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The Path of Less Trouble

Jane S. Halonen
University of West Florida

*It's noble to be good.
It's nobler to teach others to be good, and less trouble.
~Mark Twain*

I got snagged into teaching. I intended to become the world's best clinician when I began my graduate training at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. However, I was unprepared for how fulfilling the classroom would turn out to be. Simply by adding a few active learning strategies to my six assigned developmental psychology discussion groups, my classes began to hum. What most of my peers regarded as a necessary evil—their obligated 20 hours per week teaching assistance chore—quickly became my wellspring.

There was one small detour. I was not able to get an academic job during the bleak economic period of the late 1970s that followed the completion of my internship. As a consequence, I took a job as a school director at Shore School, a special school in Evanston, Illinois, for children with significant emotional and physical handicaps. It was an arduous job from which I extracted many lessons about both the delicacy and exuberance of the human spirit. The job also provided an unusual introduction to the importance of using behavioral objectives in guiding pedagogical design that would serve me very well in my next adventure.

I was truly blessed to begin my teaching career at Alverno College, a gem of liberal arts college for women in Milwaukee, Wisconsin that provided an extraordinary beginning to my academic career. By the time I began teaching at Alverno, the college had already abandoned traditional grading practices, having adopted instead a performance-based curriculum. Students achieved success by meeting performance objectives that grew out of a shared vision about what students should be able to do upon graduation. It was a perfect match. I loved thinking about education from the standpoint of building student competence and quickly became a strong advocate of this revolutionary approach. I stayed at Alverno for 17 years, along the way completing service as a department head and a division coordinator.

After spending so much time securing clinical credentials, I also felt incomplete not exercising those skills. After establishing an academic routine at Alverno, I started a private practice on the side. That enterprise occupied my Monday and Wednesday afternoons and evenings for 12 years. I enjoyed clinical work but even the best clinical sessions did not generate the powerful feelings I had at the conclusion of a great class.

Soon after starting at Alverno, I became active in national leadership in the psychology of teaching. I joined the Council for Teachers of Undergraduate Psychology (CTUP: lifetime membership \$5!—even I could afford that on my Alverno salary). I became the regional coordinator for the Midwestern Psychology Association where I had the opportunity to build the teaching program at their annual convention at Chicago’s Palmer House. When I attended the national planning meeting for CTUP at an American Psychological Association (APA) meeting in Atlanta, I had the great fortune of meeting many new colleagues who have become enduring friends through the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP; only back then it was simply “Division 2”).

STP members were remarkably generous and open, sharing friendship with teaching strategies. I began to work in special roles, such as convention program chair, and eventually won the presidential election for STP, one of my proudest accomplishments. STP activities also led to some fascinating opportunities to help national curriculum issues. I served as a faculty advisor to the National Standards for Introductory Psychology at the High School Level. Subsequently, I chaired the National Learning Goals and Outcomes for Undergraduate Psychology. I am proud of both collaborative efforts and the contribution they have made to the learning of countless students.

Although my years at Alverno were rewarding, I decided to pursue administrative opportunities as an avenue to begin a new adventure. I moved to James Madison University as the Director of the School of Psychology. Although many of my colleagues teased me about sacrificing the classroom for administration, I was actually able to expand in new teaching directions with this move. In this context, I taught an ethics class for aspiring PsyD students. Ironically, shortly after I made the move from Alverno to James Madison, changing my dominant profile from teacher to administrator, I heard that the American Psychological Foundation named me as the 2000 Distinguished Teacher. The standing ovation I received when I delivered my lecture, “Teaching as Alchemy” remains one of my most cherished memories.

My current primary role is as an academic dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of West Florida. At the conclusion of my obligatory “job talk” during my interview at UWF, I was legitimately asked by one of the interviewers, “If you love teaching so much, why would you want to become a *dean*?” My response was equally candid: “Why would you want to settle for a dean who does not care about what happens in your classroom?”

My Early Development as a Teacher

My preparation for the teaching profession is perhaps best described as haphazard. To most of my peers my enthusiasm for teaching seemed like an aberration. Why would you want to teach when there was a fortune to be made in clinical work? Simply because it has been the most gratifying experience I had ever had. I was hooked on having students excited about psychology and could not pursue a path that did not involve that peculiar blend of risk and reward offered by teaching.

Of course, any child coming through a public education is going to experience a variety of teachers—the good, the bad, and the indifferent. All teachers offer lessons about how to teach whether they intend to or not. In my college years, I had some spectacular teachers who were virtually unapproachable outside the classroom. I had some teachers whose classroom performance was lackluster but they sparkled in informal “teachable moments.” I tried to extract lessons from both good and bad practices.

Alverno more than fulfilled the faculty development obligation that comes with breaking in a new faculty member. Two individuals stand out in this period. Austin Doherty, the remarkable, energetic dean who hired me, taught me a great deal about the value of listening and paying attention in solving problems both in and out of the classroom. In the early days at Alverno, I discovered Bill McKeachie’s *Teaching Tips* on the library shelves. Bill seemed to have experienced everything I could imagine and offered great advice. *Teaching Tips* remains my key reference. It is one of the great pleasures of life that I now collaborate with Bill on that exceptional volume with my own chapter on “teaching thinking.”

My teaching style evolved due to trial and error. Before I understood the formal concept of learning styles, I understood that I was a more effective learner when I could try out ideas, when I could wrestle with things I didn’t understand, or when I felt safe to ask questions. I simply tried to recreate the learning climate in which I fared the best. I have been lucky to have very candid students throughout my career to provide corrective feedback. The vast majority of my students have been generous and encouraging with their feedback.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

One of the joys of being a teacher is the crispness of seasons of teaching. We regularly get to start over. A bad semester can stop at the end of the semester. A good one can facilitate future good semesters. Not many professions allow so many opportunities for a “do over.”

There are substantial obstacles that challenge any good teacher. A primary challenge is helping students understand the role that their education will play in developing their character. It is easy to become jaded when some students—really a minority—will exploit situations by cheating on exams, downloading Internet papers, or otherwise disappointing us

with their academic short-cuts to real educational growth. I am always surprised by how much emotional pain discovering academic misconduct causes me. Not only do I feel a personal violation of trust, but I am saddened by the whole process that has produced such defective decision-making on the part of the student.

I have used several strategies to deal with student academic misconduct. I do all I can to prevent academic misconduct. I talk about why character development is so important. I ask students to sign integrity pledges and re-verify with each exam or project. I change my tests every semester. I assign writing projects that would be hard to download. I carefully observe due process and try to listen to the student's explanation before the drawing and quartering. And most of all, I try to remember most people under stress will take steps to make their lives easier.

My scholarship of teaching research and my professional service have all been geared to the improvement of psychology learning. Not until I discovered teaching scholarship at Alverno did I truly understand how seamless this arrangement could be. I was not as excited about research as a professional obligation until I began to see the classroom as a lab. I think this approach allows educators to follow bliss and to move gracefully through promotion and evaluation processes rather than simply having a focus on doing what you need to be promotable.

The Examined Life

At this stage of my teaching career, I think there are some consistent principles of good practice that I think characterize my craft:

Be Overprepared Rather Than Underprepared

It is probably laughable how much time I still put into course preparation. No matter how many times I have taught a class, I keep trying to assemble the perfect combination of lecture and activities and I never get it just right. I bring too much support material to class. I sometimes shuffle through overheads to find just the right flow chart or cartoon. More than once I have had the experience of "esprit d'escalier," (the spirit of the staircase), a term I recently learned that I think captures what happens to you as you trudge up the stairs to your class and abandon the plan and go with a spontaneous idea. Those classes almost always are more lively and interesting.

Go Deep Rather Than Broad

I confess to being amused by faculty members who are driven to "cover the content" of a course when such a motivation seems oblivious to principles of effective learning. Stanford Ericksen (1983) likened the process of exposing students to the light of the discipline by trying to cover the field to a good sunburn. It is uncomfortable in acquisition and decidedly

temporary in its impact. Unless the content of a course has personal relevance or the course provides opportunities that facilitate meaningful connections, the minutiae of what we teach will fade away like a suntan. The gift of great teachers is the ability to help students find meaning in what we ask them to learn. For their long-term learning, I prefer to examine fewer content areas in depth than more content areas in the shallows.

Engage Rather Than Entertain

The one circumstance that I am troubled by as a dean is when I get repeated comments from students about how entertaining a faculty member is. These remarks are often accompanied by an inflated grade distribution. If students are not moved to talk about their learning in evaluations, I worry that they have been bought off by charm and high grades. Their meaningful learning may be microscopic.

Provoke Rather Than Appease

I concentrate on gentle provocation of students to engage them to think critically. I try to design critical thinking challenges that knock students off balance (cf. Halonen, 1986). They will work to right themselves again to make sense of the world. The challenge is figuring out how much to push.

Admit Ignorance Rather Than Pretend That You Know It All

You are in front of a class and a student lobs a question at you that is practically disorienting. What to do? Students genuinely appreciate a robust, “Beats me!” than a meandering attempt to cover for what you do not know. An even better response in such circumstances is to congratulate the student for coming up with such a good thought-provoking question and then engage students in some speculation about possible answers. That kind of class activity will be more memorable, producing greater potential for meaningful recall, than showing off your expertise (and I thank Bill McKeachie for teaching me this elegant strategy).

Be Explicit Rather Than Mysterious

In virtually every assignment I develop, I answer the question—“What exactly do you want in this assignment?”—by providing a list of performance criteria to guide students’ work. Prior to submitting an assignment, I typically ask them to grade their own work by telling me how they met the criteria. Their responses are refreshingly candid. Many students have spontaneously encouraged me to teach other people how to teach this way because, although initially challenged, they felt comfortable with my expectations and empowered to meet them.

Measure Rather Than Speculate

Good assessment strategies have the power to teach as well as to provide the feedback that you need to chart your direction. I think it is important to gather evidence of student

learning. It is important to look at the patterns of performance and extract guidance from them for improvement. I think it is especially helpful to measure student attitudes about how the course is going long before the course is over.

Trust Rather Than Suspect

With so many episodes of student misbehavior under my belt, it would be easy to feel quite jaded about students who attempt to take advantage of situations by cutting corners or generating other kinds of disappointment. Yet I think the wiser course is to trust students until they prove they can not be trusted. It is better to trust and be disappointed than live in a world where you suspect students of the worst behavior.

Respect Potential Rather Than Predict Failure

If you expect bad behavior, you will surely not be disappointed because students will always live up—or down—to your expectations. Students will thrive, though, when they experience your belief in their abilities. To those ends, I like to find out from students what dream they are pursuing. Knowing the dream can help me extract examples that will keep them motivated to learn what I have to offer. Knowing the dream reminds me of my role in helping students realize the dream.

Be Friendly Rather Than Familiar

Students cannot be your friends. I know that many who read that statement will quarrel with it. Unfortunately, many faculty see themselves as being able to transcend the boundary regulations that most universities suggest for the mutual protection of student and faculty. Faculty judgment can be compromised when students get too close. Even if judgment is not impaired, the appearance of affectionate relationships with a select group of students destroys the level playing field. At worst, friendships can spiral into other kinds of relationships that have the potential to undo both the lives of the student and the faculty member. This principle is an important one that you should trust rather than learn painfully through personal discovery.

Be Prepared Rather Than Surprised That the Profession Does Not Get Easier Over Time

My cherished mentor, Bill McKeachie, once confided that he thought teaching got harder every year. I thought, “That can not be right!” After all, with each passing semester one accumulates more experience and wisdom about how classes operate, what students are like, and what the discipline has to offer. Fully confident that I had caught him in his first and only bit of misadvice, I rather smugly looked to the future thinking things would get easier. Of course, he was right. The chasm that looms between students and faculty enlarges each semester. Popular culture recedes from our grasp so we risk being seen as out of date, fueled by the ageism that is pervasive in our culture. It becomes harder and harder to be sufficiently “cool” to capture student enthusiasm.

Most of my frustrations about teaching relate to having insufficient time to pursue all of the information I feel I need. I would like to be well-rounded in my understanding of the discipline as well as the glories of the profession. Frustratingly, there is so much to learn—and especially with the time sink that is e-mail—so little time in which to pursue more background to instill a greater sense of accomplishment. It seems the older I get, the less discretionary time I have.

No matter how pinched for time, I always try to make room in my professional life for the incredible teaching conferences that enrich our lives as psychology educators. We are quite rare among the disciplines in the number of opportunities that we provide to help faculty at any stage of their careers to update their skills. My love of teaching conferences began in 1985 when I attended my first regional conference at the MidAmerica Conference on the Teachers of Psychology (MACTOP). Not only did I learn many new techniques for enlivening class, but I met and fell in love with many colleagues who have remained life-long friends. I have had similar good fortune in connecting to important teachers at the National Institute for the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP), Midwestern Psychological Association's teaching program, and the annual teaching program at the Society for the Teaching of Psychology. I had the pleasure of serving on the steering committees for both the historic St. Mary's Conference on Enhancing the Undergraduate Major and the Psychology Partnerships Project (P3). My affiliation with the "Assessment All-Stars", my assigned group at P3, has been particularly gratifying. That group continued to collaborate well beyond the original conference to write an article, mount the first "best practice conference," and develop an edited book on assessment. Obviously, I am an addict.

Another source of joy has been my involvement in the Advanced Placement reading every summer sponsored by the Educational Testing Service. I am currently serving as the Chief Reader for this event as well as serving on Test Development Committee. Perfecting multiple-choice and essay questions, building rubrics, and enacting secure test protocol has been very professionally enlightening. In addition, the community that we have been building creates great opportunity to learn through endless informal discussions.

I also have been fortunate to develop teaching internationally. About a decade ago, Bill McKeachie (here he is again!) facilitated my invitation to speak at an international conference—the Improving University Teaching (IUT) Conference, formerly run out of the University of Maryland University College. Not only did the conference provide the opportunity to look at cutting edge ideas in higher education, but it facilitated having a whole new interdisciplinary network to develop new ideas. I have stayed active in the conference and several years ago assumed organizing responsibilities with my friend and colleague Peter Seldin. My participation has allowed me to visit and learn about Hong Kong, Australia,

Brazil, Germany, Ireland, Sweden, and Switzerland. The commonalities in character of good teachers truly cross international boundaries.

My writing activities also continue to hone my teaching skills. There is nothing quite like writing an introductory textbook to embed you in the discipline, but other writing in the scholarship of teaching also contributes to better performance in the classroom. When I do not have a writing project underway, the old restlessness returns.

Advice for New Teachers

Find someone who speaks to you as a role model and mentor. I was lucky. I found Bill McKeachie in the library stacks and had the good fortune to get his wise counsel and valued friendship throughout my teaching life. I have never been in his presence when I have not learned something new. I could only hope to emulate that kind of impact as a tribute to all he has done for me. Whether you find support in a text or from a real live person, that special person can help to set the standard you will strive to achieve.

There is simply no better career than the one we have chosen. We are paid reasonably well for our thinking. We have the opportunity for constant renewal. We can constantly recharge in the company of energetic young people. We truly can touch the future. How could anything be better than that?

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[†] From T. A. Benson, C. Burke, A. Amstadter, R. Siney, V. Hevern, B. Beins, & W. Buskist, (Eds.), *Teaching psychology in autobiography: Perspectives from exemplary psychology teachers* (pp. 127-134). Society for the Teaching of Psychology. Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.lemoyne.edu/teachpsych/tia/index.html>