

*When Psychology Teachers Introspect*¹

Larry W. Bates

University of North Alabama

(This essay originally appeared as the monthly "E-xcellence in Teaching" e-column in the PsychTeacher Electronic Discussion List for October 2002.)

Pulitzer-nominee Frederick Buechner (1989) wrote a short life-affirming book entitled *The Alphabet of Grace*. With only three chapters (gutturals, sibilants, and the absence of vowels) Buechner explores the undeserved wonders of one day on the planet. When asked to write about teaching, I am drawn to Buechner's ideal of grace, for I, too, feel lucky. Hence, I chose to use similar pastry shells from Buechner's book to cook a rather different pie.

Psychology's first interest was the science of introspection. Today we consider introspection a much different animal than that tested in the Leipzig laboratory. The term conjures up the idea of examining oneself for strengths and weaknesses, a kind of self-assessment followed by internal self-to-self communication. Although introspection may no longer be what the Structuralists investigated, I cannot help but think that, when you and I, as teachers of psychology, talk to ourselves about our craft—when we introspect just a bit, Grandfather Wundt smiles. After all, it is in taking time to teach ourselves about the important matters of our lives that we are positioned to make the greatest impact on our students. Any such self-examination will necessarily involve a few gutturals, consonants, and sibilants.

The Gutturals of Teaching

Gutturals are those unpleasant throaty sounds that English speakers find harsh to the ears. They form the language of Klingons. Teaching has its fair share of gutturals, things we do not like and seemingly must vent. Primary among gutturals, for me, are final grades. I still take grading much too personal and my angst increases as final exams approach. Students come to our offices after final exams with tears, even panic, to request a better grade. They have real needs for a better grade: they will not graduate, their scholarships will be revoked, a promising collegiate sports career will end, academic suspension awaits, or, as I once heard, "my father will kill me." I cope with this guttural by providing a speech, with great honesty, just before the final exam:

"I care very much about your grade in my class. In the past I stayed up late and worried about where to redraw the line for grades. I was stressed and irritable; my wife hated me, my cat avoided me, and I hated myself. Stress is very harsh on my family and my body. The probability of me developing heart disease or cancer increases when I am stressed. Death or divorce is too high a price to pay. So until I learn a better way to cope, your grade is your

¹ Bates, L. W. (2003). When psychology teachers introspect. In W. Buskist, V. Hevern, & G. W. Hill, IV, (Eds.). *Essays from e-xcellence in teaching, 2002* (Chap. 11). Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.lemoyne.edu/teachpsych/eit/index.html>

grade. If you need a better grade to graduate, you may need someone to cry with you. If so, come by my office because I will cry with you. I really will. But I won't change your grade...ever. Not because I don't care, but because I think I care too much."

This speech inhibits considerably the requests for a better grade. However, occasionally students take me up on the offer to cry with them.

Minor gutturals for me include grading tests, committee work, and money. Regarding the task of grading tests, it is repetitive and boring, and any chimpanzee could be shaped to do it. Committee work, the epitome of diffusion of responsibility, sometimes seems to function only to give the illusion of shared governance. Money, there is never enough of it, personally or as a department. Express your gutturals judiciously.

The Consonants of Teaching

Not all languages have vowels; nevertheless, consonants are basic necessities in most languages. What are the consonants, the important elements of teaching? Academia involves many activities, but few are essential for professional success. E-mail is a non-consonant; it can be a serious way to waste a day. Web sites are not consonants. You cannot compensate for horrible teaching with a great Web site. These are only tools, not teaching.

The true consonants of teaching, in my opinion, can be broken down into two necessary constructs: truth and passion. What we teach our students is extremely important, but not because the truths we teach will stand the test of time. Instead, the truths we teach will give our students a foundation with which to charge the ignorance of our day and leave it in ruins. This foundation is critical. Because truth is crucial, because behavior is life, preparation is essential. Remind yourself that what you teach is ubiquitously important.

Passion for our craft is likewise consonantal. Facts are dead and only the messenger has resurrection powers--the ability to breath life into the mere clay of data. Until quickened by our passionate voices, the truths that are so important for living will remain moribund details.

Lastly, part of our theatre is to convey that we actually like our students, that we have passion for them. If we do not care about their success we are unlikely to have much success in conveying our truths to them. Liking students is part of teaching, a consonant.

The Sibilants of Teaching

Sibilants are those sounds that can only be made with a whisper, (e.g., the "s" in essence). If unvigilant, we may never hear the sibilants of teaching. These are what Annie Dillard (1990) refers to as the bright copper pennies cast all about us, seen only by those who look for them. Remember how much fun it was the first time you taught? You merely spoke and people actually wrote down what you said. They still do it, but some of us no longer hear this particular sibilant.

Each semester I have students who come to my office and cry about something other than schoolwork. Maybe it is because I teach abnormal psychology, but maybe, just maybe, it is because they think I care. In a great paradox, I sleep better at night because they come, because they cry in my office, because they reify so silently, that perhaps I am a decent and caring human.

But the whisper to which I am most often deaf is the incredible freedom that I possess as a teacher of psychology. Within broad parameters I decide what I will teach, when I'll slink into work in the morning, and when I'll drag myself home in the evening. My job is to investigate whatever interests me and to share it with a largely captive audience. Whether I am teaching about sex, sleep, prejudice, or abnormality, I am wallowing in the single subject that is maximally fun to teach, human behavior. I can't imagine a job anywhere on the planet with greater freedom or fun. Too often I fail to hear that habituated sibilant of life.

Last Thoughts

When students ask me why I chose to teach psychology, I tell them of looking out of my office window on a sunny June day at 3:30 p.m. At that moment I recalled a few jobs that I had endured in the past (e.g., working in the steam room at a garment factory) and knew that right at that minute, all across America, many people were begging a slothful minute hand to speed up, effectively petitioning their life to end sooner as they pled with Father Time to just let them go home. On the other hand, I was working at my office during my vacation, because, unlike too many others, I love my job. So I tell this story to my inquisitive students and ask them, "What will you do when the clock reaches 3:30, some twenty years from today? I hope you don't care. I hope you don't try to speed up your life. I hope you sacrifice a few bucks for a job for which you have great passion."

With the myriad of choices for a profession at our disposal during post-adolescence, with so many oreless mines awaiting our spades, somehow we, the teachers of psychology, struck a vein of gold. Maybe Wundt was correct in spotlighting introspection. Perhaps our communication with self—the gutturals, consonants, and sibilants—will enhance our ability to appreciate the yellow glitter, to remain passionate toward our science, our craft, our students, even life.

References

Buechner, F. (1989). *The alphabet of grace*. Harper-Collins: New York.

Dillard, A. (1990). *Three by Annie Dillard*. Harper-Collins: New York.