

On the Occasion of My Retirement

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I appreciate Bill Buskist’s invitation to write a few words on the occasion of my retirement. To put this piece in some sort of context, I should tell you something about my career. However, I promise not to dwell on the details; that is not the purpose of this piece.

I received my B.A. and M.A. degrees from Southern Methodist University and my Ph.D. in general experimental psychology from Texas Christian University. I have spent my 35-year teaching career at three institutions: King College (Bristol, TN; enrollment 325), Austin Peay State University (Clarksville, TN; enrollment 5,500), and Emporia State University (Emporia, KS; enrollment 5,500).

I exited my doctoral program a hard-core rat runner who was thoroughly trained in the Hull-Spence tradition and studied olfactory communication. Fortunately, I was able to attract several students to help with these projects and several co-authored presentations and publications resulted from these efforts. However, as additional students became involved with my lab group, I found that not all of them shared my burning passion to investigate olfactory communication in animal maze learning. In fact, a few of my assistants began to propose some of the “strangest” (at least to an old-time rat runner) research I could imagine. Among the proposed topics were “personality characteristics of civilian and military policemen,” “an analysis of the size of human figure drawings and level of self-esteem in school-age children,” “the Type A behavior pattern and level of self-esteem,” and “death anxiety in military couples.”

Thankfully, I had the presence of mind not to just dismiss these, and similar, research ideas. So, well over 30 years ago, I found my research focus shifting. To the dismay of my dissertation director, all of those hours invested in teaching me the importance of programmatic research seemed wasted. In some ways he probably was right; I came to the realization that my laboratory and professional interests did not exist for any specific type of research; they existed for the training of quality students. In short, I have not been content to conduct programmatic research; rather, my research and most of my

¹ Davis, S. L. (2002). On the occasion of my retirement. In W. Buskist, V. Hevern, & G. W. Hill, IV, (Eds.). *Essays from e-xcellence in teaching, 2000-2001* (chap. 14). Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.org/resources/e-books/eit2000.php>

professional activities have been student driven and rather eclectic. From my perspective, the trip has been superb! So, here's my first bit of advice. (I couldn't resist throwing in some advice here and there. If it makes sense, use it; if it doesn't work for you, that's fine, too.) Don't turn students and their research ideas away just because they aren't "in your area." Remember "diversity is the spice of life"—your students are more than capable of providing the spice if you will let them.

So, at age 59, what has prompted early retirement? To me, "retirement" simply means that I am taking control of my own time. Professionally, there still are many places to go, things to do, and students to teach; I just intend to do them on my own schedule. (I do not intend to sit on the front porch and rock and drool!) Another driving force in this decision to retire was a realization that currently I am physically able to do certain things (e.g., work on a Habitat for Humanity project or take hiking trips) that may be beyond my capabilities in the future. I don't want to miss out on some of these activities.

Here's my second bit of advice. Think and plan; take charge and do what's best for you and your own unique circumstances. In my case, early retirement fits my needs and personal circumstances. For example, a life-threatening operation that my wife underwent nearly two years ago put things in a very different perspective and quickly convinced me that I needed to spend more time with my family. Also, I consciously have opted not to do a phased-retirement program; they usually involve as much work as a full-time appointment. The opportunity to teach on a part-time or adjunct basis will satisfy my need to be in the classroom and fit my time schedule perfectly.

Clearly, you may have to do a bit of soul searching. What really is important in your life—what are your priorities? Thus, my third bit of advice is to do a "priorities inventory" periodically throughout your career. In short, know what you are doing and why you are doing it; don't just let retirement "happen" to you.

I suspect that one reason that Bill asked me to do this feature is that he may have looked around at the attendees at various teaching conferences and Society for the Teaching of Psychology sessions at the APA Convention and had reality smack him firmly in the face. Let's face it, many of our number are showing some signs of aging and a substantial number will be joining me "out in the pasture" in the near future. In an era when teaching is finally being recognized and valued, we need to be cognizant that our number may dwindle in the coming years. What can (should) be done about this situation? From my perspective, the answer lies in encouraging our younger colleagues to become more actively involved in the multitude of teaching-related opportunities that are currently available to them. What are some of these opportunities? Some possibilities, although not a complete list, appear below. Although I am suggesting these possibilities for the younger faculty, it's never too late to get involved. If you are already engaged in some of these activities, that is great: keep up the good work and see if you can expand your horizons a bit!

- Attend regional and national teaching conferences and teaching sessions at regional

conventions.

- Present at the teaching conferences and teaching sessions.
- Serve as a reviewer for *Teaching of Psychology*. (You may have to volunteer for this assignment. Don't be hesitant; volunteering is encouraged.)
- Join the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP).
- Become active in STP programs and activities. (You will read about STP activities in *Teaching of Psychology*. Some opportunities, such as serving on committees, may require volunteering. Again, do not be hesitant; the STP folks are a great group with whom to work!)

The real task before the “seasoned veterans” is to find ways to encourage greater numbers of younger faculty to become involved in the teaching of psychology. In turn, younger faculty must rise to the challenges inherent in these opportunities. Only in this way will the academic and scholarly values that we cherish be passed along and flourish in the next generation of psychology teachers.

My final bit of advice comes from my friend, the late Mike Best. Mike was never without a supply of ornately engraved business cards that said “Learning is a Grim and Serious Business.” If you knew Mike, you know that this slogan was the antithesis of his true feelings. I wholeheartedly endorse Mike's approach to being a psychologist. Have fun with your career, enjoy the journey as you are taking it, and don't take yourself too seriously.