

1[†]
Learn By Doing

Charles I. Abramson
Oklahoma State University

My major appointment is in the Department of Psychology at Oklahoma State University (OSU). I have been a full professor since 2002 and hold joint appointments in the Zoology Department and in the OSU College of Osteopathic Medicine. In 2003, I became co-director of the OSU Pet Food Testing center and Director of the Brasil Desk in the School of International Studies. I have been a visiting professor at a number of universities in South America and Europe and currently serve on the editorial board of 6 journals. I have published 10 books and over 70 peer-reviewed articles. One of my books earned a national book award. I have been honored with several teaching and research awards including OSU Regents Teaching Award, three-time winner of the Oklahoma Psychological Society Outstanding Teaching Award, a Commendation from the Oklahoma State Legislature, the OSU Chapter Sigma Xi Lectureship Award, and the 2003 Robert S. Daniel Teaching Excellence Award of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology of the American Psychological Association. I have also received two teaching and research awards from the Universidade Federal da Paraiba in Brasil.

I was greatly honored when I was invited to contribute to Teaching of Psychology in Autobiography. Although honored, I also felt a bit apprehensive because to understand my approach to teaching, it is also important to have some insight into my background prior to graduate training. The preparation of this chapter has forced me to come to terms with some of the factors that have shaped my teaching style and perspective.

My background may not be typical of an academic. I have no memory of my parents ever living together, neither of them attended college, and I am not confident that either of them graduated high school. I do remember that my mother highly valued education and maintained a large library of many first editions and would take me to Broadway plays and museums. She was particularly fond of biographies and autobiographies and would often have me read similar types of material and regale me with stories of people who have overcome great odds to become successful.

At the age of 10 or so I was banished to military school in South Florida and later to a similar institution in upstate New York. I attended military school during the 1960s where physical beatings and mental cruelty at such institutions were almost a daily occurrence and were the preferred method of behavioral control. It was here that I first learned that education leads to “special privileges,” if not opportunities.

After my third year it soon became obvious that I was not military school material, and I spent 8th grade living with my father in a single room within an apartment, although we were allowed to have kitchen and bathroom privileges. When the time high school arrived, I took an entrance examination and entered Brooklyn Technical High School. Unfortunately, I did not last long there, perhaps two months or so. The regimentation reminded me of military school and, instead of attending classes, I could be found in the audience of a variety of game shows being produced in New York at the time. Eventually my truancy was discovered and I was transferred to Brandies High School Annex across from Lincoln Center. The annex was the home for 9th graders, many of whom were 17 and 18 years old. I soon stopped attending and became a security guard at the World Trade Center.

In an effort to continue my high school education, I was sent to Georgia to attend school. In return for working on a farm I would be given room and board. I was returned to New York City in under two weeks. A series of scholastic tests followed and eventually one school admitted me. Croydon Hall Academy was a small private school in Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey. The school was in financial trouble and took my word that I attended 9th grade and should be allowed to enter 10th grade. I enjoyed the school but was disappointed at being sent back to New York City several times because of nonpayment of the bill. As in military school years before, I experienced privilege associated with academic success. We could not afford the tuition for 11th grade, so I was sent to Brandies High School. Here, there were not enough seats or equipment to go around and I faced some of the same problems that confronted me in 9th grade. I believe I lasted about a month before returning to my job as a security guard at the World Trade Center.

My job as a security guard gave me the opportunity to study on my own. I saved some money, and with the considerable help of my parents returned to Croydon Hall for what, in theory, was my senior year. The administrators of Croydon Hall remembered me from 10th grade and naturally assumed I was now a senior. When it came time for college I applied to Boston University (BU) for no compelling reason other than it was far from New York. If I had not gotten into college I would probably be a longshoreman or a merchant marine.

When I entered the university, I knew I wanted to be a psychologist, specifically a behaviorist. I had no illusions of helping people – I wanted to predict and control them. No doubt my philosophy was shaped by my experiences in military school. It was at BU where I met Dr. Henry Marcucella. I marched into his office the first day of class armed with books by Watson asking if I could work in his laboratory. He said yes and I began my career as a pigeon runner. I have been intimately involved in academic psychology since I was 18, with my first professional publication appearing when I was a junior.

My Early Development as a Teacher

I received no formal training as a graduate student to prepare me for a subsequent faculty position. Most of what I learned about teaching came from my undergraduate instructors – particularly Dr. Henry Marcucella and Dr. Soda Bhatt. I was rather quiet as an undergraduate – most of my human interactions were negative, and I saw no reason to engage in social behavior. To this day I am not a joiner and believe that groups simply serve to squash rather than encourage intellectual activity. I doubt that any of my graduate professors would have predicted that I would become a teacher.

What I remember best about Dr. Marcucella was that he expected me to learn on my own – though he was always in the background in case I needed assistance. Perhaps this strategy was his way of separating motivated from non-motivated students. If I had a question, I should ask only if I made an honest attempt to solve the problem on my own. This pedagogical style suited me perfectly. An excellent example of this perfect fit was evident from my learning how to program the relay equipment we used to control our experiments. He presented me with a rack full of modules and a box of snap leads (wires used to connect the various modules). After a lecture on the theory of electricity and the importance of not directly connecting a positive voltage with ground he told me to get to it. When I had a question about programming he would show me how it was done, asked if I understood, and if I answered yes, would take the circuit apart. I have adopted this style in my own teaching.

Dr. Marcucella also gave me the opportunity not only to run his experiments but he also gave me the freedom to run mine. I have never forgotten his approach.. Any student has a place in my laboratory independent of reference letters, grades, etc. They must however, take advantage of the opportunity. If not, they are asked to leave; it can not be said that such a student never had a chance or opportunity.

I also learned from Dr. Marcucella the importance of intellectual integrity. Although the incident I am about to relate happened almost 30 years ago, I still remember it as if it were yesterday. In the course of running a baseline condition for a particular pigeon I did not make the required change from the baseline condition to the first experimental session. When he asked me why I said, “You did not tell me.” I knew the second I uttered those words (of course, I knew better) I had made a mistake. He did not say a word but his expression shamed me and does still whenever I think about it.

In addition to Dr. Marcucella, the other professor who influenced me the most was my undergraduate Sanskrit professor Dr. Bhatt. Dr. Bhatt was quite a remarkable scholar. He spoke Tamil, Hindi, Urdu, and Sanskrit – which is not as easy at it sounds. Dr. Bhatt always had time for his students. His dedication was such that he intentionally lived within walking distance of the university just to be near his students. Unfortunately for him, he believed his

intellectual property should be free. Accordingly, his book length manuscripts on these four languages were given away and not published. Subsequently, he was denied tenure. My relationship with Dr. Bhatt taught me that being an excellent teacher does not necessarily mean much without administrative support. Only the publications and amount of grant money really counts at some institutions. In my braver moments, I toy with the idea of publishing my work, not in academic journals, but on the Internet. If I were to do so, I have no doubt that it would be the end of my academic career.

Following my undergraduate experiences I applied to graduate school. The only school I applied to was BU. Eventually I was enrolled in two graduate schools simultaneously with BU my home institution and the University of Hawaii as my secondary institution. It was at the University of Hawaii where I conducted my dissertation research under the primary direction of Dr. Morton E. Bitterman, but that is another story. Upon graduation I sought an academic appointment, gained one ironically back in New York, and subsequently moved on to OSU where I have been for the past 12 years.

My reason for becoming a university teacher is a simple one – personal freedom. I have no great love of teaching or of universities. I searched for a vocation that would provide me with the opportunity to do what I wanted and be relatively free of changes in the economy. In some ways I look at my position as the closest thing to being self-employed without the risk.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Overall, I have not faced any obstacles with regard to my teaching. I have had the benefit of working under several excellent department heads who valued instruction. In particular, I have been given space to create a psychology museum and resource center, and I obtained support for an on-line version of the psychology museum. Moreover, contributions to teaching are appreciated in our department. For example, we make no distinction between teaching and research-based grants nor do we distinguish between articles focusing on teaching and articles focusing on basic research. Moreover, if a professor is having problems teaching, our department offers remedial help.

I have found that having a supportive department head and faculty colleagues who value teaching-related activities does not force me to choose between my research program and my teaching. In fact, many of my teaching-related activities flow directly from my research activities. For example, I have published several teaching-related activities that use invertebrates to demonstrate principles in psychology. This work was the direct result of my research activities. I have also published exercises that show students how to use a research library and another that turns pet stores into research centers. I enjoy writing such papers and

receive the appropriate departmental credit. My outreach programs are also a direct result of my teaching. I have created programs such as the PsycMobile in which I go into local school systems to put on what I call psychology as science shows. I have also created the Citizen Scientist program in which I trained primary and secondary school students to run, for instance, palatability studies.

If I have a major obstacle to my teaching it is the so-called “course evaluation.” Frankly, I do not read them (others do) and do not believe they are worth the paper they are printed on (others do). In our evaluations, we do not ask such questions as “How many office hours have you attended,” “How many hours do you study,” and “What grade do you expect in this class.” If the purpose of the evaluations is to improve our teaching, why return them during the subsequent semester (i.e., the delay of reinforcement effect). Students in my classes are told that if there is a problem to come see me at the time of the problem. This way we can fix it immediately. I also do not like the idea that we are telling students that it is acceptable to criticize anonymously. Nor do I like the trend to publish these course “evaluations” on-line or create Web sites such as “myprofessorsucks.com.” Many of the criticisms I am subjected to focus on me being a native New Yorker and this, combined with my size, seems to intimidate students. I demand students be prepared, attend class on time, and restrict cell phone use and newspaper reading during class; I do not view this as my problem, yet I must deal with it each semester.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

I am not voicing the popular opinion, but I believe that there is no such thing as a good teacher – only motivated students. As such, I do not suffer through endless self-evaluations, assessments, and self-criticisms. I take pride in the various achievements of my students, but this pride is tempered with the realization that those achievements are theirs, not mine, and they are the result of their efforts, not mine. I understand that I am opening myself to charges of being “anti-intellectual” but I have documented and repeatable success throughout my college teaching career. Moreover, my teaching style has not changed. I have personally experienced the success of the “learn by doing approach” while an undergraduate and as a professional educator this approach is the only one I use – I see none better and no reason to change.

Throughout my student career I have experienced professors who were enthusiastic and supportive and those who were not. In my view, it is not a competent professor’s job to make a course entertaining or stimulating. If that happens so much the better; if it does not, why should it prevent a student from learning? As I have tried to illustrate, my life

experiences taught me to value education and to seize upon educational opportunities. The burden of learning was on me.

Learning, like writing, is a lonely process. No one tells you when to study or for how long, no one tells you how to make a choice between going to a party and going to the library, and no one takes that test for you. I cannot force students to look at the Charles Henry Turner Web site or to study a bit each day rather than waiting until the night before as if they were a rodent responding on a fixed-interval reinforcement schedule.

If I were to have a core teaching principle it would be as Dewey would say – “learn by doing.” I have designed, implemented and disseminated many “hands-on” experiences. For example, my psychology museum Web site (<http://psychology.okstate.edu/museum/index.html>) contains exhibits on using animals in the classroom, a pronunciation guide for historical names in psychology, the contributions of women to psychology, and the life of the early African American scientist Charles Henry Turner. New exhibits appear all the time. I design my own Web sites, and I develop teaching exercises and programs to give psychology instructors and students the tools they need to be successful. The tools created by me and other professors are there – they only need to be used.

Some of my greatest frustrations in teaching are students who toss away an educational opportunity because they do not bother to make an effort. I have had the opportunity to teach in developing countries where students literally are dying for an education. It upsets me greatly when I come back here and see some bored look on the face of a student. Perhaps the hardest lesson I have learned is that you can only meet someone “49% of the way.” The student must make some effort before I can reinforce and shape intellectual attainment. I also was forced to confront the reality that some students are just resistant to learning and are attending the university for nonacademic reasons. In one specific case I was subjected to a grade appeal by a student who asserted that “There were questions on the final I did not expect.” I made an offer to retake the examination but the student refused. This student readily admitted he had no interest in learning the material. Surprisingly, the student lost his appeal.

Advice for New Teachers

My approach to teaching is, I believe, somewhat unique and is based upon my life experiences. You will find out what works and what does not through your own experiences. I am the last one who should be giving advice to new teachers. However, I would caution you to determine early in your career if teaching-related activities are highly valued at your institution. If not, you risk losing your job. Perhaps the hardest lesson you will learn is that the receipt of knowledge is not really up to you – it is up to the student.

† From T. A. Benson, C. Burke, A. Amstadter, R. Siney, V. Hevern, B. Beins, & W. Buskist, (Eds.), *Teaching psychology in autobiography: Perspectives from exemplary psychology teachers* (pp. 1-7). Society for the Teaching of Psychology. Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.lemoyne.edu/teachpsych/tia/index.html>