

Teaching: “Trust Me, It Will Be Good For You”

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Being a first generation college graduate, I certainly never thought I would be a teacher, let alone a college professor. As a non-traditional, first generation college student, I was certain Dr. Stephen F. Davis was making a colossal misjudgment when he told me “Trust me, it will be good for you.” I had gone to Steve’s office to discuss applying to the Experimental Psychology Master’s program at Emporia State University (ESU). Steve insisted that I apply for a graduate teaching assistantship despite my intellectual insecurities and intense fear of public speaking. I will be forever grateful that he believed in me more than I believed in myself. Unbeknownst to me at the time, that was my first lesson in being a good teacher.

Currently, I am an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology and Special Education at ESU in Emporia, Kansas. In 1986, I received a BS in psychology and a BSB in business administration at ESU. After earning my MS in experimental psychology in 1988 from ESU, I entered the Experimental Psychology PhD program in the Department of Psychology at Texas A&M University (TAMU) in College Station Texas, and received my PhD in 1992. For the next several years, I worked as a postdoctoral fellow (National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences award) and assistant research scientist in the Department of Medical Pharmacology and Toxicology in the Medical College of the Texas A&M University Health Sciences Center. Subsequently, I held temporary teaching positions in psychology departments at various universities in Kansas, before becoming a tenure-track faculty member at ESU. Currently, I teach three courses required for our psychology majors: Descriptive Research Methods and Statistics in Psychology, Experimental Research Methods and Inferential Statistics in Psychology, and Foundations of Psychology. Additionally, I teach Drugs and Behavior each summer and one of the following courses each fall: Sensation and Perception, Brain and Behavior, or Theories of Motivation. I also serve as faculty sponsor of the Psychology Club, faculty member of the Honors Council, faculty member of the ESU Alcohol Advisory Committee, and Chair of the ESU Animal Care and Use Committee. Very much related to my role as a teacher and mentor is my membership in the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP), Council of Teachers of Undergraduate Psychology (CTUP), Great Plains Behavioral Research Association (GPBRA), Psychological and Educational Research in Kansas (PERK), Southwestern Psychological Association (SWPA), American

Psychological Society (APS), and the Society for Neuroscience (SFN). My most treasured award is my 1990 STP McKeachie Early Career Award.

My Early Development as a Teacher

My development as a teacher began with Steve Davis as my mentor at ESU in Emporia, Kansas. I was an experimental psychology graduate student in the Department of Psychology and Special Education housed in the Teacher's College. The department has 14 full-time faculty, MS and EDS graduate programs, and 200 undergraduate psychology majors. Like many graduate programs, ESU offers incoming graduate students the opportunity to apply for teaching assistantships as a means of gaining financial assistance. Unlike some programs, graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) at ESU have complete responsibility for the courses they teach. The department provides a GTA training program supervised by a senior-level faculty member (Davis, Grover, & Burns, 2004). Traditionally there are 14 GTAs who teach the Introductory Psychology, Introductory Psychology Laboratory, Applied Psychology, Psychology of Adjustment, and Developmental Psychology for non-majors courses. During each of my four semesters I taught two sections of Introductory Psychology. Additionally, during the later two semesters I team taught the Introductory Psychology Laboratory. There were approximately 20-35 students, mostly freshman, non-psychology majors in my classes.

Early in the summer, prior to teaching my first class as a GTA, I received a copy of the textbook, ancillary course materials, and a model course syllabus. My instructions for the summer were to read a copy of McKeachie's (1986) *Teaching Tips*, develop a rough draft of my syllabus, and begin developing lectures with demonstrations for my first several classes. As I recollect, I was extremely overwhelmed and at the same time exhilarated by the magnitude of the responsibility given that my first semester to teach had not yet begun. However, I also recall being thankful for the summer preparation because my first semester of teaching got off to a rapid start and seemed to never slow down.

The first semester began with 3 days of intense orientation that included presentations of university, college, and departmental policies and procedures, in-depth discussions of effective teaching strategies, a lecture presentation by each new GTA, and presentations of activities and demonstrations by second-year GTAs. Training continued with the faculty supervisor and GTAs group meetings throughout my two-year assistantship. These 2-hr biweekly meetings included discussions of problems the GTAs encountered, discussion of successful and unsuccessful classroom practices and activities, discussion of controversial teaching issues and practices, an assigned GTA's presentation of an effective class demonstration, and the presentation and discussion of selected chapters from *Teaching Tips* (McKeachie, 1986) by assigned GTAs. Additionally, the faculty supervisor provided

constructive oral and written feedback at least once a semester after observing each GTA in the classroom. In addition, GTAs completed self-evaluation forms requiring ongoing reflection of their teaching. Finally, the department provided support for all GTAs to attend a regional teaching conference (e.g., Southwest Regional Conference for Teachers of Psychology) to present papers, posters, and participate in symposia related to the teaching of psychology.

It is worth noting that I shared an office with my fellow GTAs, which facilitated open communication and fostered a sense of camaraderie. Unlike most beginning teachers in higher education, I needed not travel far from my desk to find emotional support from several of my colleagues during the more challenging teaching incidents (e.g., a student attempting to cheat on an exam). Likewise, my fellow GTAs were within ear shot when I chose to share stories of my modest but rewarding teaching triumphs (e.g., a primacy, recency demonstration working).

My training as a teacher continued in my doctoral program at TAMU where I was assigned to be one of Dr. Ludy (Ben) T. Benjamin's graduate teaching assistants for his introductory psychology classes. Students attended Ben's lectures on Monday and Wednesday of each week, and on Fridays the students would meet for a "small group" session conducted by one of Ben's two teaching assistants. As his GTA, it was my task to lead discussions, provide demonstrations, and oversee hands-on activities for several small groups each Friday. Before the semester began, Ben provided his GTAs with a complete syllabus and detailed descriptions of the semesters' activities. Prior to each Friday's small-group sessions, Ben would meet with the GTAs for 1-3 hrs to explain and demonstrate our small group assignment for the week, after which the teaching assistants would practice the activity for him. I can still recall the gut wrenching nauseous feeling I experienced the first time I had to practice for Ben. Here I was, a novice wannabe, presenting an introductory psychology activity to an award-winning teacher of psychology. Given the weekly practicing for Ben and his frequent unannounced visits to my small-group classes, it is not surprising that my composure while teaching is now unaffected by classroom guests. Fortunately for me, Ben was a patient, caring, man who truly is an exemplary teacher and mentor of teaching. It was always evident that he enjoyed teaching my colleagues and me to teach.

In a subsequent semester I enrolled in Ben's graduate level seminar in the teaching of introductory psychology. The course was designed to explore topics and methods related to the teaching of psychology. Texts used included several books (Benjamin, Daniel, & Brewer, 1985; Diekhoff, 1987; McKeachie, 1986) and articles dealing with issues and research on the teaching of psychology. Weekly seminars consisted of oral presentations and discussions covering a wide array of topics related to teaching methods (e.g., class management,

evaluating students using non-exam procedures, use of multimedia) and psychology content (e.g., states of consciousness, motivation and emotion, abnormal psychology and therapy). Over the years, I frequently have referred to the collection of teaching materials I acquired in this course, and often use the methods I learned from Ben.

As a final note on my training as a teacher, I am uniquely fortunate to have been trained by two outstanding psychologists and award winning teachers of psychology, Stephen F. Davis at ESU and Ludy T. Benjamin at TAMU. Both Steve and Ben genuinely cared about my development as a teacher, and I continue to value their advice about teaching long after having been their student. My eclectic teaching style is the result of close observation of several of my wonderful psychology teachers, including but not limited to Cooper B. Holmes (ESU), Teresa Mehring (ESU), Jack Nation (TAMU), Kenneth Weaver (ESU), and Paul Wellman (TAMU). Without each of these individuals, I simply would not be the teacher I am, and continue to become.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Once I experienced the thrill of watching the “light bulb turn on” for one of my introductory psychology students, I was forever hooked on teaching. Rarely does a week go by when I do not experience an emotional high because of my students’ accomplishments. Recently, after handing back an exam for students to look over (I keep their exams) one of my students asked if she could have a copy of the front page of her exam so she could take it home, frame it, and hang it on her refrigerator. She had been struggling with statistics until recently when I was assisting her with a correlational problem in class and the “light bulb came on.” Her increased enthusiasm and motivation for learning statistics was clearly evident the very next class period. I can only hope that the zest for learning that she experienced extends beyond this course into her other studies.

Unfortunately, teaching has not been without its challenges. My greatest recent challenge has been teaching students who have increasingly busy lives. The majority of my students work 20 hrs each week, take full-course loads, are active in one or more student organizations, and either commute and/or have families, leaving them little time for studying. I find balancing my belief that they need to do course work outside of class and my empathy for their complex lives to constantly be at odds. Similarly, another challenge has been finding enough time to be both the best teacher and the best researcher I can be. Thus far, I have learned to be demanding but flexible of both myself and my students.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

As a teacher of higher education, my ultimate goal is to encourage my students to be lifelong learners. As such, I believe they must be able to learn by listening to others (e.g., professors, supervisors, clients), by observation (e.g., watching me doing a problem on the board, watching an employer), by reading (e.g., textbooks, manuals, scientific and popular reports), and by actually attempting to do a novel behavior (i.e., just do it). I try to incorporate all of these methods of learning in my courses. For example, I try to add interesting relevant material not covered in the textbook to my lectures to encourage students to listen in class. In classes such as research methods and statistics, I write out statistical problems on the board or write sample results sections in APA format on the board so students can observe the process step-by-step. I encourage them to master the art of reading for understanding by not including all the important information in their textbooks in my lectures, and have half of the exam questions cover information found only in the textbook. I also try to reference frequently the assigned reading in my lectures, especially tables and figures relevant to the topic. Finally, I have class activities in all of my courses that encourage my students to apply the knowledge and skills they are acquiring in their reading and lectures.

In Foundations of Psychology (history of psychology), I have groups of students “do” by developing a Jeopardy-type review game. I assign each group one or two chapters for which they must develop several “Dr. Grover” type exam questions, and host the game in the class immediately prior to the exam. One benefit of this type of review has been that because students want to do well in front of their peers they come almost as prepared for the jeopardy games as they do for the actual exam (i.e., they do not procrastinate studying). In Theories of Motivation, the “doing” component of the course is the required term paper in which students must explain a behavior of their choice (e.g., self-mutilation, masochism, volunteering at Big Brothers Big Sisters) using any four theories of motivation, and provide empirically-based evidence via published studies for the theories they have selected. Allowing students to select the behavior gives them the opportunity to think critically about a topic in which they have a genuine interest and one that I rarely have time to cover in lecture. Carrying this idea of learning by “doing” to the extreme, my students in Experimental Research Methods and Inferential Statistics classes conduct a simple “true” experiment that includes doing a background literature search, designing their experiment, submitting a completed APA format proposal to the university IRB for approval, collecting and analyzing data, writing a final APA format manuscript, orally presenting their findings to the class, and finally preparing a poster that they present at the end of the semester department-wide Luncheon and Research Display Day. This project is extremely time consuming for both my students and myself, but

the reward of seeing them proudly explain to faculty and students their experimental project at the end of the semester makes it all worthwhile.

Reflecting back on the changes that have occurred in my courses and my teaching, I realize that I have learned as much as my students. For example, when I first came to ESU undergraduate psychology majors completed a statistics course prior to enrolling in experimental psychology. As the instructor of the experimental course, I was delighted that the four-credit course met four days each week allowing plenty of time to impart my wisdom on my students via lecturing and hands-on activities in class. However, prior to my coming to ESU, the psychology faculty had decided that the statistics and experimental courses should be merged to two three-credit hr sections of research methods and statistics courses. The faculty believed that students might better understand and retain statistical information if they were learning it while doing research.

I initially perceived this change to mean less class time to teach more material. Nonetheless, I was determined to do my best because I agreed with the faculty's motivation behind the change. This endeavor required serious rethinking regarding the best ways to spend class time. By the middle of the first semester of the combined course, I realized I was not going to be able to continue to lecture extensively and have time for the hands-on activities in class. Fortunately, the books that I chose to use for the two courses were very readable, so I decided to lecture less. This choice clearly put more of the responsibility for learning directly on my students, and they quickly rose to the challenge. Immediately, it appeared to me that the quality and extent of their participation in the in-class activities improved because they were now reading the text as assigned rather than waiting for me to impart my wisdom to them in lecture. I am now on my fourth semester of teaching the combined courses and I believe the combined method is more effective. Thus far, the largest benefit has been that students are enrolling in the combined course sooner in their program. Prior to the conversion to the combined courses, many students postponed taking Statistics until their senior year, thereby leaving Experimental Psychology to their last semester. It was common to have those students tell me that if they had taken it earlier they would have done more research before graduating. Now, more students are enrolling in independent study to conduct improved versions of their experimental research projects. As a result of this change in courses, the most important lessons for me have been to continue to be willing to do my best no matter how challenging the new teaching endeavor may be and that my students truly are capable being responsible for their own learning by listening, reading, and doing.

Advice for New Teachers

If you are truly interested in becoming a good teacher, listen to good teachers, observe good teachers, read about teaching, do teaching research, and do not be afraid to try new things when teaching. Be passionate about what you teach. Challenge yourself and your students to do the best they can do, and be the best they can be. Model the behaviors you want your students to adopt. Have fun teaching and never stop learning!

Final Thoughts

In summary, I want to continue to develop as a teacher. Thus far, not a semester has gone by without my modifying my lectures (some more than others), trying new activities and demonstrations, updating my supplemental information, and looking for new ways to “turn on the light bulbs.” I hope my persistent growth and learning serves as model for my students. Clearly, I believe learning should be lifelong! Teaching: Trust me it will be good for you. It has certainly been good for me, and hopefully for my students!

References

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