

Tales of an Accidental Teacher

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I completed my bachelor's degree in psychology at the University of Pittsburgh in 1964, and my masters and PhD in clinical psychology at Northwestern University in 1966 and 1968, respectively. From 1968 to 1998, I was on the psychology faculty at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where I taught graduate and undergraduate courses ranging from introductory psychology to clinical practica. After reaching the rank of full professor, I served both as Associate Department Head and Director of Introductory Psychology. I am currently Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois, Courtesy Professor of Psychology at the University of South Florida, and Visiting Professor of Psychology at the University of Southampton. I am a fellow of both the American Psychological Association (APA) and the American Psychological Society (APS).

My teaching awards include the University of Illinois Psychology Graduate Student Association Teaching Award in 1969, the University of Illinois Psi Chi award for excellence in undergraduate teaching in 1979, the Illinois Psychology Department's Mabel Kirkpatrick Hohenboken Teaching Award in 1993, and the 2002 American Psychological Foundation's Distinguished Teaching in Psychology Award.

My efforts to promote excellence in the teaching of psychology began in 1979, when I spoke at the Second Annual National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP). I joined its program committee later that year, and eventually became committee chair. In 1994, I founded the APS Preconference Institute on the Teaching of Psychology, and in 2000, helped to plan the First Annual Summer NITOP. From 1989-1991, I served on the steering committee for the APA National Conference on Enhancing the Quality of Undergraduate Education and, in 2001, on the advisory panel to the APA Board of Educational Affairs Task Force on Undergraduate Psychology Major Competencies. I am currently serving as Chairman of the Steering Committee for the APS Fund for Teaching and Public Understanding of Psychological Science.

I have co-authored textbooks in introductory psychology, abnormal psychology, clinical psychology, criminal behavior, and progressive relaxation training, and have co-edited books in applied, developmental, and introductory psychology. My most recent book, authored with Sandra Goss Lucas, is *Teaching Psychology: A Step by Step Guide*. I have also contributed chapters to *Teaching Introductory Psychology: Theory and Practice* (Sternberg, 1997), *The Teaching of Psychology: Essays in Honor of Wilbert J. McKeachie and Charles L.*

Brewer (Buskist & Davis, 2002), *Handbook of the Teaching of Psychology* (Buskist & Davis, in press), *Voices of Experience: Memorable Talks From the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology* (Perlman, McCann, & Buskist, in press), and (with Sandra Goss Lucas) *The Compleat Academic: A Career Guide* (Roediger, Darley, & Zanna, 2002).

My Early Development as a Teacher

I have referred to myself as an accidental teacher because, in graduate school, my main goal was simply to get a job in a psychology department somewhere. I knew that professors teach, of course, but the teaching aspect of academic life did not clearly register on my radar screen until the fall of 1967 when a note from the department head at Northwestern informed me that I was to teach Introductory Psychology the following quarter. The start of the quarter was barely two months away, and to make matters worse, my class was in the adult education division on Northwestern's downtown Chicago campus. No one gave me the slightest clue about how to teach anything, and certainly no information or guidance about how to teach a course as broad as introductory psychology—to people who were not only older than me, but also tired, and perhaps in a bad mood, after working all day.

With no teacher training and no one to mentor me in teaching (it never occurred to me to ask my advisor for help, as I assumed that the department believed that I already knew how to teach) I forged ahead on my own. I chose the textbook that I had been assigned in my own undergraduate days, and because my teachers always distributed one, I wrote a syllabus for the course. The problem was that when I looked carefully at the textbook, I realized that I did not know enough about certain areas to feel comfortable teaching them. These areas included biological psychology, sensation and perception, developmental psychology, motivation and emotion, thought and language, and social psychology. I was much more comfortable with research methods, learning, personality, intelligence testing, abnormal, and psychotherapy, so I simply distributed these latter topics over the 10 weeks of the academic quarter. This strategy worked out fine, except for the fact that when the quarter was over, I had actually taught a course in clinical psychology, not introductory psychology.

Still, two things happened during that quarter that affected me deeply. The first occurred when I faced my class for the first time. I was so nervous that, for a moment, I did not know what to say. In desperation, I made some lame joke and was amazed to hear some of the students politely laughing. When they did, I realized that students are not as hostile as I had feared, and I got my first inkling that teaching might be fun. The second memorable event from my first teaching effort was that I received excellent evaluations from my students. I now know that I didn't get those ratings because I had offered a good course, as defined by the standards for introductory psychology that I now maintain. (I am sure that many students

noticed my omission of large sections of the book.) What they were telling me was that they recognized that I cared a lot about teaching the course, and about them, and that I had given it my best shot.

I am not proud of that first course, and every student who took it should have demanded a tuition refund. Good teaching is far more than just making students laugh while earnestly offering half-baked courses. However, the experience was enormously helpful to me in that it set me on the road to learning some teaching methods, and some ways of thinking about teaching, which made it possible for me to teach better in the years that followed.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Consistent with my status as an accidental teacher, when I took my first academic job I worried most about whether I could meet the psychology department's rigorous research standards. So planning a research program, setting up a lab, applying for a grant, and hiring research assistants became my top priorities when I arrived in Champaign, Illinois in the summer of 1968. The fact that I had been assigned to teach a graduate course in Research Methods and a 350-student section of Abnormal Psychology slipped into the background.

As had been true at Northwestern, my ability to teach was presumed. No one told me what my courses should cover, how I might best organize them, or even that there was an instructional development office on campus that could help me improve my teaching. To be fair, though, I never asked about any of these things. The questions I dared to ask of departmental colleagues focused on plans for research (theirs and mine), how to write a grant application, which journals take what kinds of articles, and the like. I was not about to waste their time on such trivia as setting up a grading system or writing exam items. Instead, I looked at the syllabi used by previous instructors of my assigned courses, and did my best to follow their example. After all, it was the era of Woodstock and the Summer of Love. The focus of my fear of failure was on how hard-nosed senior colleagues would judge my research, not on how a sea of flower children would evaluate my teaching.

Indeed, I soon came to see my classes as a break from the pressures of life as an assistant professor in a department populated by some of the most famous names in psychology and where my annual evaluations depended as much as anything else on national impact and recognition! As nervousness about public speaking evolved into anticipation and even excitement, I walked to my classes with far more confidence than I had any right to experience. I had quickly developed a successful teaching style, aided in part by the fact that I was hardly older than my students, but I can now see that there was far too little *substance*. I simply did not know enough, either about my subject matter or about the nuts and bolts of effective teaching, to warrant the praise I began to receive in student evaluations. For

example, I am absolutely sure that the department's newly formed graduate student organization gave me its 1969 teaching award simply because I was seen as friendly, approachable, and obviously not a member of the "establishment." There was just no other way in which I, one year out of graduate school, could have been a better or more knowledgeable teacher than, say, Lloyd Humphreys, Charles Osgood, Raymond Cattell, or Hobart Mowrer.

The quality of my course content improved over the following decade as I learned more psychology, but because I was being rewarded for some rather unsophisticated and probably not very effective teaching methods, I did not think much about improving those methods. This situation changed, though, after I got to know Frank Costin. Frank was not a major star in the departmental firmament. His role as director of introductory psychology was seen mainly as a service job, and because most of his research was on teaching-related topics such as the effects of particular lecture methods and the validity of student ratings, he did not get big grants (or big pay raises). However, his interest in promoting excellence in the teaching of psychology inspired him to do a remarkable thing: In 1978, he organized an annual "Institute on the Teaching of Psychology to Undergraduates," the first meeting of its kind for psychology faculty. Frank invited me to talk about teaching abnormal psychology at this event in 1979, and he later asked me to join the program committee for what became the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology, or NITOP (for more on the history of NITOP, visit <http://www.nitop.org>).

It was at the first Institute that I realized that there were psychology faculty whose careers and passion focused primarily on their teaching. Listening to them talk about their teaching opened new horizons to me, and I was soon asking myself a lot of questions about my heretofore unexamined teaching methods. Were my lectures as clear and logically organized as they could be? Was I taking advantage of the classroom demonstrations and other activities that were available to me? Were my multiple-choice exam items well worded and properly balanced across content areas, and were the correct answers randomly distributed across the four response alternatives? As my involvement with teaching grew over the years, new questions arose relating to such issues as promoting critical thinking and active learning, incorporating cultural diversity, creating an inclusive classroom atmosphere, dealing with student excuses, and discouraging academic dishonesty.

I am not teaching as much as I did in years past, but I find that talking to the faculty who attend NITOP and other psychology teaching conferences each year still gives me new things to think about, new ideas for improving my teaching, and renewed enthusiasm for the teaching enterprise.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

The elements of the teaching enterprise have changed considerably since the 1960s. The advent of the Internet, PowerPoint, Blackboard and WebCT, distance learning, wireless student response devices, online office hours, and other aspects of high-tech teaching have made the teaching of psychology more complicated, more challenging, and potentially more powerful. However, I have found that my basic approach to teaching has not changed much, and that when I do use various digital teaching tools, it is in the service of goals and principles that over the years have become simpler and somewhat less ambitious.

For example, although it is now possible to cover more content in a course, I now prefer covering less, especially during class, and especially in Introductory Psychology. I have learned to accept that students may not be as interested in psychology as I wish they were, that they may not read the textbook as assigned, and that they may forget many of my course's finer points quite soon after the final exam. I have also realized that no matter how fast I talk, or how many multimedia displays I present, there will never enough time in class to get to everything that I might like to cover. However, I have not despaired because having these insights has led me to another insight, namely that there is always enough class time to make a small amount of course material come alive and to encourage students to learn more about it—and the rest of the course—on their own if they wish. So I like to spend my class time on material that I think students will find fascinating, or that I think I can make fascinating. I punctuate my lectures on these topics with lots of demonstrations and classroom activities, and I do not worry much about all the material that I have to omit. I like to think that this use of class time helps motivate students to read, or even re-read, their textbook, to ask questions and make comments in class, and to come to office hours or have an e-mail discussion about material that remains unclear. So, as in my graduate school days, I am still skipping a lot of material, but not because of ignorance, and only in class. The material I do not have time to cover in the classroom is to be learned by doing the assigned reading, and my quizzes and exams test students' knowledge of the entire textbook.

This approach to teaching is based on the premise—a correct one, I believe—that college students are responsible adults who can decide for themselves what they want from their courses. If they want to learn a lot about psychology, I will bend over backwards to help them do so. If they just want to get by, I am willing to let them do that, too. Their choice is reflected in their grade. When I explain my approach on the first day of class, a few students inevitably drop the course, but the vast majority stick around, and many of them later tell me that they took great satisfaction from having faced and overcome the challenge I set for them. I benefit from this approach, too, because it has helped to maintain my enthusiasm for teaching, and it makes me miss teaching when I am not doing it. Knowing that I am going to

surprise, delight, confound, or challenge my students in tomorrow's class has made teaching—and planning my teaching—one of the most enjoyable and satisfying aspects of my life.

Finally, I find that the teaching approach I have described allows me more class time to pursue several goals that I think are at least as important as the teaching the specifics of psychology courses. These goals, which I have described in more detail elsewhere (Bernstein, 1997; Goss Lucas & Bernstein, 2005) include (a) portraying psychology as an empirical science based on critical thinking, (b) portraying psychological knowledge as a body of information that changes through research, (c) portraying the breadth and diversity of psychology and its subfields, (d) creating opportunities for active learning, (e) emphasizing the importance of psychology in everyday life, and (f) portraying psychology as a discipline whose subfields overlap with each other and with other disciplines.

Am I a better teacher now than I was when I started? I think so, but any improvements are not reflected in student ratings, which were (unjustifiably) high in 1968 and haven't declined much since. Recent ratings tell me that students still like my classroom style, but I like to think that my courses are now more substantial in terms of the content I present, the methods I use to present it, and the tests I employ to assess students' learning. With experience, including the experience that has come from writing psychology textbooks, I have found it easier to tell a richer story in class, to answer students' questions in greater depth and within a broader context, to anticipate what material students will find most challenging, to help motivated students find relevant additional readings and resources, and to advise students about careers in psychology. Because of these changes, I believe that students taking, say, introductory psychology with me today would get a version that is superior in almost every way to the one I taught thirty-five years ago. At least I certainly hope so!

Advice for New Teachers

My uncertainty about the quality of my teaching reflects the difficulty inherent in trying to decide exactly what constitutes “good teaching,” or how, exactly, to do it. Still, I think there are some very simple, very general guidelines for effective teaching, and I wish that someone had told me about them before I taught my first course. My version of these guidelines is presented below. Further information about these and other characteristics of effective teachers can be found in other sources (e.g. Forsyth, 2003; Goss Lucas & Bernstein, 2005). Keeping these guidelines in mind can help make new teachers' first forays into the white water of teaching a lot less stressful, and may thus help them become better teachers sooner.

1. Show students that you care about your teaching and about them. Caring teachers tend to get better ratings, have more enjoyable classes, and receive more student respect and support.
2. Be yourself. Students are not impressed by exaggerated efforts to impress or intimidate, and such efforts can poison the classroom atmosphere.
3. Be reasonable and fair, but set firm rules and stick to them.
4. Be prepared for your course, and for every class.
5. Expect the unexpected, and stay calm when it happens.
6. Remember that what you teach today may be proven wrong tomorrow, so present psychological knowledge in the context of a continuing research process.
7. Keep your sense of humor, and don't be afraid to let it show.
8. Keep your students in mind. Can they easily see and hear you? Are your visuals visible from the back of the room? Repeat every student question and comment so that everyone can hear it.
9. Do not demean or argue with students in class. If you are disrespectful to a student, even an obnoxious one, you will look like a bully. Deal with individual problems outside of class.
10. Remember that most students are on your side when the course begins. They want you to succeed, and they want the class to go well, so you actually have to work at alienating them. In other words, success in teaching is largely a matter of keeping a positive atmosphere positive.

Final Thoughts

I hope that you find some of these guidelines useful in your own teaching. To those readers who are about to start an academic career, I would like to say that teaching psychology is the greatest gig I can imagine. Every term, you are given a new group of students who, for the most part, know less about psychology than you do. You then have the pleasure of telling them about what psychological scientists and practitioners have accomplished over the last 125 years, and why those accomplishments are important—not only for promoting human welfare in general, but for their lives in particular. You also get paid. Not a lot, of course, but there are many other compensations.

For example, every now and again, sometimes with an offhand comment or example of which you may later have no memory, you will affect students' lives in ways you could never have foreseen. I will never forget the APA convention at which a well-known psychology professor told me that it was his experience as a student in my abnormal psychology class at Illinois that led him to change his major to psychology. I was delighted,

because—even though he has written a competing book in introductory psychology—I realized that I had indirectly contributed to our field through him and his research. I am sure that readers who are experienced teachers have had similar experiences, and that you share these same feelings of pride.

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