

*Amen to Passion*¹
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Several years ago I stood at a podium and taught probability in a statistics class, watching 26 faces stare back at me as though I was speaking a different language. My pitch rose, my speech-rate increased, and I began to pace eagerly back and forth across the front of the room. I had to make them see the logical, almost spiritual, perfection of the sampling distribution of means. One by one, they began to nod their understanding as I stopped at each row and drew pictures of symmetry in the air. When they were all nodding, I was moved to call out, "You get it! I can see it on your faces!"

In the back of the classroom, a young woman jumped from her desk, threw her hands toward heaven, and yelled, "Amen!"

As a graduate student, I was fortunate enough to take a course on how to teach. It was a one-hour class with discussions of syllabi, tests, textbooks, and grading. We might even have talked about classroom management, but I was too inexperienced at the time to apply it to real people. I am certain we never discussed the "less" important aspects of our profession, like loving your job, respecting your students, and being passionate about teaching.

To be honest, if we had covered those topics, I wouldn't have understood them any better than classroom management, especially passion. I would have thought knowledge was more important than passion—that the mere promise of knowledge was enough to bring students to class and entice them to read fascinating textbooks full of facts, theories, and applications. I would have told the instructor that passion was for family, religion, and country, but certainly not teaching.

Living The Classroom Taught Me Something Different

When I started teaching, each lecture was structured, complete with a detailed outline of all the material I had to cover in a 50-minute period. I droned on about every topic in an Introductory Psychology textbook, stuffing as much information as I possibly could into half of the class. The other half was absent. Then an older student had the nerve to interrupt my lecture on operant conditioning. I tried to ignore her, but she kept waving her hand and wiggling in her desk, demanding my attention. When I finally allowed her to speak, she asked

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me why operant conditioning of pigeons was relevant. I had to admit, it was a fair question. With great care, I put down my precious lecture notes and talked about reinforcement and punishment of children's behavior. The students told me their beliefs, and I told them about research. When the class period ended, most of them wanted to keep talking, and I had to promise that we would continue our discussion the next time we met.

I wish I could say that I never went back to notes, but that wouldn't be true. However, I did abandon detailed outlines in favor of relevant examples, open discussions, and the freedom to make a human connection. I embrace the sort of passion born of less structure, more humanity.

With the revelation that passion might be important to students, I thought back on my own education. Which teachers mattered? Who made psychology matter? The research methods professor with a perpetual grin peeking from under his gray mustache as he energetically drew a cross-lagged correlation on the chalkboard, explained it three different ways, and never showed frustration nor lost his enthusiasm. A soft-spoken young woman with incredibly long red hair who drove her old Ford 240 miles to an undergraduate research conference so her student could present a research project. They were passionate about psychology, passionate about teaching, and passionate in their dedication to students' success.

Passionate Students

These professors and others not only revealed their own passion for psychology and teaching, but they also somehow fostered passion for psychology in their students. They showed that passion is contagious. I try to remember that when a student in research methods says she wants to study the effect of room color on mood. Instead of telling her it's been done a thousand times before, I nod and tell her it sounds great. When another student says he wants to study responses to aggression by being aggressive to participants and watching their reactions, we discuss using scenarios illustrating different aggressive situations and a rating scale as a dependent variable. Any topic will work. We'll make it work. After all, if that's what they're interested in, that's what they should study. Choosing their own way is a step toward finding their passion.

A few students from each class even go on to present their research at a conference, where their enthusiasm grows among colleagues who nurture a budding professionalism. I stand back and watch, in awe of the community of support we offer students of psychology. In return, we bring back greater passion within ourselves as teachers, as keepers of the faith. This synergistic relationship between instructors and students continually renews the passion that we share for each other, our discipline, and our profession.

Passionate Teaching

I don't presume to know what works for other instructors, but my path taught me this about fueling my own passion for teaching:

1. Know the material so well that I can teach it without notes. Projected outlines (overheads or PowerPoint slides) allow me to glance quickly at the main points and return attention to the students.
2. Ditch the notes (at least the detailed ones). Students' faces guide lecture better than notes ever could.
3. Use examples relevant to students' lives. If students can relate to the examples, they'll listen, and if they listen, they'll have a better chance of learning. Besides, no discipline is more useful to everyday life than psychology. I want students to know that.
4. Attend teaching conferences as often as possible and attend the sessions. My favorite conferences to get new ideas about teaching and network with other dedicated instructors are the Southeastern Teaching of Psychology (SETOP) and the National Institute for the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP).
5. Try different teaching techniques in the classroom. When I return from a teaching conference, I look forward to trying a new approach on my students. If the technique doesn't work for us, we laugh together and move on. If it works, even better.
6. Talk with enthusiastic instructors. Spending time with people who dislike teaching and students drains energy and is just plain depressing.
7. Encourage questions, skepticism, and even disagreement. For the first few days of class, students don't believe I really want them to question me. After they catch on, we have discussions in which we both deepen our understanding of the material. I learn just as much from them as they do from me.
8. Share opinions, beliefs, and convictions, but teach research. I can't spend the bulk of my adult life standing in front of people and pretending to be a machine. Sharing the "real" person lets students know that I'm honest and they can trust me, which is particularly important when I'm explaining research on controversial topics like why they should never hit their children and why ESP is not scientifically valid.
9. Never discourage. Students taking their first academic steps need encouragement to keep walking and working. They can learn about the "real world" of discouragement and rejection when they've grown to love psychology and the process of learning.
10. Care. Above all, I want students to know I care about them and want them to succeed. It always amazes me how hard they work when they know I'm one of their biggest fans.

I still have a lot to learn, but the past decade has taught me that passion isn't just for family, religion, and country. Now I wholeheartedly add teaching to this list. I realize that passion is a natural extension of believing in something and allowing it to be a central part of life. The next time a student interrupts my carefully laid plans for class structure and dares to ask for

emotion behind the facts, I'll leap from behind the podium, raise my hands to heaven, and shout, "Amen!"