

Good Fortune, Good Friends, Good Times

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I have spent my entire professional career as a Professor of Psychology at Mesa Community College (MCC) in Mesa, Arizona. Although teaching has changed considerably over the years, my love for teaching at MCC has never waned. The opportunity to give students their first taste of psychology and to share my enthusiasm for the field has kept me energized about teaching. I love students and I love teaching, thus the community college environment suits my passions.

I received my B.A. and M.A. in Experimental Psychology from Occidental College (Oxy) and my Ph.D. from Arizona State University. I served as Psi Beta National President in 1994 and was awarded the Virginia Staudt Sexton Psi Beta Faculty Advisor Award in 2000. Also in 2000, I received the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP; Division 2 of the American Psychological Association [APA]) Two Year College Teaching Excellence Award. I am a Fellow and Executive Board Member of Western Psychological Association (WPA) and was awarded the WPA Outstanding Teaching Award in 2003. At MCC, I was honored with the MCC Faculty Excellence in Teaching Award in 1995, and most recently, with the inaugural MCC Distinguished Faculty Award in 2005.

My Early Development as a Teacher

My first exposure to psychology, as a freshman at Occidental College, proved to be addicting. I was so enthralled with my first course in psychology that I knew right away that this was the field for me. It was 1970, behaviorism was popular, and I was especially interested in comparative animal behavior. Although Oxy had only 1600 students, the Psychology Department had eight outstanding full-time faculty members. I developed my concept of what constituted good teaching by observing these individuals.

I had the good fortune of having Dr. Dennis VanderWeele as my senior honors thesis advisor. He had recently joined the Oxy faculty and he was pleased to have an undergraduate who was interested in animal research. Although he said that he did not know much about birds, he was willing to help me with my thesis study on prenatal auditory imprinting in quail. This point marked the beginning of my fascination with experimental psychology and research. Dr. VanderWeele not only taught me how to conduct animal research, he also initiated my socialization into the field of professional psychology. He helped me design, run, and publish my undergraduate thesis, then enabled me to present the findings at the annual meeting of the WPA. He also facilitated a graduate fellowship that enabled me to stay at Oxy

and complete a Master's Degree in Experimental Psychology. In addition, he inspired me to think about college level teaching of psychology. His dedication to students provided a model that has influenced my teaching throughout my career. Although I did not have any formal training in teaching, I had the good fortune of learning from a master teacher.

One week after I completed my Master's thesis defense at Oxy, I was hired as an adjunct professor to teach Introduction to Psychology at Mesa Community College. At the age of 23, I was simultaneously elated and terrified at the prospect of teaching college students. I overprepared for every class and read everything that I could on college teaching. I knew right away that I loved teaching. The subject matter of psychology continued to intrigue me and I found my interactions with students fulfilling.

I began a PhD program in Educational Psychology at Arizona State University while I continued to teach part time at MCC. Because I was simultaneously playing the dual roles of teacher and student, I paid close attention to the techniques used by my professors and privately critiqued their methods. As I watched them teach, I thought about what they did that I wanted to emulate and what they did that I wanted to avoid. I think we can learn to become better teachers by occasionally returning to the classroom as students.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Meanwhile, my husband and I began our family and we were blessed with three sons in six years. I was faced with juggling a career while raising young children. I continued to teach part-time until my youngest son was two-years old, and then I was hired full-time at Mesa Community College as the only female in an eight member department. I finished my PhD several years later. I discovered that teaching usually gave me needed flexibility to work around my children's schedules. I was even able to plan their births during spring break or summer. My time on campus was spent primarily teaching classes and meeting with students. I could do my grading and course preparation at home, after the children were asleep. As long as I did not need more than 5 hours sleep per night, I was alright. One of the greatest conflicts occurred when I suddenly had a sick child who required my care while I felt committed to hold classes for my students. This sort of dilemma always created great stress for me, but I reminded myself that my children had only one mother and my students had several teachers. As a result of this experience, I became more empathetic to my students who were also parents, and it helped me keep a more realistic perspective of the importance of my classes in my students' eyes.

Psi Beta as a Vehicle for Mentoring Students

Some of the most rewarding experiences of my teaching career have been spawned by my role as advisor of our Psi Beta Chapter. Psi Beta is the national honor society for students of psychology in community colleges. Chartering a Psi Beta chapter was one of the first efforts that I initiated after becoming a full-time faculty member. There were no other Psi Beta chapters in Arizona at that time. We started with eight members in 1989 and, as of 2004, we have inducted 607 members. We have an active chapter that engages in a variety of community service, academic enrichment, and social activities each semester. Every year, several colleagues and I take students to the APA Convention and/or to the WPA Convention to present their research and to begin their socialization into the field. Our chapter has won the National Outstanding Chapter Award six times and has been inducted into the Psi Beta National Hall of Fame. Three of our students have won the Carol Tracy National Community Service Award and 11 have won awards in the Allyn & Bacon Research Paper Competition. Psi Beta has provided a vehicle for me to mentor more than just the students in my classes. I have thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to encourage and guide students in the same way that I was guided during my undergraduate experience.

Involvement in National Psychology Organizations

My association with Psi Beta has impacted my life in multiple ways. In 1993, Carol Tracy, Executive Director of Psi Beta, encouraged me to run for Western Region Vice President. I had never considered doing anything on a national level before and I was very flattered. Little did I know that my decision to accept her invitation would change my career forever. I was elected to that position and served on the Psi Beta National Council for the next 5 years. I had the good fortune to meet some wonderful psychologists from around the country whom I will always value as good friends. I feel tremendous admiration and gratitude to Carol for her friendship, personal encouragement and leadership in the formation and administration of Psi Beta. In 1994, I was elected National President of Psi Beta and I continued to network with psychology teachers all over the nation. I learned so much from these dedicated people and my teaching greatly benefited from their association. By venturing out of my local campus and networking with this national organization, my career took a significant turn that proved exciting and life altering.

STP is another organization that has broadened my horizons in teaching and facilitated networking with outstanding teachers of psychology. In 1998, Dr. Diane Halpern invited me to participate on the STP Long Range Planning Committee. This exciting opportunity allowed me to work closely with outstanding teachers whom I had only admired from a distance. I had the unbelievable experience of discussing teaching and learning with the best teachers in the

field. I was inspired to think a lot about teaching and how I could emulate some of their techniques.

Psychology Mentors in Professional Organizations

In 1999, Diane Halpern, then president of WPA, nominated me to run for the Representative-At-Large position on the Executive Board. To my surprise, I was elected and I am currently serving my second 3-year term in this position. This outcome directly resulted from the mentoring efforts by Diane Halpern and many others who have recently enabled community college faculty to get involved and make contributions to the teaching community.

In 1997, I was invited to join Community College Working Group, a five-member group appointed by the APA Board of Educational Affairs. Through monthly conference calls and biannual meetings, this group studied and conferred on the needs of community college psychology faculty. The efforts of this group led directly to the formation of the APA Committee of Psychology Teachers at Community Colleges (PT@CC) in 2002. This group now numbers over 700 community college teachers of psychology who are full APA members or APA affiliates. The support of many prominent psychologists from universities and colleges facilitated the establishment of PT@CC. As inaugural chair, my involvement in the “birth” of PT@CC has been an exciting and satisfying experience that has fostered many new friendships with outstanding community-college psychology teachers.

Participation on these national boards and committees has been an enriching experience. I have had the good fortune of support from MCC in terms of allowing me time away from my classes to attend national meetings and conventions. I have often missed several days each semester to attend these activities; that is the major drawback of my participation. However, these associations have provided inspiration and motivation for me to become a better teacher, so I think my students have benefited in the long run. I have no doubt that I have given much more consideration to issues of effective teaching and learning than I would have without these opportunities.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

In my opinion, good teaching involves relating effectively to students as individuals. In the classroom, I try to personalize my lectures so that students feel that I am talking to them rather than “at them.” I use personal examples and encourage them to connect the subject matter to their own experiences. Many of my assignments involve students’ active application of the concepts being studied. I think that students will best remember the material that they find relevant. For many students, the Introduction to Psychology course is the only psychology class that they will ever take. My goal is to give them something that they can use to become a better employee, better parent, better spouse, or better consumer of information.

Our job as teachers is not only to explain the concepts and theories of psychology, but to help them discover how those concepts relate to their lives.

Another important tenet of my teaching philosophy is that “less is better.” I strive to identify a few of the most important concepts and theories, then explain them thoroughly, rather than using the machine gun approach to touch on everything in the text. My primary goals are to impart depth and relevance to my students’ understanding of the classes that I teach. There is so much interesting information in psychology that I think we often teach smatterings of too many different things, leaving students overwhelmed, thus retaining little. I try to ask myself ahead of time what really are the most important concepts that I need to communicate in this lesson, this chapter, and this unit. As Dr. Ludy Benjamin (2002) so wisely commented, “If you feel that you have to communicate to students all that you know about your discipline, you are in for a lifetime of disappointment” (p. 62).

Students remember much more of what they learn outside the classroom than what they learn within its walls. I require students to do outside projects that allow them to pursue their own interests and express their creativity in areas related to the course. Due to their personal investment in these projects, students are more likely to remember the content over the long run. I also try to engage students in extracurricular activities, such as Psi Beta, and to enable them to conduct their own research and present it at conferences and through avenues such as the PT@CC Allyn & Bacon Electronic Poster Contest and the Psi Beta Research Paper Contest. Many times students underestimate their own ability, but with a little nudging, they achieve great things and become more confident. When I hear back from former students, I realize how important these experiences have been in their academic and professional careers.

One of the most rewarding experiences of teaching has been to watch students get excited about psychology and use it to become successful in their personal lives and in their chosen fields. Some of my former students have gone into careers in education or business, as well as in psychology, and they tout the usefulness of their experiences in psychology as among the most valuable in their educational experience. It is also very gratifying to see students gain self confidence as a result of classroom or extracurricular opportunities that I have encouraged. One of the greatest joys is to see quiet, insecure students blossom as the semester proceeds and they begin to realize that they can be successful or even master the subject matter of the course. When this attitude carries over into their approach to academia in general, you know that you have done your job.

Good Friends

One of the most rewarding components of teaching has been the opportunity to associate with wonderful colleagues. I am fortunate to have colleagues in my department whom I respect and admire, both as psychology teachers and as good friends. I enjoy going to work every day and discussing psychology and life with these people. They unselfishly share information and teaching ideas. They are supportive and inspire me to work continually to improve my teaching. I learn so much from them.

At a national level, the opportunity to work with many of the master teachers in psychology has been both enlightening and exciting. As a result of hearing many presentations on effective teaching, I have been energized and educated by these outstanding psychologists and educators. Although involvement in STP, PT@CC, Psi Beta, and the WPA Executive Board takes a lot of time and energy, the networking opportunities and the friendships established make it well worth the effort involved. My career is greatly enhanced by these experiences.

Reflection as a Tool

One of the great things about teaching is that we continuously have the opportunity to refine our skills. When things do not go well in a particular session, we have the opportunity to examine and improve it either next hour or next semester. No two classes are exactly the same and teaching never gets old or boring. Several times during the semester, I solicit written and/or verbal feedback in the classes that I teach in Statistics, Social Psychology, and Introduction to Psychology. If asked, students are usually willing to offer suggestions regarding what works well and what does not. They also appreciate the fact that their opinions are valued, especially when their suggestions are quickly implemented. In Statistics, I offer students an opportunity to write a letter to the next semester's students on how to succeed in my Statistics class. I distribute these letters among students the following semester and they have the benefits of their previous cohort's advice. Students usually make the same suggestions to their successors that I would, but it is perceived differently coming from their experienced peers. This tactic is just a playful way to engage students in the assessment process.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

I place great value on the scholarship of teaching and learning. I make liberal use of publications such as *Teaching of Psychology* and the *APA Teaching Activities Handbooks* for acquiring new teaching ideas. Currently I am meeting biweekly with three colleagues to discuss ideas presented in *Thinking About Teaching and Learning* (Leamson, 1999). I carefully test new teaching techniques and gather data on their effectiveness. I recently received a Maricopa Institute of Learning Fellowship that will enable me to evaluate the

effectiveness of the new student response system technology that has become available. I want to measure the effectiveness of the technology on my students' attendance, retention, test grades, and satisfaction. For me, teaching is a dynamic process that requires constant input and refinement. The more I learn about teaching, the more I realize there is so much more to know.

Advice for New Teachers

Good teaching is an elusive goal that requires continuous research and refinement. One must stay current with information in the field and with the data on assessment and new classroom teaching techniques. Technology has had a huge impact on how we structure our courses. However, we must be careful to use technology to help us teach more effectively without allowing it to overwhelm the essentials of good teaching that have served us well in the past. We can learn much from master teachers in the field by reading their publications, attending their lectures, and getting involved in their organizations, but we must each develop our own unique style that works for us. Good teaching requires enthusiasm, energy, immersion in the field and a love for learning, but the satisfaction that it brings is unparalleled. Teaching has defined my professional life and my students and colleagues have enriched the experience beyond description.

References

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