

*Finding Your Passion, Refining Your Skills:
Lessons Learned as a Graduate Student and Junior Faculty Member*

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I am currently an Assistant Professor of Psychology at California State University (CSU) at Long Beach. I first became involved with psychological research and teaching as an undergraduate at Smith College where I worked as a teaching and research assistant. My research with Dr. Phil Peake ultimately took me to Stanford University, where I worked as a research assistant the summer following graduation. I then obtained a research assistant position at the Center for Health Care Evaluation at the Palo Alto VA Hospital. It was here that I became exposed to Community Psychology, the field that soon became my area of specialization. I received my PhD in Community Psychology from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 2002. It was during graduate school that I received the Society for the Teaching of Psychology's (STP) McKeachie Early Career Teaching Award. I also received numerous university fellowships, teaching awards, and student research awards, and my dissertation was awarded the 2004 Best Dissertation in Community Psychology award from the Society for Community Research and Action (Division 27 of the American Psychological Association [APA]). While completing the final stages of my dissertation, I also took a one-year Visiting Assistant Professor position at Loyola University Chicago. I have now been working at CSU Long Beach for 3 years.

My Early Development as a Teacher

Although I come from a long line of teachers (my great-grandmother was a professor), I did not seek out the role—it sought me out. I had just completed my master's thesis when I learned about a teaching opportunity at Loyola University Chicago. A faculty member in the Criminal Justice Department was going on sabbatical so I took over her class on domestic violence. I will never forget that first day of class. I was terrified. My hands shook, my voice trembled, and I could not stop wondering what the heck I was doing there. I did not feel qualified, and I certainly did not feel like a “professor.” Then something happened. I looked out into the class and saw all the eager faces. I realized that the students wanted me to succeed. They wanted this class to be interesting and were hoping to learn something useful. I realized that I had something useful to say. So I made a decision. Rather than focusing on being a “professor,” with all the stereotypes and role requirements that it entails, I decided to simply be myself. I talked to the students like I would talk to a group of friends. I shared what I knew about domestic violence, and I worked to draw each of them into the conversation. It

worked. By the end of class, everyone in the room was engaged, interested, and excited, perhaps no one more so than me. I was on cloud nine as I rode the subway home. For the first time in my life, I felt as if I'd found what I was born to do.

Feeling inspired, I then sought out teacher-training opportunities at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The Department of Psychology provided two distinct courses. The first course was a 6-week teaching colloquium geared towards preparing graduate students to work as teaching assistants. In this class we learned to create and deliver lectures, create and grade assignments, and create and maintain effective learning environments. Students who wished to teach their own classes took a separate teaching practicum class. This year-long class enabled us to develop course materials with the assistance of knowledgeable professors and peers. During the first semester, we created syllabi, lectures, and exams for our particular courses. We also gave practice lectures to peers and a group of undergraduates. These lectures were video-taped and evaluated to give us feedback about our strengths and weaknesses. During the second semester, we taught the classes we for which we had prepared but continued to meet weekly to discuss the joys and challenges we were facing in the classroom. I found both classes to be immensely helpful in developing my teaching skills and teaching philosophy.

I also benefited from faculty and fellow graduate students who served as excellent teaching mentors. Three in particular stand out. The first was my advisor, Dr. Rebecca Campbell. Becki was extremely generous in sharing syllabi, detailed lecture notes and overheads, class activities, and exams. Not having to recreate the wheel was an enormous relief, and I am forever thankful for her generosity. The second person was a professor for whom I worked as a teaching assistant, Dr. Bryant Marks. Bryant is one of the best teachers I have ever seen. I would sit enthralled during his lectures, noting how he engaged students, used interactive teaching strategies, and conveyed genuine enthusiasm for the material he was teaching. The third person was a fellow graduate student, Kimberly Duff. Kimberly was the best graduate student teacher in the department. She taught the teaching colloquium and made herself available to any student who needed help. She was a great help to me personally, particularly when I took over her position as the instructor for the teaching colloquium.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

My development as a teacher continues to evolve. It has been informed by my training, my experience in the classroom, and my experience as an academic. All too often, people assume that time spent on research detracts from teaching and vice versa, but this has not been my experience. My role as a teacher is informed by and guides my research and service activities. The classes I typically teach—Community Psychology, Psychology of

Women, and Fieldwork in Psychology—are directly related to my research on violence against women. I frequently use examples from my own research in my teaching and recruit research assistants from my classes. In turn, the theories I teach in class are often useful to my research, and my efforts to find internship and community service learning placements for my students put me into contact with community organizations. These organizations then benefit from my expertise on their advisory boards, and I benefit from their cooperation in my research and their willingness to appear as guest speakers in my classes. Thus, each aspect of my academic life is intricately related to every other aspect. Time I spend on one type of activity ultimately enhances my work in the other areas and I believe I am a more effective teacher as a result.

My experiences in the classroom have also allowed me to grow as a teacher. Perhaps the area of greatest growth is my ability to deal with difficult students. Everyone faces difficult students at some point in time—the belligerent student, the insensitive student, the student who dominates the conversation. We all hope and pray that we will not be faced with these situations. After all, most of us did not become teachers because we like being disciplinarians. Learning to deal with these situations is an on-going challenge, particularly because what works in some situations does not always work in others. Dynamics of the class and characteristics of the students often interact to create unique situations that require unique solutions. Talking to belligerent students after class has worked in some situations, but making these discussions public has been necessary in others. Calling on different students has successfully brought new voices into the conversation in some classes, but has caused resentment and discomfort in others. I have found that the key to handling such obstacles is to realize that each situation is unique and thus may require a unique approach. Being attuned to the dynamics of the classroom and being flexible in both teaching and disciplinary style can help create teaching environments that work in different situations. This skill developed with experience, and is one I hope to continue to refine.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

I love teaching. It is as simple as that. I love figuring out how to communicate complex ideas in ways that students can understand. I love generating student enthusiasm for the learning process and the concepts covered in class. I love seeing the “click” that is visible in students’ faces when they finally understand something. I love seeing students grow in self-confidence and pride as they take an active role in their own learning. I love hearing about the changes students make in their own lives as a result of taking my classes, and, of course, I love the positive feedback I get from the students themselves. These things energize me and I would not trade them for the world. However, there are frustrations as well. The range of

student abilities in my classes is immense. Finding the right balance can be difficult, and I am constantly concerned about losing the struggling students or boring the high achievers. Combating a student culture focused on grades and graduation is also frustrating. It takes a lot of time and energy to convince students that there is more to college than receiving a diploma, time and energy I would rather spend presenting interesting activities or material.

These frustrations have led to a continuous effort to develop a teaching style and philosophy that works well for me and my students. Although my teaching philosophy has evolved over time, utilizing interactive and applied activities has always been at the heart of my teaching. I believe that actively engaging students in the learning process is the most effective way to encourage in-depth understanding of complex, theoretical principles.

I believe that this deeper understanding results from three main benefits of interactive and applied work. First, such activities can bring psychological principles to life in a way that a textbook or lecture never can. Complex theories are often difficult to describe in language, and many students struggle to understand just what the heck those journal articles are saying. When students see these principles in action, however, the theories often become much easier to comprehend. Just think of all of those confusing instruction manuals you have read in your life; having someone actually show you how to use that new palm pilot is usually a lot easier than merely reading about it. Actually doing it yourself, of course, is even better. The doing is the second benefit of using interactive and applied activities: Students gain a far more profound understanding of course concepts when they actually are required to utilize the information. They pay a lot more attention if they know that they will have to apply the theories, particularly when they are required to use course concepts in community settings. In order to use a theory, they have to understand its intricacies and implications—simply memorizing the theory will not help them at all.

Finally, using such activities is often quite motivational for students. Too often, students fail to see the relevance of information discussed in their classes. They seem to think that much of it is esoteric, irrelevant, and arcane. This attitude can be countered by showing students that many psychological principles have broad applicability. When students can see psychological principles play themselves out before their eyes, they see that these principles are both relevant and useful. When they see this for themselves, they become far more motivated to learn.

The extent to which I have used such interactive and applied activities has varied over time, however. When I first began teaching at the University of Illinois at Chicago, many of my classes were quite large and it was challenging to find ways to engage students in discussions and class activities. When I began teaching at Loyola, I had much smaller classes and was able to expand my use of active learning exercises. My emphasis on applied learning

increased yet again when I began my current position at CSULB. Driven primarily by the existence of the Community Service Learning Center on campus, I began exploring the benefits of getting students out of the classroom and into the community. I attended several training sessions at the center and received assistance in modifying my syllabi, lectures, and class activities. Students spend at least 20 hours per semester working at specific community organizations, and they answer weekly reflection questions that help them connect their community experiences to course concepts. I structure the class itself around their experiences, and I gear lectures toward discussing theories that students can use or observe at their site. Incorporating community service learning has required a radical change to my teaching approach, but it is one that has brought great joy and benefits both to my students and to me.

These changes in my teaching style have also been driven by evaluation results. Evaluation has been a key part of my teaching from the beginning. It was part of the culture of graduate school and has continued to be a part of the culture in my current position. As a community psychologist trained in program evaluation, it is also a personal interest of mine. I therefore systematically incorporate evaluation into my classes in a variety of ways. First, I create a list of learning outcomes that I want students to achieve. These outcomes then guide the development of my syllabi, lectures, class activities, and exams. Using student exam and paper performance as a guide, I continuously modify class activities to enhance these outcomes. I also assess student satisfaction. In addition to the university-mandated evaluation forms, I create my own evaluation forms that I give to students in the middle and end of the semester. These forms ask for more specific feedback on particular exercises, videos, lectures, and textbooks.

This information helps me to improve my teaching, an ongoing process that requires a lot more work than I once thought. I used to think that once I had prepared for a class, all I would have to do is pick up the lecture and deliver it. This assumption is far from the case. I have yet to find a lecture that I truly consider “done.” There are always new theories, updated statistics, new videos, and new textbooks. I get novel ideas from attending conferences, participating in teaching workshops, reading listserv discussions, or just having conversations with colleagues. There is always the feedback I get from my students or just from my own observations of the class. I am never really teaching the same class twice. Sure, some aspects of the class stay the same from one semester to the next. However, when I compare a class to the way I taught it 5 years ago, I realize that just about every aspect of the class has changed ... and changed for the better.

Advice for New Teachers

There are standard steps toward improving your teaching—take classes, attend conferences, join electronic discussion lists, read books, observe others’ teaching, and talk to your colleagues. These activities will certainly give you ideas about course content and activities. However, effective teaching involves far more than using proven techniques. It takes skill, experience, and the willingness to make mistakes. It requires patience, commitment, and a passion for what you do. Above all else, it requires the ability to learn and change. In this spirit, I wish to share the three most important discoveries I have made in the hope that these lessons will serve others well.

1. *Be Yourself.* The worst teachers I have ever seen are those who are playing a role. Do not worry so much about being formal or appearing intelligent. Sometimes the ability to use small words sounds far more intelligent than using jargon. Allow yourself to make mistakes. Students like to see that you are human, especially if you can laugh it off. Smile. Tell stories. Have fun. If you are enjoying what you are doing, your students will, too.
2. *Avoid Power Struggles.* No matter how you handle it, the minute you engage in a power struggle, you have lost. There is no faster way to lose the respect of most students than engaging in a public power struggle. Even if you “win” by publicly exerting your power, you have forever changed the dynamic of the classroom. The students will not trust you and they will be ill at ease. If you have a confrontational student, handle it outside of class. If that does not work, learn to steer the conversation away from that student or reframe his or her comments in a useful way. If a student publicly complains about grading or assignments, open it up to the rest of the class. Start a conversation about what works and does not work or use an anonymous poll to get feedback. The students will appreciate your willingness to engage them in the conversation rather than simply dictating the rules of the game.
3. *Teach Classes you Love.* Find the classes about which you are most passionate. Figure out why they excite you and emphasize those aspects in your teaching. Communicate your enthusiasm to the students. Advocate on your own behalf to teach those classes on a regular basis. Although there are political reasons that you cannot always teach the classes you want, fight to teach at least one class about which you are passionate. This is where you get your energy. It will affect everything you do.

Final Thoughts

In his book, *Teaching Tips*, McKeachie (2002) emphasized the importance of loving what you do: “Once you find that teaching can be fun, you enjoy devoting time to it, you will

think about it, and you will develop into a competent teacher” (p. 3). I could not agree more. Find your passion and your skills will follow.

References

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