

What We Need to Know About Teaching and Teachers

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It is critical that we learn all we can about undergraduate teaching both for ourselves and our students. Better understanding of the phenomenology and complexities of college teaching will help faculty, both new and senior alike, and administrators, maintain and improve pedagogy, faculty vitality, and faculty commitment to a teaching career.

There has been serious thought and voluminous attention paid to teaching over the years. A recent handout on some, but not all, books about teaching and higher education (Perlman, 2001) was 38 pages long! As a result of our work as editors of the Teaching Tips column that appears regularly in the *APS Observer*, our attendance at the annual National Institute of the Teaching of Psychology and other teaching-related conferences, and our ongoing research into teaching, we have given considerable thought to what we do not know about teaching. What is it we do not know about teaching and teachers, but should? What follows are some examples of ideas on teaching that need further exploration and attention, though we are sure the list is incomplete.

The Prosaic

Sometimes the simple, but important, day-to-day activities escape our scrutiny.

Efficient Ways to Survive As Teachers. Despite McKeachie's *Teaching Tips* (2002) our own *Lessons Learned* (1998), and a host of other practical books on pedagogy, we cannot find an archive of simple survival tips for teachers. We are talking about simple things faculty do that help them avoid problems and increase the time and attention they can pay to other matters. For example, when teaching a large class always have a pad of paper to keep track of students who need to make-up an exam, make an appointment to talk, or who are concerned about performance. This real-time record allows a faculty to personalize a larger class and keep track of a myriad of details in a minimum amount of time. We are presently in the early stages of gathering efficiency tips from faculty to share with others, especially new colleagues.

¹ Perlman, B., & McCann, L. I. (2002). What we need to know about teaching and teachers. In W. Buskist, V. Hevern, & G. W. Hill, IV, (Eds.). Essays from e-xcellence in teaching, 2000-2001 (chap. 10). Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.org/resources/e-books/eit2000.php>

Lecture Preparation. Robert M. Arkin at The Ohio State University approached us with an idea for a Teaching Tips column. He could find a great deal of information on the practice of lecturing, but almost nothing on the composition of lectures. All teachers prepare lectures, and spend a lot of time doing so. What advice can we offer colleagues on the how-tos of lecture preparation?

Course Level. How do first year courses differ from second year, or sophomore from junior? What distinguishes an upper level course from a lower level one? Do students know more about course level and difficulty than faculty? How do faculty correctly place courses into their proper curricular level?

Make-up exams. All faculty have students who miss exams, and many structure their courses so these exams must be made up. We do not know what make-up procedures are most widely used by faculty nor how well they work. Make-up exams are a good example of an ongoing teaching activity we deal with regularly, but as with many such facets of teaching, we have little data regarding how best to do it. We are presently gathering data on this question.

Classroom Issues

Despite the superb writings of teachers such as Stephen Brookfield and Parker Palmer, there is still much that occurs in a classroom about which we need to learn more. For example:

Teachable Moments. All faculty know what teachable moments are, sort of, and all want more of them. They occur when the class is truly involved with the material, when because of good teaching, good examples, good rapport, or a host of other reasons, time stops. Students hang on every word of the lecture or discussion, material is accurately and clearly perceived, and the affective miasma in the room, whether intensity, interest, or enjoyment, enhance the learning experience. Can teachers plan for such moments? How often do they occur in a course? Have they been described from various perspectives? We do not know the answers.

Rapport. Everyone knows what rapport is, a sense of mutual trust and emotional affinity, and everyone agrees that good rapport between teacher and students is desirable. The outcomes of rapport should be better learning, more student discussion and participation, and simply a more pleasant experience throughout the course. When the editor this e-column, Bill Buskist approached us about writing a Teaching Tips column on rapport we readily agreed. But the more we all looked, the less we could find, the murkier the concept seemed, and the more work we had to do to understand the concept. That which we take for granted may be poorly understood.

Ending a Course. There is quite a bit written and data gathered on the first day of class and starting a class, but all courses also end. We cannot find useful information on good

ways to end courses, ways that summarize and pull together both the intellectual work that occurred and capture the spirit of collaborative learning, accomplishment, and time well spent. Students' perceptions on the course ending experiences they found effective and interesting would be useful. Our guess is that many faculty spend little time ending a course, perhaps as little as a few minutes, and this is a valuable teaching moment lost.

Teaching the Science of Psychology by Doing. The most important goal of undergraduate education in psychology is generally agreed to be students' learning about the science of our discipline. How often in a major are students required to or, as an elective, can they pursue laboratory work? How much of this work is hands on, how much canned experiments or virtual ones on a computer? What aspects of science do students learn in these experiences? This is a question we intend to pursue in the months ahead.

Bigger Issues

Beyond the prosaic and classroom and laboratory experiences lies the larger landscape of faculty development and careers.

Continuities in Teaching. What continuities exist in teaching and what changes over time for faculty? Why do some aspects of teaching remain unaltered while others develop, and what influences change or continuity?

What Losses and Gains in Teaching Accrue Over Time? Lifespan developmental models posit both gains and losses as development progresses. We can find little data that address the question of losses as faculty members' teaching careers progress. As we gain experience and maturity as teachers, what do we lose? We also know little about how faculty conceptualize perceived gains in experience and expertise in teaching undergraduates.

The Influence of Tenure On Teaching. How does receiving tenure affect how faculty define the responsibilities of teaching? Do teachers slack off, emphasize scholarship and have fewer concerns for student learning? Our own experiences argue the opposite. We can find no data on this question.

The Emotional Dimension in Undergraduate Teaching. Somewhat unexpected in our current longitudinal research (Perlman, McFadden, McCann, & Kunzer, 2000) was the importance faculty placed on the emotional dimension of undergraduate teaching, both for faculty themselves and students (e.g., appreciating, liking, and enjoying the subject matter). For example, enthusiasm is critically important to our cohort of faculty. However, we are unclear (a) exactly how it is defined, or (b) why it is so important to undergraduate teaching.

What Does Having an Interpersonal Connection With Students Mean to Faculty? Our present research points to interpersonal relationships with students as a critical dimension of undergraduate teaching. Given its apparent importance, we need to learn how faculty

define such a connection, whether it has multiple dimensions, and what those dimensions are.

How Do Gender, Race, Age, or Ethnicity Affect Teaching and the Definition of Good Teaching? Menges (1999) presented experiences of newly hired men and women, and perspectives of faculty of color for all phases of academic responsibilities. Tierney and Bensimon (1996) also addressed issues of socialization for untenured faculty, particularly women and minorities. Neither specifically addresses how these matters affect teaching. Qualitative studies are needed to inform us about the influence of individual differences on teaching (Bland & Bergquist, 1997).

How Do Student Characteristics Influence Teaching? Students are one of the most important influences on teaching. Rojstaczer (1999) discusses changes in his course goals and content at Duke, partially in response to changing student preparation and expectations. More data are needed, especially for faculty at teaching institutions. How do changes in such characteristics over the years interact with teaching and faculty satisfaction with it, and faculty expectations for student performance?

What Metaphor Best Captures Faculty Teaching? How long do metaphors, once adopted by faculty, influence teaching, and how is it faculty adopt different pedagogical metaphors? (For example, the business world uses metaphors, such as referring to managers as Atilla the Hun or cat herders.) Metaphors are powerful ways of understanding and knowing, and to understand something metaphorically provides an intuitive grasp of situations. Metaphors provide depth and shades of meaning that rational arguments and empirical data do not. Paradoxically, we may best understand teaching by describing it as something else.

Conclusion

One conclusion we have reached over time is that many of the things we know or accept as true about teaching, are, upon investigation, opinions based on accepted wisdom rather than hard data. We should be worried about not only about what we do not know about teaching, but also skeptical about the things we believe we do know.

We are sure there are many other teaching-related issues and phenomena that need systematic study and thought. Please let us know what ideas you have for such research and writing (perlman@uwosh.edu). Thank you.

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