

At Play in the Fields of Academe

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The story of my journey, as will likely be true of others in this volume, is a story about people. For me, teaching is quite personal, so what I have to say about teaching must revolve around people. Two people highlight my undergraduate experience: Julian Granberry and Mary Ann Hartnett.

I received my undergraduate degree from St. John Fisher College in 1971, where I did not enjoy *any* of the psychology courses I took. However, I did come to love Anthropology (and academics), primarily because of Julian Granberry—a most engaging professor. The biggest lesson that I learned from Julian was the positive impact a teacher can have on a student because he made learning fun and made me work hard to master difficult material.

In my senior year I encountered another kind of love, falling head over heels in love with Mary Ann Hartnett. Since our marriage in 1973, Mary Ann (now Foley) has supported me and taught me so much. As fortune would have it, not only is Mary Ann my best friend, but she also is a wonderful colleague and a talented teacher.

After completing my undergraduate degree, I went to SUNY Stony Brook to pursue a Ph.D. in Anthropology. Those plans changed after I met Dave Cross, who got me excited about perception and psychophysics. I soon left anthropology to become a graduate student in psychology. Mary Ann had also become a graduate student in psychology, so we were able to share an office. I was allowed to teach several courses as a graduate student, which I truly enjoyed. I received positive evaluations from my students and a teaching award from the university. In 1984, I completed my PhD in experimental psychology with Dave Cross as my dissertation advisor.

In addition to the university teaching award (which, ironically, relieved me of teaching responsibilities), I also received the McKeachie Early Career Teaching Excellence Award from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology in 1983 (although at that time, the award was simply called the “Graduate Student Teaching Award”). That award has certainly had a pivotal impact on my professional life. First, it surely played a prominent role in helping me to secure my first faculty position at Union College in 1984. (Fortune continued to smile on me, because Mary Ann joined the faculty at nearby Skidmore College in that same year.) Second, Margaret Matlin (who knew me only as a recipient of the award) contacted me in 1989 about collaborating on her perception textbook. I have had the pleasure of working with Margaret on two editions of that textbook (Matlin & Foley, 1992, 1997). Margaret has been

appropriately recognized by many organizations for her significant contributions as an educator. Personally, however, Margaret's strengths as an educator are best illustrated by her ability to improve my writing. Margaret is remarkably knowledgeable and patient — important virtues for any teacher—and I am now a better writer because of her efforts.

In 1994, I left Union College to join Mary Ann on the faculty at Skidmore College, where I am currently a professor. I teach courses that students often find to be challenging: statistics, advanced statistics, experimental psychology, and perception. Through the auspices of a Mellon Foundation grant, I am currently developing courses directed at enhancing the first-year experience (such as Psychology in the Courtroom).

My Early Development as a Teacher

I was an undergraduate when I first entertained the notion of becoming an academic. Naïvely, after observing faculty (but asking nary a question), I decided that teaching would be a wonderful profession. As it happens, I was right, but not for the reasons that filled my head at the time. In retrospect, it is probably the clueless approach I took to making such decisions that now makes me such a proactive advisor and mentor.

Once I started taking graduate classes in psychology, it dawned on me that I would actually become a teacher one day. With that realization I became a different kind of student. Instead of focusing solely on the material in a lecture, I was also studying the pedagogy of my teachers. Stony Brook was blessed with a number of talented teachers, including Dave Cross (who actually made statistics interesting), Dave Emmerich (who taught a marvelous perception course that continues to influence the course I teach), Howie Rachlin (who led a wonderful seminar on philosophy and psychology), Marcia Johnson (from whom I learned about both cognition and statistics), and Everett Waters (who had a lot of interesting ideas about teaching statistics). So, I learned a lot about teaching by watching others teach.

I learned even more by teaching. Although I served as a teaching assistant for several courses, I was soon allowed to teach my own courses. I taught both statistics and research methods, which I consider to be great courses for the novice teacher. The nature of the material is fairly circumscribed and the students typically approach the courses with trepidation. Thus, if you can convince the students that the material is important and that you are their best hope of getting through the course, they become quite receptive.

While at Stony Brook I took a teaching seminar, which was required of graduate students who were teaching courses. I taught at least one course before Alan Ross offered the seminar. Here is an embarrassing revelation: I remember thinking that the seminar would be a waste of my time, because I could not imagine that Alan (or anyone) had anything to teach me about teaching. My position was a combination of arrogance and a belief that one could not be

taught to be a better teacher. I do not remember many details about the seminar, but I do remember that Alan won me over right away because he was supportive and not the least bit authoritarian. He was surely a better teacher than any student in that seminar, but Alan made us all feel that we were colleagues working at the common goal of educating students.

Over the years, I have learned enough about teaching to know that I will always have a lot to learn. I have learned from colleagues at both Union and Skidmore. I have also learned a lot from my “virtual” colleagues on the TIPS (Teaching in Psychological Science) listserv.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

My professional life may be atypical, but it truly revolves around teaching. When I reflect on what my days are like, I might be advising (which I truly enjoy), working on the textbook, conducting research, preparing or delivering courses, working on my Web sites, reading books or articles, writing letters of recommendation, or reading e-mail and corresponding with colleagues and current and former students. The connections to teaching may not always be apparent, but they are real.

Research is a good example. I have yet to engage in any research in which students have not played prominent roles. I conduct research to learn about the world and to infuse student research assistants with an appreciation for the research process. In fact, it was the teaching-research connection that led Mary Ann and me to run a summer research program (through the auspices of the National Science Foundation’s *Research Experiences for Undergraduates* Program) for five summers.

I love teaching and I would teach for a pittance. Some people might argue that I do. However, I detest committee work and begrudge the time it takes away from work that I truly enjoy. As a graduate student, my admittedly naïve view of academics had not a single committee in it. Although I recognize the value of committee work for institutional goals, I wish that I did not have to contribute. Because I want to be a good citizen, I serve on committees, but never happily. Although I have to admit that I reap occasional rewards from serving on committees, I consider the net effect a loss.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

Although I did not think to save the source, long ago I read an article that likened being a teacher to being a wilderness guide. I have always liked that image. First, it evokes the shared purpose that should lie at the heart of the educational enterprise. People come to the wilderness guide because they have a goal that they cannot meet without help. All too often, I fear, our students do not really come to college with a desire to learn (Pirsig, 1982). I cannot know that for certain, so I treat students as though they are seriously committed to learning. Second, it defines my role as protector and facilitator of a student’s educational

journey. Having presumed that students are in my course because they are serious about learning, I can then work with students to achieve mastery of the material.

Consistent with that image, students in my courses do a lot of work—much of it during class time. That is, I am a firm believer in the value of active learning. Over the years, I have found more and more ways to engage the students in work during class time, so that every student is actively engaged and social loafing is at a minimum.

Because of the popularity of psychology among female students, they typically outnumber men in my courses. Early in my career, I read a brief piece by Gorra (1988), who teaches at Smith College. He was reflecting on being a male professor at a women's institution and on gender differences in styles of interaction. He drew on Adrienne Rich's (1979) essay ("Taking Women Students Seriously") in which she urged that we "listen to the small, soft voices." Surely, women students have changed somewhat in the intervening years, but my experience has been that finding a strong woman student who lacks self-confidence is much more likely than finding a male student with similar characteristics. I hope that over the years I have improved at listening to and encouraging all my students, but particularly women.

Advice for New Teachers

Take Teaching Seriously

Faculty who teach at small liberal arts institutions, as I do, probably have a biased perspective. We have sought these positions because we want to work at an institution that takes teaching seriously. However, when we send students off to graduate school, we warn them not to be too explicit about any ultimate desire to work at an institution that focuses on teaching, because we fear that their graduate faculty will see them as less serious. We envision university faculty who treat teaching as a necessary evil and pass such a perspective along to their graduate students. My own experiences as a graduate student suggest that many university faculty do take teaching seriously, but I still fear that most graduate students do not find themselves in an environment that reveres teaching. Anyone reading this advice is probably already a member of the "choir" to which I am preaching, but I would encourage faculty everywhere to embrace the notion that teaching is vitally important at whatever institution it might occur.

Talk to your colleagues about teaching. Visit their classes and encourage them to visit yours. Plan your lectures carefully and work to hone them year after year. Be on a constant lookout for materials and strategies that will enliven your classes.

Make Personal Connections With Your Students

Admittedly, I never have a class larger than 25, but I learn all my students' names within the first week or two of a semester. Doing so serves the dual function of making me more comfortable in the classroom (because I am basically shy) and letting my students know that I value them as individuals. Then, throughout the semester, I try to be myself in the classroom. That is, I do not assume a "classroom persona," but behave as naturally as possible. If something funny happens, I laugh. If something happens that annoys me (like a cell phone ringing), it is clear to everyone that I am annoyed.

I am now at the stage of my career when I have a large number of former students scattered about the world. Some of them have become faculty colleagues. Hearing from these former students is always the high point of my day. Think of the personal connections with your students as an investment in the future. One day they will make you proud.

Teach What You Know Best

Henry Gleitman had some great advice for me at an early stage of my career. Although his advice works best for introductory courses, I think that it applies more generally. Henry had written a comprehensive introductory textbook, but he argued that no one should attempt to teach the breadth of the discipline in the introductory course. Instead, he argued that we might deliver a course in which we focus on those areas that we know best and for which we feel the greatest passion. So, when I teach perception, I focus on visual and auditory perception. When I teach statistics, I focus on analysis of variance. Sure, we must cover some essential breadth in our courses, but whenever possible, I think that our students are best served by learning about those areas in which we are most interested. I believe that such interest is contagious.

Pay Attention to Your Course Evaluations—But Not Too Much Attention

Trying to teach in a manner that ensures positive evaluations is probably as fruitless as trying to write a hit song or the Great American Novel. I know of faculty who have deliberately given their students very high grades because they convinced themselves that course evaluations were positively correlated with grades. Even if such a strategy worked, invoking it would be selling out. Instead, I prefer the "Field of Dreams" approach. If we offer really good courses, students will come and they will evaluate the courses positively.

I realize that a good deal of controversy swirls around the topic of the efficacy of student evaluations. That said, I will always seek input from my students, because I have learned a lot over the years from student evaluations of my classes. In an atmosphere where assessment is pervasive, I think that we will eventually establish a comprehensive means of assessing faculty performance in the classroom—one in which student evaluations play a role.

Yield to Temptation

Or at least read Richard Nisbett's (1990) *American Psychologist* article on the "Anticreativity Letters." Trust me, you will smile and you will learn some important lessons about academic life. One lesson, I think, is echoed in the message of modern philosophers like Grace Slick and Freddie Mercury—"Find somebody to love." A supportive partner enhances one's personal and professional lives.

Do Not Focus on Tenure

I think that it is a poor strategy to focus on acquiring tenure, because it may lead to a real disjuncture between your pre- and post-tenure life. Instead, I encourage you to find a work style with which you are comfortable, and one you can sustain for a lifetime.

Final Thoughts

Have you thought about what your students will remember a decade after leaving your classroom? Increasingly, I wonder about the lingering residue of my teaching. I love teaching psychology, but in a decade will my students remember the intricacies of the analysis of variance? Will they remember the distinction between the parvocellular and the magnocellular systems? Some students may remember the details, but a safer bet is that most would not. What, then, should be my goals? Of course, I will continue to teach the content that is the focus of my courses, but I think that I do so in service of a broader set of goals.

First and foremost, I would like to instill in my students a love of psychology and a love of learning. Human beings are fascinating creatures and psychologists have found such creative ways to approach their various areas of interest. Surely I can convey an appreciation for the discipline to my students, but even that focus is a bit narrow. Is it not intrinsically rewarding to master difficult material? When you see the struggling student finally grasp a difficult concept, is it too hard to imagine that the concept may fade but the recollection of the ability to grasp a difficult concept lingers? Might not that student then approach mastering difficult material with greater confidence? I would like to think that my own enthusiasm for learning can be conveyed to my students and affect them for the rest of their lives.

Second, I would like to teach my students to think more clearly (if not creatively). I doubt that I can improve their thinking skills if I do not challenge them. I try to offer challenging courses and to present my students with problems that proffer no simple solutions (or where the simple solution masks a better solution).

Third, I would like to teach my students to be better communicators. Human beings seem to be afraid of speaking in public, but we should place our students in positions where they must do so. Year after year I meet cohorts of students who do not write well, nor do they appear to be willing to work to improve their writing. The notion of multiple drafts of a paper seems to strike them as anathema. As difficult as it is to work with students to improve their

writing, especially given that many faculty are not confident teachers of writing, I think that we must all make writing a focus of our courses. When they leave the confines of academia, our students will likely find themselves in positions for which communication skills are crucial. We will not have served them well if we have not prepared them for that world.

Finally, I hope my students (and you, gentle reader) find a satisfying life. For most people, it will lie outside of the field of psychology, which is fine. Scott Lilienfeld (a clinician and researcher from the Emory University) uses a signature file that encapsulates my best advice: “May your work and play be indistinguishable.”

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