

## **The Never Ending Story: Renewing One's Teaching and Professional Life**

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(This essay originally appeared as the monthly "E-xcellence in Teaching" e-column in the *PsychTeacher Electronic Discussion List* for June 2003.)

After almost 25 years of teaching, including a decade of off and on administrative positions mixed in, the major premise I have developed about teaching and our academic life in general is that change is inevitable and to survive and flourish as teachers we must learn to welcome it as an opportunity for renewal both in and out of the classroom. In fact, it seems to me that the degree and speed of change over the last 15 years has probably been faster and greater than any we have seen in higher education since the phenomenal growth of the 1960s. As Gardner (1981) noted, "In earlier generations value patterns were created and withheld the test of several generations. Today, we are like people in a land of recurring earthquakes and tornadoes, where each generation must keep its building skills fresh and in fact build almost continuously" (p. xiv).

I think there are several major sources of change that affect our academic lives. One source is external to the institution (e.g., regent or board mandated changes, legislative mandates, economic conditions, new directions and emphases in higher education). Another change agent is internal to the institution (e.g., enrollment growth or decline, new administration, changes in mission emphasis). For example, when I first came to Kennesaw State University, then Kennesaw College, in 1979 it had recently converted from a 2-year to 4-year institution, had an enrollment of 3,500 students, 130 faculty, and only 15 undergraduate degree programs (which did not include psychology) and no masters degrees. Today Kennesaw has almost 17,000 students, 420 faculty, and 45 undergraduate and 15 master's degree programs. It is not the same school!

Changes also occur at the departmental level. For example, a new department chair may institute changes in focus and expectations. In addition, our immediate colleagues change through retirements, resignations, or even occasionally through adding a new position. These changes can result in a sense of loss for old and valued colleagues, changes in the personal and group dynamics of the department, increased (or decreased) diversity of the faculty, and a potential gulf between tenured and non-tenured faculty. We might view these changes as either a threat to our status in the department or as an opportunity for renewal through the introduction of fresh ideas and perspectives.

We also experience many changes in our classrooms. Our students are becoming more diverse and increasingly more nontraditional (both in age and approach to education, with many working full- or part-time). For some of us, myself included, students are significantly younger, resulting in fewer and fewer shared experiences, and often making some of my favorite examples obsolete. I also have experienced changes in the content of the discipline with respect to sub-areas, current research, and methodologies. Many topics, methodologies,

and types of equipment that were central when I was a graduate student and were relevant in my teaching and research are no longer mentioned in current textbooks, with the possible exception of History and Systems. How many of you remember or actually worked with equipment such as a memory drum or the Lashley Jumping Stand? Let's not forget technology and its impact on teaching. When I started teaching the main technology I had in my classroom consisted of a 16mm film projector, filmstrip projector, overhead projector, and a blackboard. Today, I might walk into a classroom equipped with a PC with a CD/DVD ROM, a data projector, an Internet connection, and a whiteboard. I am beginning to wonder what might be obsolete in the not too distant future, such as textbooks, slide projectors, and VCRs.

Finally, we also change as faculty members. Hopefully, many of us will change status through promotion and tenure. However, we also change in our roles in the department. For example, many of us go from being a mentee to a mentor, we assume a variety of leadership roles in the department, and our professional identities and activities outside the college or university change.

Clearly, change is inevitable and can present opportunities for renewal during our careers. However, there are institutional and personal barriers to renewal in our teaching and professional lives against which we must guard. Institutions may lack support systems and incentives that encourage renewal such as rewards, both financial and recognition, money to support faculty enhancement (i.e., travel), time to incorporate effective classroom technology, and administrators that value the status quo.

Although these institutional barriers are important to address, more critical are the personal barriers. Some faculty lack the motivation to change, feeling that it involves too much effort, is unnecessary because everything is going well, or are unwilling to take risks that may lead to mistakes, which result in a perceived loss of status and the perception that they lack competence (McKeachie, 2002; Menges, 1999). Individual change may be inhibited by a vested interest in a particular approach or an inability to recognize that students have change. As Menges (1999) noted, for some teachers it is easier to continue teaching in the same way than to try something new.

Although I agree with McKeachie and Menges that most of the changes and adjustments we will make in our teaching must result from our own self-motivation to improve, we cannot let administrators totally off the hook. Administrative attitudes about, and support for, faculty enhancement are essential ingredients for the development of a climate of continuous renewal for faculty. Administrators are increasingly being asked to address issues such as retention and student success. My belief is that the best investment to achieve these outcomes is in the faculty. Administrators must be faculty-oriented, providing encouragement, resources, and flexible opportunities for faculty innovation and renewal.

What I want to share with you now is my 12-Step Program for maintaining or renewing that sense of novelty I think we all had when we first entered this profession. Although some of the suggestions reflect my own idiosyncratic journey, many are derived from sources such as

McKeachie's (2002) classic *Teaching Tips*, Bland and Bergquist's (1997) *The Vitality of Senior Faculty Members*, and some suggestions by colleagues at the 2002 Summer NITOP.

1) Get to know your students. Some strategies for becoming more familiar with your students include asking for their personal Web sites (this can be very revealing about their interests and personal experiences) and distributing a biographical questionnaire that they complete on the first day of class. Learning what your students' interests are can help you connect the course material to their lives.

2) Never stop listening to your students. Pay attention to evaluations and don't wait until the end of the course to get feedback. Use e-mail or class discussion lists to keep in contact. Also consider establishing a class advisory group by asking the students to select a subgroup that meets with you periodically during the semester to discuss the course and give you feedback on the class. I recommend establishing the group during the first class period by letting the class select representatives from among themselves. You can also consider allowing class time, with you absent, for the advisory group to solicit comments from the class as a whole to present when the group meets with you.

3) Always remember that what is old to you is new to your students.

4) Don't let yourself get in a rut, take risks. Make an effort to change your courses in either minor or major ways every semester. Changes may include adding new research content, using a different text, adding supplemental readings, modifying the sequence in which you present course material, using new assignments and activities, or team teaching—either with a disciplinary colleague or an interdisciplinary course. If you really want to be radical, throw away all your lecture notes and start fresh.

5) Interact with colleagues, both on and off your campus. Teaching should never be a solitary endeavor. In fact, Hitchcock, Bland, Hekelman, and Blumenthal (1995) noted that faculty who interact more with colleagues produce more research, are promoted quicker, receive more recognition, and report higher job satisfaction. On-campus interactions can often be the most difficult because the emphasis on teaching effectiveness for tenure and promotion purposes contributes to a hesitancy to share one's teaching experiences with a colleague who may later evaluate you. All too often when we ask a colleague "What are you doing these days?" the answer tends to be a description of his or her latest research project or a description (or maybe complaint) about committee work and campus politics. We miss the opportunity to share our teaching successes and failures with colleagues who are in the best position to provide informed feedback because they deal with the same students. For example, I have served on a number of promotion and tenure review committees over the years and often "discovered" several innovative activities and assignments that I never knew about until then. We need to spend more time discussing and exploring teaching through strategies like asking colleagues to sit in and observe a class or providing opportunities to share and discuss teaching (e.g., setting aside a department meeting, establishing a "teaching circle," see Scharff, 2002). Also, get to know colleagues outside your institution who share your interest in teaching through attendance at teaching conferences, getting involved in organizations like STP, and attending workshops on teaching.

6) Keep a teaching journal. Journals can be individualized for particular courses or more general across courses. Keeping a daily or weekly journal encourages you to record your teaching experiences, including observations and reflections on what may have worked or failed in a particular class session, which may otherwise be forgotten over time. Entries in your journal can also be “data” for revising courses in the future, revising your philosophy of teaching, or added in a summary to your teaching portfolio.

7) Continually assess what you do in your courses. I know that assessment is a dirty word for some faculty. However, assessing students in your classes provides you with data as to whether students are achieving your intended course learning outcomes. These assessments can reveal where you are and are not successful in your goals and provide direction for improving your teaching.

8) Embrace and encourage your department to engage in periodic curriculum review and reform. This may be guided by current literature on the structure and outcomes associated with the undergraduate major or the desire to incorporate new theoretical or applied areas in the discipline. Such a review could be combined with an external review that can provide an outside perspective to stimulate renewal.

9) Take a break. For some of us, breaks can be accomplished through a sabbatical. Even if your institution does not have sabbaticals, explore the possibility of teaching an overload for several semesters that can be “banked” to earn a semester off. Believe it or not, taking an administrative assignment can sometimes help get a fresh perspective. Finally, consider taking time off from teaching a particular course.

10) Read about teaching and higher education through books and journals. Many of us already read *Teaching of Psychology* religiously, but additional ideas for innovation and renewal are available from teaching-focused journals published by other disciplines (e.g., I find *Teaching Sociology* a great resource for activity ideas that can be adapted for psychology) and more general teaching-related publications such as *The Teaching Professor*, *Change*, or *College Teaching*.

11) Use the Internet to get new ideas and resources as well as meet new colleagues. You can take advantage of online discussion groups such as this one both to meet new colleagues and get new ideas for your classes. I also occasionally take some time and search the Internet using Google for Web sites on a topic of interest. You can discover some great resources posted on the Web by colleagues, especially on their public course Web sites.

12) Be an advocate for faculty renewal both among your colleagues and across your institution. I think one way to do this is through participation in areas of faculty governance that impact curriculum development and teaching. For example, if your institution has a teaching center, get involved through both attending and volunteering to assist in doing workshops. Staying active in governance can provide opportunities to advance and maybe advocate for resources to support faculty renewal. In addition to providing leadership and

mentoring of new faculty through your participation, your participation helps you stay abreast of the latest trends in teaching and higher education across disciplines.

I believe all of us entered this profession because of our love for teaching and learning. I think all of us approached those first classes with a mixture of excitement and fear. Our challenge is always never to lose that almost childlike sense of anticipation and excitement as we approach each new semester or class. If we can hold on to this ideal, we don't really need to renew ourselves because renewal and change become a way of life rather than something we suddenly have to do to recapture what we may have lost.

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#### Author Note

1. Portions of this essay were originally presented as my STP Presidential Address at the 2002 APA Convention