

From Researcher to Teacher–Researcher: A Case of Unplanned Development

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I am a Professor of Psychology at the University of Florida in Gainesville, Florida. I received a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology and mathematics at Bradley University in 1970, and then, after receiving a PhD in cognitive psychology at Indiana University in 1974, I came to the University of Florida, where I have spent my entire academic career. I was promoted to Associate Professor in 1979 and to Professor in 1985. Fortuitously, I have won numerous teaching awards at the University of Florida, including teacher of the year, honors professor of the year, instructional excellence, and outstanding undergraduate teaching awards, and was named the American Psychological Association's (APA) Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP) Teaching Excellence Award for 4-year Colleges and Universities in 1994 (now called the Robert S. Daniels Teaching Excellence Award). I am also one of the fortunate few University of Florida faculty members to win two state Teaching Incentives Program awards. I have served on the Editorial Board of *Teaching of Psychology* for over a decade, as an *APA Review of Books* consulting editor in charge of textbook reviews, and as an Associate Editor of *Thinking and Reasoning* since its inception in 1995. My two main research areas are human reasoning and the teaching of psychology, and I have authored over 100 journal articles, reviews, and chapters on these topics, including 30 in *Teaching of Psychology*. I am also one of the originators and developers of the STP's on-line resource, *A Compendium of Introductory Psychology Textbooks*, the editor of Volume 3 of STP's *A Handbook for Teaching Introductory Psychology*, and the author of the new introductory textbook, *Psychology: A Concise Introduction*.

My Early Development as a Teacher

As a graduate student, I did not receive any preparation for teaching. The psychology department did not offer a formal course on teaching. I never even served as a teaching assistant because I was either on research fellowship or research assistantship funding during my 4 years as a graduate student. In brief, my teaching experience and teacher training as a graduate student was essentially nil. On two occasions during my four years of graduate study, my research advisor asked me to cover a class for him because he would be out of town to give a colloquium. He told me the general topic for that day's class and assumed that I could take it from there. In one undergraduate learning class I lectured on the basics of classical conditioning and in the other, a small, advanced undergraduate laboratory class, I talked about my own cognitive research. As you might expect, the conditioning lecture did

not go very well. Because my adviser did not circumscribe the topic, I tried to present everything ever known about classical conditioning in one 50 min class period without ever entertaining student questions or even pausing for them. I am sure that the students were bewildered. The details of my lecture are now a blur to me, and I am sure that at the time my lecture was a blur to the students, too.

The other class went differently. The topic allowed even more leeway—any research topic in cognitive psychology with an emphasis on its methodology. Thinking like a researcher, I used this class as an opportunity to collect some pilot data from the students in the class. Serving as participants allowed the students firsthand experience with the methodology used in my area of research and provided them with a better basis for subsequent discussion of this type of research. I was right. The students enjoyed the class and actually liked participating in and then discussing the research. These two classes comprise my entire preparation for teaching. As a graduate student, I truly never thought about teaching. My world centered on research; I was trained to be a researcher. I never discussed teaching with my advisor or any of my fellow graduate students. In sum, I had no mentoring or training for teaching.

Given my strong research orientation in graduate school, I did not make a conscious decision to become a college and university teacher. During my last year of graduate training—when I applied for academic positions—I applied for positions at research universities, and my application materials did not contain any references to teaching. I had neither teaching experience nor a teaching philosophy. I did not even think about the specific courses that I might be teaching, much less list them in my application materials. I guess that I assumed that such courses would be in my area of expertise, cognitive psychology, and that I would be able to teach them given my graduate training in that area. My final decision about a position came down to three choices—a tenure-track position at a research university (University of Florida), a research position at a private research facility in the Northeast, or a temporary visiting position at a research university in the Midwest. Needless to say, I chose Florida, having spent most of life in the cold Midwest.

In my early years as an assistant professor, I taught courses in my area of expertise, such as human information processing and thinking, and never really thought about teaching mechanics or techniques. Obviously, I prepared lectures and constructed exams, but I think I depended on my knowledge base, my compulsive nature, my need for organization and structure, and my incredible exuberance for my chosen area of expertise to carry the day. I truly loved my specific research area, deductive reasoning, and cognitive psychology in general, and this enthusiasm infused my teaching during my assistant professor years. I did not think about former teachers that I had had as a student and try to model my teaching after

them. I did not consciously think about the nature of teaching. I just did what I thought at the time would stimulate my students' interest and help them to learn the material in my classes. Thus, I neither "taught" myself to teach nor was I "taught" to teach. My progression from researcher to teacher-researcher was entirely unplanned, a natural development.

I think that good teaching arises primarily from both genuinely caring about your subject matter and leading others to care about it. If these two conditions exist, I think that the actual methods and mechanics of one's teaching are not so critical to being a successful teacher. This idea is akin to the premise upon which Parker Palmer builds his book, *The Courage to Teach*: "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p. 10). Palmer goes on to explain that good teaching depends upon teachers' ability to connect with their students and to connect them with the subject and that these connections depend not so much on the methods used but rather on the teachers sharing with their students their strong sense of personal identity that infuses their work. In brief, "good teachers join self and subject and students" (p. 11).

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

I truly did not work at defining myself as a teacher, but my teaching continued to develop, mainly as a function of the obstacles that I encountered when I began teaching introductory psychology. Ironically, after being promoted to associate professor, I volunteered to teach this course. Hardly anyone in the department would teach the course, so the departmental chairperson tried offering incentives, such as providing a research assistant *gratis* while you taught the course. Mindlessly, at least in my colleagues' eyes, I volunteered.

Unlike the courses that I taught up to that time, I did not have either the knowledge base for or research experience in the vast majority of the topics to be covered in the course. I was about as far away from being a "general" psychologist as one can be. I knew a lot about cognitive psychology and was relatively familiar with learning and sensation/perception, but I was not conversant at all with the remaining course topics, such as personality, social psychology, and development. To make matters worse, the course section size was 300 students. Most of my classes had been rather small, but I had taught a few classes with enrollments approaching 100 students. Tripling this class size, however, truly creates problems. Even the logistics of exam administration become more problematic.

I realized that maintaining attention with so many students in such a large classroom would probably prove challenging. I found, however, that teaching a large section was not as difficult as I had thought that it would be. Why? Fortunately, the answer was simple. I became incredibly interested in learning about all of these other areas within psychology. They were new to me, and I got immersed in learning about them. It was like I was a graduate student

again. This enthusiasm for the course content that carried me early on in my teaching served me well again in the introductory course. I truly cared so they cared. I learned as much as I could about each area and continually searched for better examples of concepts and phenomena to use in lecture. My classroom behavior also evolved to fit the new, larger classroom environment. I have always had what might best be termed an “evangelistic” lecturing style. This style played well in the big classroom, but I found that I had to cover more of the room physically, sort of play the entire room rather than the just the front.

This period of adjustment did not seriously detract from my research program and productivity because at research universities, the teaching load is much less. The normal load in my program is 2-2, two courses each term; and, if you teach a section of 300 or more students, this one course counts as two courses. However, I seemed to be working overtime on both my research and teaching. Thus, because time is a zero-sum game, something did suffer. In my case, the time for my personal life continued to be impacted. I had thought that once I got tenure and was promoted to associate professor, I would have more personal time. I did not. As such, I strongly recommend that as a new teacher, you consciously confront this time-use problem early on and do not let your personal life suffer as a consequence. You can always work on your teaching and scholarship later; but your personal life suffers far more when put on the back burner. Keep it up front; do not sacrifice it. The earlier you do so, the happier you will be and the better teacher you will be. A troubled personal life leads to a troubled teacher.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

I confess that I am a contrarian with respect to examining and analyzing the teaching process. I have never truly developed a personal philosophy of teaching. I do not think teaching should be analyzed. To me, teaching is neither an art nor a science. Your teaching works or it does not work. I do not think teaching is a skill that can be taught. I perceive it to be primarily a function of one’s personality. Caring about both learning and helping others to learn is the key to good teaching. I do not think you can teach people to care in these ways. This caring, along with a penchant toward organization and a certain way with words, usually result in good teaching.

I have also never used formal class evaluation data to evaluate my teaching. I use the day-to-day class reactions of the students in my classes. How attentive are they? Do they ask questions? What is attendance like, especially in larger classes? The value of such ongoing assessment throughout the term is far greater than that of some end-of-the-term numbers from a standardized evaluation instrument. Student written comments on such evaluations might be valuable, but why wait to get the feedback until the term is over? Talk with your students

regularly and take care of problems sooner rather than later. Ask your students about the class. Be approachable, and they will give you honest feedback. Such feedback does not necessarily entail change, but it provides good food for thought.

Students' behavior does, however, have to be put in the context of their emerging consumerist attitude. Simply put, students are not as academically engaged as they once were. Making matters worse, many are not prepared in terms of skill development for college work. The proportion of such students seems to grow each year. In my discussions with students, I have found that the number of students who view credentialing and not learning as the main purpose of higher education is also increasing. The task of teaching students to care about learning becomes more and more difficult in the face of this growing consumerist attitude about education. Early on in my teaching career, my enthusiasm worked to lead many unengaged students to care about their learning just as I did. However, I have found that my enthusiasm is now providing diminishing returns.

Given what I perceive to be a major change in student attitudes toward learning and in their skill development, have I tried to change my teaching approach significantly to combat these changes? I have not. If you have a passion for teaching and this passion does not impact your students, then changing teaching mechanics will not do so. Our most effective tool is our passion for our subject matter and for teaching itself. In my case, I have found its effectiveness has waned. Initially I thought that this change may only be for students in teaching environments like mine—teaching undergraduate courses with hundreds of students at a large public university. However, my discussions of this problem with my colleagues and teachers at much smaller schools with much smaller classes have convinced me that it is a true higher-education problem and not one only present in larger classes and at larger schools. Sadly, there is no simple answer to this growing problem.

I have, however, changed the focus of my teaching in response to this problem. I have given up trying to teach all of my students. Over the last decade or so, I have gravitated toward aiming my classes at the motivated students and not the “classroom occupants,” those students physically but not mentally present. Sadly, many of these classroom occupants have evolved to be “class roster occupants,” students both mentally and physically absent. I see this change in my teaching as the major one in looking back over my own career. In sum, my concern for students' learning has changed to be my concern for concerned students' learning. If they do not care, I do not care. Possibly my behavior is the product of curmudgeon development as I have aged, but I do not think so.

Advice for New Teachers

I always hesitate to give advice to teachers, old or new, but there are two points on which I would like to comment. First, if you use the lecture method of teaching, continue to do so. Do not listen to those who claim that the lecture method is “dead.” I have lectured for over 30 years and will continue to do so until my retirement. During that time I have also observed the classes of many exemplary graduate students and faculty, and over 90 percent of them lectured. The vast majority of colleagues who I have talked with at teaching conferences have told me that they mainly lecture in their classes. There will always be a new method du jour that supposedly is going to replace the lecture. One recent one is active learning. My thoughts on active learning are best summed up by saying that classes that I have observed that used active learning had a lot of activity but little learning. There is a reason that lecturing has been and continues to be used in the classroom—it works.

My second point concerns the emerging consumerist attitude among students toward higher education. I think that it is important to realize that this attitude exists and that this attitude is not a product of your teaching. You need to realize that you cannot reach all of your students. Regardless of how small your classes are and at what school you teach, you will have many disengaged students. Spend your time and efforts on those students who care. Do not waste your efforts on conversion, trying to engage those that are disengaged. Keep the focus on the subject matter and learning. You also need to realize that you will often not do as good a job as you want; time and personal problems preclude it. You should, however, strive to do your best each day. This striving is what is important and leads to good teaching.

Final Thoughts

In reading the diverse chapters in this book, keep in mind that the authors have led different lives and taken many different career paths. Thus, their advice will vary significantly. I recommend that you read each author’s introduction carefully and use the author’s biographical information as a context for understanding that author’s chapter and perspective. Find those who have taken a path similar to the one you would like to take. Their comments will likely be most valuable to you. However, remember that higher education has changed greatly during all of the authors’ careers. You will not be experiencing what we experienced in our careers in higher education, but these chapters should give you a better view of your starting point and how it came to be.

References

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