

A Self-Actualizing Career Choice Yields Unexpected Rewards

Harry P. Bahrick
Ohio Wesleyan University

I am a research professor at Ohio Wesleyan University and a guest professor at the University of South Florida during the winter months. I am also Principal Investigator of a 5-year study entitled Cognitive Aging and Access to Knowledge funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

A native of Vienna, Austria, I immigrated to the United States in 1940 at age 14. My secondary education included 4 years of a Viennese gymnasium and 2 years at a public high school in Baltimore, Maryland. My undergraduate years at the University of Maryland were interrupted by military service in the US Army during World War II. I was assigned to a specialized training program in civil engineering at the University of West Virginia, where after my discharge from the service in 1946, I completed an undergraduate degree and a masters degree in psychology. Concurrently, I had my first university teaching experience as a full-time instructor of German. Most of my students were older, returning veterans, and the shortage of fully qualified language teachers gave me the opportunity to teach college courses at an early age without the usual academic qualifications.

After 1 year of graduate work at the University of West Virginia, I was accepted in the doctoral psychology program of The Ohio State University (OSU). There I obtained a PhD in experimental psychology in 1950 under the supervision of Delos Wickens.

I started to teach full time at OWU in 1949 while completing my dissertation. For the following 8 years, I also moonlighted as a research associate in the Laboratory of Aviation Psychology at OSU under the direction of Paul Fitts who became my mentor in all matters pertaining to research. I also taught psychology courses at Kenyon College on a part-time basis.

During my 55 years at OWU, I taught courses in introductory psychology, experimental psychology, statistics, learning and motivation, and history of psychology. I was promoted through the ranks to Professor in 1956. I retired after 36 years of teaching and was then appointed a research professor.

Additional opportunities at other institutions significantly enriched my teaching experience. I took several leaves to teach in German Universities, lecturing in German to large classes on learning theory and memory research. In 1959, I was a Fulbright Professor in Ulm and later a guest professor at the University of Marburg and the University of Hamburg. In 1964, I replaced Delos Wickens for a semester at OSU, teaching a course in learning

theories and I spent the 1967-68 academic year as a senior National Science Foundation Fellow at the Institute of Learning, University of California, Berkeley.

OWU awarded me the Outstanding College Teaching award in 1968 and a year later I was given an endowed chair. I was elected president of Division One (Experimental Psychology) of the American Psychological Association in 1993, and the American Psychological Foundation awarded me their Distinguished Teaching Award (now called the Charles L. Brewer Distinguished Teaching of Psychology Award) a year later.

My Early Development as a Teacher

My graduate training involved no formal preparation for teaching. During my second year at OSU, I taught sections of Introductory Psychology and Delos Wickens met weekly with all teaching assistants. There was some discussion of course content, but the focus of those meetings was on administrative details (e.g., reading assignments, grading procedures, and examinations).

None of my undergraduate or graduate teachers actually served as a mentor. However, several instructors, whose teaching style impressed me, became role models who influenced my subsequent teaching. Among these were Allen Edwards, who taught my first undergraduate statistics course at the University of Maryland; Wickens and Arthur Melton at OSU. Wickens had an informal teaching style that invited questions and discussion. He had an excellent command of subject matter, but gave the impression that most of the important psychological issues were unresolved and that his lectures were intended to present the pro tem status of the field. His style encouraged students to participate in class discussions and to challenge existing methods and conclusions.

Melton's teaching style was formal and his articulate delivery left students in awe, not only because of his command of subject matter but also because of his imposing presence. His manner was not forbidding or authoritarian, but his personality and delivery were so impressive that listeners were likely to give his accounts the credibility of a course in algebra or geometry. I tried to profit by emulating Wickens' informal and non-defensive approach to psychology and Melton's articulate presentation.

During my first year of teaching German at the University of West Virginia, I was able to focus on my own performance. Since German was my native language, I felt confident that I knew the introductory language courses' content. As a result, I quickly became comfortable in front of a class, even though I was younger than most of my veteran-students. Basic language courses also provide many opportunities to interact with individual students and to praise and reinforce positive aspects of their performance. Such interactions were important in making the class an interesting and pleasant experience and I applied this insight

when I first taught introductory psychology. To facilitate individual interactions, I made it a priority to learn the names of all my students using a seating chart and obtaining pictures of students from the registrar if necessary. I worked on associating names and faces before the second meeting of the class.

College teaching became attractive to me within days of setting foot on a college campus as a student. What appealed to me was the potential for independence and for intellectual growth as well as the performance aspects of teaching (i.e., experiencing the admiration and approval of students). My motives were self actualizing and self-serving; they did not focus on service to others, but I felt confident that I could become a competent teacher and researcher and that I would enjoy this role. I was used to living on a tight budget and I gave little thought to the financial limitations of a teaching career.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Before entering college I had considered a career as a psychiatrist but was deterred by the required medical training. The introductory psychology course I took, though poorly taught, immediately attracted me and opened my eyes to the possibility of exploring human nature scientifically. That option was more appealing to me than a focus on individuals.

Two obstacles left me pessimistic about my ability to obtain a college teaching position. First, academic positions and advancements were most difficult to obtain during the depression and. My status as an immigrant was an additional deterrent because prior to the impact of affirmative action policies, candidates with strong academic connections had preferential access to the few available positions. My undergraduate teachers who were still struggling in their careers in the early 1940s cautioned me against this choice. Second, my undergraduate grades were mediocre because of undisciplined study habits. Given those challenges, I decided to prepare for a career as an industrial psychologist rather than as an academic. It was my good fortune, however, that the end of World War II brought about an abrupt shortage of college teachers and a dramatic improvement in academic career opportunities. In addition, my study habits had improved after my military service and the improvement was reflected in my graduate school record. With increased optimism, I approached Wickens during my last year in graduate school about changing my program from industrial to experimental psychology, and he encouraged me to do so.

During my last year of graduate work, I was offered an appointment as an instructor at OWU, 20 miles north of OSU. The salary was slightly higher than that of an OSU teaching assistant, so I accepted, expecting to stay only for a year. Teachers at OWU taught four courses per semester, a course load not atypical for liberal arts colleges at that time, and at first I found the demands challenging. My prior psychology teaching was limited to the

introductory course, so preparing lectures for the other courses was time consuming, but all told, my first year at OWU was a positive experience. Many of the undergraduates were older, returning veterans who were serious about their education, and I found teaching the laboratory course particularly rewarding. Students performed individual experiments during the last part of that course. They appreciated suggestions from the instructor, and I was able to try out a variety of ideas for my own research.

I always saw teaching and research as complementary aspects of an academic career. It is true, of course, that hours spent in teaching are not directly available for research, and vice versa, but the positive symbiosis outweighs these constraints, particularly at the graduate level. Research illustrates and supports teaching content, and ideas about research inevitably arise during class discussions and lectures. The focus on research is particularly strong in teaching and mentoring graduate students. Teaching graduate seminars involves intensive reading and organizing relevant primary literature, and the knowledge gained translates readily into research ideas and scholarly publications.

Undergraduate courses generally cover broader topics and do not usually require equally intensive reading. Many undergraduates do not plan to pursue an academic career and thus may have a more limited interest and tolerance for the details of programmatic research on relatively narrow topics. Such students tend to be more responsive to teachers who present overall conceptualizations of content in interesting ways, with a more limited emphasis on detailed documentation. It is also true, however, that my closest relationships with undergraduate students resulted from their involvement as assistants in my research program; their participation was a salient aspect of their education in psychology.

I believe that the differential rewards pertaining to undergraduate versus graduate teaching shape our research productivity as well as our teaching style. Undergraduate teaching has not limited my interest in research, but it has detracted from my mastery of specific research literature. As a consequence, I tend to focus my research on topics that are less dependent on an extensive literature (e.g., topics that have been neglected in the current paradigm). For similar reasons, I believe that undergraduate teaching is less likely to yield the type of expertise that is expected of editors of specialized journals.

Finally, teaching is generally valued more highly in undergraduate than in large, research-oriented universities. Though relatively indifferent teachers can have highly successful careers in research-oriented universities, such is far less likely in undergraduate institutions. All of us want to be valued and rewarded for the things we do well, and these rewards in turn shape our behavior. There are no generally agreed on criteria defining great teaching, and the divergent reward systems of graduate and undergraduate institutions influence the performance of teachers. Thus, undergraduate colleges are more likely to attract

and hold individuals who see their primary talents in teaching. I have enjoyed being an undergraduate teacher, and although the choice has involved tradeoffs, I do not view these as a net sacrifice.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

I believe that scientific understanding of human behavior offers the best hope for the survival of human societies. Long before the atomic age, H.G. Wells said that “human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.” The fact that our ability to control human aggression lags far behind our ability to understand and control the physical environment jeopardizes our survival and makes progress in the social sciences including economics, sociology, and psychology matters of great urgency. As a social science teacher, I feel an obligation to stress this urgency and to illustrate and clarify the relevant issues.

Societal changes, as well as my own maturation prompted me to change some aspects of my teaching style. Enhanced societal appreciation of diversity has made me more responsive to individual differences, and my own appreciation of students has made me more aware of the satisfactions of being a mentor. In retrospect, I see mentoring relationships with students among the most enjoyable aspects of my career. My original motives for becoming a college teacher were self-actualizing and intellectual; serving students was incidental to my personal goals, but mentoring individuals increasingly became intrinsically rewarding.

A specific example of changes I initiated is the tutorial system I introduced at OWU some years ago to solve a departmental problem. We failed to attract many talented science-oriented students to psychology because such students frequently committed to a physical science major before taking their first course in psychology. We therefore decided to offer the tutorial program as an inducement for the top 10% of entering freshmen. It involved one-on-one meetings with an instructor throughout the semester and required students to complete a specific research project. Because tutees generally had no prior course work in psychology, the sessions and readings covered basic introductory concepts, preparation in the specific domain of their project, and guidance on all aspects of carrying it out. The program was labor-intensive, but we found that students were enthusiastic about individualized instruction and about their research, and approximately half of our tutorial students decide to major in psychology.

My greatest rewards as a teacher have come from the testimonials of students who credited me with having a significant impact on their lives. Students who became professional psychologists were most likely to credit me with influencing their career choice; others were more likely to credit me with having influenced their perceptions of human nature in conformance with a probabilistic, scientific perspective.

What I find most frustrating as a teacher is evidence that motivated students who worked hard failed to profit from my courses. Academic talents of students change over time, and effective teachers must adapt their content and style accordingly. Although I never managed to address these challenges to my satisfaction, I found that frequent monitoring of class notes, providing outlines and study guides, and offering review sessions were all beneficial.

I have used only conventional methods to evaluate my teaching. Course evaluations were the principal source, and I supplemented these with occasional discussions with colleagues who visited my classes or team-taught a course with me. I found that the individual comments students added to an objective course evaluation were often most informative. Early in my career I was ambivalent about the use of student evaluations, but I now regard them as an essential part of assessing teaching effectiveness and of providing feedback to teachers. Students may lack a sound perspective on what constitutes appropriate course content, but they certainly are able to provide useful feedback on personality characteristics, presentation style, and problems they experience with grading procedures, reading requirements, etc. Such perceptions significantly influence student satisfaction with their education, and I see no justification for teachers to avoid such information.

The most significant changes I implemented during my teaching career were designed to provide better monitoring and support of student progress. In the context of conferences I scheduled with students who performed poorly on tests, I discussed problems they perceived and examined their lecture notes. I found that the main problem for students who attended class regularly and worked hard was that their lecture notes lacked organization. No matter how many detailed notes they recorded, their notes were of little value in answering test questions pertaining to the interrelations among conceptual aspects of content. Based on this finding, I changed my lecture procedure, providing an outline of topics and subtopics to be covered at the beginning of each lecture. I put this outline on the board, but did not hand it out, so that students had to copy the outline at the beginning of class, actively engaging them in preparing for the lecture content to follow. The details under each subtopic were never part of the outline, but had to be filled in during the lecture. This procedure turned out to have a positive effect on student note taking and test performance. I also changed my grading procedures over the years, making them as transparent as possible so that students could assess their standing and ultimate grade with more accuracy.

Of the many conferences I have had with students who performed poorly on tests, one incident stands out in my memory. I asked this student where he thought the problem was, and whether he was disappointed with the course. He answered, quite to the contrary, that he enjoyed the course, and that in fact, I was his ideal instructor. I was quite pleased, and asked

him to elaborate. He said: “Yes, ever since I have been in high school, I have had this concept of the ideal college professor, and you fit the concept perfectly: a small guy with an accent.” I said: “Oh,” as evenly as possible. Eventually I felt comfortable enough to report the incident at home, and the following Christmas my daughter presented me with a t-shirt. The lettering on the front said; “Ideal Professor” and the lettering on the back: “Small guy with an accent.”

Advice for New Teachers

I believe that there are many ways of becoming a good teacher and that individuals should adapt a style that best suits their talents and personality. Great lecturers, for example, should not feel obligated to organize and facilitate discussion groups. It is essential, however, to invite frequent, anonymous feedback and to be responsive to that information. Making an effort to know and respond to students as individuals is undoubtedly an important aspect of successful teaching; and procedures that show interest, approachability, availability, and grading transparency all contribute to forming human relationships that students appreciate and enjoy.

Satisfactions of an academic career depend significantly on the quality of collegial relations. Young faculty members enjoy a great deal of independence, and this privilege may obscure expectations of senior colleagues in regard to supportive, cooperative behavior. Sensitivity to these implicit expectations affects performance evaluations and the quality of long-term collegial relations. A psychologist friend once remarked that departmental relations function best if seniors treat junior colleagues as complete equals from day one, and juniors show consideration to their seniors.

[†] 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. 22-28). 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>