

Psychology—“It’s a Wonderful Life!”

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Are you wondering why I, along with all the other contributors to this volume, agreed to write these teaching autobiographies? At this moment, sitting at a hard desk, in front of a cold computer, facing a sea of blank pages waiting to be filled with a concise summary of my entire teaching life and philosophy, I am asking myself the same question. However, when I recall my own early years of “trial and error” teaching, I am reassured that a text of this sort, and a chapter of my own teaching reflections, may serve as a valuable guide to beginning teachers. It also might work as a “comforter” and potential inspiration to experienced teachers.

I am currently a full-time professor of psychology at Palomar College, a two-year community college in San Marcos, California. I completed my undergraduate and graduate studies at San Diego State University (SDSU), and taught for 2 years as an adjunct faculty member at three local colleges before obtaining my full-time teaching position at Palomar in 1980. Reflecting on my teaching honors and awards, I am most pleased by the Teaching Excellence Award for 2-Year Colleges, which I received from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP; Division Two of the American Psychological Association [APA]), and the Distinguished Faculty Award for Excellence in Teaching from Palomar College. I was also a recipient of the Outstanding Teaching award from the University of Texas at Austin.

My authorship of three introductory texts: *Psychology in Action* (Huffman, (2004), *Essentials of Psychology in Action* (Huffman, Vernoy, & Vernoy, 1995), and *Living Psychology* (Huffman, 2006), might also qualify as teaching-related awards because my work as an author is directly related to my teaching. Students are the foundation of my textbook writing—as well as the joy of my teaching life.

I have also learned a great deal about teaching and writing from fellow teachers, and I am honored by their invitations to speak at conferences and on their college campuses. My special interests are in active learning and critical thinking. I have presented workshops and invited addresses at several teaching conferences, including the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP), Midwest Institute for Students and Teachers of Psychology (MISTOP), and the Texas Community College Teaching Association (TCCTA). In addition, I have presented critical thinking and active learning seminars at colleges and universities throughout the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico.

My Early Development as a Teacher

Why did I decide to become a college teacher? Ironically, I was once an extremely shy child who stuttered and never dreamed that she would one day voluntarily stand in front of a group and make her living by speaking. During graduate school, I considered several career options, but never teaching—until two college professors intervened.

The first professor unknowingly started me on my teaching career with one offhand remark. After attending several classes of an advanced statistics course, the professor walked up behind me while I was working with a group of students, gently touched my shoulder, and said, “That was a very clear explanation. You should become a teacher.” I think this is the one, and only, time he spoke directly to me during the entire class, but I still remember his exact words. They prompted a remarkably transformative moment in my life.

The second professor played a much larger, and more dramatic, role in my life. Dr. Herbert Harari was my teaching mentor and hero. He was widely considered the best and most popular teacher on the SDSU campus, and I sat through his entire class as a quiet, front row, star-struck fan. At the end of the semester, when he asked me to become his teaching and research assistant, I was so surprised and elated that I may have momentarily returned to my childhood stuttering!

Despite my intense shyness, nervous giggle, and initial reluctance to teach, Dr. Harari persevered with his continual encouragement, reassurance, and guidance. Working alongside this great teacher, I began to discover the hidden joys and rewards of teaching. Dr. Harari was a true friend, mentor, and a master of the art of teaching.

Once I began full-time teaching at Palomar, I continued my teaching preparation by seeking out and working with more “master teachers.” Through my ongoing contact with these highly gifted colleagues, I continue to fine tune the “art and science” of teaching by watching and modeling their skills and interactions with students. Isaac Newton once said that his accomplishments were the result of having “stood on the shoulders of giants.” My teaching has similarly benefited from the gifts of several “teaching giants.”

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

What teaching obstacles or sacrifices have I faced? I work at a community college where good teaching is the primary mission, and I have experienced few outside, administrative obstacles. My teaching problems fall under two personal categories: *shyness* and *time*.

Despite years of help and modeling by great teaching friends, I still find that my shy personality often interferes with my teaching—or at least my enjoyment of it. For example, even after almost 30 years of teaching, I still feel awkward and self-conscious on the first day

of class and the first moments of each class. I also frequently have nightmares at the beginning of each semester—I cannot find the classroom, no one signs up for my courses, I forget what to say, or I am in front of the class in my bathrobe (or naked).

Fortunately, I have discovered ways to cope with my shyness. For example, rather than lecturing on the first day of the semester, I start with several ice breaking, get-acquainted exercises. (Getting students involved with one another and with their own learning takes the focus off me and gives me time to warm up and relax.) I also begin most class meetings with a brief (5-10 minute) “real life” review, where I ask students for examples of how this week’s topics have applied to their own life or the world around them. This activity has become a favorite feature of my classes, and it has several important side benefits. In addition to helping me cope with my shyness, it increases student participation and practical application of psychological principles. It also helps discourage late arrivals.

When it comes to day-to-day classes, I sincerely admire and envy teachers who give full-length outstanding lectures and seem to transform into first rate Hollywood actors on stage in the classroom. I attempt to emulate these teachers by presenting brief “great lectures” followed by focused activities, interaction, and participation from the students. In a typical 50-minute class, I generally present one or two of these brief lectures, followed by one or two active learning exercises, for each class session. Although I have had moments of wondrous delight after presenting a good lecture, I find that being a “guide on the side,” rather than a “sage on the stage,” works best for me. I feel most comfortable and relaxed when my students are actively discussing and participating in exercises. Establishing an interactive, respectful climate in the classroom helps with my shyness, while simultaneously relaxing my students and reawakening their Piagetian innate need to know. Luckily, this approach has a name—*active learning*—and some research finds it to be one of the best ways for students to learn.

In addition to my personal obstacle of shyness, I also share every educator’s problem of “too much material and too little time!” Around the globe, time seems to be our most precious and limited commodity. College faculty are no exception. Unfortunately, just as our time resources are declining, scientific research and intellectual output are expanding exponentially. Never before in history have we seen such an information explosion. With a few keystrokes on a laptop computer, faculty and students alike can access hundreds or thousands of pages on even the most obscure topic.

In addition to this information overload, Community college teachers are generally required to teach five classes per semester, normally without the help of teaching assistants. Our student body also includes a wide range of talents, ages, motivation, preparation, and ethnicities. This diversity is truly exciting, challenging, and rewarding. However, it requires a

large number of constantly evolving assignments and methods for assessment—all of which take time.

How do I cope with these time pressures? First, I try to reuse the skills I developed as a busy and overwhelmed young mother. By default, I learned early on how to multi-task and make every moment count. At the same time, I also attempt to honor my most beloved mantra—“Be here now!” I believe that one of the chief dangers of our multi-tasking, modern, fast-paced society is that we too often forget to stop and enjoy our “moments.” To guard against this problem in my teaching, I remind myself before each class to breathe deeply and mentally say to myself, “Be here now!” This reminder (or stimulus cue) helps me to focus my attention on my students and on the most important things they need from me—and from psychology.

I know that this sounds rather “hippie dippy,” but I am a baby boomer. I believe it is important to multi-task and accomplish a lot when you are working with “things.” However, people generally need our full attention and we should not be looking at the clock counting the moments.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand.
Chinese Proverb

The art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery.
Mark Van Doren

Education is what survives when what has been learnt has been forgotten.
B. F. Skinner

What is my philosophy of teaching? As you can see from these quotations, along with my classroom activities, I am a strong advocate of critical thinking and active learning. “Active learning” has become almost cliché in education, but its popularity is increasing because research shows that it is based on sound scientific and educational principles. Being an active participant in the learning process clearly improves understanding, mastery, and retention of information. As most teachers and students know, true learning and education are much more than memorization of terms and concepts to be retrieved during exams—and then quickly forgotten. To master psychology or almost any other subject, you must question, debate, experiment, and apply the core principles to the world around you.

I also believe that an active learner is by definition a critical thinker. To process and understand information, we must employ a type of metacognition, or critical thinking, which

requires watching and evaluating our thought processes. In other words, we must think about our thinking. Throughout my teaching, I present psychological science as an intellectual detective story in which the student is the detective. In my role as a facilitator, or guide on the side, I try to model the analytical, questioning mind-set of science, and the personal values and rewards of critical thinking. In turn, my students must become metacognitive detectives who adopt, adapt, and apply these skills to real-world problems.

In line with this emphasis on the outside world, I find that adopting the “application of psychological science” as my mission statement, or highest goal, of my day-to-day teaching also helps save time and frustration. Rather than attempting to “Dance (and Talk) as Fast I Can” while covering all the major psychological principles, I try to slow down and focus on application—my one simple, overarching goal. My lectures, activities, assignments, and exercises are all devoted primarily to helping students understand and appreciate how the basic concepts and research of psychology can be used to improve their personal lives and the world around them.

When students ask what psychologists think about the war in Iraq, or voluntarily bring in newspaper clippings, cartoons, or magazine ads that demonstrate psychological principles, I know they are mastering core concepts, learning new ways to process information deeply, and developing application skills that they can carry with them long after they complete my course. They have become true “life-long learners.”

A final component of my teaching philosophy is my belief in the self-fulfilling prophecy. I believe that students will live up or down to our expectations. When I create high standards and express high expectations for all my students, they generally live up to them. Although it sometimes helps to discuss student problems with my teaching colleagues, I try to minimize simple “gripe sessions.” Focusing on the possibilities and success of my students helps me remain optimistic and fully committed to teaching.

As I near the end of this autobiography, I hope I have conveyed my deep joy and satisfaction with my life as a teacher. I love my career choice and my day-to-day interactions with students. I am also pleased that I made the decision to spend my life teaching at a community college. I respect and fully support our “open-door policy.” Education is the surest route to personal and material success in our culture, and I am pleased that my teaching career has contributed to such a democratic system.

Advice for New Teachers

Years ago, as part of his presidential address to the American Psychological Association, George A. Miller urged psychologists to “give psychology away.” Because psychological science has accumulated such a wealth of practical and valuable research about

the human condition, Miller believed the public had the right to (and need for) this type of information.

I believe today's students are more in need of critical thinking, active learning, and applied, psychological science than ever before. Our political, economic, and academic worlds have all undergone enormous disruptions and challenges. We need teaching that reflects those changes.

What is my advice for teachers who want to “give psychology away?”

1. *Focus on Themes and Core Concepts.* Rather than attempting to force-feed students with all the facts and theories of psychology, I think we should first identify what we believe are the most fundamental, *core*, psychological concepts that no student should live without. Then we should look for a common theme among these core concepts. This theme and personal list of core concepts can then be used as a big picture map for all our lectures, activities, and assignments. Although there is considerable disagreement over the core concepts in psychology, the “simple” act of examining and identifying them for yourself can be helpful in your teaching. Also recognize that your list will likely change from year to year, but over time, you will see a pattern to your choices.
2. *Have Fun and Be Here Now.* As psychologists, we know that burnout is one of the greatest threats to our successful lives as teachers. Reminding ourselves to relax and have fun with all parts of our teaching (and personal) lives can help prevent burnout. I have also found my personal mantra to “Be Here Now” helps make each class session more enjoyable—and sometimes even magical!
3. *Choose Passion over Money.* Teaching is not a good career choice for anyone seeking high financial rewards. The rewards are enormous, but not economically so. Perhaps it is rationalization (or cognitive dissonance) on my part, but I believe career choices should never be based solely on money. From what I have observed, the surest route to happiness is to choose a career that you almost would do even if you were not being paid for it! As my 101-year-old granny once reminded me, “Sister, if you marry a man for money, you’ll earn it!” I believe the same can be said about a career.

References

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