

***Editing E-xcellence in Teaching:
The Mishaps of Moving and Other Lessons Learned***

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My, how time flies! It doesn't seem like it's been 3 years since we began editing *E-xcellence in Teaching (EIT)*. However, upon reflection, quite a bit has changed during that time. When we began editing *EIT* in the summer of 2003, we were just finishing our first year as assistant professors in the Department of Psychology at Stephen F. Austin State University (SFA) in Nacogdoches, Texas. Although it had been nearly a year since we relocated to “Deep East” Texas, we were still reeling from a hectic move that was marred with more mishaps than either of us cares to remember (one of those mishaps involved an old moving van, a broken air conditioner, and a 12-hour drive in 100-degree heat). Moreover, we were still acclimating to the many demands that accompany a switch from advanced graduate student to greenhorn faculty member (Zinn, 2004). Fortunately, we had wonderful colleagues at SFA who helped make our transition a smooth one. However, another big change occurred unexpectedly in early 2004: We accepted faculty positions at James Madison University (JMU). So once again, we packed our belongings and headed north to JMU and the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains of northern Virginia. Fortunately, we learned a lot from our first move, and this one had fewer calamities—only one car broke down on the way.

We are also more experienced teachers than we were 3 years ago. Since then, we have collectively taught over 1000 students in nearly 20 different courses. Although we've faced numerous challenges along the way (Saville, 2005), we've also gained greatly from our experiences. Overall, the past few years have been very busy for us; they have also been incredibly rewarding. In retrospect, we guess the old adage is true: Time flies when you're having fun.

During our tenure as editors of *EIT*, we have had the good fortune of editing an awe-inspiring collection of 40 essays. We have enjoyed reading cutting-edge essays on various aspects of the teaching of psychology, and each month, we can honestly say we have learned something new and valuable about effective teaching. Maybe even more importantly, we have had the opportunity to interact with some of the best psychology teachers around. If that isn't inspiring, we don't know what is. In our final installment as *EIT* editors, we thought we would share with you some of the most important lessons we have learned while editing this column. We hope these lessons might inspire you the same way the *EIT* essays have inspired us.

Don't Be Afraid to Try Something New

While re-examining *EIT* essays from the past few years, we noticed one inexorable fact: Effective teachers are not afraid to stick their necks out and try something new in their

classrooms. Whether it is the use of ConcepTests (Chew, 2005), Just-in-Time Teaching (Benedict & Apple, 2005), classroom debates (O’Kon & Sutz, 2005), writing assignments (Dunn, 2006), self-change projects (Slavich, 2006), Reciprocal Peer Tutoring (Riggio, 2006), or any other number of activities, effective teachers are willing to put their reputations on the line for the betterment of their students.

In fact, these inspirational essays were partly responsible for our decision to try interteaching in our classrooms. After reading Boyce and Hineline’s (2002) description of this new behavior-analytic teaching method, we thought, “Why not?” Not knowing exactly what to expect, we nervously described the method to our students, who looked at us with a sense of unease and uncertainty, to put it mildly. We even told them that if they didn’t like interteaching, we would change back to a standard lecture-based approach. Lo and behold, our students loved interteaching—and so did we. Since that time, we have incorporated interteaching into most of our classes. We even initiated a program of research in which we found interteaching to be more effective than more traditional methods of classroom instruction (Saville, Zinn, & Elliott, 2005; Saville, Zinn, Neef, Van Norman, & Ferreri, 2006). We are also in the midst of a series of studies designed to identify which components of interteaching make it an effective and enjoyable alternative to traditional teaching methods.

Granted, not everything you bring to the table is going to work effectively. We willingly admit that we have tried many things in our classes that flopped tremendously. However, as our teaching mentor Bill Buskist told us many times, “It’s not a matter of *if* you will make mistakes in the classroom; it’s a matter of *when*.” Nevertheless, one characteristic of master teachers is their willingness to experiment and try new things (Buskist, Sikorski, Buckley, & Saville, 2002). In fact, in a recent study, award-winning teachers reported experimenting with alternative methods as they became more experienced (Buskist, 2002). Moreover, great teachers persevere when they experience failure, trying again and again until they hit upon more effective ways to increase their students’ learning and enjoyment. So go ahead and try something new. It might just be the secret ingredient that turns an otherwise bland teaching dish into a tasty instructional recipe to enhance your students’ learning and boost your own teaching vitality.

Whenever Possible, Use Evidence-Based Methods

As psychologists, we know a lot about how people learn. Considerable evidence, for example, suggests that students learn best when they (a) are actively involved in the learning process (Mathie et al., 1993), (b) interact frequently with their teachers and classmates (Astin, 1993), (c) are tested frequently (Roediger & Karpicke, 2006), and (d) are required to think “deeply” about course material (Halpern & Hakel, 2003). Yet many of the practices that most teachers use in the classroom do not capitalize on what we know about human learning. As Halpern and Hakel (2003) stated:

“We have found precious little evidence that content experts in the learning sciences actually apply the principles they teach in their own classrooms. Like virtually all college faculty, they teach the way they were taught. But, ironically (and embarrassingly), it would be difficult to design an educational model that is more at odds with the findings of current research about human cognition than the one being used today at most colleges and universities” (pp. 37-38).

For most, “teaching” is synonymous with “lecture.” In fact, Benjamin (2002), who called lectures the “Velveeta of teaching methods” (p. 57), estimated that 80% of college teachers use lecture-based methods in their classrooms. Although there are numerous ways to make lectures more effective (see, e.g., McKeachie, 2002), myriad studies suggest that they are less effective than alternative methods, especially when it comes to long-term retention (e.g., Halpern & Hakel, 2003). Assuming that most teachers would like their students to retain some of the course material they encounter, maybe the use of lecture-based methods is not the best idea.

So what alternatives are there? Fortunately, for teachers wishing to try something new, there are several evidence-based methods that seem to enhance students’ learning. For example, Pear’s (2004) essay on Computer-Aided Personalized System of Instruction (CAPSI), Benedict and Apple’s (2005) discussion of Just-in-Time Teaching, and Riggio’s (2006) description of Reciprocal Peer Tutoring all provide interested readers with evidence-based alternatives that have been shown to be more effective than traditional methods (see also Alferink, 2006). Similarly, other resources (e.g., the journal *Teaching of Psychology*) are filled with useful discussions on evidence-based teaching practices.

Regardless of how you choose to structure your classes, we urge you to adopt evidence-based practices whenever possible. Although lecture has remained the method of choice for most college instructors, it often fails to capitalize on what we know about human learning. Instead, psychology teachers should apply what they know about psychology in their classrooms; in other words, they should “use psychology to teach psychology.”

Always Strive to Improve

It’s been inspiring to read how authors of the *EIT* essays continually strive to improve their craft. The desire to improve seems to be ubiquitous. For example, Wimer and Keeley (2005), two up-and-coming teachers, discussed their roles in the Graduate Student Teaching Association (GSTA), an organization designed to help graduate students become better teachers. Similarly, Baron (2006), whose distinguished career has taken several twists and turns, described ways he continually tries to improve his ability to “export our field.” Regardless of their level of experience, these teachers seem to embrace the notion of lifelong learning, always identifying ways to become better at what they do.

We feel fortunate to work in a field in which even exceptional teachers are inspired to venture into unknown territory, continuously searching for new gems of knowledge. This reminds us of the sage advice of Charles Brewer, who described how he regularly visits the classes of other well-respected teachers in order to learn from them (Saville, 2001). If someone as knowledgeable as Charles Brewer still feels he can fine-tune his teaching, then we should all heed this advice—even when we think we’re at the top of our game. As we read these essays, we can’t escape the feeling that there always seems to be room to improve. As Slavich (2006) reminded us, great teachers extend their expectations for what their students can accomplish. Great teachers also extend their expectations for what they can accomplish.

Fostering Relationships is Vital

While editing the *EIT* essays, another theme emerged time and again: the importance of fostering relationships. One important relationship is between teacher and student. Giordano (2005) discussed the significance of “critical moments,” or specific instances that impact how students view themselves and their futures. These moments are more frequent—and more frequently positive—when we have good relationships with our students. Other authors also touched on this theme. Burke (2006), for example, reminded us that humor can enhance these relationships, and Rasmussen (2005) advised us on how to “bridge the gap” between student and teacher. We also learned about the importance of developing relationships from Schultz and Marchuk (2006), two undergraduates who discussed their views on teacher-student rapport. Their essay reminded us how important it is to examine frequently our relationships with students, lest we forget what life is like on the other side of the lectern. In support of this idea, Benson, Cohen, and Buskist (2005) recently found that students reported they would be more likely to engage in pro-academic behaviors for courses in which their teachers had established good rapport with them.

Our professional relationships are also vital for a number of reasons. For example, they provide much needed support and rejuvenation as we traverse our sometimes unfettered, sometimes rocky, career paths. Weaver (2006), in his essay on professional partnerships, reminded us that, “Because outstanding teachers work diligently to learn, and because partnerships are potentially excellent opportunities to learn, quality teaching is enhanced through partnerships.” As we work on our day-to-day projects, preparing for the next class or meeting, we often feel like we’re on our own. But we’re not! Professional partnerships can work wonders for improving our teaching, generating new ideas, and initiating broader changes that have a positive impact on the teaching of psychology as a whole. Similarly, Wilson and Hobbs (2006) gave us pointers on one type of partnership, team-teaching, and reminded us that working alongside colleagues can be refreshing. In short, we learned we are not alone on our journey to become better teachers. As the old African proverb states, “It takes a village.”

Conclusion

Editing the *EIT* essays over the last 3 years has been truly inspiring and educational. Although we have discussed but a few of these essays, each was informative and motivating in its unique way. In that time, we have learned many lessons about effective teaching, a few of which we have discussed in the present essay. However, we also know we have a long way to go in our quest to be the most effective psychology teachers we can be. Thankfully, we know that future *EIT* essays, along with the wonderful psychology teachers we’ve met—and have yet to meet—will help us achieve that goal.

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