

Psi Chi and Teaching with Our Mouths Shut

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This summer I read a terrific book on teaching. The book, entitled *Teaching With Your Mouth Shut* by the late Donald Finkel of Evergreen State College, was an absorbing read. Finkel, a skilled writer, draws on the ideas of Dewey, Piaget, and Rousseau to argue that students learn through experiences that put them in direct contact with ideas and concepts. He does not criticize any particular method of teaching, though he is wary of an exclusive ‘teacher as teller’ approach. Rather, he describes ways to shape classroom experiences to put students and ideas, not the teacher, at the center of the learning activity. The chapters include titles like “Let the Books Do the Talking,” “Let the Students Do the Talking,” and “Let Us Inquire Together.” The book rests on the assumption that, as Dewey once said, “no thought, no idea, can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another.” Thus, the classroom (and beyond) becomes an environment where the teacher’s task is to let activities and assignments do the talking.

Finkel’s ideas are certainly not the last word on how to teach. If there was a perfect solution to our pedagogical puzzles, it would have been discovered long ago and we could read about it on cave walls. However, this book stimulated me to think anew about our work as teachers both inside and outside the classroom.

As I read Finkel’s book, I could not help but think about Psi Chi, The National Honor Society in Psychology, and the role it plays in student learning and personal development. It would be natural to add a chapter to Finkel’s book called “Let Psi Chi Do the Talking.” Psi Chi activities and opportunities are, I believe, at the heart of teaching with our mouths shut. Teaching and learning, as we all know, do not happen just within the walls of the classroom. Students learn a lot when we are nowhere in sight, though hopefully we play an important role in initiating and facilitating the process. Think about your own experiences as a student. Didn’t some of your “aha” experiences, moments of intellectual connection, or personal development come when your teachers were not around?

¹ Giordano, P. J.. (2002). Psi Chi and teaching with our mouths shut. In W. Buskist, V. Hevern, & G. W. Hill, IV, (Eds.). *Essays from e-xcellence in teaching, 2000-2001* (chap. 17). Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.org/resources/e-books/eit2000.php>

Let me suggest five ways that lead me to the conclusion that Psi Chi provides great opportunities for students to learn while keeping our mouths shut. Of course, Psi Chi is not the only place where students might gain these experiences, but a Psi Chi chapter is certainly a good place to start.

First, Psi Chi underscores the value of an empirical approach to psychological knowledge. Part of our work as psychology educators is to help our students understand that the subject matter of our discipline, even the most slippery constructs, can be studied scientifically. Because of Psi Chi's emphasis on science, it is no accident that the organization provides many opportunities to support student research activities. If you have not done so in a while, go to the Psi Chi Web site at www.psichi.org. At the site, you will read about research award and research grant opportunities for Psi Chi students. Psi Chi's quarterly newsletter, *Eye on Psi Chi*, also has information on these research opportunities. In addition, the *Psi Chi Journal of Undergraduate Research* is a publication outlet for undergraduate research projects. There is no better way for students to learn our science than by doing it.

Second, Psi Chi teaches leadership skills and supports professional growth. At the 2001 Eastern Psychological Association meeting in Washington, DC, I had the privilege of sitting in on a presentation by the Lehman College, City University of New York chapter advised by Dr. Vincent Prohaska. The Lehman chapter is the 2000-2001 recipient of the Cousin's National Chapter Award. The energy and enthusiasm coming from the Lehman officers, who presented about chapter vitality, was inspiring. These officers unmistakably exhibited the leadership skills necessary to run an organization. They had vision for their chapter, they planned and executed activities, they tweaked these activities to make them better, they raised money and spent money for students, they invited speakers, and they worked together to make it all happen. This type of experience is invaluable and will pay dividends in their careers and personal lives after they graduate. As Psi Chi advisors know, not all chapter officers are as capable and motivated as this group from Lehman. However, given adequate support and encouragement, most officers rise to the occasion and effectively lead their chapters, learning skills that will last a lifetime.

Third, Psi Chi emphasizes teamwork and the value of group accomplishment. This aspect of Psi Chi is related to leadership, but it expands the idea to capture the group's synergy. Psi Chi officers, like teachers, create an environment for action, but ultimately the officers must step out of the way as events unfold. Kelly Voss is the current Psi Chi Chapter President at my institution. She is energetic and intelligent, and I am very enthusiastic about the year ahead with her at the helm. However, Kelly knows that, as President, she cannot do everything herself. Ultimately, the teamwork of officers and students is what leads to the accomplishments of the chapter. Students do not learn these lessons by reading about them in books. They learn them by immersion in the experiences of the group.

Fourth, Psi Chi teaches the importance of planning and preparation. Psi Chi advisors know that Psi Chi chapters, officers, and members are "works in progress," and sometimes the best lessons are learned, if not from failures, then from less-than-optimal outcomes. I will

never forget one of our Psi Chi members who attended a local psychology conference and presented his research in poster format. This student, let's call him Bob (not his real name), was bright and capable, a psychologist in the making. At the conference, Bob methodically put up his poster and a few moments later, just before the poster session was to start, a colleague and I walked by to take a look. Looking with a sense of satisfaction at the poster, we all had the same realization at about the same time: there was no Method section. We all looked at each other and started to laugh. There it was in all its empirical glory, a poster with an Introduction, Results, and Discussion section, but no Method. I think we all learned something from this situation, and the story has become part of the folklore in our department—"don't forget the Method!" we tell students in preparation for poster sessions. Bob went on to earn his Ph.D. in clinical psychology from an excellent program and is now Dr. Bob. The lesson was learned outside the classroom, however.

Finally, Psi Chi teaches the value of effort and perseverance. Sometimes the things that mean the most to us are those that initially elude us. Over the years, I have seen students work extremely hard to become eligible for membership in Psi Chi. The goal of membership served as an impetus for their academic achievement. I hope I have communicated to these students how much I admire their effort. Some students have worked for several years to bring their GPAs up and have been inducted during their last semester in school. Truthfully, though, the greatest gain in this context is not their membership in Psi Chi. It is experiencing the value of sustained effort to reach a desired goal. Twenty years from now, I imagine they will forget the details of our Psi Chi chapter, its activities, and members. However, they will not forget their accomplishment and the effort that led to it.

Psi Chi presents a number of opportunities for us to teach with our mouths shut. I am indebted to Donald Finkel for this excellent idea. With 402,536 Psi Chi members and 990 chapters, the organization has nurtured many students over the years. Certainly, there are other situations that allow students to grow academically, professionally, and personally: Psi Chi is not the only show in town to help students learn important skills and lessons. However, Psi Chi provides an ever-expanding (check the Web site!) range of opportunities for us to work with our students. Psi Chi weaves together the scientific and the professional, the individual and the group, the local and the national, the classroom and the department. In these contexts, we can keep our mouths shut and watch our students develop.

Reference

Finkel, D. (2000). *Teaching with your mouth shut*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.