

Reflections on Teaching

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In "Teaching: Have Your Cake and Eat it Too?" (*American Psychologist*, April 1951), Claude Buxton implored psychologists to value teaching as much as research. Educators mostly ignored his exhortation, but we recently addressed certain issues that he raised (i.e., Division 2's involvement with the project on Redefining Scholarship; see Halpern et al., *American Psychologist*, December 1998).

Research need not be detrimental to teaching. Research can improve teaching and teaching can improve research, if they appropriately complement each other. Also, people who are primarily teachers should not be less knowledgeable about the history, methodology, and substantive content of psychology. Jerome Bruner was right when he said that "it takes no elaborate research to know that communicating knowledge depends in enormous measure upon one's mastery of the knowledge to be communicated." Some outstanding researchers are masterful teachers, but most of us cannot "have our cake and eat it too." Despite recent lip service being paid to teaching in research universities, teaching has not attained equal status with research in psychology.

Aside from research, I now want to talk about teaching. My perspective on this topic comes from having taught in liberal arts colleges for almost 40 years. Be forewarned that my comments are not constrained by one scintilla of empirical evidence. I will mention 10 things that beginning teachers should hear. Readers who are not neophytes can stop here or read on.

Number 1

Be clear about your educational goals and ensure that your students are clear about them. Beginning teachers' notions about their academic objectives may be murky, but how can teachers know what to do until they know what they want to do? If you do not know where you are going, the likelihood that you will get there borders on randomness.

Number 2

¹ Brewer, C. (2002). Reflections on teaching. In W. Buskist, V. Hevern, & G. W. Hill, IV, (Eds.). Essays from e-xcellence in teaching, 2000-2001 (chap. 1). Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.org/resources/e-books/eit2000.php>

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Know the relevant facts, but go beyond them. Stress concepts and principles that have wider applicability than isolated facts. Facts fade fast, and most students will not remember them for the final examination; if they do, they will not remember them 2 weeks later. Emphasize that "everything is related to everything else."

Number 3

Be willing to say "I don't know," but strive to decrease the frequency with which you must do so. Samuel Butler observed that "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, but a little lack of knowledge is also a dangerous thing." With more experience, you will understand Hal Borland's point that "facts are not answers, but only tools with which to fashion more questions" and James Thurber's wise observation that "it's better to ask some questions than to know all the answers." For every complex question, there is a simple answer—and it is wrong.

Number 4

In speaking and writing, strive for clarity, conciseness, and felicity of expression. Coleridge insisted that "preciseness in the use of terms is required, and the test is whether you can translate the phrase adequately into simpler terms, regard being had for the feeling of the whole passage." Strunk and White echoed the same sentiment even more succinctly when they advised writers not to be tempted "by a twenty-dollar word when there is a ten-center handy, ready, and able." (Their wonderful little book, *Elements of Style*, is now in its 4th edition—Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000.) In speaking and writing, as in almost every other endeavor, it is a simple task to make things complex, but a complex task to make things simple. Heed Thoreau's advice and "simplify, simplify, simplify." Also, learn to recognize what Oscar Wilde called "the precise psychological moment when to say nothing."

Number 5

Develop a passion for teaching that approaches religious fervor. If you are not passionate about what you are doing, your students will not be excited about what you want them to do. I am convinced that passion is the chief ingredient that distinguishes adequate from exceptional teachers. Ralph Waldo Emerson insisted that "nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm," and he was right.

Number 6

Be friendly and fair with all students but familiar with none. Benjamin Franklin made a similar point when he said: "Be civil to all; sociable to many; familiar with few." Recognize that you will not like some students as much as you like others. I prefer capable students who work hard to learn the facts, concepts, and principles that they should know. Do you favor certain kinds of students?

Number 7

Maintain rigorous academic standards, despite grade inflation that is a national travesty. Emerson knew whereof he spoke when he remarked that "our chief want in life is someone to make us do what we can." Do not expect instant perfection from your

students but strive for steady improvement. A common problem with beginning teachers is their intense need to be liked or loved by students. Being respected is more important. I do not know any esteemed teachers whose classes are flooded with mediocre students who get high grades without doing any serious academic work.

Number 8

Cherish colleagues of all ages. From older ones, you will learn about historical perspective. From younger ones, you will learn to avoid intellectual flabbiness and to have a healthy skepticism for traditional ways of doing things. When you agree with all your colleagues, you should probably change your mind.

Number 9

Stan Ericksen said that "the most important influence the teacher can have on students is to help them learn how to learn independently." This point can be threatening to young teachers, who may believe that students cannot learn anything that they are not taught. The best teachers are those who have no students, because the students have learned how to learn without their teachers.

Number 10

Samuel Johnson remarked that "praise, like gold and diamonds, owes its value to its scarcity." Teachers must be willing to work for intangible rewards that may not come until many years after students graduate, which gives new meaning to the "delay of reinforcement gradient." Henry Brooks Adams was right when he said that teachers affect eternity; they never know where their influence stops. But you must learn to be patient with your students and especially with yourself. One of the most frustrating things about teaching is that you never know what you are doing. I sometimes hope to be a house painter or a bricklayer in my next incarnation, because they can more easily quantify the results of their work.

Conclusion

One of the most important and rewarding aspects of teaching is that it is more fun than bipeds should have. After almost 40 years of having more fun than I deserve in teaching, I simply cannot imagine doing anything else! (Please don't tell my Dean, but I would probably pay Furman to let me do what Furman pays me to do.)

But the real reason for teaching is to make a difference—to be honorable, to be competent, to be responsible, to be productive, and to be unselfish but proud. Teaching is not a profession; teaching is a calling—delightful, invigorating, mysterious, frustrating, passionate, precious, and sacred. Good teachers stretch the mind and they stretch the heart. I hope that the world will be a better place because we teachers make a difference to our students.