

Teaching: What's In It For Me?

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Just over 20 years ago, when I was a greenhorn assistant professor, I sat in a committee meeting to discuss the design of three courses that would eventually become the general education core curriculum requirement in the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University. During the meeting, a former professor in the Political Science Department issued a serious complaint about the pedestrian nature of the courses and their lack of intellectual rigor. He then noted that for him to teach in the core curriculum, he needed to get something from the course. “There’s got to be some benefit for me in the courses if I am to teach in the core,” he said. At the time I thought to myself, “What a selfish, arrogant *!@%#. Teaching is about students—it’s not about us.” Now, with considerably more experience under my belt, I understand the point he was making and just how important those personal benefits are that compel teachers to teach.

In addition to the satisfaction that facilitating student learning brings, there are other rewards for teachers—10 of which I describe below. I am sure that there are other benefits, but these seem to stand out as being particularly meaningful and relevant in motivating teachers to teach or for students to seek a career in the professoriate.

Enjoying the Intellectual Challenge

Teaching is through and through an intellectual endeavor, especially if it is to be done well. Teachers rate knowledge of the field as being the top characteristic of excellent teachers and students rate it as number two (Buskist, Sikorski, Buckley, & Saville, 2002; Keeley, Smith, & Buskist, 2006). It involves studying and understanding a distinct body of knowledge and how it interconnects with a wide range of other bodies of knowledge, including, for example, the biological and other social sciences. Teaching psychology well, regardless of the course, requires that teachers remain students of their field. As psychology continues to blend with other disciplines, the challenge to keep pace with new developments in these areas becomes especially daunting. This challenge gives new meaning to the phrase “life-long learning” and for those teachers who truly love learning, the task is one that brings continual joy.

Enjoying Solving “Engineering Problems”

Knowing content is one thing; engineering the optimum learning environment in which students learn that knowledge, or at least strands of it, is something entirely different. What topics should I teach? How much detail should I provide? What texts, journals, electronic media, or their combination will best serve as the basis for student learning? What teaching techniques are best suited to teaching the subject matter?

What extracurricular activities might best help students learn the material? How should I assess student learning? How will I develop rapport with my students so that they are maximally receptive to my teaching? These questions represent course design issues that must be addressed and solved prior to the beginning of the academic term and then tweaked or otherwise modified during the term as classroom dynamics emerge and change. The good news for teachers who enjoy this challenge is that no two courses, even on the same topic, are ever the same. Those teachers take what they learn about course design one term and use that new knowledge to create a better-engineered iteration of the course the following term.

Acquiring and Refining Communication Skills

Teaching well is as much about communicating knowledge as it is acquiring knowledge in the first place. A person with a brain full of knowledge is not a teacher in any sense of that word until he or she can convey that knowledge to another person. Acquiring useful communication skills, both verbal and nonverbal, is essential to effective teaching. Teachers who take their charge seriously work hard at developing these skills, and the benefits of this toil are many. In addition to explaining the subject matter more effectively to students, these teachers also are likely to perform better in other public speaking venues ranging from departmental and college meetings to conference talks and workshops. Developing effective communication skills also can have monetary benefits—sometimes delivering a good conference talk results in being asked to deliver talks or workshops for honoraria.

Sharing Our Passion

One reason that many teachers teach is because they truly love their discipline and enjoy sharing their passion for it with others. In fact, this sort of passion is a key ingredient in becoming an effective teacher (Brewer, 2002). Teaching provides a platform from which to convey our enthusiasm for psychology to our students, a benefit that teachers wittingly or unwittingly often parlay into enhancing students' perception of the quality of their teaching.

Making a Difference in Students' Lives

Master teacher Charles Brewer (2002) tells us that the real reason for teaching is to make a difference. Although psychology teachers find psychology an inherently fascinating subject matter, teaching just the facts and figures of the discipline is not likely to make the sort of difference in students' lives that Brewer advocates. In fact, students will confirm this point. I asked a small group of psychology students ($N = 20$) what it meant to have teachers make a difference in their lives and not one of them responded "learning psychology." But what they did say related directly to how psychology teachers teach psychology—70% indicated that teachers made a difference in their lives by helping them "discover their academic and personal strengths," "become more confident in themselves as students," and "develop values that applied to everyday life." Thus, making a difference in students' lives transcends the nuts and bolts of the subject matter by impacting students' perspectives on themselves and life.

We don't always know when we've had such an effect on students, although some students will chat with us after class, write us a note, or stop by the office to let us know just what a significant impact we've had their lives. They will say things such as "I changed my major to psychology because of this class," or "you really influenced

how I see things” or more to the point, “you really changed my life.” These sorts of comments penetrate the deepest regions of a teacher’s heart, leaving us with an unrivaled sense of satisfaction that few other aspects of our jobs bring. Once teachers receive these sorts of accolades, their quest to become an even better teacher becomes almost insatiable.

Recruiting the Next Generation of Psychologists

Without psychology teachers, there would be no next generation of psychological researchers, practitioners, and teachers. In effect, we are the conduit linking generations of psychologists, ensuring that the flow of psychological information, values, applications, and truths remains steady and sure over time. Those teachers who inspire students to go to graduate school in psychology know well the special satisfaction that accompanies moving the next generation of psychologists forward. In a very real sense, watching our students succeed in this way validates our work as teachers and inspires us to continue it.

Delighting in Self-Discovery

Teaching teaches us important lessons about ourselves, especially if we take time to reflect on what we do as teachers (Brookfield, 1995; Palmer, 1998). Certainly, we learn much about our discipline and the craft of teaching in preparing for and teaching our classes. But we learn much more in this process. We learn about our personal strengths and weakness and our likes and dislikes. We explore and learn about our personal values. We face challenges and overcome fears. We change personally as a result. Teaching, especially reflective teaching, can be a powerful catalyst for our personal development as human beings. Reflecting over our careers as teachers — especially if we have been in the trenches for a while — can provide a palpable sense of awe when we compare ourselves to the kind of persons we are now to the type of persons we once were.

Enjoying the Fun that Teaching Is

Many psychology teachers, like teachers in other disciplines, have fun teaching. This sort of fun is not necessarily the “ha-ha” type, although certainly many teachers make a point to use humor in their classrooms (Pollio, 2002). Instead, it is like the fun that we experience when we take a calculated risk — putting ourselves on the line when the outcome of our actions is uncertain. After all, teaching occurs in real time, and despite all of our class preparation, anything could happen, and often does: a demonstration fails, a class discussion or activity takes an unexpected twist, a new lecture goes especially well, and so on. Personally, I still get a tad nervous before each class, although I am now in my 28th year of college teaching. The opponent process of relief, and sometimes exhilaration, which I experience when class is over is the same kind of feeling I get when kayak down a river that has tricky rapids and big waves. I can only describe that feeling as “fun.”

Enjoying Good Company of Other Teachers

Teachers who truly love teaching are attracted to others who feel the same way. Within our home departments, our closest colleagues are often those who also love to teach. Some teachers become addicted to teaching conferences where large numbers

of kindred spirits gather to celebrate the teaching life and trade their best teaching tips. In between teaching conferences they exchange e-mails to keep their friendships with other addicts alive and well until they can meet again. I think Bill Hill (2005, p. 156) expressed it best when he wrote: "I think the friendships and experiences around teaching and colleagues are the best part of an academic life, or for that matter, any line of work."

Enjoying Being a Good Teacher

Finally, there can be no doubt that teachers take pride in doing their jobs well. There is no limit as to the when or where feelings of satisfaction may occur. It could be in the classroom during a lecture that is going well or during office hours while helping a student solve a particular problem or while answering a student's question via e-mail, or simply while reflecting on things that have gone well in the classroom on the drive home from school. Although these sorts of rewards are frequent and intangible, other rewards are less frequent but much more tangible. I am speaking of course, of teaching awards, which student groups, departments, teaching organizations, and institutions bestow on teachers whom they judge to be particularly outstanding. Such awards are signified by certificates and plaques, and sometimes money. Anyone who has earned a teaching award knows first-hand the special kind of joy that comes from one's work being appreciated by others.

Final Thoughts

The primary goal of teaching is to facilitate student learning, but focusing only on this goal in discussions of teaching ignores the other reasons that teachers teach. Indeed, the personal rewards that teachers enjoy from their work seem likely to be powerful motivators for teachers to work so hard at their jobs. Thus, student-centered teaching may not be as student-centered as one might surmise. This conclusion has particularly important implications for faculty who train the next generation of the psychology professoriate. As one of those faculty, I know that many graduate students weigh the benefits of a teaching career against the benefits of other career choices while working their way toward the PhD. If we wish attract these students to the professoriate, we would do well to let them in on our secret—that along the way to helping undergraduates achieve the learning goals that we set for them, we, too, receive abundant, rich, and deeply meaningful rewards. And that's the answer to the question that began this essay—Teaching: What's in it for me?

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