

The National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology: Twenty-Five Years and Counting¹

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To some of our younger faculty, it must seem that there has always been a National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP). The rest of us, though, can clearly recall a time when there was no NITOP, and therefore, absolutely no reason for any department head or dean to pay to send psychology teachers to Florida in January. Now, it happens every year. The details of how and why NITOP came to be, and how it grew, can be found in a chapter I contributed to a book co-edited by Steve Davis and Bill Buskist (Bernstein, 2002), but Bill thought the members of the PsychTeacher listserv might like to read a shorter version of that story, and to get some idea of my views on the conference. I hope he is right, and that this column will fill the bill.

NITOP met for the first time on October 9-11, 1978 on the campus of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). Many people assume that NITOP was my idea, but it was actually the brainchild of Frank Costin, a fellow member of the UIUC psychology department in whose memory the Costin award is now given at NITOP. Frank's simple, but vital, idea was to give psychology faculty a chance to get together to exchange ideas and advice about the challenges, frustrations, problems, and pleasures of teaching psychology. To be honest, I don't recall if I attended the institute that first year. I don't think I did, because the first I remember hearing about it was when Frank asked me to be a speaker at the second annual meeting, in the fall of 1979. So I was not present at NITOP's birth, but I was there for its first birthday party. Still, to me the invitation to speak was just that. I had no idea at the time that the institute would become an institution or that I would become so involved in it, and certainly no inkling of the impact it would come to have on psychology teachers, on how and what they teach, and even on the growth of other teaching conferences.

I remember being struck by how intensely interested the participants were in listening to the speakers talk about teaching methods and updating course content, and how eager they were to talk to each other about student-faculty relationship issues, grading policies, ethical dilemmas, and the like. I had no idea that so many faculty in my discipline cared so much about these things because, frankly, most members of my research-oriented department did not talk much about teaching—especially undergraduate teaching—other than to complain about having to do it. As someone who loved teaching and who wanted to find out how to do it better, I had learned to keep my mouth shut about this nasty little secret, and just do the best I could. (I remember being laughed at by a senior colleague when I told him how happy I was to have been "trusted" with a 350-student section of abnormal psychology in my first semester at Illinois.) However, now I wondered: If there were faculty who took the trouble to come to Champaign, Illinois of all places, in an effort to improve their teaching, maybe there was a way I could help make that happen, and improve my own teaching in the process.

¹ Bernstein D. A. (2003). The National Institution on the Teaching of Psychology: Twenty-five years and counting. In W. Buskist, V. Hevern, & G. W. Hill, IV, (Eds.). *Essays from e-xcellence in teaching, 2002* (Chap. 5). Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.lemoyne.edu/teachpsych/eit/index.html>

Early in 1980, Frank Costin asked me to join the planning committee for the Third Annual Institute, and it was at a meeting of that committee that we decided to try to broaden the appeal of the institute, and serve more people by moving it to Florida in January, where it has been held ever since. At the 5th Annual Institute, in 1983, we tried something else that was new: we included two roundtable discussion sessions that were suggested by previous participants. The format was popular enough that the following year we scheduled six roundtables. By 1988, at program committee member Bob Hendersen's suggestion, we began inviting all participants to submit topics for discussions that they themselves would lead during what came to be called Participant Idea Exchanges (PIE). That same year, we also invited participants to present posters on any topic related to the teaching of psychology. The response to these invitations was stunning, as dozens of participants submitted PIE topics, poster proposals, or both. No doubt they did so partly because giving a presentation at NITOP helped support requests for travel money, but years of touring crowded rows of posters and eavesdropping on packed PIE sessions has made it clear to me that these presentations and discussions are helping to meet much more fundamental needs. They actually give participants at our conference a chance to confer with one another, to tell interested colleagues about what they are doing in their classes, and to hear what those colleagues are doing, too. Perhaps even more important, they provide participants with an opportunity to describe the problems they are having in their courses, and to get ideas for solving them. In the process, they discover they are not alone in having to face those problems, or in being perplexed, worried, and even frightened by them.

I am particularly proud of these features and of the stellar talks our distinguished speakers have delivered over the years. Together, they have helped to realize the vision that Frank Costin had for NITOP a quarter of a century ago—to get teachers of psychology together in a way that benefits their teaching, and their lives as teachers. Past participants tell me that attending NITOP helps them to renew their enthusiasm for teaching, gives them new ideas for making their classes more interesting and up to date, and offers them fresh perspectives and strategies for dealing with the inevitable student-faculty problems they must face. I, too, am gratified, that NITOP's impact has been amplified through its role in helping others who seek to promote the teaching of psychology. NITOP appears to have served as a stimulus and a model for the many regional teaching conferences that have developed since 1984, and for the American Psychological Society's efforts in the realm of teaching—most notably in the form of its own annual Preconvention Institute on the Teaching of Psychology. I am pleased, too, to have played a role in helping APS forge closer ties to the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP), first by inviting STP members to introduce speakers at the APS Teaching Institute's sessions, and then by turning over the planning of the APS institute to STP. In the years to come, I look forward to working with the NITOP program committee to find new ways to improve our institute, and to expand its role in promoting excellence in the teaching of psychology.

The most recent of these new efforts takes the form of the Annual Summer Institute on the Teaching of Psychology. The first annual summer institute took place in 2001, and the second annual meeting is scheduled for July 23-26, 2002. This 4-day event is designed for a diverse group of participants, including high school teachers who want to enrich their psychology courses, graduate students preparing for academic jobs, young faculty who are developing their teaching style, and senior faculty with a desire to recharge their batteries, and sharpen established teaching skills. The format includes not only the usual speaker presentations, but hands-on workshops focused on skills relating to lecturing, classroom demonstrations, ethical issues, and the like.

Let me close by saying how grateful I am to those of you who have come to NITOP in the past, and especially for the comments and suggestions you have made to help us to plan and improve NITOP. Though the committee and I tend to get the credit for NITOP's value and success, NITOP would not be what it is without your loyalty and your help. I hope that NITOP will continue to serve you, and those who follow you, for another 25 years.

Reference

Bernstein, D.A. (2002). Promoting the teaching of psychology: A history of NITOP. In S. F. Davis & W. Buskist (Eds.), *The teaching of psychology: Essays in honor of Wilbert J. McKeachie and Charles L. Brewer* (pp. 271-280). Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum.