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Joy of Teaching

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This chapter should be titled “Joys of Teaching,” because there are so many such joys. I chose the singular noun to parallel titles of two popular books that people of my generation will remember: *Joy of Cooking* and *Joy of Sex*. I hasten to add, however, that this chapter focuses more on teaching than on cooking or sex, which will disappoint some readers more than others.

Born in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, on May 10, 1932, I graduated from high school there, received a BA degree in psychology from Hendrix College, and earned MA and PhD degrees in experimental psychology from the University of Arkansas. In addition, I did graduate work at Indiana University and postdoctoral work at Harvard University and the University of Michigan.

After teaching at The College of Wooster and at Elmira College, I joined the faculty at Furman University in 1967, was promoted to Professor in 1970, served as chair of my department from 1972 until 1984, and was named the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Psychology in 1998. My work has received more recognition than it deserves. For example, I received Furman’s first Meritorious Teaching Award in 1969, the American Psychological Foundation’s (APF) Distinguished Teaching Award in 1989, and the American Psychological Association’s (APA) Distinguished Career Contributions to Education and Training Award in 1995.

I especially cherish a few memorable highlights. After serving as editor of *Teaching of Psychology* from 1985-1996, I was named Editor Emeritus during a special session at the APA convention in Toronto. Stephen F. Davis and William Buskist edited a book, *The Teaching of Psychology: Essays Honoring Wilbert J. McKeachie and Charles L. Brewer*, that was published in 2002. The editors and many authors of these essays are dear friends, and I was touched by their work on this extraordinary project. To be associated in this way with Bill McKeachie, my long-time friend and a national treasure for teachers, was a peak experience. In 2003, the APF renamed its teaching award, which was first presented to Fred S. Keller and Freda Gould Rebelsky in 1970, the Charles L. Brewer Distinguished Teaching of Psychology Award. Recipients of this prestigious award include many legendary teachers, and I am deeply honored to be associated with them. Endowed funds to enhance the teaching and learning of psychology have been established in my name at Furman University and Hendrix College. I received the Distinguished Alumnus Award from Hendrix in 2004. At the 2005

APA convention in Washington, DC, the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP) will sponsor a session titled *Affecting Eternity: Honoring the Contributions of Charles L. Brewer*.

Most of my recent scholarship and publications concern undergraduate education; teaching; and John B. Watson, who graduated from Furman in 1899. Having participated in almost all important conferences dealing with undergraduate education in psychology during the last 30 years, I have been a consultant on psychology curricula and teaching for many colleges and universities throughout the country. I have presented numerous invited addresses at local, state, regional, national, and international conferences. In all this work, I received abundant positive, but intermittent, reinforcement from many wonderful colleagues.

My Early Development as a Teacher

When I was a graduate student in the 1960s, not many psychology programs stressed teaching and even fewer provided formal preparation for aspiring teachers. The lacuna in this important aspect of academic preparation was appalling, and it still is. I was fortunate, however, to have several excellent mentors. Dr. John P. Anderson was my favorite Hendrix College professor. As his teaching assistant, I presented lectures in a few of his classes. After college, I served an apprenticeship with Miss Emily Penton, a history teacher at Little Rock Central High School, in a program sponsored by the Ford Foundation to encourage college graduates to pursue teaching careers. Both of these master teachers provided good guidance as I struggled to cultivate an appropriate philosophy of education and approach to pedagogy. They both insisted that beginning teachers should not merely emulate their role models, but that all neophytes must develop their own educational philosophies and personal styles. These two teachers were important influences in my early career, and they still are. Memorable mentors at the University of Arkansas were Professors Donald Kausler and Hardy Wilcoxon. I learned a lot about psychology from them, and their exacting standards and teaching techniques affected my further development. The most valuable lesson I learned from these four extraordinary people was how exciting and rewarding the life of a teacher can be.

I never took a course in the teaching of psychology, and nothing in graduate school prepared me for those first few frenetic years of full-time teaching. Staying two pages ahead of the students in courses I never taught, or maybe never took, required more time than I ever imagined. This illustrates what later became Brewer's Third Law: Things always take longer than they do.

Since early childhood, I wanted to be a teacher, but the problem was deciding what to teach. I could have been happy teaching biology, English, history, philosophy, or political science, but taking General Psychology with Dr. Anderson changed my life. After this course, I decided to be a psychology major and a teacher of psychology. His excellent teaching, high

standards, and constant encouragement were critical in shaping every aspect of my academic career and professional life.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Not Enough Time

In addition to ignorance about how to teach, the major problem in my teaching relates to the previously mentioned Third Law. There is always more to do than time to do it. After decades of experience, I still struggle with this problem. I concluded many years ago that most college teachers are far smarter and more efficient than I am. This conclusion came from observing that I have to spend more time doing my work than they spend doing theirs. One effective strategy for overcoming this deficiency is to start earlier and work later than they do.

Another adaptive strategy concerns setting priorities for spending one's time. Early in my career, I did a lot of university committee work related to so-called faculty governance. Many years ago, however, I decided to do less of this work after learning that most of it is neither productive nor rewarding and that much of it is a waste of time. I now leave such work to people who are eager to do it and who seem to have nothing else to do. My only regret is that this decision did not come earlier in my career.

Teaching, Scholarship, and Service: A Delicate Balance

The relative importance of teaching, scholarship, and service for college teachers has been a contentious issue for a long time (McGovern & Brewer, 2003). Perhaps because of widespread public criticism and greater insistence on accountability by various constituencies, the debate has become hotter in recent years. College teachers are expected to excel in all three areas. Some people can, but most of us cannot. These conflicting demands have never been a problem for me, however, because I try to balance them in a way that is manageable and right for me. They all complement each other. For longer than some readers are old, I have been a spirited teacher, an active researcher, and a frequent participant in far-flung professional activities. Each of these aspects of my work improves performance on the other two, thereby making me better at all three. My problem is not allocating appropriate time to each of the three but the total time available. As noted earlier, my strategy is to work harder and longer.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

Trying to discuss one's philosophy of teaching is difficult and perhaps fatuous. Forced to do so, however, I suggest that my approach has several important ingredients, including passion, principles, preparation, parsimony, perseverance, patience, and precision. Brewer (2002) and Batson and Einstein (2002) illustrate how these qualities pervade my life as a teacher, and I shall comment on them later in this chapter. A critical aspect of my philosophy

concerns academic rigor. Based on extensive experience, I can assert with confidence bordering on certainty that academic rigor is on the wane and grade inflation is a national travesty. Intellectual pursuits that are not challenging and rewarding are probably worthless; they are surely worth less than those that are challenging and rewarding. My rigorous, no-nonsense approach to teaching was greatly influenced by the four mentors mentioned earlier. This approach received a high compliment from a student who graduated from Furman more than 3 decades ago and who is now a clinical psychologist in Charlotte, North Carolina. In the postscript to a letter, she wrote: "Brewer, leave no academic butt unkicked." This exhortation is now my maxim. One obligation of academic butt-kickers is to embody facets of my philosophy mentioned earlier. These will go a long way toward engaging students and inspiring them to do better than they can. I hope that many of my former students, including some of the more than 200 who have earned doctoral degrees in psychology, would agree that this is what I try to do in all interactions with students. To conclude the first lecture in every course, I tell students that I will not teach them anything. After watching their reactions of incredulity, I repeat that I will not teach them anything. Then, after a pregnant pause, I say that I will try to arrange the situation so that they cannot avoid learning more than they ever wanted to know about psychology and more than they ever learned in any other course. They leave that first class thinking that this course will be unusual, and I try not to disappoint them.

Changing Approaches

As a beginning instructor, I thought that students had to learn everything in their textbooks and that they could not learn anything that I did not teach them. Trying frantically to cover every chapter, I lectured in a style resembling rapid-fire pontification. My approach is different now. I start on the first day of the term and stop on the last day, without fretting about covering everything about everything. I have not covered all chapters in my introductory psychology textbook in decades. Likewise, I now believe that good teachers are good story-tellers, so I tell more stories. (As a beginning teacher, I had no stories to tell.) Ever since I started teaching, students complain about two things: I talk too fast and my exams are too hard. After hearing these comments for many years, I have no plans to change my rate of speaking or the difficulty of my exams.

Technology in Teaching

Computer technology may have produced more dramatic changes in how we teach and students learn since Johann Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1437. Many Web sites contain valuable information for teachers and students, and I consult them often. Accessing the Oxford English Dictionary with one mouse click is delightful. I regularly check certain Web sites devoted to science, and I frequently use information from them in my classes. Electronic access to journals, with full text and graphics, has changed how I do many things

that were unthinkable a few years ago. In addition, most textbook publishers have their own Web sites that provide more information than I need or use. PowerPoint presentations have supplanted old-fashioned lecturing for many teachers. I routinely use computer technology in ways that improve my teaching and scholarship. I have never used PowerPoint presentations as substitutes for lectures, and I probably never will. I continue to believe that the most important education occurs in face-to-face interactions of teachers and students.

How Am I Doing?

One of the most rewarding things about teaching is lecturing in ways that combine effective communication, panache, and a willingness to try anything to make a fact or principle memorable. Such lecturing can be exciting and fun. When it no longer is, I will stop teaching and do something else.

The most frustrating thing about teaching is that you never know what you are doing. As a beginning teacher, I was concerned almost exclusively with assessing students' knowledge of the substantive content of courses, and this assessment seemed straightforward. Recent emphasis on more varied and comprehensive assessment, including such things as critical thinking, diversity issues, portfolios, and group projects, has complicated the situation. Assessing students' knowledge of the substantive content of courses is the easy part; assessing these other aspects of performance is frustratingly difficult. The APA's Task Force on Undergraduate Psychology Major Competencies provides valuable suggestions and a copy of its report may be found on STP's Web site: <http://www.teachpsych.org>.

The most reassuring and valuable assessment has little to do with what students learn about psychology, although I hope that my students learn a lot about it. A teacher's greatest rewards often come when students write or visit, sometimes many years after they graduate, and tell you that something you said or did changed their lives in important ways. Making the world a better place by making a difference in students' lives is the real reason for teaching. Understandably and unfortunately, few formal assessment techniques address this facet of our work.

Instant success as a teacher is impossible, but constant improvement is not. I ignore the former and concentrate on the latter. I read every issue of STP's journal, *Teaching of Psychology*. In addition, STP's Office of Teaching Resources in Psychology (OTRP) provides a plethora of useful information, and I consult it often. Local, state, regional, national, and international conferences of psychological organizations and on the teaching of psychology are excellent opportunities to learn about good teaching and how others do it. I have participated in more of these conferences than I can remember, and I always learn from them. The camaraderie and informal discussions at these meetings are important benefits as well. Information about the resources mentioned in this paragraph is included on STP's Web site.

Advice for New Teachers

My advice for new teachers is called “Brewer’s Ten Commandments of Teaching” (Brewer, 2002, pp. 503-506). Summarizing them briefly is difficult, but they involve the following:

1. Be clear about your educational goals and objectives.
2. Go beyond the facts; teach principles.
3. Questions are more important than answers.
4. Strive for clarity, conciseness, and felicity of expression in speaking and writing.
5. Be passionate about learning and teaching.
6. Be fair and friendly with all students but familiar with none.
7. Maintain high academic standards.
8. Cultivate close relationships with colleagues of all ages.
9. The most important education is self-education, and it is a lifelong process.
10. Be patient with your students and with yourself.

Practical advice is easier. A few suggestions:

1. Read and heed *McKeachie’s Teaching Tips* (2002).
2. Participate in the numerous activities concerning teaching sponsored by APA, STP, and APS. These are updated on each organization’s Web site.
3. Read every issue of STP’s journal, *Teaching of Psychology*.
4. Learn about teaching from colleagues and/or mentors.
5. Proudly celebrate teaching as a sacred calling.

No advice from me or anyone else will ensure success for new teachers, but these things have benefited my academic odyssey and made teaching more interesting and exciting for me and my students.

Final Thoughts: Personal Joys

One great joy of teaching is to observe students’ personal, academic, and vocational success. Many of my former students are psychologists and other professionals with notable accomplishments, and I heartily celebrate them. I rejoice when students do well, but I am proudest when students do right.

Another great joy is working with many exemplary and indefatigable teachers of high school psychology, especially in TOPSS. Their outstanding work in getting APA’s official approval of national standards for the teaching of high school psychology is one indication of their stunning success. I am pleased to have played a role in that historic project.

Still another great joy comes from mentoring colleagues at Furman and elsewhere. Many of these people have won teaching awards at local, state, and national levels. Several of

them are outstanding scholars who contribute regularly to the primary literature. Others are leaders in APA, STP, TOPSS, and APS. Many of them now write with greater clarity, conciseness, and felicity of expression as authors, reviewers, consulting editors, and editors. (Another great joy of teaching is to read good writing and to write good reading.) I take no credit for their noteworthy and commendable achievements; I merely note and commend them. I must admit, however, that I take pride in having encouraged these valued colleagues to pursue certain opportunities for their professional development.

My greatest joy as a teacher comes from the warmth and support of congenial colleagues and faithful friends throughout the world. Most of these people are kind enough not to dwell on my many foibles and idiosyncrasies, for which I am grateful. My simple and heartfelt message for all of them: You have enriched my life, and I thank you very much. Borrowing from Alexander Pope and Henry Brooks Adams, I revere teachers who devote their lives to “bending twigs” and “affecting eternity.” I always have. I always will.

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