others who see teaching as their passion, not an activity that takes away from research, is especially validating. I can only hope that I end up at an institution where this philosophy prevails.

Another significant obstacle, and source of cognitive dissonance for me, is the balance of teaching, service, and research. As someone who has been heavily involved in student life, departmental service, institutional and system-wide leadership, and service to the profession, I admit that I seek out new challenges and have a hard time saying “No.” The other necessary balance in academia, often bemoaned by others, is the balance of teaching and research.
Leora Baron once told me that teaching and research should be seen as an iterative process. That is, research should inform your teaching, and your teaching practices and reflections should lead to research. This conceptualization was much more useful for me than the previous model I operated under during the dog days of graduate school.

During one particularly challenging semester I took one seminar course, taught five classes, served as the President of the Association for Psychological Science Student Caucus, and worked on my dissertation. I had often remarked to disbelieving colleagues that if I could survive all this, I can handle a 4:4 teaching load. My model was one analogous to workout regimens. After fatiguing one muscle group, one can train another body part and later go back and do another set when the exhausted group recovers. Instead of continuing with this model of cross-training, I find myself enjoying my journey as a graduate student teacher much more under Leora’s model.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

At the core of my teaching philosophy is the coach and team analogy. I aspire to be a good learning coach, not a friend, authority figure, or talking head. I believe that teachers should let their students see them as similar beings with much in common. However, it can be dangerous for a teacher simply to be warm and approachable; they must also be firm. As a wayward undergraduate, only those teachers with that particular combination gained my respect. By the same token, those baseball coaches who adopted a similar mentality got the best performances out of their teams. I wouldn’t be an effective teacher or learning coach if I were simply fun to be around. Creating this environment of rigor and fun is a priority for me in teaching.
Another priority when structuring a course is how best to integrate activities, discussion sessions, and group projects for a given course. Some courses may seemingly feature content that better lends itself to activities than others. For instance, I had once believed that it would be relatively easy to stand back and facilitate learning in a Social Psychology course and difficult to do so in a Statistics or Research Methods course. I have changed my tune across my courses as a whole. A theme of unpredictability and novelty underlies all of my classroom activities and discussions.

Teachers often give students activities that they cannot solve alone, but only through collaboration with their teammates. This approach has always been one that I have admired through observation of master teachers. It is, however, a difficult approach for a new instructor to be at peace with. In fact, I am still coming to terms with my role as a facilitator and the balance between giving students freedom and providing them direction. As I sit back and read my informal student evaluations at the end of a class session from the “2 Minute Drill” or from the midterm evaluation, I find that students enjoy and learn most from each other. As much as I would like to believe a well-practiced lecture with vivid examples is going to get through to my students, it probably is not the most effective pedagogical technique. Standing back and facilitating student learning is an approach I prefer and will refine in the years to come.

One of the ways I assess my own teaching practices, besides through informal and formal student evaluations, is through dialogue with other teachers of psychology. The many conversations I have had in the halls or in the office with mentors such as Robert Cramer, Wayne Weiten, Tony Scinta, David Copeland, and colleagues such as Ryan Lipinski, John Meteer, and Paul Schroeder have stimulated a process of continual self-reflection. Moreover,
I have found that the research and topics discussed at NITOP, the APS-STP Teaching Institute, the Society for the Teaching of Psychology’s (Division 2) programming at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, and the various regional teaching conferences resonate with me and also stimulate the reflective process. As much as I consume teaching research in the form of journal articles, I find these conferences and meetings especially worthwhile.

**Advice for New Teachers**

The many master teachers of the *Teaching of Psychology in Autobiography* series have provided many nuggets of wisdom, and I would encourage all new teachers of psychology to consider them. I will provide two suggestions especially relevant for graduate students wrestling with their professional identities. Establishing my own identity as a teacher-researcher in psychology is a work in progress, and this process has been most assisted by two actions: *attending teaching conferences* and *finding a teaching “safe zone.”*

I have found that keeping current with teaching and learning research through devouring journal articles and books on pedagogy has provided me some direction on where I am, where I should be, and who I would like to become. Even being part of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology’s PsychTeacher listserv contributes to my identity formation. However, as I alluded to earlier, attending teaching conferences has provided me the greatest benefit. I have always found a way to attend my favorite meetings whether it is through travel grants or setting aside my graduate pittance. Every time I go to a teaching conference, I feel validated and energized to begin a new semester.

Another suggestion for budding teachers of psychology would be to find a “safe zone.” That is, surround yourself with people who respect the time and effort you put into your
teaching and do so themselves. These mentors and colleagues will be a source of support in the midst of others who may not be able to relate to your passion for teaching. I am very fortunate to have found a few safe zones as a graduate student. One of them was outside my own department in the university’s Teaching and Learning Center.

**Final Thoughts**

A song from the Great American Songbook, “I’ve Got the World on a String,” nicely encapsulates my love affair with teaching. The chorus reminds me of the feelings I had when I was first introduced to the teaching of psychology, when I realized the great life one could have at a teaching institution, and my eventual recognition that this career path is the one for me. I only hope that graduate students who find this world and life alluring will allow themselves to fall in love with it as I have.
References


Surely They Don’t Expect Me to Teach

Jessica Irons

James Madison University
Surely They Don’t Expect Me to Teach

I never wanted to teach. At various points in my life, I have wanted to be a philanthropist, a lawyer, a clinical psychologist, and a researcher, but I never once wanted to teach. That is, of course, until I taught for the first time. After earning my BA and MS degrees at Augusta State University in Augusta, Georgia, I decided to pursue graduate school in experimental psychology to study health risk behavior. The summer before I packed my belongings and moved from Thomson, Georgia to Auburn, Alabama, I received a package from Bill Buskist, one of my professors for the upcoming fall at Auburn University. Bill sent some readings about being a teaching assistant, notes about the introductory course I was to help teach, and a few other odds and ends. My first reactions were these (in no particular order): “Surely they don’t expect me to teach,” “I am not a teacher,” “I don’t want to teach,” “When they say ‘teach,’ they mean grade, right?” I held tightly to these ideas until the first week of classes at Auburn when I met Bill Buskist, and perhaps more importantly, I met my very first class. It was at Auburn when my life changed—when I changed—and I became a teacher.

My Early Development as a Teacher

Auburn University’s PhD program required that first year students earn their keep as graduate teaching assistants (GTA) by teaching small recitation sections for introductory psychology classes. The department also required that first year students who function as teaching assistants enroll in a teaching course taught by Bill Buskist. During this two-semester teaching of psychology course, we covered topics related to teaching content in introductory psychology, teaching skills in general, and professional development. We taught in front of our classmates, and Bill provided feedback. He observed us in our classes and provided feedback. He read over our teaching evaluations with us and provided feedback. He required written work
related to teaching and—you guessed it—provided feedback. Bill worked tirelessly to support us in our roles as new teachers. He was open and truthful, supportive and encouraging—even when he was “bleeding” (with his pesky red pen!) all over the words we had written. I became comfortable with Bill as a mentor and, in my first semester, I approached him about a teaching conference with which I was familiar—the Southeastern Teaching of Psychology conference in Kennesaw, GA. Bill immediately asked me if I was interested in working with him and another graduate student, Jared Keeley, to prepare a talk for that conference. I hesitantly accepted and, from that point on, Bill and I, along with several others, have worked closely together to write many talks, papers, and chapters related to the teaching of psychology.

After that first year at Auburn, Bill appointed me to work as the Head GTA, a position that would allow me to serve as a mentor for upcoming first year GTAs. The Head GTA position came complete with the opportunity to teach my own large section of Introductory Psychology as the teacher of record. I accepted the opportunity and, under Bill’s guidance and supervision, developed my first course. After that course, I had many more opportunities to teach at Auburn. I taught Introductory Psychology courses, a Drugs and Behavior course, and Research Methods courses. I also sought out teaching opportunities at other schools including teaching Abnormal Psychology at LaGrange College, a small liberal arts school in LaGrange, Georgia; and teaching Introductory Psychology at Southern Union, a small community college in Opelika, Alabama.

While at Auburn, I had the opportunity to enroll in the Preparing Future Faculty program led by James Groccia and the Preparing to Teach a Psychology Course (Grad 980) taught by Victor Benassi through the University of New Hampshire. I attended teaching conferences, and I learned as much as I could about teaching and research on teaching. I also began to mentor students in the laboratory in which I studied my primary area, health risk behaviors. My major
professor, Chris Correia, was a great mentor not only for research but also for teaching students about research in the lab. He gave me the opportunity to start working with my own small group of students under his supervision, and I modeled his work in mentoring and teaching. In addition to working closely with Bill and Chris, I also received mentorship from the chair of our department, Barry Burkhart. Barry taught me an important lesson about giving students the benefit of the doubt and what he called “humanity” in teaching. He also facilitated many of my teaching opportunities. All of my mentors realized and respected that teaching had touched most every aspect of my graduate career. I am so lucky to have trained in a department with the kind of support for teaching and research that Auburn provided.

After several classes, I came to the conclusion that teaching was integral to my identity. I loved it. I loved teaching. I loved talking about teaching. I loved studying my own teaching. I loved teaching so much so that I began to think about changing my plans to become a researcher. I was, in fact, a teacher-scholar, and I wanted to—and could—do both teaching and research. When I completed the requirements for my degree, I applied for both post-doctoral positions and academic jobs. I struggled with the decision to pursue a post-doc or a faculty job. I struggled with which post-doc or job to take. If I took a post-doc, surely they did not expect me not to teach. If I took a faculty job, surely they did not expect me not to do research. I was just not sure what to do. I struggled with my identity as a psychologist. Those months on the job market were among the most difficult times in my life to that point. I ultimately decided that teaching was too important in my life to walk away from and I took a job as an Assistant Professor at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, where I am today. When I began my job at James Madison, I found that my transition from graduate life to the life of a professor was made seamless by my myriad teaching experiences. I was able to immediately begin working on
research, publishing, training laboratory students, and other research-related activities because I had already prepped courses and taught them as a graduate student.

I would not be an effective teacher or researcher today had it not been for the wonderful mentors and training opportunities I had while at Auburn. I was also fortunate that my mentors supported my work and made it possible for me to win several teaching awards including the 2007 Society for Teaching of Psychology’s Wilbert J. McKeachie Award, the 2005 Auburn University College of Liberal Arts Teaching Assistant Excellence in Teaching Award, the 2005 Auburn University Department of Psychology Outstanding Graduate Teaching Assistant Award, and Teaching Fellow status at Auburn University in the Department of Psychology. I am exceedingly humbled by the recognition I have received for my teaching and I consider these awards a testament to the amazing mentors I have had in teaching and research. It is through great opportunities and the invaluable wisdom provided by my mentors that I am able to do this job that I love so much.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

My first experiences with teaching were positive and I had great mentorship, but I did not begin my teaching career as a “natural” teacher—I had to, and still have to, work very hard. Like most students of psychology, I was very enthusiastic about most of what I taught in classes so the content came easily. Also, I enjoyed the challenge of developing interesting ways to teach ideas and concepts. The biggest barriers for me as a teacher (I am embarrassed to say) were some aspects of my personality and my communication habits. I was sarcastic. I talked too fast. I was impatient and often tactless. As you can imagine, students often do not appreciate those characteristics in a teacher! As a result I was not developing rapport in such a way that facilitated learning among my students. I began to take on a teaching persona that was very truly and
genuinely me but better—more articulate, respectful, patient, and encouraging than before. I decided I would “fake it until I make it.” Eventually I became the teacher I wanted to become. I learned that patience is virtue in the classroom, and I even started to become more patient in general. My teaching persona helped me become a better person all of the time! I found that students appreciated my enthusiasm for psychology, teaching, and their welfares, and that establishing rapport was essential to mutual respect in the classroom. I am still very much me—students call me Jessica, I laugh and tell jokes, and I am clumsy and silly sometimes. I am a better teacher by working to become a better person. Or maybe I am a better person by working to become a better teacher.

Another challenge I experienced as a novice teacher was related to expectations for students. I expected that all my students should be able to read, write, and think critically. I discovered that the level of preparation of my students varied well beyond what I could have imagined. I encountered students who struggled to read their texts, students who struggled to answer essays that required complete sentences, and students who simply did not know how to study or to formulate good questions to ask for help. I also encountered students who were very advanced in reading, writing, and critical thinking skills. It was a struggle to find a balance of content and skills to teach that challenged my advanced students without alienating and discouraging other students. It was perhaps a bigger challenge for me to change my expectations for students. Instead of expecting students to come prepared and excited about class, I realized that it was my responsibility as a teacher to show students that psychology was exciting and to provide contingencies to reinforce behaviors consistent with student success strategies. I also learned that you can lead students to knowledge but you cannot make them think. My job is to
lead well, and I worked (and continue to work) very hard to do so. Finally, I learned that sometimes I may not reach a student, no matter how hard I try, and that is ok.

With all the time spent focused on teaching and learning, it may seem as though research has taken a backseat in my career. I have been fortunate to train and work in places that very much prize both teaching and research so that I could focus on both pursuits. Also, I find that my teaching influences my research and vice versa. My best teaching occurs in the laboratory. My best examples in class are born from successes and failures in research. I also collect data on my teaching when possible—after all, each class is like an experiment, and it is an empirical question whether what I do in the classroom is effective. Despite my efforts to integrate teaching and research, certainly a few minutes spent on my teaching are a few minutes not sitting in a laboratory or writing. I find, though, that the most productive situations are those in which I can provide learning opportunities to my students in the laboratory and through writing proposals, papers, and grants. Surely, the process may be a little slower with training, editing, and feedback, but in the end the work is done, the students have learned, and I have a product I am prouder of than if I had done every step of the work myself. I believe that my true influence as a teacher and a researcher will be realized in the work of my students, many of whom will undoubtedly go on to be great researchers, great teachers, or great teacher-scholars.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

As I noted previously, I was not a natural at teaching. Public speaking made me nervous. I embarrassed easily. I talked too fast and I was (am!) clumsy. Students occasionally thought I was abrasive or indifferent. But I loved psychology. I loved learning. And I loved to be good at what I do. Although seemingly not an ideal situation, my circumstance of having to teach those first Introductory Psychology sections (despite my fervor that I was not going to do it) was
serendipitous. My personal passions for my discipline and for doing good work created a perfect storm for me to become a teacher, despite my pitfalls. I made it a personal goal to show students how great psychology is and can be. In order to do that, I knew I had to work very hard and to take advantage of opportunities and resources available to improve my teaching.

My first step was simply to think about my teaching. What were my goals for my students? What were my goals for myself? How could I achieve those goals? How had others achieved those goals? I thought back to all my old teachers, both good and bad, and considered how they had helped me learn, piqued my curiosity, or facilitated ambivalence. I consulted Bill or Chris (and still do!) when I had questions or concerns. I read the journal *Teaching of Psychology* and other resources from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology. I attended teaching conferences every year. I talked to others about their teaching. I found all of these efforts helpful in improving my teaching, and I still engage in each of them. Today I also work closely with my teaching assistants to talk about teaching and how we might improve what we are doing to help students in and out of the classroom. I find that talking about my teaching energizes me for even more teaching! I am never satisfied that I have finished improving my teaching so I am always looking for new methods and inspiration.

I no longer get physiological sensations of nervousness before speaking, and I certainly do not embarrass easily anymore. I still talk a little fast when I am really excited, and I am still clumsy, but my ability to laugh at myself is a strength in the classroom. I had to work to become a technically good teacher but, without my love for psychology, I am not sure I could have ever done it. Through teaching I discovered a new love—a love for my students. Students know that I genuinely care about them as both students and as people.

**Advice for New Teachers**
When I began teaching I was impatient with my students. I learned how to be patient with students when I realized how much I cared for my students and how much I loved teaching them. I then had a new challenge—to be patient with myself. I want to be good at what I do and I want to be good immediately. I had to work hard to learn to be a good teacher; that took time and still does. Based on my experiences, I advise new academics to have dynamic expectations for their teaching and to be patient with themselves when striving to meet new goals. Good teaching does not happen overnight. Good teaching today is not necessarily good teaching tomorrow. So it is important to re-evaluate goals and progress toward those goals and to accept and embrace that perfection in teaching is virtually unattainable. I would also suggest that talking about teaching is integral to maintaining vigor and passion for teaching and for developing ideas. In particular, seeking advice and support from more experienced teachers can lead to invaluable learning and encouragement. If new academics are not fortunate enough to find themselves in a department that discusses teaching openly, I advise them to find a confidant (either within the department or in another department or even another school), to attend teaching conferences, and to join the Society for the Teaching of Psychology in order to find a family with which to share their passions for teaching. Finally, I would advise teachers to consider working with teaching assistants (graduate or undergraduate). Students often have creative and interesting ideas about ways to teach, learn, and assess; and they can offer perspectives that we often fail to remember from our days as students.

**Final Thoughts**

Charles Brewer and colleagues (1993, p. 169) said that “the fundamental goal of education in psychology, from which all others follow, is to teach students to think as scientists about behavior.” I wholeheartedly agree with this assertion. In order to meet this goal effectively,
I believe that good teaching is essential. But what is good teaching? I suppose this depends on whom you ask. I certainly do not have the definitive answer, but I suggest that good teaching starts with learning from those who came before us. Bill Buskist says in his teaching philosophy that “if teaching is about anything, it is about opportunity” (http://www.auburn.edu/~buskiwf/teaching_philosophy.htm). By my estimation he is absolutely right. Having the opportunity to teach is a great responsibility and a great honor. Having the opportunity to learn is just as great a responsibility and honor. Good teachers will provide opportunities to their students and will seek opportunities to challenge themselves and to improve their teaching. Parker Palmer says that “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (Palmer, 1997, p. 10). Good teachers will embody informed enthusiasm for both their content and their craft. It is through opportunities to teach, to learn about teaching, and to learn my true passions in psychology and teaching that I have become a teacher. I never wanted to teach. But today being a teacher is not what I do, it is who I am.
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Fortuitous Foundations for a Vivacious Vocation

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Fortuitous Foundations for a Vivacious Vocation

My dad has a favorite saying: “It is better to be lucky than smart.” I can think of no better way to summarize my teaching career—I feel I have been incredibly lucky to have the opportunities and experiences I have had thus far. It is strange to talk about my “career” as a teacher because it has really just begun. Although I can certainly trace the many things I have learned and the ways in which I have grown as a teacher, I find it hard to imagine that I will not continue to grow and change in new and unexpected ways.

I began my psychology career at Knox College, where I earned a BA in psychology and classics. The liberal arts approach to education allowed me to explore my curiosity in many subjects and to relate ideas across disciplines. From there, I attended Auburn University where I earned an MS and PhD in clinical psychology. I have been humbled to be recognized by my department, college, and by the Society for the Teaching of Psychology for my teaching during graduate school. I am now in my first year as an assistant professor at Mississippi State University where I teach both graduate and undergraduate courses.

My Early Development as a Teacher

My development as a teacher really started in high school in the most unusual way. In high school, I was a member of the school’s fencing team. I was not a terribly good fencer, but through the influence of my brother, I had experience previous to joining the team, which meant that I was the most experienced member on the team. In that role, almost by default, it fell to me to help the coach teach all the other members the basic skills of the sport. Fencing is a very precise sport that involves combining small movements into a graceful gestalt. Initially, many students struggle with the complexities
of the coordination. I quickly learned that the same method of explaining something did not work for everyone. I had to adapt my methods for each student and vary my explanations until I found something that resonated with that person. The coach must have liked what she saw, because she arranged for me to attend a national coaches’ college where the best coaches in the sport trained future coaches. Their most important lesson, and one that I still carry with me today, was to think about the lesson from the student’s perspective, not from my own. I had to construct all of my actions and motions not as I would like to do them, but in a way that would lead my students to learn what I wanted to teach. It is that method of purposefully and reflectively guiding a student towards learning that most defines my current teaching style.

I have had the astounding luck to have had some truly excellent teachers throughout high school, college, and beyond. I have tried to mirror their successes in the classroom in my own teaching style. For example, at Knox College, I had the great fortune to work with Tim Kasser. During my time at Knox, I took three classes from him, he selected me to be his teaching assistant (TA) for his Abnormal Psychology course, and he was my mentor for my honors thesis. I can still vividly remember my introduction to Tim when I arrived at 8:00 AM for my first Abnormal Psychology class. He stormed into the room in a huff, ranted and raved for a few minutes, then said he was not in the mood for this today and stormed back out, leaving all of us sitting in that dark room wondering what just happened. After letting us stew in our juices for a minute or two, he returned to the room and lead us in a Socratic discussion about our reactions to his behavior and how we might define it as abnormal or not. He followed this sort of engaging and challenging style throughout the course, and led me to fall in love with the subject matter that would
later become my career. A year later as his TA for the same course, for the first time I saw teaching from the other side of the podium. It was a very eye-opening experience, because from my perspective everything occurred behind a veil, and I had no conception of what went into teaching a course. Tim let me into that world by including me in his decision process as he thought about the course and what he wanted his students to get out of it. I began to see that, just like my coaching, teaching could be a process that was very purposeful and reflective.

At this point, I knew that I enjoyed teaching and I hoped to be able to continue to teach in some way, shape, or form. Again, I was more lucky than smart by finding my way to the graduate program at Auburn University. There, I lucked into one of the best teaching training programs in the country along with one of the best teaching mentors, Bill Buskist. All first year graduate students were TAs for Introductory Psychology, we all shared one big office, and we all took a year-long course in the Teaching of Psychology. In that class, we were exposed to the wisdom of two sages: Bill McKeachie through his well known book *Teaching Tips* (soon to enter its 13th edition; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2010) and Bill Buskist through his wealth of knowledge and experience in the field. At Auburn, I found a home for my notion that teaching could be a purposeful, reflective process and so much more. The structure of that first year immersed us in the teaching experience. We each helped with large lecture sections of the introductory course, which were then split into individual recitation sections that we taught directly, so that we had a hand in preparing material, creating quizzes and tests, encountering “difficult students,” and all the other things while simultaneously reflecting on the problems we encountered in our teaching course.
Also at Auburn, I found a research group that resonated with my already ingrained notion that teaching can be a reflective, examined process. Bill Buskist led the Excellence in Direction and Guidance of Education (EDGE) research group, which engaged in a catch-phrase that was music to my ears: “the scholarship of teaching and learning.” Being a good psychology student, I was solidly grounded in a belief in empiricism; we are able to come to know and better understand the world around us through gathering data. We test our hypotheses and direct our future actions from those conclusions. Why ever would we not do the same when it comes to our teaching?

Coming from clinical psychology, I had already been introduced to the idea that practice should be informed by science, and vice versa. Even further, from a scientist-practitioner model, it is impossible to divorce the two. The mindset of a clinician is that of a scientist; when working with a person, the clinician forms hypotheses about what is wrong and how to improve it and then gathers data in the service of testing those hypotheses. Thus, I was delighted to find Boyer’s (1990) Scholarship Reconsidered, as it gave me a way of applying this broader notion of “scholarship” to all of my professional activities, including teaching. To me, a scholar is one who uses a critical method of examination to improve his or her professional work and then disseminates the findings so that all may benefit from the knowledge gained. I constantly strive to be that sort of scholar, especially in my teaching.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

Every teacher, at some point or another, encounters obstacles to his or her teaching. For me, this experience happened early and often. As I prepared to teach my first course, I was bubbling with excitement. I felt like I had received excellent
preparation through the variety of teaching courses I had taken. I had seriously
considered my goals for my students through the reflective process of writing my
teaching philosophy. I was ready to instill critical thinking skills in my students and had
cooked up a cornucopia of clever exercises to illustrate those principles. I had the best of
advice in planning out my syllabus and ensuring that all the important elements were
represented. I was armed with an empirically-supported set of principles about how
human beings best learn material through active engagement. My class was going to
change lives. After so much excellent preparation, what could go wrong?

As I began to teach the course, everything was going beautifully to plan. My
lectures were interesting. My students were engaging in discussions and struggling with
important ideas. All the contingencies I had set in place were having their desired effect.
And then they had their first test, and my students revolted. Why would they do such a
thing when I had clearly set up everything for their best benefit? In my zeal, I held my
students to very high standards. My students felt like they were putting forth tremendous
effort for my class, much more than was its due. Only a handful of students even finished
the test. This incident began a tension with which I continue to struggle.

I think of it as the Goldilocks problem of academic achievement. I believe that if
you set the bar high, students will strive to reach it and achieve more than they thought
themselves capable of producing. If that bar is set too low, students will lose motivation
and in the end achieve less. However, if the bar is too high, then students lose motivation
as well and enter a state of learned helplessness. The level of challenge has to be “just
right.” An important part of any challenge is that the student must perceive it as useful
and achievable. I tried to make the challenge achievable, but I had forgotten to explain
why it was useful. That began a dialogue with my students about my goals for them in the class and explaining why I had constructed the course as I did. This process only strengthened the rapport between me and my students, and as I made adjustments, so did they, making the course a success from both of our perspectives.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

At its core, my teaching philosophy returns to my roots: a liberal arts sensibility paired with that first lesson from my fencing mentors. My primary goal for my students is to instill and foster a scientifically skeptical attitude along with the critical thinking skills necessary to ask the right questions and to understand the answers. To me, higher education is not about what you learn. Knowledge, by its very nature, continually changes and updates. Knowing a set of facts will not help in life nearly as much as a flexible ability to learn and evaluate new knowledge. Therefore, I strive, through my own enthusiasm, to promote a passion for learning that hopefully taps what I believe to be an inherent curiosity in every human being. I attempt to use the same method that worked previously in my fencing lessons. I strive to guide my students towards a set of skills by carefully constructing an environment and a set of contingencies that will foster critical thinking and interest in the topic. All the while, I try to maintain the understanding that each individual student will have his or her own way of approaching the material, so I try to provide multiple modalities and opportunities for all elements of a class.

Practically, this philosophy translates into a variety of teaching techniques that I attempt to use with more or less success. I do my best to keep my students actively engaged through the use of discussions, activities, demonstrations, and assignments, hoping that one or another modality will strike home for each student. For example, in
teaching statistics, I might develop a lesson over regression that includes a guessing game designed to illustrate errors in prediction and the concept of the mean as a “best guess.” This game would lead to a discussion about factors of prediction and practical concerns. I would verbally and visually demonstrate how to calculate a regression while also demonstrating some of the concepts graphically. My students then would complete a problem on their own while I circulate among them and help as I can.

As the scholar I hope to be, I also find ways of evaluating my own and my students’ performance so that I can improve the course the next time. To me, this process is more than the ubiquitous end-of-term paper and pencil evaluations. I want feedback from my students throughout the course and thus solicit it on a regular basis through formal evaluations, quick responses after class, or even casual chats as I walk out of the building with a student. These candid approaches have given me some of the best insight into what students find valuable (and annoying) about class, and students often have excellent ideas about how to improve the course. I also invite feedback from my peers, who offer a different perspective from what my students are able to give, especially in terms of content, presentation skills, and style. Finally, I engage in regular self-reflection, much like the opportunity to write this essay, on where I have been, where I am going, and how well my efforts are matching my goals. The process of self-reflection often calls my attention to broader, global issues of my teaching that I might overlook in the more specific feedback from students or peers. For example, moving to a new institution has led me to reflect upon the nature and composition of the student body and how students’ goals, motivation, and expectations are different from other places I have been, leading me to alter some of my approaches.
Advice for New Teachers

For those who are just embarking on their own teaching career, I have a few words of advice:

1. Never underestimate the value of reflection. Take some time every now and again to think about your goals for your students and yourself, your methods, what has worked, and what you would like to change.

2. Be purposeful in what you do. When you create an assignment or include a demonstration, it should flow directly from your goals for the course. If you expect students to be familiar with a particular set of knowledge, make sure that it is reflected in your choice of assessments (i.e., quizzes and tests). However, if you are more interested in developing critical thinking skills, you might choose a paper, or a service learning project for awareness of practical and social implications.

3. Be aware of the relationship you have with your students. Your courses do not occur in a vacuum. If possible, learn your students’ names and something about them. Circulate around the room and talk to them before class. The interaction can not only be satisfying on personal and professional levels, but also it can have an impact on how your students perform.

4. Don’t forget what it is like to be a student. By virtue of striving for and (hopefully) attaining a graduate degree, we are not “typical” students. Many of our students will not approach a class in the same way you did, nor will they hold the same values and goals for their education. Meet your students where they are, and try not to loose sight of what it is like to encounter this information for the first time.
5. Most importantly, enjoy yourself. You likely chose to teach for a reason. As a vocation, it has the potential to be one of the most rewarding activities in which someone can engage (at least in my biased opinion). Have fun, and your enthusiasm will be infectious. If you find yourself bogged down, do something to revitalize your passion for teaching: reflect on your teaching, read one of the many excellent books on teaching (including these volumes of *Teaching in Autobiography*), or attend a teaching conference.

**Final Thoughts**

I began this essay by highlighting my great fortune to have had some wonderful opportunities that have allowed me to follow my current path. However, in our hectic lives it is easy to let some of those opportunities slip past us as we face “the tyranny of the urgent,” as one of my professors was fond of saying. Teaching has the fortuitous characteristic that those opportunities have a way of resurfacing with every new semester and every fresh set of eager young minds. I encourage all of us, as teachers, to take advantage of those opportunities to improve our craft and to learn about the field that inspired us to teach.
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Learning to Step Aside

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Learning to Step Aside

By the time I completed my first year of formal education at the ripe age of five, I knew I wanted to become a teacher. But it wasn’t until I experienced transformative teaching while enrolled at Nebraska Wesleyan University (NWU) that I set my sights on becoming a professor at a liberal arts college. After receiving my BS in Biopsychology from NWU, I headed east to Stony Brook University, where, in addition to receiving my MA and PhD in social/health psychology, I received an introduction to college teaching. I served as a teaching assistant for a couple years, and then started teaching independent courses. By the time I graduated in 2002, Stony Brook’s psychology department honored me with the Departmental Award for Excellence in Teaching.

After receiving my PhD, I headed to George Mason University to pursue a three-year research fellowship. I received counsel that taking a fellowship would take me out of the running for the kinds of teaching jobs I wanted. So, I kept a proverbial oar in the teaching waters by adjunct teaching for George Mason and also mentoring a cadre of undergraduate students in the research lab.

After three years in the fellowship, I accepted a tenure-track position as the sole psychologist in the highly interdisciplinary Department of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Arts at Harvey Mudd College (HMC), a liberal arts school of science and engineering. Since joining the HMC faculty in 2005, I received recognition by the Social Psychology Network for an action teaching activity I designed, was named the HMC Critchell Assistant Professor in recognition of my mentorship of students, and received the Jane S. Halonen Award for teaching excellence during the first five years of full-time teaching (awarded by Division 2 of the American Psychological Association).
My Early Development as a Teacher

The people who most influenced the form and function of my teaching were my teachers—namely the stellar faculty in NWU’s psychology department. Whether analyzing media representations of women under the guidance of Heather Bullock, applying operant conditioning principles to train rats under the tutelage of Ken Keith, or identifying sub-cortical structures in dissected sheep brains with Jodi Meerdink, I was engaged. I discovered that this discipline was relevant to my life, that my life represented a minute slice of the possible, and that there existed a world of questions much more profound than I could have thought to ask before these individuals stirred my intellectual curiosity.

I put some of these learned-by-osmosis lessons into practice in graduate school. Our research lab employed a multi-level mentorship model. Graduate students worked directly with our faculty advisor, each graduate student recruited, trained, and supervised undergraduate research assistants, and more senior undergraduate students helped supervise the most junior members of the lab. In those early years, I worked closely with undergraduate students Nancy Cuilwick, Diana Millilo, Mark Portugal, and “the twins” Ken and Rich Johnson to design and conduct research.

I enjoyed the time I spent with the research assistants largely because my roles as teacher and learner blended together; we all brought skills to the table, trusted each other enough to take risks, and expanded our mastery of psychological ideas and methods. Those research students were my teaching mentors—they guided my development by revealing the rewards of flattening the power hierarchy often present in student-teacher interactions.

Although my interest in teaching swelled during graduate school, this enthusiasm stood in contrast to the message I heard from some of the faculty—and parroted by some students in
the program—that I shouldn’t get distracted by teaching, that I should keep my eye on the research ball, and that future employers wouldn’t consider me a serious scholar if (gasp!) I was also a serious teacher. I recall being told that teaching is something professors have to do, that there are ways to get out of teaching, and that it is okay to cut corners because nobody will deny you tenure for bad teaching (a flat out lie, I now know). Comments like these went a long way toward marginalizing this pursuit I found so intensely gratifying. Thankfully, there were teaching allies lurking in the hallways—faculty and fellow graduate students I could turn to for practical and moral support.

John Robinson was one such faculty member. John taught the teacher training course, a one-semester, three-unit course designed to introduce graduate students to the nuts and bolts of teaching. We talked about course design, planned a semester course, critiqued mini-lectures, discussed theories of classroom management, and tried out different grading strategies. John’s interest in teaching, and his willingness to share that interest so openly, served as a salient signal to me and other graduate students that teaching was, indeed, a worthwhile pursuit.

After completing the teaching course and serving as a teaching assistant for a couple semesters, I was—in the eyes of the department, if not in my own—qualified to teach an independent course during the summer session. During this first teaching experience, I tapped into another invaluable mentoring resource: other new teachers. We started a teaching-focused support group that met once a week to vent, strategize, and discuss papers drawn from the pedagogy literature.

Thanks to the experiences and mentors mentioned above, by the time I left graduate school I had shaken the socialized sense that my interest in teaching was somehow “less than.” I embraced myself as Teacher.
Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

To say I embraced myself as a teacher might be a bit of an understatement. More accurately, I became consumed. I worked late into the night developing clever assignments and in-class workshops. I started using teaching-related activities as my reward for slogging through tasks I perceived as more onerous. Eventually, I realized this mode of engagement was not sustainable, especially if I also wanted to tend relationships, pursue hobbies, and take care of my physical self.

Before I could relax my grip, I needed to figure out what motivated the intensity. Two answers presented themselves. First, I genuinely love developing courses, class sessions, and assignments. These teaching activities engage me fully; I revel in figuring out how to creatively piece together readings, experiences, and content to bring psychology to life in a logical, holistic, and accurate way. Second, having rarely heard a teacher say, “I don’t know,” I was under the mistaken impression teachers are suppose to know everything. Having a modicum of self-insight, I realized I did not know everything. I unwittingly turned to course preparation as protection against being discovered as an imposter. If I over-stuffed my class sessions with content, then there would be no room for questions about and digressions into areas I knew less about; if I maintained a forceful linear drive from A to B, then I wouldn’t have to reveal to my students that I don’t know everything.

Upon taking the tenure-track job at HMC, I quickly realized there weren’t enough hours in a week to engage in the time dumping to which I had become accustomed. For the first time, I found myself teaching multiple courses at a time (in addition to setting up a lab and taking on service obligations). I became frustrated with myself for biting off more than I could chew with my courses. Out of necessity, I cut back rather dramatically on course preparation.
And, alas, the Earth kept spinning. I didn’t feel sufficiently prepared heading into my classes, but the students didn’t boo me. In fact, they seemed more engaged than before, perhaps because space now existed for them to ask questions and for me to offer my answers.

There were now many more opportunities for me to proclaim, “I don’t know.” I started saying things like, “That’s a good question. Where might we look for good information on that issue?,” “Let’s do a preliminary lit search to see if there is research on that question,” and, the most difficult of all, “I have absolutely no idea. Is there a volunteer who would like to look into this issue before our next class?”

I continue to put a lot of effort into my course preparation, but I now take a more incremental approach. When I repeat a course, I might modify the instruction set or the rubric for an assignment, or revamp the content for a subset of the class sessions. I’m much less likely than before to recreate the whole course. When teaching new courses, I try to import effective assignment types from other courses.

I’ve stumbled into a relationship with my teaching that I find both rewarding and sustainable. Likewise, I’ve come to see the relationship between my teaching and my scholarship as synergistic. Reminiscent of those early days as a graduate student collaborating with undergraduates in the lab, some of my most rewarding teaching moments occur in the context of my scholarship. Conversely, producing and consuming the research literature adds depth and currency to my teaching. And, my classes provide a venue for staying in touch with the research literature; as a function of the design of my assignments, students regularly introduce me to research I would otherwise not know about. Likewise, some of the research ideas I’m most motivated to pursue arise from in-class discussions with students.
I’m also fortunate to be at an institution that explicitly recognizes the creation of teaching materials or techniques as scholarship. As such, the presentations I give at teaching conferences, ancillaries I author to accompany textbooks, and a conference I co-hosted (and subsequent volume I co-edited) to examine social psychology’s relevance to teaching and learning all count as valuable products in my tenure portfolio.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

I remember the first day of my first class as a tenure-track member of the HMC faculty. Intending to set a tone of curiosity for the semester ahead, I opened my Introductory Psychology class with a discussion of the mind as a black box, a puzzle to be solved. The discussion took more time than I had allotted; we barely made it through the syllabus before class ended. A successful first class, I surmised. Ah, but wait! After class a senior engineering major approached me, politely introduced himself, then said: “I wanted to let you know that I don’t believe in psychology.” Too stunned to ask any clarifying questions (thus setting myself up to remain uncertain to this day what the heck it means to say one doesn’t believe in an entire discipline), I offered a shaky smile and said, “Thank you for letting me know. I look forward to learning from you this semester.”

HMC students, the vast majority of whom major in science, engineering and mathematics, typically enter my classroom unfamiliar with psychological ways of knowing. During my first year at HMC, I quickly realized—thanks to a number of interactions that looked similar to the one I had with The Disbeliever—that, unlike my experience teaching upper-level courses for psychology majors at large state universities, I could assume neither prior exposure to, nor current interest in, the subject matter. What I could assume, however, was that all of my
students were both intellectually curious and intelligent, both skeptical and willing to change their minds in the presence of convincing evidence.

My teaching philosophy emerged and continues to develop within this teaching context. In a nutshell, I seek to create autonomy-supportive courses with the intent of (a) creating or amplifying student interest in the discipline, (b) leveraging this interest to expand and deepen student understanding of psychological science, and (c) fostering a spirit of intellectual curiosity that will ideally manifest itself across the curriculum and well beyond the college experience. My course design process begins with an articulation of aims and objectives. From there, I develop the course architecture to support these goals. Finally, working within this structure, students exercise a tremendous amount of choice in terms of what they learn and how they learn it. That is, I’ve learned to step aside, to allow flexibility within structure.

My commitment to flexibility within structure is relatively new. It certainly wasn’t present when I taught my first Social Psychology course as a graduate student a decade ago. That first course was 90% lecture and 10% “other,” mostly short demonstrations and brief discussions. Since arriving to HMC five years ago, I’ve become much more able and willing to share power with my students. I think the HMC context really demanded this change of me as I sought to meet the students on their own turf vis-à-vis interests and background, skepticism and intelligence. Now, my courses are about 25% lecture and 75% “other.”

Now, the 75% “other” takes many forms. For example, students in my Introductory Psychology course participate in Book Clubs where they communally interrogate a topic of personal interest, drawing material from self-selected non-fiction books about psychology written by experts for non-expert audiences. Students in my Social Psychology course synthesize primary research literature and popular media to answer self-generated questions
about social psychology (e.g., How can we apply principles of persuasion to convince students to donate during the campus blood drive?). And, students in my Close Relationships course dive into the empirical research to evaluate the accuracy of popular relationship advice of their own choosing.

My greatest frustration thus far is perhaps specific to the HMC context. I’ve found myself time and again defending psychology as a science to a minority of students with interests exclusively grounded in the “hard sciences.” Now in every survey class I teach, students assigned to particular positions draw from a standard set of readings to debate the question “Is Psychology a Science?”

When forced to define their understanding of science, and to then pit that understanding against their understanding of psychology, good things happen. First, I’m given the opportunity to address misconceptions about psychology (e.g., Freud’s ideas are at the heart of our discipline). Second, I’m able to use this debate to frame the rest of the semester. I ask students to tell me what they would like to know about psychology before settling on answers to the debate questions. Inevitably, the students say they need to know more about the methods used; I promise we’ll talk about research methods. They say they want to know whether psychologists can do anything beyond describing behavior; I assure them we’ll spend lots of time during the semester reading primary research focused on the experimental manipulation of human behavior. They say they want to know whether psychology studies anything that’s actually important in the world; I ask them to tell me about some important current affairs, then wax poetically about how psychologists from various perspectives might think about the current event.

Making space for debate about the form and value of psychology has given way to some powerfully rewarding experiences. I love watching students toy with the “science/not
science” issue over the course of a semester as they read primary research, scoff at the lack of external validity of some studies, marvel at the effect sizes of others, and search out findings relevant to their own interests. By resisting the urge to proclaim, “Of course psychology is a science! No question about it. Moving on…,” I’ve given my students the space to come to their own informed understanding and, along the way, I have tackled a personal frustration.

If all goes according to plan, I will continue staging such debates for at least the next three decades, a time horizon that offers much space for continued growth. Prior to landing a tenure-track job, I thought of teaching evaluations as little gold stars I could use to decorate job applications. It wasn’t until I arrived at HMC and really started thinking about my long term teaching career that I came to view evaluations as an opportunity to assess and reflect on what I could do to improve my teaching. Now, my favorite evaluation comments are those that point out trouble spots in my course design, approaches in the classroom, the nature of the feedback I give on assignments, etc. These comments are real gems in that they give me ideas for ways to tweak my teaching.

Likewise, I’ve come to rely quite heavily on the feedback of my teaching peers. A group of colleagues and I regularly conduct small-group midterm evaluations in each others’ classes. We then go out for lunch on the college’s dime to debrief, focusing our feedback on those concerns shared by the majority of the students. Before the semester begins, we sometimes get together for coffee to go over syllabi and to brainstorm assignment ideas to meet particular course objectives. We co-teach and we sit in on each others’ classes. Without a doubt, I’ve been blessed with amazing colleagues who invest willingly in my personal development as a teacher.

Advice for New Teachers
Although I’m not convinced I have any advice anyone would care to listen to, I’ll offer the following just in case. Get your students involved in the design and implementation of your teaching. Perhaps an analogy would be useful here. Imagine a community organizer who sweeps into a neighborhood and lobbies the municipal government for specific changes without ever asking the residents of the community what it is they want and need. Most of us would perceive that organizer as well-intentioned, though wildly paternalistic. My sense is the same holds true in the classroom. Like the community organizer, teachers offer interventions—daily, we intervene in terms of our students’ experiences, knowledge, and worldview. The least we can do is provide opportunities for our students to have a say in the process.

**Final Thoughts**

As one who embraces change and challenge, I don’t imagine I will ever consider my courses fully developed, my teaching philosophy fully formed, or my development as a teacher complete; I will continue to tinker. That said, I find a lot of comfort—and freedom—in knowing I am zeroing in on an approach to teaching that my students find enriching and that I find sustainable and rewarding.
The Margins of Significance

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The Margins of Significance

As a professor at Kennesaw State University, I regularly teach statistics and research design. One of the important concepts of statistics is statistical significance and I spend a great deal of time trying to explain the difference between statistical significance and what might be considered real significance, or effect size. In many respects, teaching parallels statistics in our ability to truly detect what is important. For example, we often spend inordinate amounts of time emphasizing the details of a specific statistical test or how to format an APA style research paper, only to discover that students have missed the broader understanding of the course. Similarly, we can be lulled into a false sense of believing that we have really taught the important content of the discipline, only to learn that what really matters is teaching students how to think. Our small actions, often unintended, result in what we might consider real or significant results.

Defining what is important for students to learn did not become an integral part of my teaching until later in my career. Like many of my colleagues, I spent the early years of my teaching focused on learning the content of the discipline in great depth, and spending a great deal of time communicating every excruciating detail. I did not learn until much later in my career that, not only do students have difficulty managing a multitude of statistical details (c.f., Memory 101), but the details are rarely remembered at the conclusion of a students’ education. My ability to really become creative in my teaching began after I earned tenure and had an opportunity to reflect on what was important to teach, how I could teach the content, and how students would benefit from their educational experience.

My Early Development as a Teacher
I arrived in the classroom through a rather circuitous route. I would like to say that I always wanted to be a teacher, but in reality my career has been shaped by the realities of life. Mary Catherine Bateson (1999) in her book *Composing a Life* suggests that women’s careers are frequently not linear; instead they are shaped by the experiences of family and society. My development as a teacher resembles the Texas two-step; two steps forward and one step back, as personal circumstances allowed.

I grew up in the Midwest as the eldest child in a family of 10 siblings. With eight brothers and one sister, I was constantly on my toes, both literally and figuratively. My siblings continue to provide me with endless opportunities to laugh, understand, and contemplate how learning can be transformative. The experience of sharing, really sharing, a life with many siblings prepared me well for surviving academe. One of the most important things I learned is that relationships are enduring and they are influential for helping each of us to develop as professionals, teachers, and people.

In many respects I have two sets of siblings—those who are related in the traditional sense, and professional colleagues that have provided me with untold support and opportunities. Barney Beins is a gentle, kind, and nurturing mentor. He has provided many of us with opportunities that would not otherwise have been possible. Mary Kite, a mentor for many, possesses balance and wisdom well beyond her years. Charlie Blair-Broeker, the single most talented teacher whom I know, helped me to realize that a big part of teaching is having fun. Jane Halonen has provided many of us with perspective; she helps me to see the broader academic landscape. Dana Dunn is my hero in all matters scholarly. Without my professional siblings, I would not have learned how important it is to contribute to the larger teaching community.
My “real” brothers have also been extremely influential. Two of my brothers provided me with the opportunity to vicariously relive my undergraduate experience, but from a different vantage point. In many respects, they helped me to learn what was really important in teaching. I spent a few semesters tutoring my brothers by helping them to use the principles of psychology (e.g., heuristics, memory techniques) to learn. They seemed amazed that a few simple principles could be so useful and asked why all college faculty do not attend to the art and science of teaching. I dutifully explained the tripartite model of scholarship, teaching, and service. After considerable thought they vehemently argued that if faculty aren’t really concerned about teaching, faculty should not be in the classroom. Although I agree wholeheartedly, the reality is that our educational system continues to emphasize research over teaching and this trend is not likely to change in the near future. More importantly, their observations afforded me an opportunity to reexamine my approach to teaching.

My academic career began in the counseling center at Tulsa Junior College. In my first professional position, I thought that my undergraduate degree in psychology qualified me to save the world. I was simply wrong. Instead, I learned that my job was not to fix people, but as a counselor for students with disabilities, to assist in the learning process. The students with whom I worked generously shared their experiences and in the process I discovered that learning is shared, solitary, and reciprocal; I can only guide students in their quest for knowledge.

My first professional position provided me with my first opportunity to glimpse just a small insight into the role of gratitude in the process of learning. One student in particular provided me with an enduring feeling of gratitude. The student was seriously
injured during a university wrestling match during which he sustained an injury to his spinal column that resulted in complete paralysis including the need for a respirator to assist his breathing. Despite his daily challenges, he was always willing to try new technologies and was among one of the first to use the sip and puff method to drive a wheelchair. My role was to serve as his scribe when he took exams. More importantly, I was humbled by the talents of this student and the experience provided me with insight into one of the truly important elements of life—gratitude.

Although my first professional position offered me the opportunity to gain some initial insights into learning, I continued to labor under the illusion that life was simple. When I realized that life was complicated, rather than pursue a degree in a clinical area of psychology, I instead chose to pursue a degree that would help me to learn how to measure human behavior. Computer technology and statistical software offered endless opportunities for measuring and classifying human behavior. I did not learn until much later that measuring human behavior would prove much more difficult that I ever imagined.

The excitement of learning how to measure behavior led me to begin taking graduate statistics courses as a fun diversion. I quickly reached the credit-hour limit for undeclared graduate students and I had either to formally enter a doctoral program in research and evaluation, or quit taking courses. This meandering approach to pursuing a doctoral degree is not usual for many women. As I continued in my education, I realized that my personal struggles to understand complex material might be useful to others who want to learn: I could use my own experiences to teach students some of the more difficult concepts in a more accessible way. I knew first-hand about the difficulty of
using the building blocks of a discipline to acquire knowledge. I also had a passion to share my knowledge by trying to make things understandable for students. It was only through luck and serendipity that I was able to obtain a tenure track position and so I began my teaching career armed only with my personal insights into learning.

**Defining Myself as a Teacher**

Without formal training in pedagogy early in my career, I struggled to remain even one day ahead of my students. As I noted earlier, serendipity frequently played a role in my life. I was fortunate to learn about the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP) through my attendance at the Mid America Conference on Teaching of Psychology (MACTOP). At MACTOP I learned about activities, demonstrations, and pedagogical techniques that could be used to energize my teaching. I also learned that laughter and humor are important tools to help students learn. In the end, it was the Society, or more accurately the people that comprise the Society, that provided a wealth of material that would serve to enrich my teaching. With tenure I now had the time to be truly creative in my approach to teaching students the basics of statistics and experimental design.

Using the resources that were available through STP (e.g., Buskist, 2003) served as my first step toward developing a personal philosophy of teaching. Later I learned that it was quite possible to merge my personal interests with the content that I was trying to teach. Making information relevant to students was, after all, my ultimate goal. How better to make information accessible than to reference activities of daily life? Neil Lutsky (1999), in his STP presidential address, spoke eloquently about the role that stories can play in teaching. I also delight in finding new and innovative ways to draw students into the learning process before they realize what is happening. Randy Pausch
(2008) described the head fake as teaching people things before they realize they are really learning. I use Neil’s storytelling technique and Randy’s head fake approach in my own version of making learning relevant. For example, in my Experimental Psychology course, I invite students to join me in a very important experiment. We test cookies. Students rate the taste of two different cookies. We then embark on a process of discovery to determine if the cookies differ significantly in terms of taste. I schedule the tasting near the end of the class period and we begin to conduct the statistical test just prior to the end of the session. Students are so curious about the outcome that they are motivated to finish the analysis before returning to class. Quite frequently they express a desire to answer the question immediately and are excited to return to class to try to find out why the cookies that appear identical are rated as statistically different. This exercise is an example of an innovative demonstration highlighting my belief that learning is inquiry-based. I believe, and cognitive psychologists support the assertion, that students truly learn material when they are personally invested.

**The Examined Life of a Teacher**

Change is at the heart of the examined life as a teacher. I often question whether people can really change. We, students and teachers, change only in small incremental ways, but I believe that the small changes allow us to ultimately realize meaningful changes in our lives. I began my teaching career with only the most basic of tools—limited knowledge of the discipline and a desire to convey the content to students. As I developed as a teacher, I was able to use pedagogical techniques to enhance my teaching and I have begun to understand that learning entails much more than simply conveying the content of the discipline.
Despite having gained some degree of perspective on teaching, even today I can easily be drawn into the minutiae of detailing my syllabus to account for every possible situation that could possibly occur in the classroom. Although it is important to provide clear policies, maintaining perspective means that I am not lulled into believing that I can craft a policy for every possible scenario. Instead, my goal is to retain balance. I try to provide students with clear criteria that will help them succeed, but at the same time, I try to provide enough flexibility for students to learn in a variety of ways. Remaining flexible, yet balanced is at the heart of good teaching. The need to remain flexible is perhaps best illustrated by my experience of dealing with a student who missed an exam for reasons that were clearly out of her control. In a well publicized newspaper account, her son was seriously injured in a motorcycle accident that left him paralyzed. Clearly, she was unable to attend class for a period of time, yet she remained steadfast in her belief that she could complete the course work. In many respects, school was her only outlet and served as a source of support and accomplishment. If I had been inflexible, I would not have taken these circumstances into account and would have asked her to withdraw from the course. Much to my surprise, by allowing her to continue in the course, she was able to demonstrate her ability to learn and succeed. Ultimately, she completed a Master’s program and she is now a successful school psychologist.

In the grand scheme of things; what is really important for student learning? It is difficult to identify the significant influential events in students’ lives. Instead, students define what is significant in their learning. Quite often we do not fully realize what is important until years after the formal process of education. I believe that a student may not fully realize the merits of learning statistics until they apply them in a work setting.
Similarly, a student may not fully realize the importance of writing until they produce a professional report.

Maintaining perspective requires flexibility. A sense of humor helps me to remain flexible and to enjoy my chosen life as a teacher. I carefully find ways to interject humor into my classes. For example, I discovered that students in an Introductory Psychology course often have difficulty understanding the concept of shaping in the operant conditioning model of learning. Building on a technique that I learned from Charlie Blair-Broeker, I offer my students the opportunity to shape my behavior. Each semester I invite students to identify a behavior that they want me to perform and to apply the principles of operant conditioning to shape my behavior. This activity, grounded in sound principles of learning, helps students to understand the concept while having fun at the same time. My appropriate use of potentially self-deprecating humor allows students the opportunity to engage actively in learning. Not only do students enjoy the exercise, but more importantly, their experience translates into knowledge and understanding.

**Advice for New Teachers**

It is difficult to craft advice that will resonate with every potential new teacher of psychology. If you have read this far, I hope that you will consider how your personal circumstances provide you with a unique approach to teaching. We are perpetual students, learning, changing, and continuing to develop in our approach to teaching. I have learned that flexibility, humor, and perspective will allow me to continue to develop as a teacher of psychology. Somewhere in the process of my development as a teacher, I also began to merge my professional identity as a “professor” with my personal roles (i.e., colleague, daughter, sister). I hope to use the many facets of my life to enrich my
understanding of the learning process. Here are just a few simple axioms that might be useful in guiding a new teacher toward meaningful teaching.

- It is okay to present information in a humane and pedagogically meaningful way. My goal is to be friendly, but not friends with my students.
- My students are learning to learn, and I am learning to teach. Therefore, research and teaching are not antithetical but complimentary. I try not to create an artificial dichotomy between teaching and research.
- Recognize that there are limits to what you can accomplish. You will have to engage in efficiencies of scale, which may mean that you are using multiple-choice tests so that you can spend more time enriching your teaching and providing feedback on written assignments.
- Read something other than psychology. Dana Dunn (2002), the 2010 STP President, in a keynote address at a SETOP conference, described the benefits of reading outside the discipline. I was (and continue to be) overwhelmed with the many demands on my time. I initially questioned his advice. However, much like physical exercise, paradoxically, even when I don’t have time to engage in exercise, it is precisely during these busy times that I should engage in exercise or read something other than psychology. Reading an interesting book can provide perspective.
- I tend to focus on what I want students to know, really know, when they leave my class. They will forget the vast number of details that I teach, but I want them to have the skills to critically examine life’s issues.
• How do you want to be remembered? A small action can result in lasting impressions. Academia is fraught with politics. There are skirmishes and there are battles. I have found that it is important to choose wisely. Although I offer these simple suggestions as guidance, my best guess is that as I continue to develop as a teacher, even these simple suggestions will become more complex. I constantly run the risk of oversimplifying life. Nevertheless, I hope that they provide ideas for creating your approach to teaching.

**Final Thoughts**

My teaching techniques, approach, and style continue to develop as I strive to improve my teaching. At the beginning of my teaching career, I was focused on the details of structuring a course and defining content-specific information. Although these issues remain important, students have helped me to change my perspective. Today I spend considerable time envisioning broad goals for student learning. I then carefully consider how I can help students successfully demonstrate their competencies. I measure success as change. When students demonstrate their knowledge of content, or when they express value in having learned the material, I believe that I have been successful. My transformation as a teacher is equally important. I am successful when I am able to capture a glimpse of learning from the perspective of the student. It is this insight that allows me to truly learn and grow.

Finally, I want to leave you with one important piece of advice. Although one of the goals of psychology is prediction of behavior, it is difficult to accurately predict how seemingly insignificant actions as a teacher may resonate with a student. An off-hand comment can have significant consequences. We need to remain vigilant in our efforts to
teach students and attentive to our goals for teaching. I was recently reminded of the
time of our role as mentors when I made a comment encouraging a student to
pursue her future academic studies. I learned only later that this small, seemingly
insignificant comment was influential for the student. The student arrived in my office
after the conclusion of the semester with tears of joy because she now had hope. It seems
that the small statement of encouragement helped her to believe that she could pursue
graduate school. I don’t know what her future may bring, but I do know that I do not
determine what is significant. Rather, it is the student who defines what is truly
significant.
References


Venture the Work for the Sake of the Zest

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Venture the Work for the Sake of the Zest

I was born in Houston, Texas and raised by my maternal grandparents. My grandfather was an immigrant from Hungary and my grandmother was the daughter of a Baptist minister. My passion during my secondary school years was music, playing viola in the high school and All City orchestras. In 1965, I left Texas to study psychology, anthropology, and sociology at Weber State College. I received my B.S. in 1968, and spent the next period of my life flying airplanes for the U. S. Navy. Honorably discharged in 1970, I was accepted into the interdisciplinary graduate program in social psychology at Northwestern University, where I completed an M.A. and Ph.D.

My first teaching job was at Georgetown University. While there, I was offered a chance to conduct applied behavioral science research in Heidelberg, Germany. After 10 years as the director of various research projects for the Human Resources Research Organization, my family and I moved to Spain where I founded a community college for the English-speaking residents living on the island of Mallorca. For the next five years, I served as director of the Community Learning Centre. At this time, I also created a summer camp program for children on Mallorca that I continue to run every July and where several of my students have conducted cross-cultural research (e.g., Balcetis, Dunning & Miller, 2008; Stastny, 2007).

In 1989, I followed my son, who graduated from high school in Mallorca, back to the USA. He began his studies at Northwestern and I spent a year as a visiting professor at the University of Arkansas at Monticello. Since 1990, I have held the position of professor and chair of the Psychology Department at the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK), where I also serve as chair of the Institutional Review Board.
I am a past-president of the Nebraska Psychological Society (NPS), the UNK Chapter of Sigma Xi, and the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association. Currently, I am the special topics editor for the *Journal of Psychological Inquiry*, which publishes undergraduate research, and the coordinator of both the RMPA Wertheimer-Portenier Teaching Conference and the NPS/PERK teaching pre-conference.

My teaching interests include social psychology, cross-cultural psychology, organizational behavior, and environmental psychology. In teaching these courses, I am committed to promoting undergraduate student research as a means for learning critical thinking skills.

I am the fortunate recipient of several teaching awards including the University of Nebraska system award for “Outstanding Teaching and Instructional Creativity,” the UNK Award for Mentoring Undergraduate Research, the Robert S. Daniel Teaching Award from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology, and the 2009 U. S. Professor of the Year Award from CASE/Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

**My Early Development as a Teacher**

One of my favorite sayings is by Jackie Robinson, who broke the color barrier in baseball. He suggested that our lives are unimportant, except for the influence we have on others. This is certainly one of the greatest joys of teaching—the difference we are allowed to make in the lives of our students.

In my life, three teachers/mentors stand out as having made a real difference in who I have become. The first was my junior high-school orchestra director, Daniel Bristow, who had a B.A. from Julliard and Ph.D. from Columbia. When asked why he taught junior high school, Dan said that it was his last chance to have a real impact on people’s lives. He was a teacher who
inspired us to be better than we thought possible. Gary Carson, my first psychology teacher and mentor at Weber State College, taught me how to become involved in students’ lives beyond the classroom and he remains a close friend to this day. It was Gary and his wife LouAnn who took me in and gave me a place to stay when I ran short of money the beginning of my sophomore year. The third is Philip Brickman at Northwestern who taught me that real teaching often happens outside the classroom, in informal settings where ideas can be nurtured, coaxed and molded into clarity. Summer get-togethers at the beach on Lake Michigan were the setting for many a dissertation topic. For whatever success I have had working with students, I owe a large debt of gratitude to these outstanding teachers and the principles by which they lived. I have tried my best to emulate them.

My first teaching experience took place in Dr. Carson’s Introductory Psychology course. Our textbook used the life of the sculptor Henry Moore to illustrate Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. While I had never heard of Moore, I was well aware of several musicians whose lives, I thought, contradicted Maslow’s contention that one had to satisfy lower level needs in order to achieve higher level needs. I asked Dr. Carson if I could conduct a mini-lesson on the subject. Talk about chutzpa! I remember beginning my lesson by asking how many students had heard of Moore. None had. I then asked how many had heard of Mozart. Most had. I used the example of Mozart, who at times couldn’t satisfy basic needs for food and adequate shelter, to illustrate my contention that the needs outlined by Maslow were not necessarily hierarchical. The technique worked. I was hooked and knew I wanted to be a college professor, and this “Socratic” method is one I still use to this day.

My earliest formal college teaching experience occurred during graduate school. Northwestern University prided itself on not using graduate teaching assistants in the classroom.
However, in May, 1970, we went on strike along with hundreds of other colleges and universities after students were killed at Kent State during an anti-war protest. At Northwestern, we set up an alternative university program of peace studies that continued to the end of the term. I taught a class on attitude change using Don Campbell’s copy *Canvassing for Peace* (1970) by Bob Abelson and Phil Zimbardo. The purpose of the course was to prepare students to work for peace candidates. This experience convinced me of the value of using real-world applications in engaging students in the learning process. The class went well, and my professors noticed, so the next year I was given the opportunity to teach a developmental psychology course to nurses at Northwestern University’s Medical Center. Many of the students were older than I, which provided me with two valuable lessons: how to teach non-traditional students, and how to teach a subject for which I had minimal preparation.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

My most notable failure as a teacher occurred during my first semester of teaching and was an example of how much I didn’t know about teaching a subject for which I had minimal preparation. I was asked to teach statistics and chose to do so using the Personalized System of Instruction (PSI) method. I was not particularly knowledgeable in either the topic or the teaching method, a fact quickly ascertained by my students. I came away frustrated and disappointed. It was a humbling experience and a good antidote to my young arrogance and unwarranted self-confidence. I learned a healthy respect for the skills and experience of my colleagues and a realization that there was much to learn from others in becoming a good teacher. As a result, the next time I was asked to teach a class outside my area of expertise, I talked at length with colleagues who had taught the course about the importance of the subject, key issues to be covered, and concepts that were confusing to students. I also gathered teaching demonstrations
and exercises to help me make key points and reviewed others’ syllabi to discover essential topics to address.

Over time, I have come to believe that good teachers require students to think, to solve problems, to pose questions, and to wonder about the “why” behind the “what” that we know. In his 1901 book *American Traits*, Hugo Munsterberg contrasted the education received in high school with that received at a University. He pointed out that the high school distributes knowledge that has been collected, whereas the university strives to teach the student to take a critical attitude toward all collected knowledge. The high school teaches facts while the university should teach students the methods whereby they can uncover the facts for themselves. My greatest satisfaction as a teacher has been in finding ways to involve undergraduate students in the critical examination and expansion of the knowledge base. I know that some people will say that this is scholarship, not teaching, and that some folks are convinced they are two different things. I am not. To me, they are different words for a very similar process that is at the heart of teaching and learning, the process by which we come to understand that which we didn't understand before.

**The Examined Life of a Teacher**

In thinking about the teachers whose influence made a difference in my life raises several interesting questions. What makes one teacher more influential than another? What qualities do highly effective and influential teachers possess? What do effective teachers do to engage students so that they learn more, achieve more, reach for more?

I find these questions interesting and to answer them I have done what academics always do—consult the literature (see Buskist, in press). I have also observed other teachers, and most importantly, I have listened to my students.
Harry Kirke Wolfe is arguably one of the most important psychologists and educators of the early 1900s. His impact on the education of a vast number of students is probably matched only by his unfortunate obscurity. Because he did not train graduate students, his legacy has been more indirect than that of some more famous psychologists. Throughout his professional career, he labored diligently at the University of Nebraska to enhance the education of his students, working with them individually in the laboratory. His undergraduate lab ranked third in the nation in producing students who would later attain doctorates. Three of his students who became presidents of APA commented that Wolfe had influenced them more than any other mentor (Benjamin, 1987, p.69). Wolfe received no teaching credit for his lab work and neither did his students. Yet enrollments in his courses continued to mushroom. A student of his once remarked that they were willing to “venture the work for the sake of the zest” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 52).

Like Harry Kirke Wolfe, the greatest joy I have in teaching is the process of mentoring undergraduate research. My earliest experience with undergraduate research took place in 1966 when I was an undergraduate student and Dr. Gary Carson was my mentor. My topic was leadership and conformity. My motivation was to seek a way to resolve a long-standing late-night dispute within my circle of friends using something like evidence instead of opinion. What thrilled me was the creation of new knowledge (Miller, 1967), a thrill I try to encourage with my own students.

During my time at UNK, I have mentored over 200 undergraduate research projects that were presented at regional or national conferences. My students and I have very similar goals—to discover that which we did not know before. We tend to avoid replications and extensions and often take risks in examining little known or at least little written about phenomenon. As a result,
we have published over 20 articles together in professional journals and they have published about 27 articles as sole author, which again highlights the relationship between scholarship and teaching. Many students identify this experience as one of their most significant academic endeavors and I find that my lectures have become enriched with examples drawn from the many undergraduate student research projects that it has been my privilege to mentor. At this point, there are very few topics in my courses where I cannot refer to the results of a student research project to expand students’ knowledge of the subject matter. And don't think that that doesn't affect their attention—it can be very exciting to realize that students just like them can contribute to the knowledge base.

**Advice for New Teachers**

In the preface to *Principles of Psychology*, William James wrote, "In spite of the exclusion of [certain important subjects], the work has grown to a length which no one can regret more than the writer himself" (1890, p. v). During the past twenty years, introductory psychology texts have accelerated this trend, expanding both the number of topics covered and the amount of material devoted to each topic. Many beginning teachers believe that it is their responsibility to fit all of this material into a 15-week semester. It is not. I believe that many things are more important than comprehensive coverage including (a) stimulation of continuing interest in the subject (b) an appreciation of what counts as evidence in scientific inquiry (c) encouragement of critical thinking skills and (d) application of psychological knowledge. So what can the new teacher do to manage the explosion of information in our field?

One strategy for limiting the number of topics is to teach what we know best. This strategy has two advantages: We may communicate our own excitement, which can stimulate continuing interest in our students, and we may be more likely to help students develop critical
thinking skills because our favorite topics are ones in which we have placed more thought. A disadvantage associated with this approach is that it may not provide students with a balanced view of the field, which may limit their interest if our areas of expertise do not overlap with their own. A second teaching strategy would be to try to cover everything provided in the text in a cursory manner. However, this strategy is very likely to prove deficient in engendering an appreciation of how psychological knowledge is created and it gives little time to develop critical thinking skills. A third strategy would be to teach students what they are most interested in learning. Simply by surveying students at the beginning of the course, the instructor could tailor the course to students’ interests. This strategy is most likely to stimulate students’ continuing interest as well as provide them with real world applications of psychological knowledge. On the other hand, coverage of the field is very likely to be limited, leaving students unprepared for later courses. A fourth strategy, and the one I would recommend, is to encourage student-directed learning outside of class. If students can independently review and process material not covered in class, more material can be learned without sacrificing student interest, critical thinking, or research methodology. To encourage students to be independent learners, teachers can require them to master the material not covered in class through review papers, tests, chapter outlines, and student presentations.

There is no shallow end in teaching. Teaching starts with a bang and, if you do it right, it doesn’t end with a whimper. Teaching is one of the few jobs where you are expected to perform immediately while learning how to do it at the same time. To address this challenge there are a number of good books that provide advice to new teachers (Bain, 2004; Filene, 2005; McKeachie, 2005). From these, I have selected a few general principles that I strongly endorse. First, plan your class sessions so that you are able to involve your students actively in the
teaching/learning process; that is, encourage active rather than passive learning. It is better for students to assimilate and digest fifty ideas or concepts during the semester rather than just passively to record several hundred. Second, teach from your own experience, not from someone else's. If you're comfortable and having fun, students will feel it and share your enthusiasm. In each course spell out your expectations for your students in the first class, reiterate them at regular intervals, and stick with them. Students do not deal well with surprises, particularly related to their attainment of grades. Establish high academic standards, including rigorous, but fair, grading criteria. Offer students the support and encouragement they need to meet or exceed those criteria. Finally, share your joy in being a teacher. Demonstrate your enthusiasm for the subject matter, teaching, and students. Take an interest in the students themselves. Develop positive rapport with your students, which makes it more likely that they will attend class and participate in learning activities.

**Final Thoughts**

In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Professor Dumbeldore says "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities." (Rowling, 1999, p. 333). At my age, I am beginning to look at the choices I have made during my career and what I hope to leave behind. When we reflect on what we have contributed during our time as teachers, it is the impact that we have had on other people, on students, on colleagues, and on members of our community that really counts. Those of us who teach are in a unique position to make a very real difference in the lives of talented, young people, and we must be ever vigilant to retain both the vision and the resources we need to make that difference.

I would like to close with another of my favorite quotes. It is by the Principal, Holy Trinity High School, Charlene Szumilas (1997) who said:
We hope that during their time with us, our students gain an understanding of what it
takes to live a worthy life. That they understand what injustice is and will work to correct
it. That when they see those less fortunate, they assist them. That they reach out to others
in need even when they themselves are struggling. That they give generously of
themselves and their talents. Above all, we hope that they help those with whom they
come into contact to see the value of an educated heart.

As a teacher, I think my greatest satisfaction comes when I am able to help students see the value
of an educated heart.
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Good Teaching is Like Life—It’s All about Relationships

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Good Teaching is Like Life—It’s All about Relationships

After earning my doctorate in Clinical Psychology at Temple University, I completed a two year fellowship at Yale University and then accepted a staff psychologist position in a day hospital program. I worked in clinical positions for several years and then I took a position as a part-time member of the faculty at Naugatuck Valley Community College in 1997. This was my first teaching appointment after completing my doctorate and I quickly realized how much I wanted to return to the classroom. I accepted a full-time position at NVCC in January 1998 and I am currently a Professor of Psychology at Naugatuck Valley Community College in Waterbury, Connecticut.

Since I began a full time teaching career, my work and accomplishments have been largely split between teaching and more administrative tasks and leadership roles. This combination has mostly worked well for me, but finding the correct balance between them has been a theme in my professional life and an ongoing challenge. One of my most defining roles has been my work as Chair of the college's Center for Teaching over the last 10 years and my involvement in Connecticut's Great Teacher Seminar. These roles allow me to shape institution wide initiatives, while I keeping teaching related concerns at the center of my professional life. The fact that I have been nationally recognized for both my teaching and my work in faculty development served as significant validation of the choices that I have made in my professional life.

My Early Development as a Teacher

My first experience in a teaching role occurred when I was an undergraduate in my senior year at New York University. NYU awarded academic credit to selected students to serve as teaching assistants for the General Psychology course. In this role, I was one of ten or so TA's in
a weekly recitation section. It was our role to review the chapter material each week with our 8 assigned students and to answer questions as well as we could. I loved being in this role, and it was perhaps the beginning of imagining myself as a professor. My memory of the training for this position is fairly vague—I know there was some support from graduate students overseeing the group of us, but I do not remember any formal training on teaching techniques or approaches.

The assumption that I could figure out how to teach on my own continued after I began graduate school at Temple University. All graduate students in the Clinical Psychology program worked either as research assistants, as I was in my first year, or as teaching assistants, as I was in my second year of studies. Although I was excited at the prospect of teaching, I was a bit unnerved when I realized that my first assigned course would be Theories of Personality as the sole instructor. There was no professor to provide direct supervision of my teaching and I received no training. I did not even receive an instructor's manual to accompany the textbook.

Although I had many conversations with fellow graduate students who were also teaching, there were a fairly small number of us in my program. Mostly, I felt very much on my own to figure out how to effectively engage and educate the undergraduate students who enrolled in my courses. I cringe to think about the poor quality of education they must have received as I experimented and felt my way through this fairly overwhelming task. In doing so, I reflected a great deal on teachers I had that I thought were particularly effective (as well as those who were not) and tried to emulate what I thought were the most effective approaches they had used. I knew that I needed to be entertaining, that the information I presented needed to be interesting as well as accurate, and that I needed to be fair to my students.
Outside of these fairly vague ideas about teaching, I, mostly unwittingly, used my ongoing training as a therapist to inform my classroom behavior. I began focusing a great deal on my relationships with my students and the importance of gaining their trust and respect if I wanted their engagement. I needed to see them as individuals and to think about what those individuals wanted from their interaction with me, as well as what I might think they needed from that interaction. I was not doing therapy with them, but I was entering into a similar facilitative relationship through which I hoped they would experience personal growth.

While my earliest thoughts about becoming a teacher stemmed from the enjoyment of my experience at NYU, my graduate teaching experience changed that goal to a large degree. I realized that, more than any other activity, I loved the engagement with others that I experienced both in the therapy room and in the classroom. However, I actually put aside the plan to seek an academic job because I assumed that any teaching position would be subordinate to a role as a researcher and writer. I did not have any models for faculty who prioritized their teaching rather than other forms of scholarship. Given this assumption, I decided to pursue clinical work upon completion of my degree.

Several years later, after working exclusively in clinical positions, I was still thinking about teaching. I loved being a therapist, but realized that teaching was not something I could put aside. I am not sure why exactly. I suspect that teaching was an activity in which I could use the interpersonal and reflective skills that make me an effective therapist, but with the excitement, optimism and relative immediacy of change that one can experience in the classroom.

Once I began my full-time position at NVCC, I had opportunities to talk to other faculty about teaching, and worked with a senior colleague who visited my classroom several times and also invited me to visit his. Those exchanges were helpful, but the mentoring relationship ended
(by design) after the first semester and, at the time, the culture of my college was not one in which conversations about teaching often happened. I continued to focus on my relationships with my students, and they gave honest and helpful feedback about what worked and what did not work. The most significant event in learning to really teach came at the end of my first full year at NVCC when I attended Connecticut’s Great Teacher Seminar.

Like all such seminars, the Barnes Seminar is organized around minimally structured conversations among teachers. The main idea is that teachers learn best by talking to other teachers and that those conversations are not discipline specific—good teaching is good teaching, regardless of the topic. That experience in May 1999 was a true catalyst in my growth as a teacher. I had conversations with individuals at many different stages of their careers and came away with concrete ideas and feedback about my own teaching. Most importantly, I came away with the conviction that I needed a community of teachers with whom to continue these conversations, and I began to seek that out on my campus. I also formed a mentoring relationship with a senior faculty member at another campus whom I had met at Barnes. Over the last decade, this relationship, and a broader commitment to forming these kinds of relationships with others, has been a driving force in my growth as a teacher.

Within a year of the Barnes Seminar experience, I joined our campus Center for Teaching committee and also became a staff member of Connecticut’s Great Teacher's Seminar. Within three years, I became chair of our Center for Teaching and joined the statewide CFT Steering Committee. Since then, I have also become one of two Teaching and Learning Consultants on my campus and have been trained as an Instructional Skills Workshop facilitator, offering ISW's at least once per year. Focusing so much of my energy and work life on activities that force me
to think about my teaching and the teaching of others has, by far, been the greatest influence on my teaching.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

There are two main obstacles that I have struggled with as a teacher. Both stem largely from personal traits, and both continue to be issues that I think about each semester. I am a fairly driven individual with clear and vocalized goals. I get excited about new projects and interesting ideas. While I often like this about myself, and it is often helpful to my success, it can interfere both with my time for teaching and with effective classroom behavior when these other projects become distracting or become drains on my time. I believe that I have successfully engaged with these issues, but it has been a struggle.

I have often marveled to others that I have a job in which I get to spend my days thinking and talking about ideas that I find fascinating. This fact is certainly true, but for me it presents a potential trap in which I talk excitedly and at length to my students while they become increasingly glazed-over and uninterested. At the start of my career I certainly relied heavily on lecture as a teaching approach and only gradually incorporated increasing amounts of group work and other active learning approaches. These non-lecture approaches are now much more at the heart of my teaching, but my own preference for talking is still evident. I need to remind myself often to incorporate activities that rely less on written or spoken media, and to incorporate opportunities for more visual or hands-on activities. Because these are not what I find most comfortable, I easily forget about them or treat them as unimportant to learning. To keep this tendency in check, I often use anonymous feedback forms in class through which students can tell me how class is going for them. Without exception, this feedback includes comments that I need to do more "hands on" work and more "fun" activities. This request from students is, I
believe, really a request for more emotionally engaging activities, while my own tendency is to focus on intellectual engagement. It is an important, if frustrating, reminder of how much who I am colors my teaching, for better or worse.

Similarly, my excitement about new projects and ideas can sometimes interfere very directly with my teaching. Over my years at NVCC, I have happily taken on leadership roles in many areas of the college, including institutional research, curriculum affairs, and strategic planning. Having a leading role in making something new and important happen is very appealing to me. Too many times in the past, my non-teaching commitments have directly interfered with the quality of my teaching by limiting the amount of time I have for class preparation, thoughtful responses to student work, and other important teaching tasks. Several years ago, I became very aware of a growing sense that my teaching and my students' demands were "interfering" with my ability to complete other projects. This was an important realization for me, and one that led to significant changes in the choices that I make.

While I still happily serve on committees when asked, I try to make choices to work on projects that are more directly related to teaching in some way. A current example of this change is my choice this year to lead my college's effort to implement learning communities and a first year experience course. While this project has taken up a great deal of time, all of it involves conversations with other teachers about creating a successful experience for our freshmen. Working on this project leads to closer examination of my own teaching and of my relationships with students and feels like an opportunity for growth as a teacher, instead of a drain on my teaching time. On a larger scale, my primary professional commitment outside of the classroom is my work through the Center for Teaching. Again, this work as a faculty developer directly enriches my teaching.
On the other hand, I relinquished my nine-year tenure as department chair because of its impact on my teaching. Most directly, it released me from half my course load each semester. Indirectly, it was simply a distraction from teaching, both in terms of time and emotional commitment. As chair, I felt that I was increasingly embroiled in administrative problem solving, including managing conflicts among faculty and between faculty and students. These activities created a mindset about the college that took me away from the idealism that I think is at the heart of most good teaching—the belief that we are doing something good or altruistic. As I felt my cynicism and annoyance growing, I decided to move away from administrative tasks and to focus more on teaching and my own relationships with students.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

My ideas about teaching and the support of teaching excellence continue to be related to my earliest ideas and experiences of teaching. I continue to believe that relationships with students are central to teaching success. If any teacher can instill loyalty, trust, and respect in his or her students, then learning will happen. Of course, teachers are not likely to earn loyalty, trust, or respect without knowledge and competence, but knowledge and competence alone are not enough. All of us have seen many highly respected scholars fail at teaching—with students who don't attend class, who don't put full effort into assignments or activities, or who simply do not invest what they need for full engagement in the learning process.

Consistent with this philosophy, my own teaching has changed over my career in ways that I believe make it more likely that I will gain my students’ loyalty, trust, and respect. At the start of my career, I was almost exclusively focused on course content—on the information that I needed to give to the students. I had ideas about what information was important and believed I knew the best ways of teaching and learning it. I spent little time or effort thinking about my
students' goals, or their preferred learning approaches. I think I was often entertaining, especially to bright students and those already interested in the subject. As I matured as a teacher, I became increasingly concerned with those students who were struggling or who were uninterested. I began to think more about how to reach these students. While "learner centeredness" has become a somewhat overused buzz phrase, I believe that there has been an important shift in my own teaching to focus more on the individual learners and less on my pre-existing ideas about what is true for "most" students.

Along with this change towards learner centeredness, there has been a parallel increase in my willingness to fully engage with individual students. I am more likely to know details of my students' lives. This level of engagement often seems messy and not directly related to teaching. It also involves issues and problems I often feel powerless to address. But my willingness to develop that side of my student relationships seems very important to earning that loyalty and trust. As a younger teacher, and one who was trained as a therapist, I think I tried to adhere to stricter boundaries in my interactions with students, making clear distinctions between their academic and personal issues. I have learned, however, that those "personal" issues often directly interfere with their academics. In addition, many of our students, especially at an open enrollment college, need to see me as a person who is invested in them before they will fully invest in me and my course.

This shift toward a teaching role that is more personally engaged and emotionally relevant is evident in my own practice of assessment and reflection. Although I do use classroom assessment techniques (Angelo & Cross, 1993) as well as the college's formal assessment instrument to gauge my teaching success, much of my practice in this area is more reflective and involves regularly scheduled opportunities to engage with colleagues about
teaching. As with my changing engagement with students, these reflective sessions often include discussion of the subjective experience of teaching, focus on personal doubts and frustrations, and pride in specific accomplishments. For several years, this reflective practice included participation in a small group of faculty who regularly journaled about our teaching experiences and met to share those journal entries. More recently this practice has involved a group that has met for several semesters—reading and discussing books that touch on teaching in a variety of ways. Through these activities, I have developed a trusted group of colleagues. These are individuals with whom I can share my darkest teaching doubts and fears and whom I can trust to give me honest feedback, even when they think I am failing in some way as a teacher.

Advice for New Teachers

My best, but perhaps least simple, piece of advice for new teachers is to think very carefully about where you choose to teach. Before accepting a teaching position, try to assess the overall culture of the institution, especially as it is reflected in peer relationships among teachers. I believe that it is very difficult to become an excellent teacher in a vacuum and that conversations and reflection with peers are central to any teaching career. Once you accept a position, actively seek out the most respected teachers on campus. Find a mentor in someone you respect as a teacher and who you can trust as a person. Commit yourself to reflecting on your own teaching practice for the rest of your career—your development as a teacher will actually accelerate the longer you teach. Teaching is about relationships. Failure at teaching, I think, often happens when teachers forget about this truth and see themselves as somehow apart from their students and their colleagues.
References

Cultivating Scholars

Jennifer L. O’Loughlin- Brooks

Collin College
Cultivating Scholars

The title of this chapter comes from a colleague of mine, Dr. Salena Brody, who established an event at Collin College called *Cultivating Scholars*. This yearly gathering highlights our psychology students who are encouraged to present their original research in a conference-style forum. By actively planting the seeds of knowledge in my students, I strive to cultivate scholars while facilitating growth through a dynamic reciprocal learning process.

Born in Abilene, Texas, I received my B.A. in Psychology and Speech/Communications from Texas Christian University in 1991, and graduated from Emporia State University in 1994 with a M.S. in General Experimental Psychology. I joined the full time faculty at Collin College in 2002, after teaching there as an associate instructor of psychology. I was honored to be the recipient of the Wayne Weiten Teaching Excellence Award (2009), and to be named the Texas Professor of the Year by The Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2006). A six-time recipient of the Collin Faculty Recognition Scholarship for Exemplary Teaching and Service, I was also acknowledged by my colleagues as Outstanding Professor at Collin in 2004 and 2006. I act as primary advisor for the Collin chapter of Psi Beta National Honor Society, the national honor society in psychology for community and junior colleges, and serve as an Associate Editor for the *Journal of Psychological Inquiry*.

Currently, I teach Honors Introductory Psychology, Life Span Psychology, Human Sexuality and a course called, “Deep Impact: Exploring Media Influences on Human Development,” which combines Life Span Psychology and Child Growth and Development. In addition to my course load, I promote scholarship through undergraduate research and have
enjoyed accompanying students to national and regional conferences since 1999. I have had the privilege of supervising award winning undergraduate research presentations, with several resulting in student publications (e.g., Tanuvasa et al., 2006; Bridgman et al., 2004).

My research with students has centered on their interests, such as civic engagement, lucid dreaming, road rage, sexuality, youth sports, service-learning, and criminal behavior. Facilitating undergraduate research ultimately led to a highlight in my teaching career which was the co-founding of the National Psychology Synergy Conference in 2006. The conference was developed to afford psychology enthusiasts from high schools, community colleges, and colleges/universities the opportunity to build bridges through scholarship. The Psychology Synergy conference is now in its fourth year as a collaborative venture between Psi Beta and Psi Chi national honor societies.

**My Early Development as a Teacher**

Multiple scholarly experiences as a graduate student influenced my career direction. Under the supervision of my primary mentor, Dr. Stephen F. Davis, I helped maintain an animal vivarium while assisting with research on caffeine exposure and how it affected bar pressing behavior in rats, cadmium exposure influences on aggression, and basic discrimination learning in bearcats (arctictis binturong). Dr. Davis pushed me beyond what I thought possible, supported me, guided me, and ultimately tested me. I also had other secondary advisors, such as Dr. Kenneth Weaver, who helped shape my experiences and guide my successes.

My second year in graduate school, I was thrilled to receive a teaching assistantship and independently taught a general psychology lab course. I did not know it at the time, but this experience in the classroom would ignite my love for teaching and propel me towards the path of choosing to be an educator.
Training for Teaching

I did not receive formal training in teaching, although responsibilities as a graduate teaching assistant (GTA) included periodic mandatory meetings with Dr. Davis to discuss, as a GTA group, any problems or concerns in the classroom and to elaborate on successful teaching practices from which we could all benefit. These meetings were valuable and helped create and foster an atmosphere of camaraderie and collegiality. GTA desks were housed in one office space affectionately called the “bull pen,” where we could converse and collaborate in a spontaneous nature. Often we would commiserate the joys and anxieties of teaching.

Dr. Davis also actively encouraged scholarship by having his students conduct and present original research at local, regional and national psychology conferences. As a result of his leadership, I presented and co-presented papers at many conferences on various different topics. Conferences also provided an opportunity to learn of new and exciting research in the field of psychology and afforded occasions to expand social networks with other students and professionals in the field. We were able to attend research sessions that incorporated components we were studying in own courses. In addition, meeting with faculty and graduate students from other campuses provided a view of their institutions as potential graduate schools for further study. These scholarly opportunities outside the classroom demonstrated to me how teaching and research were intimately related.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

As a professor at a community college, I face unique challenges. I concur with research that suggests, “At the core level of the classroom, many of the pedagogical demands arise from the sheer diversity of community college students—in terms of their preparation, expectations, and aspirations” (Cox, 2003, p.1). Other hurdles include the transitional nature of the two-year
community college and the large percentage of students with heavy commitments to their off-campus work, families, and regular course work.

Teaching a weighty course load, it can be complex to create the extra time needed outside of class to nurture connections with students. Nonetheless, I recognize that my students need research experience that will enable them to compete for jobs and coveted spots in university. To that end, I design research projects and establish research groups to equip my students for the outside world. By taking this hands-on approach, I try to synthesize my experiences as professor and researcher to offer my students a glimpse of the real world of psychology. Therefore, my work with students often takes me beyond the classroom, where I endeavor to cultivate the skills of students, who even at this early point in their academic journeys, have the capacity to conduct research proficiently and the desire to embark on this path as soon as possible.

In addition to providing research opportunities for my students, I also try and model the benefits of civic engagement through pursuit of partnerships with community groups. As a former liaison for Collin’s Service-Learning program, I have partnered with Boys and Girls Club, Angel League Athletics, the teen homeless shelter for our county, and many other non-profit agencies. These partnerships, along with growing concern for declining social capital among young adults, led to my development of the course, “Psychology Service-Learning Philanthropy.” Incorporating student civic responsibility into the core classroom structure was the objective and the course was constructed and based on a successful model, the Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project housed in the Scripps Howard Center at Northern Kentucky University. The primary goal of the class is to help students grasp psychology concepts as they learn grant-writing skills, develop a sense of civic awareness, and invest in the community’s future. Students learn that scholarship can be an active endeavor that also has practical
community applications. The course received national attention as the article “Creating a Successful Psychology Service-Learning Philanthropy Course” was published in the spring 2006 *Journal for Civic Commitment* (Smith & O’Loughlin-Brooks, 2006).

I use course development as a way to meet the individual needs of my students. Therefore, in order to provide intellectually gifted and highly motivated students challenging material and research opportunities, I also created the first Honors General Psychology Course taught at Collin. Teaching through the Honors Institute, I enjoy crafting specialized and enhanced learning experiences such as student-originated psychological research, incorporating guest speakers into the classroom experience, providing networking opportunities for students, fieldtrips, and facilitating collaborative learning.

**The Examined Life of a Teacher**

Critical thinking and challenging students to think beyond the classroom is central to my teaching philosophy. I believe the role of a teacher is more than one who provides instruction or disseminates information. Therefore, my primary goal is to guide my students to a deeper appreciation of themselves and the world around them by creating and fostering a learning atmosphere that prepares them to face life’s challenges.

My approach to teaching has changed over the years as I have invested more energy in facilitative instruction instead of lecture. I feel the role of a teacher really should be to guide the learning process. Passive lecturing is the mode of teaching I encountered most in college and this style entails a non-active role by students as they learn. I have tried to learn from my past experiences and reflect, through my teaching, a more active experience for my students.

*The Rewards of Teaching*
Each student whose life is touched or positively changed by my methods is the greatest reward. For example, a former standout student, who is currently a history graduate student, expressed to me he had yet to find another undergraduate student with the research experience that he has. He managed to convince a professor at his current institution to sponsor undergraduate historical research based on the work he completed under my guidance. He ended up winning second place at a history conference presenting original research using the principles that I had taught him. Stories like these from former students continue to fuel my desire for teaching.

_Evaluating and Improving Teaching_

Over the course of my career, how I evaluate my teaching has evolved. There are numerous ways to evaluate teaching, and I try to critically analyze all outlets and weigh each one respectively. In higher education, one of the most debated areas of research is student evaluations of faculty (Rhem, 2009). “Ratemyprofessor” and “Pickaprof” are online sites students can access and provide instructor feedback. How valid these sites are is still in question, but I do consider the comments, along with in-class evaluations, when assessing my teaching.

In order to improve my own teaching, I regularly engage my colleagues for ideas and often collaborate with them on new teaching methodologies. Attending teaching conferences and scouring teaching journals, magazines, and articles keeps me abreast of new techniques. Conferences are especially beneficial where the free discussion of philosophies, research, technology, and instructional materials allows me to stay on the cutting edge. I critically analyze student and administrative evaluations at the end of each semester in order to glean any areas in need of immediate improvement. There is always room for improvement, and motivation to make necessary changes is crucial for continued excellence in teaching.
Advice for New Teachers

Prioritize- No matter how long one has been in the classroom, it is important to constantly reevaluate and prioritize your life. Value and nurture your relationships with family and friends, keep physically fit, and find time to develop an outside hobby. Managing these priority areas will transfer positivity to the classroom and help you to keep a healthy and balanced perspective on the bigger picture.

Be Engaged- Learn your students’ names within the first two weeks of classes and fully engage yourself in a collaborative learning process. Keep in mind that facilitating the classroom experience does not mean a one way street of knowledge dissemination. Many new teachers are surprised by the profound reciprocal learning process that takes place as students learn from you, and in turn you learn from your students.

Rise to the Occasion- "No one rises to low expectations" (Tinto, 2008, p. 2). "Routinely project attitudes, beliefs, expectations, and attributions...that imply that your students share your own enthusiasm for learning. To the extent that 'you treat your students as if they already are eager learners,' they will be more likely to become eager learners" (Brophy, 1986). I encourage constantly challenging your students to raise their own expectations through rigorous academic experiences. One of the ways I achieve this goal is through cooperative learning groups. Group work is facilitated in my classes regularly, with the assumption that students will learn together and rise to the occasion of a finished project or mastered concept.

Step Outside the Classroom- Some of my most meaningful pedagogical moments have come from the extra time spent outside the classroom fostering further student connections. For example, oversee research projects if possible, and attend local, regional, and national conferences with students. Students enjoy and appreciate the opportunity to present their
research and network with peers from other institutions, along with meeting esteemed researchers in the field. These interactions enhance their education and show them how connections can make a difference in attaining their educational goals.

**Final Thoughts**

In your classes, students are not only learning a new subject while connecting with their peers, many of them are also exploring life options perhaps never dreamed of before! Imagine what it would be like to be a *tabula rasa* with regard to psychology as you meet your new students. Endeavor to shape information into the types of learning exercises that will effectively reach students. Strive to be an engaged teacher, set high standards, keep abreast of the current studies in the field of psychology, and dare to step outside of the classroom. Teaching is a profession where the more you give to the process, the greater the reward for both you and your students.
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33 Years and Still Getting Psyched!

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33 Years and Still Getting Psyched!

Teaching high school psychology has always been a job I look forward to 180 days out of the year. Many of those days involve working with 100 or more enthusiastic high school students, introducing them to a world of new ideas and old theories, always hoping that they will love learning as much as I love teaching.

I started teaching psychology in 1977 at West Deptford High School in New Jersey and have been there my whole career. I graduated from Glassboro State College (Rowan University) with a BA in psychology and later earned an MA in Supervision and Curriculum from Rowan in 1990. After attending the final NSF institute at Beaver College (Arcadia University), I began teaching Advanced Placement Psychology and my life really changed as a result of that experience. I became an affiliate member of the American Psychological Association and attended many workshops that helped me learn more about teaching psychology and since have become very involved in this organization. I chaired the executive board of Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools (TOPSS), worked with the Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education, served on a Task Force for Increasing the Number of Quantitative Psychologists, and currently serve on APA’s Membership Board. I am also a member of APA’s Working Group to Revise the High School Psychology Standards, and the Working Group on the Certification and Training of High School Psychology Teachers. Meeting and working with other high school and college instructors as a reader for the Advanced Placement Psychology Examination was also a great experience for me.
Over the last 15 years, I have had the pleasure of presenting at the American Psychological Association, Eastern Psychological Association, and National Council for Social Studies conventions, as well as working with my friend Rob McEntarffer to organize and implement the first APA-APF/Clark University Workshop for High School Teachers. Among my teaching awards are the APA Society for the Teaching of Psychology (Division 2) Mary Margaret Moffett Memorial Teaching Excellence Award in 2007, the TOPSS Excellence in Teaching Award in 2006, Rutgers University Public School Educator of the Year Award in 2004, and finalist for the New Jersey State Teacher of the Year in 1999-2000 when I was chosen as the New Jersey Gloucester County Teacher of the Year. None of this could have been possible without the support of my husband, Chris, who never complains about me traveling and leaving him alone to care for our pets, Scully and Vader. “Just call me when you get there” is a line I hear often!

**My Early Development as a Teacher**

When I was in college, most of my friends were studying to become teachers. I was sure I wanted to be a teacher but not sure exactly what I wanted to teach. After two years of courses in social studies, and a few electives in psychology, I became really interested in the prospect of teaching high school psychology. Most of the professors in my education program were unsure of the job market in this field but I was intent on pursuing it. I student-taught psychology with an amazing teacher and I was sure this was my calling. When I graduated in 1976, the state of New Jersey required a separate certification to teach psychology, and I was one of the few who obtained that certification upon graduation. I did not even know how many high schools offered psychology, but in
the summer of 1977 when I was unable to go on a cross-county trip with my best friends due to a car accident, I was called by West Deptford High School for an interview. They needed a certified high school teacher of psychology and I was hired—despite the fact that I had to go to the interview with the Superintendent Mr. “Chic” McNally missing five of my front teeth. It was not a pretty sight, but to this day “Chic” still comments on how memorable my interview was for him. Talk about being in the right place at the right time! That fall, I started teaching psychology, sociology and United States history. Within a few years, the number of psychology classes increased, and after starting the school’s first AP Psychology course, I continued to teach psychology and sociology, eventually becoming the department chair. In 1998, I also started teaching at Rutgers University, Camden NJ, in the Teacher Preparation Program, and just recently was asked to be the Advisor of the newly formed Student New Jersey Education Association on campus. Teaching is not just a job to me—I guess you could say it is my life.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

Over the past 33 years, I have learned a lot from my students. I have learned that they need my undivided attention at times when I do not think I can give it. There are times when I have been frustrated with myself—not able to make them understand a concept, tired of repeating my expectations, lost for a new way to present an old idea. Then there have been times when I am so in tune to their every need, so in the “flow” that I forget that I only have 43 minutes to teach this period. My students have helped to define me as a teacher. I have become the teacher that I have always wanted to be.

When I started teaching, I was very limited in my knowledge base—even though I thought I knew everything! Even though I majored in psychology, I did not know 10% of
what I know today. I relied on the textbook and the few resources that I could find. Like most psychology teachers even today, I had no one to talk to—I was all by myself. The best thing that ever happened to me is the vast network of colleagues and friends I have found. I have to credit a very important person for this change: Dr. Sam Cameron. When I met him at Beaver College and spent four weeks at the “final NSF institute” for psychology teachers, I started a new phase in my life that has led me to where I am today. He encouraged me to get involved, and I took his advice. Most psychology teachers that know Sam regard him as the “Father of AP Psychology.” Those who have never had the pleasure of getting to know him are missing someone very special.

Reading, attending workshops and learning as much as I can about what I teach my students has helped me to become proud of what I know and how I teach. Sometimes I have been called a “workshop junkie.” But today I spend just as much time teaching others as I do attending and learning to improve myself. Often teachers contact me to advise them on developing a new course. One teacher just happened to be the mother of two of my AP Psychology students. She said that they told her, “If you want to do it right, go see Park.” What better compliment could any teacher want? When I go to visit other school districts or mentor teachers on the phone or via email, I give them anything and everything they need to become the best teacher they could be.

Over the years, many of my students have majored in psychology, achieved their Master’s degrees, and a couple of them have achieved what I have not yet accomplished—a PhD in psychology. Many of them have come back to my high school to talk with my students. Often I get emails, letters, and phone calls from students still in college, telling me how well they are doing in their psychology courses. And yes—
sometimes they call or text me asking for help with a project or exam question. Unless it is past 10:00 p.m., I welcome their calls and enjoy staying in touch with them.

**The Examined Life of a Teacher**

The bell rings at 7:31 a.m., and I can usually be found in the hallway upstairs pushing the freshman into their homerooms—mind you I do not teach freshman and this is not my favorite activity of the day. After drinking my third cup of coffee—or more—I begin the day gathering all the materials I need for my first two classes. But teaching has changed over the years, and even though I teach the same courses, my life as a teacher has been in a constant state of evolution.

Over the years, high school teachers have been introduced to many educational initiatives—state standards, increased high school graduation requirements, subject area exit exams, No Child Left Behind legislation, and Understanding by Design curriculum revision to name a few of the most recent. There are national and state policies to which we must attend, and as a psychology teacher I have always been aware of the fact that if the school district needs to make changes in its curriculum, the “required” classes would take a priority over electives. Many of my friends have lost their psychology courses due to budget reductions, decreased enrollment, and board of education decisions. I have been very lucky that my enrollment figures have been high and my administration supports me in all that I have done to make my courses popular and effective. The best thing any teacher of psychology can hope for is that she will be seen as an effective teacher—one that brings to her students knowledge that will benefit them the rest of their lives. Helping parents, teachers, and students realize that psychology is everywhere and that learning about it will reach far beyond the classroom walls is a goal I have worked on every day I
have been a teacher. Developing performance assessments that allow the students to share what they have learned, participate in service learning activities, and conduct research that benefits the school and community has helped me to achieve this goal.

My textbooks are on-line now and I teach with a Smart Board in a classroom with students that are far more technologically advanced than I am. Soon all of our students will be bringing a laptop to class—no more textbooks—and we will not be running off hundreds of papers to give out (save the trees!) or using scantrons to grade tests. Every day, I use the computer to download United Streaming videos or use PsychSim and other interactive programs to help my students actively participate in their learning. Quizzes, hand-held response systems, and other means of formative assessment allow me to monitor how my students are learning. Our GETPSYCHED! Wiki allows my students to continue discussing the topics outside of the classroom and I have to say this has been a really great addition to my educational repertoire. The only real negative I have found in using all the new technology available to me is that I have to sleep with a brace on my wrists because I am developing carpal tunnel—a small price to pay for the advancement of my young students’ minds.

Advice for New Teachers

My three suggestions to new teachers are: be yourself, keep a sense of humor, and be as flexible as you possibly can. In my college course, many of the pre-service teachers have asked me what I think the most important quality of a good teacher should be. There is not just one. Consistency is important to classroom management. You have to be a good listener and always be aware of the mood of the day—both yours and your
students’. Be patient. What works with one group may not work well with the next so always have alternative plans handy!

Never hesitate to ask for help—whether it is content related or behavior related. I truly believe I do not know everything and I am thankful for my friends in the English, science, and social studies departments who are there to talk to me about anything and everything. Moreover, when I need to talk psychology, I am truly blessed to be able to email or phone more than 300 other psychology teachers for their advice or feedback. You do not have to reinvent the wheel—someone, somewhere will have an idea from which you can benefit and will be willing to share it with you. Having this network of colleagues is surpassed by no other content area I know.

Join APA TOPSS—become an active member. You will benefit from the resources and the people you meet in ways you cannot imagine. Go to the APA Convention if you can, or your state and college sponsored psychology workshops. Always be ready and willing to learn more about your craft and your content. When you think you don’t have enough room in your filing cabinets or you have too many files on your computer, remember there are teachers out there that need your resources and new teachers that will benefit from your mentoring. Plan a workshop—call up a few people and get together for coffee or pizza! Cooperative learning is not just for your students!

I hope that you will take on the challenges of the 21st century with a happy heart and a healthy mind. As Abraham Maslow might say, “Be all you can be” (the army stole this from him, I am sure) and go forth to teach psychology.
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From Teaching Tennis to Teaching Psychology

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From Teaching Tennis to Teaching Psychology

My parents instilled in me a love of learning, and I’ve been greatly influenced by my mother’s enthusiasm for art, literature, creativity, and humor, as well as my father’s passion for science and medicine. They raised their children in the small college town of Oberlin, Ohio, where opportunities for intellectual enrichment were ever present. However, after high school, when it came time for college, I set my sights on new lands and attended Pomona College in Claremont, California. There I majored in psychology and conducted my senior thesis on hemispheric lateralization and spatial ability.

After graduating from college in 1983, I returned to Ohio and became an assistant coach for a high school girls’ tennis team as well as for the Oberlin College women’s tennis team. After one year of hitting and picking up thousands of tennis balls, I craved intellectual stimulation and desperately needed to attend graduate school. Psychology was clearly the area of study for me, but my interests were broad. I knew I didn’t want to be a clinician, but that was essentially all I knew. Based on my undergraduate thesis topic, I should have applied to cognitive, experimental, or biopsychology programs. However, I was also interested in individuals’ self-perceptions and the socialization of people’s attitudes and biases. Finally, I applied to developmental psychology graduate programs and eventually decided on the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Eight years later I received my doctorate.

In 1992 I became an adjunct assistant professor at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, where I taught a research methodology course. This position was the first time I taught my own psychology class and all went well. In retrospect, it’s clear that this experience is what subsequently opened doors for me.

From 1993 to 1995 I held a tenure-track position at Ferrum College in Virginia. I had
wonderful colleagues there, but the sociopolitical climate in Virginia left me needing a new venue. I heard about a 1-year, visiting assistant professor opportunity at University of Michigan-Dearborn, so I jumped at the chance and applied for the job. It turns out that it was my excellent previous performance as an adjunct that got me an interview because my publication record was quite weak compared to other candidates’. Fortunately, I attained the temporary position and later became one of four candidates when a national search was conducted for the tenure-track job. It was my substantially stronger teaching demonstration that earned me the full-time position over the other applicants, who all had more impressive research records. I’m currently a fifth-year, associate professor of developmental psychology at UM-Dearborn, where I teach three classes each semester.

In 2004 I won the Distinguished Teaching Award at UM-Dearborn and in 2008 I received the Robert S. Daniel Teaching Excellence Award from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP). I’ve published six articles in Teaching of Psychology (ToP) and am a consulting editor for the journal. Besides my ToP articles, I have 13 peer-reviewed publications. I’ve also written test banks and student study guides for several textbooks.

My Early Development as a Teacher

Although I obtained my doctorate in developmental psychology from the University of Michigan (the home of both Bill McKeachie and the nation’s first Center for Research on Learning and Teaching [CRLT]), I surprisingly didn’t receive any training or preparation for teaching when I was in graduate school. I do vaguely remember Bill’s Teaching Tips book (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006) being mentioned by a few people, but I didn’t even know about CRLT. Instead, I was merely told that I was in charge of a discussion section of 30 students and that I needed to develop discussion topics, activities, and graded assignments. I had a few ideas,
but was also fortunate to have two, more experienced, second-year students as fellow teaching assistants for the course who gave me some helpful suggestions. However, I was still basically on my own to develop a discussion section for this course and to learn how to grade the assignments appropriately and fairly. Nevertheless, I continued to be a TA for a variety of courses and found that I greatly enjoyed helping students to understand difficult material, make connections between concepts, and see the relevance of psychology in their own lives. It became apparent early on that I was able to connect with students and make the field of psychology accessible and exciting for them. Teaching allowed me to be creative as well, which is something I find highly motivating. My passion for teaching psychology started early in graduate school and has continued to grow and take new forms throughout my career.

As I look back at my academic life, I realize that I’ve actually had no teaching mentors. However, I’ve definitely had many instructors from whom I’ve learned important lessons about teaching. I’ve learned from observation and experience many desirable instructional practices to incorporate into my own repertoire, as well as many undesirable practices to exclude from my own teaching. All of these experiences have been valuable and have greatly informed the development of my craft.

Contemplating my teaching career and abilities has made me realize that my extensive time as an instructor at a summer tennis camp is where I learned and polished many of the effective instructional strategies I use in my psychology courses. The director of the camp and two other senior instructors were superb role models for many of these teaching practices. I developed other skills on my own as I sought the best ways to reach students and help them learn. Although my initial use of these philosophies and behaviors involved tennis balls and racquets, the actions and ideas transfer wonderfully to the academic domain. In that tennis-
teaching environment I was able to observe, experience, and develop the following important, effective, pedagogical practices:

- connecting with students via enthusiasm, humor, patience, and empathy;
- preparing lessons of appropriate difficulty and pace, but being willing and able to change the structure of the class if need be;
- breaking information into its component parts for ease of comprehension;
- continually checking student comprehension during instruction;
- developing students’ fundamental skills and then building upon them;
- treating each student as an individual and monitoring his or her progress and achievements;
- using student errors as windows into their understanding;
- giving individual feedback that includes not only corrections and constructive criticism, but also positive comments concerning the things that each student is doing well;
- developing analogies and examples in order to facilitate student understanding;
- pushing and encouraging students to perform at higher levels than they think they can;
- helping students learn self-regulation skills in order to perform well;
- making sure that assessment is fair and equitable;
- creating a safe, comfortable learning environment;
- and, remembering my own initial difficulty in learning the material and using those past experiences to tailor instruction to students.

Certainly, teaching a physical activity differs in many substantive ways from teaching an academic subject. For example, I can’t say that there’s much abstract or critical thinking involved in tennis. Plus, there’s no research, written work, in-depth analytical insights, or
opportunities to apply material to real-world examples (outside of tennis). However, as can be seen in the above list, my experiences teaching tennis helped me to develop many excellent pedagogical practices that do indeed carry over to teaching psychology.

In addition, teaching tennis forced me to develop keen observational skills regarding individuals’ body movements and how those actions communicate attention and underlying comprehension (or lack thereof). The importance in my early teaching experiences of dynamic, in-person relationships with students is probably one of the reasons that I find distance-learning classes so unsatisfying and generally at odds with my teaching style and philosophy. Face-to-face, real-time interactions allow me to connect with students in ways that are impossible via long-distance technology. Additionally, an in-class presence allows me the flexibility to change the pace or focus of the class at a moment’s notice in order to better serve the needs of my students.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Despite the multitude of positive experiences I’ve had, I’ve also dealt with some obstacles in my teaching. In graduate school I encountered widespread undervaluing of teaching, especially undergraduate teaching. When I worked as an adjunct instructor, inadequate pay was an obstacle. As a college/university professor, there have been a few different roadblocks that have impeded my teaching career, but I’ve generally been able to circumnavigate them. In general, the obstacles have involved administrative decisions and actions. For example, there have been devaluations of peer-reviewed pedagogical publications, mandates to use specific instructional tools, and the use of course reductions as supposed rewards. (Instead of a course reduction, I’d much prefer a committee reduction.) These institutional obstacles can create a climate in which teaching is not valued by faculty. However, I’ve been quite fortunate in my
academic positions to work with many psychology faculty members who deeply value teaching and who create and maintain a student-centered environment. Without such colleagues, the travels along my teaching path would have been much rockier.

Ultimately, students are my main focus and the most important aspect of my job. Teaching, not research, is the reason I became an academic. Therefore, sometimes my research and writing have had to take a backseat to my grading, class preparation, and meetings with students. However, this priority is at odds with the publication record necessary for promotion and tenure, which did indeed cause some problems for me. I was advised to let my teaching “slide” for a while as I worked on my research; however, I just couldn’t allow myself to do that. Instead, my weekends and summer months were filled with data collection, analyses, and writing. Did my research suffer? Yes, I believe that it did. But, that was my choice based on my values and sense of responsibility, and to this day I still feel that I made the right decisions regarding the balance of teaching and scholarship.

**The Examined Life of a Teacher**

I tend to engage in a lot of self-reflection about my teaching so that I can continue to expand my repertoire and improve my abilities. Student feedback is just one source of information I use for self-assessment and for improving my instructional practices. I also use discussions with colleagues and family members, internet sources, articles from *Teaching of Psychology* and other pedagogical publications, and ideas from instructors’ manuals. Much of my time is spent developing writing assignments for my classes that have an analytical, applied focus and that also reduce the likelihood of plagiarism. In addition, I scour the Web sites and catalogues of independent filmmakers in order to find up-to-date documentaries that demonstrate course constructs. I also read newspapers and science-related magazines to keep up with the
latest scientific discoveries and controversies. All of these activities continue to help me develop courses that increase student engagement and learning.

It’s difficult to condense my teaching philosophy into a few paragraphs or a few main ideas. However, when I reflect on my instructional values and practices, there seem to be four general themes that emerge.

1. *Students must be encouraged to be skeptical and to question the belief systems of themselves and others.* I believe that students should be encouraged to critique psychological theory, to understand and evaluate psychological research, and to recognize the biases that are inherent in the field of psychology and in their own ideas and opinions. We all have biases. A role of teaching is to help students recognize and admit them, explore them, and then alter them if necessary.

2. *Teachers need to set high (but reasonable) standards.* I want to encourage, push, and nudge students to perform at a higher level than they think they are able to. In this way, students are challenged both academically and psychologically.

3. *Material from the course needs to be applied to real life.* An essential component of my teaching is to have students apply course material to the real world. Material is applied to real-life examples during lectures, on exams, in class activities, and in written work. I believe that if students are able to apply class material successfully, then they truly understand what they’ve learned.

4. *A teacher should be available to and respectful of students.* Students must feel comfortable to express their ideas and opinions both in the classroom and one-on-one with the instructor. They also need an instructor who is willing and available to help
them learn and reach their goals. Thus, I believe that advising and mentoring are integral components of teaching.

The rewards of teaching far outweigh the frustrations. It’s a great pleasure to help students become excited about learning, in general, and about psychology, more specifically. It’s gratifying to play a role in their sudden, or slowly acquired, understanding of course material. And, what a wonderful experience to see students achieve at a higher level than they ever thought possible. As I search with frustration for ways to keep students’ thumbs from texting during class and to keep their laptop computers focused on note taking rather than surfing the Internet, I continually remind myself of the rewards I experience as a teacher each and every week. There are the students who doubted their own abilities, but who now realize that they do have the skills necessary to excel. There are those who have reset their priorities so that their education is first and foremost. There are those who have taken their academic knowledge and applied it positively to their life. There are those who are not only the first in their families to graduate college, but who are also soon to start a doctoral program. And, there are those whose minds have been opened to new ideas that they find exciting or even transforming.

Advice for New Teachers

I feel that the 14 pedagogical practices I listed earlier are exceptionally important, and perhaps even essential, for becoming an excellent teacher. I also believe that my previously discussed teaching philosophy includes four other general practices that will lead to teaching excellence. In addition, as numerous other teachers (e.g., Brewer, 2002; Lowman, 1995) have pointed out, becoming an outstanding teacher of psychology also involves passion—a passion for teaching, for learning, and for psychology. A few additional pieces of advice I would give to those individuals who want to be good or outstanding teachers are the following:
• Engage in continual, honest self-reflection and self-assessment about your own teaching, and always strive to improve.

• Don’t feel that you have to use all the latest technological advances in your teaching. Excellent teaching can and does occur in classrooms without such electronic equipment.

• Help students explore psychology through designing and conducting their own research. Doing so enhances their sense of ownership and their excitement about learning and discovery.

• Join STP and other teaching-related organizations in order to find instructional resources and to interact with a great group of people who truly value teaching.
References

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Effective Teaching: Putting Yourself OUT There

Susan A. Spencer

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Effective Teaching: Putting Yourself OUT There

My desk at school peaks the interest of students and teacher alike. As students filter into my classroom before the late bell, some enjoy analyzing or rearranging the elaborate configuration of historical and psychological action figures. Others choose to peruse the current display of postcards purchased during various trips and excursions—the most recent from my trip to the Freud Museum in Vienna. The more curious ones venture a bit further over to the collage of favorite film stills and humorous quotes mounted on my podium. When people enter my classroom, they are drawn to this visually and tactilely pleasing space. As people explore all that my desk has to offer, they inevitably see the framed, black and white photograph of my partner and me, taken at a friend’s wedding. If they ask me, I am happy to explain who the beautiful woman (or as they often say, “that hot chick”) in the picture with me is. Through their excavation of my desk space, my students learn a bit more about who I am.

What they may not know from what they find on my desk is that I currently teach AP psychology and AP European history at Northern Highlands Regional High School in Allendale, New Jersey. Before coming to Highlands in the fall of 2008, I taught at Arthur L. Johnson High School in Clark, New Jersey for the first ten years of my teaching career. I started AP psychology programs at both Highlands and Johnson. At Johnson, my AP psychology students boasted the highest AP test average of any AP course in the school, and I had the pleasure of teaching nearly every graduating senior. In just two short years at Highlands, the psychology program has grown to ten full sections for juniors and seniors, including six sections of AP.

I was recently honored at the 2009 APA Convention in Toronto as the recipient of the Mary Margaret Moffett Memorial Teaching Excellence Award. In 2007, the APA Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools selected me as one of three recipients of the Teaching
Excellence Award. I was chosen as one of New Jersey’s Outstanding Educators by the College of New Jersey and was recognized by Rutgers University Douglass College for encouraging achievement in young women. At Arthur L. Johnson, I was honored as the 2005 National Honor Society Faculty Member of the Year and was voted Teacher of the Month three times by the student body.

I am a member of the APA TOPSS and STP divisions and have served as an AP European history exam reader for the College Board since 2002. I am dual certified as a teacher of social studies and psychology, and have completed my certification in educational supervision. I graduated from Princeton University with a bachelor’s degree in psychology and certificate in women’s studies and earned my master’s degree in history and secondary education from Smith College. I am currently completing my doctoral studies at Drew University.

My Early Development as a Teacher

When I decided to major in psychology as a sophomore at Princeton, I did not have any idea that I would later teach the subject—or teach at all, for that matter. The adjustment to college had been challenging for me, as the interests that had served me well in high school—science and athletics—did not bring the same sense of satisfaction or success at Princeton. My plan had been to major in biology, complete the pre-med requirement, play soccer and softball for four years, and go to medical school. These had been my goals since seventh grade, and I had spent most of my time since then studying and playing sports to achieve them.

Once I arrived at Princeton I found my oversized chemistry lectures impersonal and dull, and I was spending hours at practice and lifting weights only to spend most of the games on the bench. My roommates seemed to be learning more interesting things in their classes, while my course schedule resembled a continuation of high school core classes; my pre-med requirements
left little room for electives. Additionally, I was going through a personally challenging period, as I had recently come out as a lesbian at a time when the university community was not terribly supportive, and the fledgling internet had not yet evolved to offer the sort of instant social connections it does today. I had a sense of isolation and self-loathing, having never had any sort of lesbian mentor who was out, well-adjusted, and successful. I was depressed and withdrawn, and my preoccupation with these personal issues distracted me from my studies and sports. My grades suffered, my relationship with my family was severely strained, and I engaged in self-destructive behaviors. In retrospect, I believe this experience is what later motivated me to become a high school educator. High school had prepared me academically and athletically, but these painstaking preparations were completely undermined by a lack of self knowledge and acceptance. Many of the classes I took in psychology, as well as those in my certificate program, women’s studies, helped me to regain a sense of purpose and rebuild my self esteem. It took almost my entire college experience to have a better understanding of who I was and feel comfortable with myself. Eventually, I found supportive friends and a small gay community at school, and graduated in June of 1995.

It was not until the year after I graduated from college that I decided to pursue a teaching career. I spent my first year out of college in a job that gave me little sense of purpose, and I realized that I had wasted quite a bit of my college education learning not to hate myself rather than making the most of my academic experience and figuring out what I wanted to do with my future. I was drawn to high school teaching because I wanted to actively reconnect with learning and academics in a way that I was not able to do during my turbulent college years. I also wanted to help adolescents to feel more comfortable being themselves so that they would not have to go through the same thing I had experienced in college. Encouraged by a work colleague who had
coached at Smith College, I applied to their MAT program in secondary education and social studies in 1996.

At Smith, though the program required several educational theory and pedagogy courses, I found that the classes I took for my subject-area certification revealed the most important aspects of good teaching and best prepared me for success in my own classroom. My history and psychology professors at Smith not only had great passion for and broad knowledge of their subject areas, but they also had a genuine interest in awakening in their students the same sort of passion for the subject. These professors modeled teaching behaviors I would later incorporate in my own classroom. Classes were small enough to allow for more of a personal connection between professor and student, and it was this experience that shaped me most in my own approach to teaching. I felt that I knew who my professors were as people, and learning about them made me eager to learn from them.

My education classes, on the other hand, seemed less relevant. I learned various approaches to teaching and the “best” and “worst” practices. When I began student teaching, naturally I tried to use the most current methods, according to all the pedagogy I had learned. My attempts to follow the most popular theories yielded the least interesting classes, however. Discouraged by the lukewarm reception I was receiving from my students, I thought about the teachers and professors I liked most and from whom I learned the most. I realized that many of my favorite teachers engaged in pedagogy deemed “antiquated” and “ineffective” by the prevailing theorists. Additionally, few of these teachers taught in the same way. What they all had in common, however, was that they were extremely knowledgeable in their subject area, they took an active interest in their students as individuals, and their teaching style seemed to reveal a lot about who they were as people. Some had neurotic mannerisms while others drew
me in with their dramatic story-telling or their off-beat senses of humor. These qualities made coming to class an experience to which I would look forward. These teachers were always themselves, and because they were comfortable putting themselves “out there,” their students would often do the same.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

As a new teacher, I had been so concerned with following the “appropriate” methods that I lost sight of the most important features of a great class. Focusing on following a canned theory and pre-fabricated lessons inhibited many essential aspects of good teaching: subject area expertise, awareness of student needs, and self-knowledge. This is not to say that all educational theorists are wrong; rather, it is wrong to embrace only one approach and force it on everyone—especially when the approach will likely fall out of favor within a few years anyway. Some methods work for some people, and fail miserably for others; some work in certain classrooms and not at all in others. I found that my teaching improved drastically when I thought about my own personality and used methods that showcased my individual skill set most effectively. Once I stopped trying to be Grant Wiggins or Harry Wong and started being “Spence” (as my students call me), I became much more real to my students, and they were much more interested in learning what I was teaching. Once they began to respond, it became much easier for me to take an active interest in them as individual people.

Learning how to run my own classroom, however, was only one part of teaching in a school. Certainly, it helped to “find myself” in my teaching, and have my students enjoy my classes more for it. However, the politics of the school outside the classroom were much more difficult to navigate. When I arrived at Johnson to begin my career, I was the only teacher under the age of forty in the school. Many veteran teachers laced their “nuggets of wisdom” for me
with phrases such as, “When I still believed I could make a difference…” or “These rotten kids today just aren’t the way they used to be when I started teaching.” They asked to see my class lists and made black marks next to the names of “bad kids” I should “watch out for.” Needless to say, I found that the so-called “bad kids” behaved just fine if they were treated like human beings. I stopped eating in the teachers’ lounge within the first week of school. I found that there were better places to make connections with colleagues through extracurricular activities at the school, through taking graduate classes in my teaching subjects, and reading exams through the College Board.

Thankfully, my department supervisor was an excellent mentor. My supervisor at Johnson, Douglass Felter, encouraged me to enroll in graduate classes, read for the College Board, and become involved in extracurricular activities to gain a richer perspective on the lives of my students. The most important thing he did for me, however, was give me the freedom to experiment with different methods and approaches while he continued to have confidence in my ability to ultimately succeed. He provided guidance, materials, and ideas, but never told me how to teach. He treated me as professional, not a minion, and showed he had confidence in me by giving me an AP class my second year and supporting my suggestion to begin an AP psychology program by my third year. He allowed me to find myself in my teaching, and be myself in my classroom, including being out to my students. I taught all three of his children, who all took both of the AP classes I taught. Although it meant that I would not have his youngest daughter for AP European history, he still supported and encouraged me to leave the district when I had the opportunity to start a new psychology program in a larger school district at Northern Highlands.
Although my supervisor was supportive when I eventually told him of my decision to be out to my students, my initial thought on the issue was that my personal life was just that—personal. I felt no need to discuss my sexual orientation with my students. However, working with curious, outgoing high school students coupled with teaching a class like psychology where human sexuality frequently is discussed, sticking to this plan was hardly realistic. I decided that if students asked me, I would never lie to them about my partner. I had students and players ask me, because of my ring, if I were married. I told them I had a partner and that her name was Lauren. Three years into my teaching career, however, I decided that the “tell if asked” policy just did not go far enough. I came to this conclusion in the middle of a lecture on human diversity. As I was discussing “the sometimes challenging experiences of people who are gay, lesbian, and bisexual in our society,” I suddenly stopped and said, “This is ridiculous. I am gay. I can give you at least one perspective.” I went on to tell my students about my experience of coming out in college, and coming out to my parents. Many students emailed me later that day to thank me for sharing my story with the class. My sexual orientation had been the last part of myself I was not sharing, but it was a part that, ultimately, could help countless students to feel more connected to me in the way I had connected to my favorite teachers.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

As the years passed, I found that several students came to me to talk about their own coming out issues, or even their experiences of feeling different. If anything, being out as a teacher has made me more effective at reaching my students, and has made more students feel safe and comfortable in their learning environment. Unfortunately, despite working with several other gay teachers, I have yet to work with another out gay teacher. When I think of how long it took me in college to feel comfortable with myself as a lesbian, I cannot help but think of how
the whole process was more difficult because there were not any out, gay role models for me growing up. It was almost worse that there were teachers everyone believed to be gay or lesbian, but that they were completely closeted. The message was clear: being gay is something to be ashamed of. I want to be sure that I never convey that message to my students, whether they are gay, straight, bisexual, or transgender. For the past nine years, I have been as open about my partner as any other teacher is about his or her spouse. Despite what many closeted teachers may believe, this decision has caused no more stress for me than if my partner were a man, but I am certain that being as open as any of the heterosexual teachers has made students and staff—gay and straight—more accepting of diversity, as it is obvious to them that my sexuality does not have any negative impact on my ability to teach and reach students.

Most people who pursue a career in teaching want to make a difference in the lives of students. Sometimes, this desire can surpass our capabilities. Another challenge for me in my teaching has been knowing my own limitations. For many years, I combined teaching an extra class, coaching three sports, attending graduate school, and working all summer. One year, I even taught three different AP classes in addition to these other responsibilities. I started to realize that I was not able to do any aspect of my job to my satisfaction, though it took ten years of doing too much and a relocation to a new school district for me to finally see it.

Although I do not regret the activities in which I was involved at Johnson, I see now just how much I was not able to do with my teaching as a result of spreading myself too thin. It is not that I spend fewer hours at my job now; I actually spend longer hours at work, but I am spending the hours on improving my teaching specifically. I have continued to stay involved in extracurricular activities, but in areas I did not have the time to explore earlier in my career. While I am not presently coaching, I still attend my students’ games to show my support, but I
can now also attend my students’ concerts, plays, musicals, and talent shows, and have time to finish my graduate school program. I have been approached to coach sports at Highlands, but I have learned to say no, knowing that I can still be actively involved in students’ lives. Having this opportunity to reconfigure my priorities has given me the opportunity to cultivate other interests that had been on the back burner. While the decision to change was difficult and frightening, I feel that forcing myself outside my comfort zone has made me a more effective educator.

**Advice for New Teachers**

Nobody can become an effective teacher by memorizing pedagogy from a book or taking education classes. These activities may be required to complete a teacher preparation program, but they contribute little to one’s development as a teacher. I found that the best place to start was to think about the most effective teachers I had known, and the qualities that made them appealing to me. Qualities that all of these teachers shared were those I felt were most imperative to incorporate into my own teaching, and they tended to be broad and general. The most important of these qualities were being open and accessible to students. Qualities that differentiated these teachers from one another made it clear to me that being effective in the classroom was also related to being yourself. No two people are exactly alike—nor are any two teachers. While taking bits and pieces from effective teachers may be helpful in developing one’s teaching skills, trying to *be* another teacher—no matter how effective he or she may be—simply does not work. In order to *be* yourself, one must *know* yourself, and this is an ongoing process. Goals and priorities change, as do our preferred methods of fulfilling them. Change may be scary, but cannot be avoided out of fear, lest we stop evolving and improving as teachers.
Throughout this dynamic process of knowing yourself, just don’t forget to keep sharing who you are with your students, and keep putting yourself out there, and your students will do the same.
Early in My Evolution: Some Changes, Some Constants, and an Ultimate Goal

Tracy E. Zinn

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Early in My Evolution: Some Constants, Some Changes, and an Ultimate Goal

Currently, I am an Associate Professor at James Madison University (JMU) in the Department of Psychology, where I have been since 2004, primarily teaching courses in statistics and industrial/organizational (I/O) psychology. I earned my undergraduate degree in psychology from West Virginia University (WVU) in 1997, and my Master’s and PhD degrees in I/O Psychology from Auburn University in 2000 and 2002, respectively. I was fortunate enough to garner a tenure-track position at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, TX after graduate school, where I was nominated for the Faculty Achievement Award for Excellence in Teaching in my second year. At JMU, I received the Outstanding Junior Faculty Award for the College of Integrated Science & Technology in 2007. Also in 2007, I was honored with the Early Career Award by the Society for the Teaching of Psychology.

My Early Development as a Teacher

At Auburn, I met Bill Buskist, who became my teaching mentor and my dear friend. I did not originally want to pursue teaching as a career until I had the opportunity to work with and know Bill. He has certainly influenced me more than any other person. However, teaching seeds were planted long before I met Bill. Here are but a few of the many lessons that lead me to a career in teaching.

Use psychology to teach psychology. It was in Michael Perone’s psychology of learning class that I first experienced a teacher applying what he knew from psychology to how he taught the class. He explained the contingencies for attendance and performance, and how he was capitalizing on what we knew about basic principles of learning to help us succeed in class. I think it was his influence that convinced me to use psychology principles in the classroom if you are going to teach psychology (Saville & Zinn, 2009; Zinn, 2009).
Good research is vital for good application. Phil Chase, my honors thesis advisor at WVU, showed me that research was vital to the practice of psychology. I remember telling him that I was not interested in research, and that I wanted to apply psychology (I have similar conversations with my students very regularly). Phil told me that in order to apply psychology well, a psychologist has to know the research behind the concepts that he or she wants to apply. I began to develop an appreciation for research that has only grown over the years. As a teacher, helping my students understand the importance of the scientific method and of psychology as a science are two of my primary goals.

You will screw up, and that’s ok. I completely bombed my honors thesis defense at WVU. I was flustered, confused, and could not answer questions well. I was also devastated. However, that was a critical learning moment. Until then, my perception of success was being perfect. After that, I realized that mistakes are inevitable and the more quickly I could learn from them, the more successful I would be. Furthermore, it has led me to be insistent about helping students learn from their mistakes (Zinn, 2009).

Teaching and research go hand in hand. Christopher Newland, my research advisor at Auburn, did not supervise any of my teaching and, to this day, I do not believe he has ever seen me teach. Nevertheless, he has been instrumental in shaping my career as a teacher for one specific reason: teaching students about research is teaching. Through his research mentorship, I began to value the collaboration between professors and students on research. Because of his influence, supervising undergraduate research is one of my favorite parts of my job.

Apply the same evidence-based standards to teaching. By working with Bill Buskist during graduate school, I learned to appreciate the endeavor of investigating teaching behavior
just like any other behavior. I have continued this pursuit throughout my career, as investigating teaching techniques is the primary function of my research group.

*Talk to others about teaching.* At Auburn, we were very fortunate to have a supportive environment for new teachers. When I started at Auburn, all first year students were assigned three discussion sections of a course called The Individual and Society, a required course for all students in the university. Luckily, we were concurrently enrolled in a teaching course, led by Bill Buskist, where we could ask questions about teaching, share our concerns, and learn from Bill about how to be a good teacher. Having a venue to discuss common problems and get support from others is vital for surviving as a new teacher. After becoming more involved in teaching, I began attending conferences, including the Southeastern Teaching of Psychology conference, where I was able to learn from experts in the field.

Although I did not start graduate school with the idea that I would go into academics, I liked teaching right from the start. I had the opportunity to teach several different classes while at Auburn, including being the instructor of record for an I/O course. However, for over three years, I was pursuing a career in consulting, even though I was not enjoying my consulting experiences as much as my teaching experiences. After a discussion with Bill at an Arby’s across from campus, it finally occurred to me that I could pursue academics as a career. I changed my focus and got more involved in research, including joining the EDGE (Excellence in the Direction and Guidance of Education) group with Bill. This team was an assembly of graduate and undergraduate students interested in answering empirical questions about teaching. I have never regretted my decision to pursue academics or felt like I missed out on a different career. It has always seemed like the right path.

*Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher*
Hopefully, I model lifelong learning to my students. With every semester I realize how much I have to learn as a teacher. Also, with every semester the concept of what a good teacher does becomes more amorphous and less obvious, the opposite of what I expected when I started teaching.

*Can a teacher be too helpful?* One of the primary obstacles that I have worked on overcoming in my teaching is the balance between being available to students and enabling counterproductive behavior. I think that people who love teaching sincerely want to help students succeed and tend to make themselves available to students as much as possible. Those who love teaching want to provide guidance to students. It has only been recently that I have thought perhaps I should not be as available to my students and should provide less guidance.

This idea seems counter to so much of how I identify as a teacher and what educators generally think of as a good teacher. In fact, several master teacher behaviors focus on the accessibility and helpfulness of the professor (Buskist, Sikorski, Buckley, & Saville, 2002). However, it became very clear to me one day when I was sitting on the couch at home. My son, who was probably around a year old at that time, was trying to climb onto the couch to join me, but was struggling. As I went to help him, I thought that he needed to learn to do it on his own. I began to think that perhaps by providing my students with too much guidance, I have been inhibiting their abilities to learn how to learn on their own. I regularly struggle with balancing when to step in to help my students and when I should let them work harder to figure things out on their own.

*Should a teacher always be positive?* On a related note, I have recently been wrestling with the idea that being positive is not always good and that we may be doing students a disservice by not addressing real weaknesses and difficulties. In particular, should I tell students...
that they can be and do anything? Or should I help them discover their strengths and weaknesses in order to be more realistic? I have spoken several times about the importance of helping students embrace struggle and failure (Zinn, 2008; Zinn, 2009). Certain cultural pressures have emphasized the importance of self-esteem, often leading to non-contingent and meaningless praise (Twenge, 2006). These cultural pressures may have resulted in college students not being able to handle failure or struggle. Research is now showing the importance of desirable difficulties in learning, emphasizing that it is not only OK for students to make mistakes, but important for them to do so (Bjork & Linn, 2006).

_How should a good teacher handle entitlement in the classroom?_ Another obstacle that I have written and spoken about recently involves the oft-cited student entitlement problem and the idea that students are our customers (Zinn, 2007). Until recently, there has not been much research on either concept, although many faculty have lamented both entitlement and the customer perspective for some time. The primary obstacle here is explaining to students what my role as a teacher encompasses, and what it does not. Students have a very different conceptualization of learning than many faculty do; students often see teachers as dispensing necessary information, whereas faculty view teaching as helping students learn how to learn on their own. If we are dealing with students who feel entitled to certain outcomes and/or believe that they deserve to dictate the structure of the classroom because they are customers, we will certainly run into conflict. My challenge has been how to push students and simultaneously convince them that they want to be pushed, something that is quite difficult to do. I have often said that my role is like that of a personal trainer and it is my job to kick their academic butts (Clay, 2009).
Do teachers have to choose between teaching and research? In an academic’s life, there are typically three worlds: teaching, research, and service. Many people find it difficult to balance the three, feeling like they have to sacrifice in one area in order to do the others well. It is true that this balance is difficult for anyone to attain. Luckily, I have an easier time than most teachers with this balance. For me, an I/O psychologist specializing in teaching and training, my teaching goals directly correspond with my research goals. I conduct research on effective teaching and training techniques, and I apply those methods in my classes. I also focus a great deal of my attention on my student research group, which necessarily merges teaching and training. Furthermore, much of my service, at both the university and national levels, is related to teaching and improving the learning environment. Thus, my three worlds are like three overlapping Venn diagrams, each one influencing the other and all three difficult to separate.

Ultimately, when you are in a position to work with students on research, there really is no separation between teaching and research. Teaching students about psychology involves teaching them about research, and conducting research with students is teaching. Ultimately, it is one of the most rewarding aspects of my job.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

While reflecting on my short time as a teacher, I have discovered a couple of things. First, I do have a core set of goals for students. Second, I have changed as a teacher in some significant ways.

My ultimate goals as a teacher. I asked students, some past and some present, to tell me what they thought my main goals were as a teacher. Students identified that my goals are to teach students:

1. To love learning.
2. That the *science* of psychology is related to life outside of this classroom.

3. That in order to succeed, they should work hard and that hard work is good for them.

4. That hard work doesn’t entitle you to the outcomes you want.

5. How to handle mistakes.

6. How to learn and think for themselves. This was probably the most cited goal from my students, and it is truly one of my underlying goals for all of them.

I love learning. I think that characteristic is the most important one that I can bring to my interactions with students. Over the years, I have tried to hone my teaching philosophy, being careful to identify the techniques of the best teachers. However, after thinking about the most important principles at the heart of my teaching, I think it is simply that I love to learn and I want my students to love learning as much as I do.

*Ever evolving.* I still love teaching. I cannot imagine another life or another career. That being the case, I believe it is interesting the ways in which my approach to teaching has changed. First, I am not afraid of screwing up. I think that in my first couple of years as a teacher, I was very afraid of making mistakes. Now, I take things more in stride. I understand that this career is (hopefully) a long one and by making mistakes I can learn in ways that I could not otherwise.

I am now more focused on the big picture. I am less concerned about covering every piece of information in my courses. I focus more on using examples of content to teach students how to learn about that particular topic on their own. After all, there will always be more content to learn. My job is to help them learn how to learn without me.

I am more realistic with students. As I mentioned above, one of the difficulties that I have as a teacher is balancing between being positive and being realistic. When I first started teaching, I believed it was my job to encourage students to become whatever they wanted to become.
However, now I believe it is my job to help students find their strengths. I no longer believe that it is a bad thing for students to recognize their weaknesses or to come to the conclusion that they might not be well-suited for a specific career.

*Rewards and frustrations.* Often, when teachers are asked about the rewards of this career, they say it is making a difference in students’ lives. That statement is true for me, as well. It is always rewarding to hear from those few students whose lives were changed in some way due to my teaching. It is very powerful and humbling to know that I can have that kind of impact on students and their futures. However, the real rewards for me are less momentous, yet just as important. The real rewards are a student asking a good question in class, a student telling me they understand a concept based on what I said, or just simply interacting with students about the material. I find it rewarding to be on a college campus, something I am reminded of each fall when new students arrive. For them, all of this is new. There is an anticipation and excitement about the college environment. It keeps me from becoming jaded because, every year, I have the chance to do everything better and to make a fresh start. Most people do not have that opportunity.

And I love the job. I get to teach about what I want. I get to learn about whatever I want. I get to conduct research on whatever I want. There is always so much to learn and so many new avenues to explore, it is easy for me to maintain enthusiasm for the learning process. Enthusiasm and excitement are not just for the students; they are for me as well. I am able to do my job better because I can maintain a level of enthusiasm that is not phony or manufactured. It really is true that I am excited about what I am teaching and what I am learning.

However, therein lay the frustrations as well. Many of my frustrations are rooted in my interest in so many different aspects of psychology. It is so easy to be pulled in too many
directions. It is difficult to tell a student that they cannot do research in a particular area because it does not fit in well with your research program. Every semester, I am trying to learn about a different topic so that I can effectively supervise undergraduate research projects. That is difficult to do, and extremely difficult to do well. It is a worry and frustration that I have every term.

I believe my enthusiasm cuts both ways as well. Students cite it as one of my strengths, but it also causes me a great deal of frustration. When you are someone who loves learning, who loves psychology, and who loves wrestling with new problems and ideas, combating apathy in the classroom can become daunting. Why don’t they love this as much as I do? Why don’t they value education as much as I do? Why aren’t they living up to their potential? These thoughts often cross my mind, usually near the end of the semester. I have to remind myself that I was not always a good student. I am sure I did many things as a student that now drive me crazy as a teacher. I remember that my job is to be a good model for learning and self-improvement and, hopefully, my students will embrace those characteristics as I did.

*The goal of evidence-based teaching.* There are some semesters when I am simply trying to survive, barely staying ahead of my students. There are times when I forget to do mid-semester evaluations, or do not follow up on the feedback I collected. I am sure I do not evaluate and reflect on my teaching as much as I should.

However, I do try to approach my teaching as a scholarly endeavor. I teach my students that if you are going to make a decision, you need to have good evidence on which to base that decision. I try to follow the same rule with my teaching. Each semester, I collect data in my classroom to evaluate how the different methods I am using are working. Several years ago, Bryan Saville and I began collecting data on a teaching method called interteaching (Boyce &
Since then, we have published several articles on the method and how it works in the classroom (Saville, Zinn, & Elliott, 2005; Saville, Zinn, Neef, Ferreri, & Van Norman, 2006; Saville & Zinn, in press). Based on the results of those and other studies, I craft the next class. In this way, I am building a body of knowledge about how different techniques work in the classroom and, hopefully, my future students benefit from that knowledge.

I have always been interested in collecting data on teaching. I have never thought of the behavior of teaching as different from any other behavior. As an I/O psychologist who has focused on effective workplace training, the classroom is no different to me. Therefore, it makes perfect sense to assess my teaching each semester. However, I have had to become more deliberate about the changes that I make in the classroom. I tend to be very enthusiastic about making changes to my classes. I used to redesign my classes nearly every semester based on something I read or a new idea that I had. That approach tends to be exhausting and, ultimately, unproductive. Now, I try to take a systematic approach to the changes I implement in my classes. Instead of entirely revamping a course, I will modify one aspect of that course and compare it to the previous semester. In this way, I can more clearly see what aspects of my teaching work and which do not. By treating my courses like a lab, I have designed better studies and, therefore, can make better decisions based on those data.

**Advice for New Teachers**

If you want to teach, first ask yourself this question, “Do you like students?” I have seen so many college professors who seem to have a pure disdain for college students. If you do not like students, do not be a teacher! Being able to develop rapport with your students is one of the primary factors of being a good teacher (Buskist & Saville, 2004). If you do not truly like and
care for students, you will not be able to develop rapport. Students will forgive a multitude of mistakes if they believe you have their best interests at heart.

Next, be ready to make mistakes and learn from them. In fact, get ready to have bad days teaching (Zinn, Reis-Bergen, & Baker, 2009). Investigate new ways of teaching and interacting with students. Get creative with assignments. Learn about different teaching techniques. Watch other people teach. Read your colleagues’ syllabi. Observe a teacher in another department. Try new things and be prepared for some of them to flop. As I mentioned above, one of the things I want my students to learn is that mistakes are good. Failures are helpful.

Try not to worry about whether or not your students like you. In the short term, there are going to be students who do not like you or think you are too difficult. If you are genuinely interested in their learning and well-being, then most students will, at least eventually, understand the value of what you are doing.

Keep what works. It is wonderful to be able to learn from other teachers and experts in the field, but do not try to mimic them. There are a few characteristics about my teaching that I have maintained since I started. I am goofy. I’m very enthusiastic. I’m pretty laid back in the classroom. I have a low threshold for cheating. I don’t sugarcoat a lot of things. And, as one of my current students said, I am able to be “critical and opinionated without coming off as a b***.” I have learned to embrace those characteristics, because I think they make me a better teacher.

**Final Thoughts**

I am so lucky to have the job that I do. To be sure, there are times when I am frustrated with my students or frustrated with the politics of working for an institution of higher education. When I am grading papers at the end of the semester, I do not love every minute of it. I worry
that we do not value education in our culture the way we should. I fear that we are moving from educating to giving out technical degrees. But, those moments are but a few in a career that has wonderful opportunity, flexibility, and freedom, a career that has real meaning and impact. I hope to continue to evolve as a teacher for many years to come.
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