

A Course, A Course, My Kingdom for a Course
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I disagree emphatically with George Bernard Shaw’s polemic, “he who can does. He who cannot, teaches.” Indeed, I embrace the opposite view: “he who can, teaches” (Benjamin, 1998). However, I am also persuaded by the wisdom of B.F. Skinner (1964), which may be awkward for some teachers, that “education is what survives when what has been learnt has been forgotten.” Thus, our challenge as teachers is clear—at a minimum we must guarantee that the fundamentals of psychology survive in our students’ memories long after the curricular specifics have faded. We accomplish this end, I believe, through a passion for, rather than mere knowledge of, our discipline, and a respect and fondness for our students. In this column, I will consider a number of questions to show how these attributes might be nurtured.

What Does and Doesn’t Work in the Classroom?

In preparing these remarks, I have discovered that it is one thing to do what one does in the classroom and quite another to describe and understand what one does. This conundrum notwithstanding, I believe what works in the classroom varies from teacher to teacher and will largely reflect the answer to a more fundamental if rhetorical question that any teacher must attempt to answer: “What do I want my classroom legacy to be?”

My response has two components. First, I would hope there is absolutely no doubt in my students’ minds about my total enthusiasm for psychology. Second, I would like students to remember my respect and affection for them.

Fortunately, most of us do like students, and this is half the battle, but there are a few “tricks of the trade” that can buttress one’s natural affection. For example, I try very hard to learn my students’ names—students appreciate being called by name, and it keeps them on their toes. I also like to speak about former students who have earned a Ph.D., suggesting by extension that I think current students too are capable of great things. Another notion that guides me personally in terms of a respectful and affectionate attitude is that I continually try not to forget what it was like to be a student, from both an

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academic and an adjustment standpoint. For instance, I urge my students not to equate their self worth with their grades, pointing out that bad marks sometimes happen to good people.

Is Less (Content) More?

I am not in favor of a “Psychology’s Greatest Hits” approach—that is cheap and irresponsible—but neither do I recommend that one try to cover everything on the curriculum in class, for two reasons. First, from a practical standpoint, it is simply not possible to cover everything. Second, and more important, years later students don’t seem to remember a great deal of what we taught them, so perhaps we can be more relaxed about the “curricular specifics,” that is, increase the amount they will remember by doing less but doing it well.

How Best to Evaluate Students?

Because I have for years felt guilty about my unavoidable emphasis on multiple-choice questions in large classes, I take great comfort in Bridgeman and Morgan’s (1996) demonstration that more than 90% of students obtain comparable marks on essay and multiple-choice tests. In other words, students may prefer one form of assessment over the other, but most handle both equally well.

Another common component of evaluation is attendance. Dillon (1998) reported that despite the fact that faculty found three-quarters of student excuses for missing classes to be unacceptable, fewer than 40% said they would confront their students about the legitimacy of those excuses, because of concerns about the negative effect of confrontation on teaching evaluations (now so significant in hiring, promotion, tenure, and merit pay decisions), and, even worse, fear of reprisal (perhaps not unreasonable, given the increasing number of shooting incidents in North American high schools of late). While this nightmarish specter is perhaps beyond the purview of these remarks, it does speak eloquently to the importance of a congenial classroom atmosphere for effective teaching, and, at a more practical level, to the issue of attendance. If students know they are not going to be challenged for missing class, or about their outlandish excuses, their attendance will decline.

Though many students who do not attend class attempt to cover the missed material by borrowing notes from someone who did attend, these notes may be of doubtful usefulness. Baker and Lombardi (1985) found that most students included in their notes fewer than a quarter of the propositions judged worthy of inclusion and only 50% of the targeted main ideas.

What Should Be the Role of Humor in Teaching?

Buskist (1998) concluded that the use of humor is not only one of the characteristics of master teachers but also an indication of a second virtue, namely, enthusiasm. Certainly I have always hoped that my use of humor reflects an underlying dynamic, to wit, my enjoyment of what I am doing and what I am teaching.

Teacher humor should be neither excessive nor gratuitous, but judicious. It must satisfy what I call “the criterion of pedagogical purpose,” that is, it should be intended to make students’ learning more enjoyable—and, as a result, more memorable. As the lyric line in an old music hall tune (Peel Me a Grape) puts it, “amuse me or lose me!”

In my experience, the most effective humor is relevant, personal, and self-deprecating. Students love hearing teachers tell tales on themselves. For example, during my treatment of the effects of parental rejection, my students love hearing about my father’s frequent reminder to me, “Nickie”—he called me “Nickie” when he was angry with me, which was only when he was awake—“never forget that your brother is an only child.”

In a related (if controversial) context, I am of the view that humor has its place not only in classes but also on exams. Anecdotal evidence from my students is overwhelming. My personal favorite student remark: “I look forward to your exams, Dr. Skinner.” Empirically, my own research has convinced me that humor on exams is beneficial. For example, in groups equated for ambient anxiety levels, students given a multiple-choice exam containing approximately 50% humorous questions scored on average between 3 to 4% higher than matched students writing a conventional (humorless) form of the same exam (Skinner, 1992). Oscar Wilde was correct—life is too important to be taken seriously!

Should We Trust Professorial Folk Wisdom?

Much of my teaching-related research reflects a long-held conviction that the “folk wisdom” of professors and students should not be accepted uncritically. For example, skeptical of Joubert’s (1983) report that undergraduates with unusual first names were significantly less likely to graduate with honors than those with common names, I found that there was no significant difference in the percentage of female or male students with common names versus unique names obtaining averages of 80% or higher (in a sample of more than 500 introductory psychology students; Skinner, 1984).

For years I followed the advice of a respected senior colleague to put a number of easy questions at the beginning of a multiple-choice examination “to get students off on the right foot.” However, empirical examination of this piece of professorial folk wisdom revealed that students doing difficult items first obtained a mean score of 85% on later easy items, whereas students doing those same easy questions in the first half of the test

averaged about 70%, lending support to the suggestion that an initial setback may have a salutary effect on subsequent performance (Skinner, 1999).

Finally, though each new generation of students seems to be the beneficiary of the advice, unquestionably passed on by senior students (and I think by many professors as well), “don’t change your first answer to a multiple-choice question because it’s probably correct,” on average about 50% of changes go from wrong to right (e.g., Benjamin, 1984; Skinner, 1996). Clearly, teachers need to convince students of the relative efficacy of answer changing.

How Much Should Research Inform Our Teaching?

Though I am opposed to research at the expense of teaching, I am very much in favor of teachers doing research, because that research can greatly benefit their teaching. One of the things that made my best teachers so effective was precisely that they could bring their own research to bear on illustrating general principles. They invariably became more enthused when talking about their research, and this enthusiasm was not only infectious but made the general principles more memorable.

In combination, my classroom experience and research into teaching have led me to the view that the most effective teachers are, as the saying goes, “to the manner born.” In other words, “the characteristics of effective teachers are more likely to be the products of biology than teacher training programs” (Skinner, 1999, p. 71). Truly great teachers are successful in very large part because they are “doing what comes naturally” rather than trying to emulate their own best teachers, which Steve Davis recently warned against in this very column (Davis, 2000).

Conclusion

Clearly, only a few will be “great” teachers, but this should not deter us mere mortals because, as McKeachie (2002) points out, “[in the final analysis] teaching effectiveness depends not on what the teacher does, but rather on what the student does” (p. 6). Effective teachers are those who will require their students to inquire—to find out actively the answers to their own questions, rather than osmotically accepting and “... repeating what someone else says is true” (Postman and Weingartner, 1969, p. 19). The good news is that one does not have to be a charismatic inspirationalist—anyone who takes seriously the maxim, “teach me how to do it myself,” can teach effectively.

In closing, let me recall a line from Robert Bolt’s powerful 1961 play, *A Man for All Seasons*. The venerable and wise Sir Thomas More is urging a youthful protégé to consider a life in the classroom, because, More assures him, he will be an outstanding teacher. “But if I were,” demurs the young man, “who would know it?” Replied the great author and statesman, “you, your friends, your students, God. Not a bad audience, that.” Not a bad audience indeed!

[*Editors' Note*: An expanded version of this article may be found in Skinner, N. F. (2001). A course, a course, my kingdom for a course: Reflections of an unrepentant teacher. *Canadian Psychology*, 42, 49-60.]

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