

Successful Teaching: A Life of Connections

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My career is nearer its end than its beginning. As I look back, I see that remarkable serendipity has brought me to the present. I am hopeful that the rest of my academic life (and beyond) will be as fruitful and enjoyable as it has been so far.

It might be possible to blame it all on my sister. My initial exposure to books was in 1954 at the age of four, when she took the time to teach me to read. Since then, my life has been filled with books and I can imagine it no other way. It does not surprise to me that my career has revolved around the ideas I have encountered in print. It is but a small step to trying as a teacher to communicate those ideas to others.

I spent my formative years in Toledo, Ohio, departing for southern Ohio for my college education at Miami University in Oxford. My undergraduate mentor, John Jahnke, once joked that it was the wrong Miami and the wrong Oxford, but my interest in psychology flourished when I was there. So for me, it was the perfect Miami and the perfect Oxford. I graduated in 1972 with a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology with General Honors. My next move was to the doctoral program in General Experimental Psychology at the City University of New York. Most of my classes and research took place at the Brooklyn College campus where another influential figure, Arthur Reber, guided me. He may be most responsible for my attainment of the doctorate in 1979: The university initially declined to accept my dissertation because the margins on the typed copy were too narrow; fortunately he browbeat them into accepting it.

When I left New York, I spent a short time engaged in science reporting for the Columbus, Ohio affiliate of National Public Radio. Then, because academic jobs were scarce, I spent an interminable year as a statistical analyst at Blue Cross of Central Ohio. My break arose when Thomas More College offered me a position. Out of about 150 applicants, I was their second choice; happily, the leading candidate declined their offer. I remained at Thomas More for seven terrific years (1979-1986). I first met a large number of my very dear friends and colleagues during this time.

In 1986, I gave up tenure (don't try this at home) to move to Ithaca College, where I have taught ever since. I have been fortunate to be able to continue working on my craft of teaching in a department that values pedagogy.

Throughout my career, I have been most active in what we now term the scholarship of teaching and the scholarship of pedagogy. This predilection made my involvement in the

Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP) virtually inevitable. Within STP, I served as its Secretary from 1993 to 1996, and as President in 2004. My other contributions to our discipline include my work as editor of the Computers in Teaching section of *Teaching of Psychology* from 1987 to 1996 and as Associate Editor to the present.

I have also been fortunate to have participated in activities fostered by the American Psychological Association (APA). These opportunities have included the National Conference on Enhancing the Quality of Undergraduate Education in Psychology (the St. Mary's Conference) and the Psychology Partnerships Project (commonly known as P3). In addition, I participated in the first three Education Leadership Conferences sponsored by the Education Directorate at APA. I also spent two intriguing and enjoyable years as Director of Pre-College and Undergraduate Programs at APA.

My other education-related activities have included being a Reader and then a Table Leader for Advanced Placement (AP) Psychology tests. I am also a member of the AP Psychology Test Development Committee and its chair-designate. In addition, along the way, I initiated the Northeastern Conference for Teachers of Psychology in 1994, which now continues as a pre-conference meeting of the New England Psychological Association.

My goal through it all has been to foster learning in my students, which is why I am proud to have sponsored over five dozen research presentations by undergraduates over the past 20 years. I continue to enjoy immensely my professional activities outside the classroom, but in the end, the important work is to benefit my students.

I have been fortunate to spend time with many generations of delightful and hard working students. I am pleased that I have been a partner in the successes they have achieved. However, I have to admit that I agree with E. C. Tolman's (1959) statement that "In the end, the only sure criterion is to have fun. And I have had fun" (p. 152)

My Early Development as a Teacher

My teaching career began before *Teaching of Psychology* appeared as a journal. There was no emphasis on teaching, and graduate students received teaching assignments in a sink or swim environment.

My graduate program differed little from any other. Teaching was a necessity because it provided income for graduate students and it helped the department move undergraduates through the curriculum. Graduate students seldom aspired to learn the craft of teaching because our research mentors did not promote it.

Most graduate school mentors at that time identified the APA as their disciplinary organization, and APA's contributions to teaching prior to creation of a teaching division were slight (Goodwin, 1992). Initially, the teaching division was largely ineffectual.

Education and training received more attention beginning in the 1950s (Nelson & Strickler, 1992), but APA's initiatives had little impact on most teaching psychologists.

From my callow perspective in graduate school, I believed my teaching was quite good. Students voiced no complaints and graduate faculty who visited my classes were complimentary. Projecting forward three decades, the landscape has changed in ways entirely unpredictable at the time. Technology has driven some of these modifications, but higher education has undergone a sea change. What constitutes good and effective teaching has taken a new definition. Just as research subjects have become participants, students have gone from passive receptacles to active learners. My teaching transformed to match the Zeitgeist.

How has this change occurred? Over the years, there have been many teachers I have admired. Nonetheless, I cannot identify a particular person who mentored me in teaching. I admired the confidence, knowledge, and high verbal fluency of my major professor in graduate school. However, my desire to emulate him was oriented more toward style than toward pedagogical effectiveness. Back then, assessment was far from even a glimmer, and all teachers assumed that they were effective. The active mentoring that took place involved research, not teaching.

My graduate school teaching involved lectures and little else. My goal was to present as much information as possible. I believed that students probably retained a constant fraction of the information conveyed in the lecture, so I reasoned that if I packed the information densely, they would leave the classroom better off than if my lecture contained less detail. Each chapter in the book magically appeared and disappeared with no connections to any other chapters.

Looking back, I am struck by how little attention teachers paid to drawing connections across chapters. As a graduate student I was probably not knowledgeable enough to be able to draw broad connections across chapters in a book, much less about other disciplines or to life in general. My naïveté was irrelevant, though, because psychologists cared little about bridging different disciplines.

From my graduate student outlook, it never occurred to me that my teaching might change. I assumed I would spend most of my career conducting research, with teaching as an add-on. I now wonder about that myopic vision because, even in graduate school, I was not a highly productive researcher. The reality of my career has diverged from my original thoughts. It was quite true that I was looking through a glass darkly.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Even though I always enjoyed teaching, it only became a major focus of my professional identity when I secured a position at a small liberal arts college, Thomas More

College. A large portion of my change in attitude was due to my exposure to colleagues there. They viewed themselves primarily as teachers of psychology rather than as researchers, so they engaged in practices reflecting their commitment to teaching. Further impetus for my orientation toward teaching was that travel funds were scant, and professional research conferences became less attractive because my own research had flagged under a heavy teaching and service requirement.

In my first years of full-time teaching, I began to lose contact with other psychologists. It would have been entirely too easy to develop an inward focus at that point. The major obstacle to my teaching would have been stagnation. I might have remained competent in the classroom, but I do not think that my teaching would have expanded to the extent that it has, and my teaching philosophy would have been vaguely structured at best. I can easily imagine that in my 34th year of teaching (my current point), I would have lost my zeal for the classroom had I not met spirited psychology teachers who are peer mentors and sources of friendship, collegiality, and motivation.

Happily, the movement toward more active teaching and active learning was taking shape. My connection with psychology teachers began at student research conferences and regional teaching conferences that began to sprout. Also, I have been fortunate not to have been associated with an institution that regarded the scholarship of discovery as the only meaningful activity.

Most importantly for me, Joe Palladino (University of Southern Indiana) created a student research conference and, subsequently, a regional teaching conference, the influence of which still radiates in my professional development. His Mid-America Conference for Teachers of Psychology (MACTOP) began in 1984 and ran for two decades. It attracted a cohort that took teaching seriously and that later formed the revitalized core of a then-dormant Society for the Teaching of Psychology (Beins, 2004a).

The Zeitgeist that fostered teaching was further reinforced by the American Psychological Association's National Conference on Enhancing the Quality of Undergraduate Education in Psychology, the so-called St. Mary's Conference (see McGovern, 1993). I was lucky to be invited as a participant; I developed professional friendships there that have persisted. These types of connections have helped me constantly upgrade my teaching.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

For many psychologists who began their careers in the 1970s, teaching was not something to be examined. It was a mundane part of daily life and therefore unremarkable. It did not merit a well-formulated philosophy. Consequently, my own articulated philosophy of teaching emerged when I was prompted by the assessment movement fostered by the Psychology Partnerships Project (Psychology Partnerships Program, 2001) and by Project Kaleidoscope <<http://www.pkal.org>> initiatives.

As I thought about it, I realized that my perspective on teaching is tightly connected to my respect for students as people and as learners. From this viewpoint, it dawned on me that students spend most of their lives outside of psychology. Consequently, it would be prudent to expose them to psychology in connection with other aspects of their lives. So I strove to link psychology more explicitly with the liberal arts.

Another component of my teaching philosophy is that I trust that most students will respond with appropriate motivation and critical thought once a learning environment is established. Because I do not live in Utopia (from Greek, meaning not a place or nowhere), I realize that some students will resist learning, but I believe that teachers can minimize this resistance. The formula for creating an efficacious classroom environment varies for different teachers (Buskist, 2001), but, simply put, successful teachers develop their own voice and students respond.

Over the course of my teaching career, I have relied less on lecturing to students and more on activity. I firmly believe that if students leave a classroom with three or four well understood concepts and how they interrelate to one another and to larger issues, I have succeeded in my role as teacher. This belief has had a marked impact on my classroom behavior. I still work hard in front of the class, and I try to spend a preparatory hour before each class meeting, but my students work harder in class than they did in my early years as a teacher.

I try to connect the concepts in class to specific terms and ideas in the textbook, but my classes are largely devoid of definitions and small details that do not promote understanding of the larger picture. Instead, I try to pose questions that generate critical thought, even if I lose control over the exact path we follow. I agree with Henry Brooks Adams's belief that "Nothing in education is so astonishing as the amount of ignorance it accumulates in the form of inert facts." This approach has implications for students, who often prefer a class that has an obvious and rigid structure, with terms and definitions that fit nicely at certain, predictable points.

On my Research Team, the research is largely student-directed. I think that students learn best when their activities flow from their own critical thinking. My Team is not A. S. Neill's Summerhill, with each student choosing an idiosyncratic path; I still need to corral their ideas, but they make virtually all choices. In the end, they are responsible for these choices. The Team generates fewer research projects than it might be if I were to make all the decisions, but the purpose of the Team is to teach students. Paradoxically, I am in charge, but in advance I am never sure what I am in charge of.

This issue of control is important. Students need to know that teachers structure the learning environment so students can achieve specific goals. The adage that you need to know the rules before you can break them is relevant here. Beginning teachers may need to impose more obvious control and structure on a class than veterans because it takes an element of experience to recognize the point at which an active classroom environment deteriorates and learning consequently diminishes. Inexperienced teachers may have a difficult time traversing that border. Classroom experience will undergird a teacher's ultimate approach.

It is often difficult to know how well I have succeeded in my work. Ironically, although I regard student evaluations of teaching as being of little use for personnel actions like tenure and promotion, I find they can be useful in assessing whether the environment is propitious for student learning. However, good evaluations do not always equate with good learning. There is evidence that satisfaction with a training program is not always related to the amount that students learn. Roadblocks to learning annoy students but may actually be more beneficial than a smooth path. It requires effort to overcome the hurdles, which stimulate thought and evaluation, even as they may create aggravation (Bjork, 2001, 2005).

Fortunately for me, the curriculum at Ithaca College fosters long-term interaction between our students and the faculty. Each psychology major completes three semesters of research with a single professor. Consequently, I have the opportunity to see my students' development unfold. It is delightful to see their excitement for research burgeon and their ability to ask and answer complex questions emerge.

Have I reached my students? My most direct assessment of student learning comes from tests, homework projects, and research that they conduct. These measurements, particularly the applied work, hint as to whether students have incorporated the framework from my courses into their thinking. Beyond this traditional assessment, my colleagues and I are developing an assessment procedure for the constellation of overlapping courses we teach. In the end, a single course provides part of a student's overall learning, but only a part. We lead our students through an entire curriculum, so meaningful assessments will be global rather than specific. In the end, assessment is difficult because the real test of our success is

whether our graduates ultimately become active citizens who make sound judgments based on critical evaluation of information.

Advice for New Teachers

When the Roman poet Virgil, author of the *Aeneid*, was dying, he requested that his epic poem be destroyed because he was not satisfied that it was worth saving. To be honest, the story was not all that original; he borrowed extensively from Homer's *Odyssey*. To the consternation of many Latin students, but to the benefit of western culture, the poem survived. (This recalls the statement attributed to Heinrich Heine that if the Romans had been obliged to learn Latin, they would never have found time to conquer the world.) I would not think of comparing myself to Virgil, but I have the same feeling about my teaching that he did about *The Aeneid*—it is not finished and it may not be all that exemplary. In addition, my teaching owes much to my very creative colleagues whose work I have liberally exploited. Nonetheless, I will offer my advice for whatever small measure of help it can provide for new teachers.

The fundamental prerequisites for being an effective teacher are a passion for teaching and an affection for students (with whom one should be friendly but not familiar). Further, I believe that a critical element of a satisfying career in the academy is to have a network of professional friends and colleagues. Over 20 years ago, I first met many of the psychologists that I count as dear and valued friends. If I had not encountered them at student and professional conferences, I might be isolated in a career described by Thoreau, as a man living a life of quiet desperation.

I encourage teachers to reach out to make personal contact with other psychologists. One of the most congenial organizations for developing a network of professional friends and colleagues is STP. I have heard people say that STP appears to be controlled by an in-group, but I have always found people active in STP to be receptive to newcomers. It can be intimidating to insinuate yourself into a group of psychology teachers who are fast friends, but a look at the many new faces in positions of increasing responsibility in STP attests to the fact that it quite a feasible undertaking.

The regional and national teaching conferences are also wonderful venues for increasing your network. In addition to learning about teaching, you meet others who share your interests and who are looking for collaborative and supportive colleagues. STP features programming at the APA convention that effectively constitutes a teaching conference and provides for social as well as professional congregation. The American Psychological Society also created a preconference teaching workshop and has incorporated teaching-related sessions into the convention proper.

I still attend every teaching conference I can. I have been fortunate to be able to do so two or three times a year over the past decade. Not only do these meetings enhance my teaching, they also provide the opportunity for expanded professional development with current colleagues. Just as important, these gatherings give me the chance to develop new professional friendships with young and energetic teachers.

It is also important to read voraciously outside psychology. The more you read, the more you learn about life. The more you know about life, more effective you can be in promoting a broad education to your students. I believe that it does not really matter what you read. You can make a compelling case for the importance of reading of any kind (Dunn, 2002).

Final Thoughts

I encourage teachers to get a life. It is entirely too easy to let your profession encroach on every aspect of your life. Computers are portable, e-mail is ubiquitous, and everyone (except me) has a cell phone, so you are never out of touch. A quiet room and a book can revitalize your mental life.

We need time for our thoughts to be unfocused and relaxed. We also need our families, who are ultimately more important than anyone or anything else. You should plan time to expand your horizons outside of psychology. All of these elements will make you a more interesting person and will let you draw connections between psychology and life (Beins, 2004b), which will ultimately increase your effectiveness as a teacher.

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