

***Teaching with Style -- Your Style***

Stephen F. Davis  
Emporia State University

(This essay originally appeared as the monthly "E-xcellence in Teaching" e-column in the *PsychTeacher Electronic Discussion List* for March 2000).

If you plan a career in teaching, you will need to develop a teaching style that you and your students enjoy. Lacking a consistent and satisfying teaching style will greatly minimize your effectiveness as a teacher. Early in my career I often wished for someone to give me some guidance; unfortunately, guidance and support were nonexistent. My first teaching assignment came at the end of my first semester as a doctoral student. The Department chair asked how my semester had gone. "Excellent," I said. "Good. This summer you will be teaching Statistics I as your fellowship assignment," he said. The summer session started the next day.

A satisfying and comfortable teaching style ultimately rests on a foundation of good teaching practices. If you read the first contribution to this series, "Reflections on Teaching," then you are already well on your way to having a good foundation. I know of no better advice than the guidelines proposed by Charles Brewer; if you have not read them, I encourage you to do so soon.

However, developing a sound foundation for your teaching does not guarantee that you will also have a satisfying style. Here are several additional points I would suggest that you also keep in mind as you develop your teaching style.

1. Do not try to be the best teacher you ever had. It is tempting for neophyte teachers to think that the quickest or best route to success is to emulate, as closely as possible, the best teacher they have ever had. They may go so far as to copy the exact mannerisms, style of dress, and classroom practices and policies of their idol. Although emulating success may be a viable strategy in the business arena, it rarely works in academia. A more realistic and potentially more effective strategy is to learn from all the best teachers you have had. Learn from their best attributes, but do not try to duplicate them.

2. Let your self shine through. Because we are all different, each teacher brings a unique set of experiences, viewpoints, and personality to the classroom. If you want your students to have a meaningful experience in your class, then it is important for them to

<sup>1</sup> Davis, S. F.. (2002). Teaching with style--Your style. In W. Buskist, V. Hevern, & G. W. Hill, IV, (Eds.). Essays from e-xcellence in teaching, 2000-2001 (chap. 2). Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.org/resources/e-books/eit2000.php>

get to know you. Early in their careers, many teachers find going into the classroom to be a daunting and even anxiety producing experience. Some teachers defend against this anxiety by putting on their "teaching persona" or creating a "teaching facade." The result can be a class that is technically quite good, but lacks spontaneity, interest, and vitality. You want your students to feel and experience the enthusiasm and zest that you have for psychology and teaching.

Harry Kirke Wolfe was a teacher who conveyed enthusiasm to his students. In addition to being Wilhelm Wundt's second American doctoral student in psychology, Harry Kirke Wolfe was a master teacher who shared a great deal of his self with his students. According to Benjamin (1991), Hartley Alexander, Chair of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Nebraska and Wolfe's colleague, said at Wolfe's funeral "[His classes were] notoriously difficult; there was no room for the slacker there; but there never was an uninteresting lecture hour, and year after year the students filed in, willing to venture the work for the sake of the zest." (p.132)

The more you are willing to let your true self be part of the classroom experience, the more your students will come to share the sentiments of Wolfe's students. Although a class of 35, 50, 100, or 200 people may appear formidable, don't forget that most students are there to learn and you are in a position to facilitate that learning. By investing some of your self, you help create a class that is more satisfying to both you and the students.

3. Develop your own philosophy of teaching. Contemplate what it is that attracts you to this profession and why you become energized when you are in the classroom. Perlman and McCann (1999) offer some excellent advice to guide the development of a teaching philosophy. They stress the need for understanding in three areas: (a) a general overview of yourself as a teacher, (b) what you do when you teach, and (c) self-evaluation. With regard to the general overview, they suggest that you answer such questions as the following: Why do you teach? What is rewarding about teaching? What principles underlie your teaching? What is effective teaching? As a teacher what do you do that is unique? What do you expect from your students? Perlman and McCann recommend that you answer the following questions to begin to draw conclusions about your teaching. Are you teaching what you want, in the way you want? Are you satisfied with yourself and your students? What still remains to be accomplished? Once you have dealt with these three areas, you are ready to assemble a one- to two-page teaching philosophy. Learn from it; let it help shape your teaching style.

4. Determine what your teaching goals are. Perlman and McCann (1999) believe you should address the following issues in order to clarify your teaching goals. What do you want your students to learn: knowledge of facts, excitement about the subject matter, applicability of course content to their everyday lives, material that will assist them in subsequent courses? Within what context do you teach: liberal arts emphasis, preprofessional training, both? What other skills do you teach: writing, ethics, critical thinking, scientific method, etc.? What are your standards: very high, high, average, low?

Are you satisfied with your teaching goals? Why? Why not? Do you want to change your teaching goals? Why? Why not? Your teaching style will reflect your teaching goals.

5. You should also consider the value of feedback provided by student evaluations. Several years ago I was dismayed by the following comment from a junior colleague. "I teach to the evaluation, that's where the money is." The pressure to get good evaluations is understandable, especially in those instances where evaluations are tied directly to such important events as tenure, promotion, and salary increases.

Although the practice of teaching to enhance your evaluations may be appealing, it will prove fickle in the long run. At the very least you will be an unhappy teacher because this practice will undermine all of the good things you may have attempted to accomplish. It has been my experience that if you concentrate on the issues I raised above, the evaluations will take care of themselves. On the other hand, student evaluations can (and should) be used positively to guide the development and refinement of your teaching style. Obviously, you cannot make changes for each and every student comment and desire; however, general themes from a number of students are food for thought and potential change.

The potential importance of these suggestions notwithstanding, you may be left wondering how to convert your good intentions into concrete actions. It is beyond the scope of this presentation to delineate every possible action you might take. Here are suggestions from two talented beginning psychology teachers. Hopefully their approaches will spark some ideas that you can follow.

I like the idea of setting goals or developing an 'ideal teaching self.' But, you can be led astray from meeting these goals. There always are temptations to not do your best, but you need to do your best anyway. For example, the administration may not look favorably on your giving low grades to students. You must maintain your own goals and standards.

Drew Christopher, Anderson College

I operate directly from my philosophy of teaching. One of the biggest parts of my philosophy is enthusiasm. I love teaching—it is my passion—it is my joy!

Holly Stroder, St. Louis University

## References

Benjamin, L. T., Jr. (1991). *Harry Kirke Wolfe: Pioneer in psychology*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Perlman, B., & McCann, L. I. (1999, October). *Developing teaching portfolios*.  
Workshop presented at the Mid-America Conference for Teachers of Psychology,  
Evansville, IN.