

Fighting the Surf: Lessons Learned in My First Year of College Teaching

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I once heard a story of a man who viewed his life as a series of battles to be conquered. He approached the world as if he were standing in the ocean, with the brutal surf crashing all about him. He believed that the only way to survive was to use his strength, determination, and fury to resist the relentless onslaught of waves, even though each one threatened to bowl him over. There was little peace in this man’s life; everyday brought a new struggle. It was no wonder that he often felt depleted, exhausted, and hopeless. Rather than stepping out of the water to observe his circumstance, or easing past the breakers to allow the tide to carry him where it may, he chose to fight the surf, looking to conquer wave after wave.

In many ways, this story parallels my first semester of teaching. In the beginning, I focused all my energies on trying to “fight” my way into being an effective teacher. Armed with airtight schedules, strict policies, and firm deadlines, I worked tirelessly to “get through” all of the material. I was determined to cover every chapter of the text and to review every important concept. When the futility of this goal began to emerge (the students just weren’t keeping up!), I began to transform my lectures into PowerPoint handouts that I would distribute at the beginning of class. With these handouts, I would not have to wait for students to write their notes; I could lecture more and lecture faster. Although I did utilize in-class activities and film clips, I viewed them as luxuries, as addenda.

I felt certain that my extraordinary organization and “command” would engender student interest and learning. What I began to notice, however, was quite the opposite. Many of my students remained withdrawn. When I would make time for discussion, they stayed silent. When I asked them to reflect, they appeared uninspired. Here I was teaching what I thought were some of the most compelling and personally relevant courses in psychology, and yet their disconnectedness was all too evident. As the semester progressed, I began to lose my own energy and enthusiasm. I was getting tired. I was getting bored. I felt trapped by those stupid PowerPoint handouts.

¹ Meginnis-Payne, K. L. (2002). Fighting the surf: Lessons learned in my first year of college teaching. In W. Buskist, V. Hevern, & G. W. Hill, IV, (Eds.). *Essays from e-xcellence in teaching, 2000-2001* (chap. 13). Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.org/resources/e-books/eit2000.php>

Although I still believe that efficiency and organization are essential to effective teaching, I quickly learned that they, alone, are insufficient. Rather than “fighting” against time, I am learning to step out of the surf and onto the shore to reflect on what students need to learn and to grow. Rather than trying only to master the content, I am learning to ease past the waves and allow myself to be influenced and carried by students’ needs and interests. Although I consider every day an experiment in my own learning (which is progress in and of itself), these early experiences have taught me valuable lessons.

Lesson 1: Pick Only the Most Important Ideas and Then Hit Them From All Angles

Rather than covering many concepts superficially, I now cover fewer topics in much more meaningful ways. For instance, rather than spending one day in General Psychology discussing brain functioning, I now spend almost three days on this topic. Students first watch a film on the brain that illustrates the wonder of this amazing organ. They then work in groups to complete a brain map. The next day, students make a model of the brain with different colored play-dough. In groups, they rank-order the importance of each part of the brain and label them accordingly. On the last day, we discuss the impact of disease, stroke, and head injury through the case study method. Students contribute by disclosing their personal accounts of friends and family members who have struggled with these sorts of experiences.

Lesson 2: Use Lecture to Supplement, not Supplant, In-Class Learning Activities

Certainly there are topics that need explanation and elaboration. However, I have found that students remember “doing” more than they remember “reviewing.” In my Counseling Theories class, I could talk about the components of active listening and empathy for hours. I am convinced, though, that the real learning takes place when I ask students to do things such as conduct role-plays, watch and evaluate themselves on video, and provide feedback to their classmates through peer supervision groups.

Lesson 3: Make Room for Student Involvement

I have learned that if I want students to be engaged, I must give them the opportunity to be so. Although I used to fill every minute of class with my own agenda, I now try to plan for only three-quarters of the class period. This way, students are guaranteed the opportunity to ask questions, complete a note-check with peers, and bring up related topics. In some classes, I ask students to bring at least one video clip, advertisement, or article related to the course at some point during the semester. This activity not only invites students to relate the course content to their real lives, it also provides them with the opportunity to contribute to the class in meaningful ways. I also designate a handful of days throughout the semester as “Hot Topic” days. On these days, we have the opportunity to follow-up on topics of student interest that were noted in earlier discussions.

Lesson 4: Practice Flexibility

Although I still try to develop a well-planned framework for each course, I strive to be flexible within that framework. I now consider all schedules tentative, and I give myself permission to make changes. This approach allows me to respond to students' needs and interests by spending more (or less) time on certain topics. This sounds simple, but it is something I am just now learning how to do! Without allowing myself the flexibility to make changes, many of the most rewarding experiences of this semester (such as several guest speakers and class discussions) would not have emerged.

Lesson 5: Strive for "Good-Enough" Teaching

D. W. Winnicott proposed that when parents are able to create an adequate "holding" environment, children are able to develop their "true selves." Winnicott applied his theories on "good-enough" mothering to the relationship between therapist and client. I think this theory can also be extended to teaching. I try to remind myself that my goal as a teacher is not to perfect, but to foster and support the natural interests, enthusiasm, and needs of the students through "good-enough" teaching. Although self-doubt and anxiety are an inherent part of the process, I am working to recognize that as long as my intentions are in the right place and I stay open to feedback, everything will work out.

Conclusion

I have come to realize that my early approach to teaching was much like the man fighting against the surf. In the beginning, I was more focused on trying to conquer and control, than in trusting that—together—my students and I would get where we needed to go. By learning to be more reflective, as well as learning to be able to go with the flow, my teaching has not only become more effective (as measured by student participation and written feedback), but I find that I am more energetic and enthusiastic about being in the classroom.