

My Life in Teaching: A Garden of Delights (and a Few Thistles)

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I teach high school psychology. The larger audience for this book is likely to be individuals involved in or considering teaching at the college level. Thus, my particular niche is going to be different in some ways different from most of the stories in this volume. Welcome to my world!

I have taught psychology and advanced placement psychology at Cedar Falls High School in Iowa since 1978. I graduated from St. Olaf College with a BA in psychology and later earned an MA in teaching from the University of Iowa. I have been involved in a number of American Psychological Association (APA) initiatives, serving as a member of the task force that authored the *National Standards for High School Psychology*, chairing the executive board of Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools (TOPSS), and co-editing the 4th volume of the *APA Activities Handbook for the Teaching of Psychology* (Benjamin, Nodine, Ernst, & Blair-Broeker, 1999). I have been an essay reader or table leader for the Advanced Placement (AP) Psychology Examination since the test was first administered in 1992, and I completed a 3-year term on the AP Psychology Test Development Committee. I have had the opportunity to lead workshops or make presentations in 20 states or provinces. For 3 years, Perilou Goddard and I co-directed Teaching the Science of Psychology, a summer institute for high school psychology teachers supported by the National Science Foundation and the Northern Kentucky University Foundation. Among my teaching awards are the 1996 Grinnell College Outstanding Iowa Teacher Award, the 1989 University of Iowa Distinguished Teacher Award, and the APA Society for the Teaching of Psychology (Division 2) Teaching Excellence Award (now known as the Moffet Memorial Award) in 1992. Randy Ernst and I co-authored *Thinking About Psychology: The Science of Mind and Behavior* (Blair-Broeker & Ernst, 2003), a high school psychology textbook. Most of these accomplishments would not have been possible without the loving support and endless patience of my wife, Lynn, and my two sons, Carl and Eric.

My Early Development as a Teacher

I have met many teachers who knew since childhood that they wanted to be in the classroom. This thought never crossed my mind until I was a graduate student in clinical psychology at the University of Iowa in the early 1970s. My undergraduate major was psychology, and I applied to clinical programs based mostly on my interest in the field and a lack of any real examination of the alternatives. Getting accepted into a competitive program

sealed the deal, and I started at Iowa with a high dose of enthusiasm, but little clear understanding as to what I was ultimately after professionally.

I cannot tell you where the idea to teach high school psychology came from, but I do know exactly where and when it entered my head. I was walking to class in Iowa City one morning in my second semester of graduate school, and—wham—there it was. I had never taken an education class or even considered this career before. Nobody in my family has ever taught, and in fact my parents did not have particularly high regard for teachers. Nonetheless, there the idea was, staring at me and not looking at all like it was about to go away. I ended up in several offices that morning trying to learn how this new idea could come to pass. A master of arts in teaching program seemed perfectly suited to what I had in mind, and in a year and a half I had jumped through the necessary hoops to walk into a classroom in Kearney, Nebraska as a newly minted teacher of history, sociology, and, thank God, a couple sections of psychology.

Unlike many psychology teachers, I have had a full dose of education courses, ranging from educational psychology to social studies methods to A-V technology (this course is the one course that no prospective teacher at Iowa could avoid. If you ever need something laminated or require a filmstrip projector operator, I am your man.).

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Teaching in a public high school is never dull. It is an occupation that continually brings you in contact with a wide variety of people. In fact, when people ask me what I teach, my typical answer is “people.” I get 48 minutes a day with five classes of about 25 students each. A semester is 90 days, so that leaves me 4,320 minutes—72 hours—to make whatever impact I will make. In my career, I have had some 7,000 such opportunities, and I know of no way to quantify the nature of the impact. The anecdotal evidence is usually gratifying. I will occasionally get a note or, in recent years, an e-mail bringing me up to date on the life of a former student, and I admit to wondering how many have continued in psychology at least in part due to the seeds planted in my classroom. One time at the annual National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP) teaching conference, I was riding an elevator when a young woman whom I did not recognize said, “B²?” (B² is the nickname I was given years ago by students who found Blair-Broeker to be too much of a mouthful). Turns out she was now teaching psychology in a community college and credited me for her interest in the field. Such moments are as delightful as they are rare.

Of course, one can influence students in ways other than career choice. I like to think I model intellectual curiosity, integrity, critical thinking, optimism, and other qualities I believe make our world a better place. Sometimes the influence is humorous. Just this spring I

received an e-mail from a former student titled “the lucky pink eraser.” On the day of the AP psychology test, I usually give my students a little eraser for good luck (and to help them be able to change answers on a machine-scored form with out losing credit.). Jeremy had kept his eraser for 10 years. His e-mail related how it had accompanied him on foreign travels, sat on the desk when he took various qualifying tests and filled out applications, and rested in his pocket as he successfully defended his doctoral dissertation in political science the week before he wrote. I chided him about being a highly educated young man who was still unable to distinguish between correlation and causation, but remain highly pleased that I apparently touched his life in a significant way. This, at its core, is why I teach.

The job would be relatively easy if one’s only contacts were with students in the classroom. My greatest challenges often come from different directions. This year, for example, I am assigned to supervise the cafeteria for 50 minutes each day. Although most students are well behaved on most days, there are still enough thrown carrots, spilled milks, and bruised egos to make the duty unpleasant. The irony is that, in light of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation, teachers are required to devote additional time to professional development. Two days of classroom instruction time were shifted to this purpose this year. However, if my colleagues and I could devote our supervision duty to professional development, we would each have about 150 additional hours a year for the task. What’s the rub? The district would have to hire non-teaching supervisors, and the money is not available. So, the students pay for the privilege of not being “left behind” with their instructional time.

After almost 30 years, I admit I am tired of supervision duties. I am tired of faculty meetings. I am tired of committees. I am tired of bureaucratic paperwork. I recognize that sometimes these other activities have merit, but in my mind they distract me from my primary responsibilities in the classroom and rarely seem to relate to my ability to teach effectively. Alas, I have become a curmudgeon.

I truly hesitate to put a philosophy of teaching in writing, because it bestows a permanence that does not exist. Analogies often speak to me, and clarify for my students, so perhaps it is enough to say that part of my philosophy finds teaching a bit like a nice garden; it changes from month to month and season to season but generally is productive. I try to stay fresh like the garden; fertile like the garden. Gardeners require sun, water, and compost to work their magic. I require contact with colleagues and time to read and reflect if I am to serve my students. Gardens are a place for seeds to grow, and I certainly try to plant seeds in my classroom as well. Vegetable gardens serve practical needs and flower gardens serve aesthetic purposes, just as I try to touch on both realms in my classroom. A garden reflects the personality of its keeper, and a good classroom does the same. Gardens are earthy, genuine,

sometimes contaminated with a weed or two, and occasionally fail to produce. All can be said of me and my teaching from time to time.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

When I began teaching, I found it exhilarating but frightening. I still do. I am perhaps more mellow about it than I once was, and on a cognitive level I understand that my work will be adequate and often good, but I still start most days with some nagging doubts about the lesson about to unfold. I worry more than I used to about lost opportunities, convinced that our most precious resource is time. Maybe what I have planned is okay, but is it the best possible use of the day's time?

Not only do I fret before I start, I also spend time at the end of the day deconstructing what has happened, especially when the lesson has not gone well. On those relatively rare occasions when there has been an unpleasant interaction in the classroom or I must deal with unhappy parents or confront a student about cheating, my day is largely ruined. I replay the scenario in my head wondering what I could have done differently to avoid the unpleasantness. I think these situations just go with the territory. Even in cases where I can attribute almost all the blame to a dishonest student or an unreasonable parent, it is difficult to let it go. Albert Ellis would be all over me.

I have always emphasized content in my class. Public schools are called upon to handle everything from personal hygiene to computer literacy. At various times just in the current school year I have been asked to consider how to instill a love of reading, how to improve the performance of my students on standardized tests, how to help students develop a sense of personal responsibility, and (this seems to be the big one in my school this year) how to get students to dress appropriately within the confines of our dress code. If I am not careful, it is easy to forget I was hired to teach psychology.

The vast majority of students appreciate a content-rich course. It's the classes filled with busywork and with no clear expectations of academic accomplishment that they complain about most. I hear some grumbling along the way, but most students enjoy the sense of accomplishment that comes from mastering new material.

Finally, I have learned that effective teaching and learning are not incompatible with having fun. I want laughter in my class every day, partly because it makes it a more pleasant environment for me (after all, I spend more time in my classroom than anyone else) does and partly because I am convinced students learn more under such circumstances.

Advice for New Teachers

My father was fond of saying that a good life is a balanced life. The same, I believe, can be said of a good teacher. Those who cannot maintain a sense of balance (some days it

seems more like juggling) ought not apply. Somehow, one must deal with both the little details, like how to get students to see the distinction between positive and negative reinforcement, and the big picture, like helping students realize the incredible potential of psychology to improve our world. One has to consider overall lesson planning for an entire semester *along with* how to spend four extra random minutes when a lesson is completed early. One needs to appreciate that allowing one more student in an overloaded class, in itself, does not create an unreasonable burden on your time, but saying yes to every request to do just a little more is a rocket ride to burnout. One must carefully consider the concerns of every disgruntled student (not to mention parent, colleague, and administrator) yet remember that you cannot please everyone.

Ultimately, every teacher, whether new or well-seasoned, must chart his or her own course. Literally hundreds of decisions are made in the course of a single day. Some will be easy and some will be hard; some clear-cut and others ambiguous; some trivial and others crucial. You will not make the right call each time, but then again you do not have to. Take pride and comfort in the fact that our discipline specializes in critical thinking and, whatever else, know that you are doing something important, worthy of your passion, and fun. Teach well.

References

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