25†
Lessons Learned and Relearned

Robert L. Johnson
Umpqua Community College

Having taught 140 iterations of the introductory psychology course, I now think I could get it right if given the opportunity to teach just one more time and, perhaps, justify the two-year college teaching award I received from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology in 2004. To do so, however, would mean giving up the luxuries of retirement: no 8 a.m. classes, no papers to grade, and no judgments to make about the veracity of reports on the recent passing of relatives and the concomitant impossibility of the grieving students' presence at the last exam. It would also require that I apply the two most important pedagogical lessons that I have had to learn and relearn during the nearly three decades that I served as the entire psychology department at Umpqua Community College, a small school in southwestern Oregon.

The first of these lessons is this: The worst approach a professor can make to a new topic is at its logical beginning rather than starting with how our students already understand an issue. The second lesson says that students always become more interested when we *involve* them with the course content than when we *tell* them about the course content.

My Early Development as a Teacher

I did not set out to be a teacher. In fact, for most of my undergraduate career at the University of Oregon, I studied to be an economist—not realizing that continual napping in class should have been a warning sign. By happy chance, it was an introductory psychology course taken from Lou Goldberg (of Big Five Traits fame), taken to fill out my schedule during my junior year, that made me rethink my career plans. Unlike the succession of economics professors whose names I do not remember, Dr. Goldberg kept me on the edge of my seat, whence I realized that human behavior and mental processes were far more interesting to me than were monetary theory and the Invisible Hand of the market. Fortunately, I made the decision to switch majors just in time to earn the psychology credits required to graduate on schedule. At that point, I must have known less about the discipline than any other psychology major since 1879.

Despite these meager credentials, I managed to slip into a graduate program in counseling psychology, which led to a master's degree and an educational hiatus filled by a stint as a juvenile corrections counselor. Then—within days of acceptance into a doctoral program—I received a job offer from Selective Service, resulting in a three-year stint as a counselor in the Norfolk Navy brig, an assignment that, at least, kept me out of Viet Nam.

Then, upon return to less structured life, I resumed graduate work, for which the University of Oregon awarded me yet another degree, this time a PhD.

A job search ended at Umpqua Community College, located in the town where I had grown up. Alas, no counseling positions were available, but the college did need a psychology teacher—a post that I decided to take until something in counseling opened up. To my surprise, teaching psychology was so much fun that I did not apply for the counseling position that became available 2 years later. The decision to stick with teaching must have been the right one, for I continued to teach five sections of introductory psychology each term for 28 years. (You see, I always thought I could get it right the next time!)

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Regrettably, I had no mentor to take a personal interest in my career. Nevertheless, I did have some provocative and dynamic professors whom I used initially as my models for teaching—as I suspect most beginning teachers do. Gradually, however, my own style emerged, as I experimented with techniques borrowed from colleagues and from sundry instructor's manuals accompanying the texts I had adopted. The early editions of Bill McKeachie's marvelous little book (1999) helped, too.

There were two other sources of teaching ideas that had even more impact on my development as a teacher. One occurred in the summer of 1978, when I attended a Great Teachers Seminar in Illinois. It was an interdisciplinary gathering of community college folk for a week of talking about problems and innovations in teaching. The Seminar had leaders, but no "guest experts." Instead, we were all instructed to come prepared to share a teaching innovation that we had attempted. Thus the Seminar grew out of the group's own expertise. Applied to the classroom, the Great Teachers Seminar model made perfect sense to me. Teaching was not about the teacher as the expert. Rather, it was about seeking collaboration between teacher and student. I was so captivated by what I experienced that summer in Illinois that I returned to Oregon and founded the Pacific Northwest Great Teachers Seminar, which continues after 25 years.

The Western Psychological Association's (WPA) annual convention became my other important source of teaching ideas. In fact, WPA was a professional lifesaver for me as a one-person psychology department—with no one else for 75 miles to whom I could talk about the teaching of psychology. WPA not only offered stimulating programs, but it afforded a chance to meet the big names—for example, Phil Zimbardo, Elliot Aronson, Beth Loftus, Gordon Bower, Carol Tavris, Christina Maslach, and Diane Halpern—whom I found to be friendly people who did not mind talking with Bob Johnson from Umpqua Community College. Even

more important, I found kindred spirits at WPA among community college teachers of psychology, who have long since become dear friends.

Once I gave up my identity as a counseling psychologist, defining myself as a teacher of psychology was natural, because that is what I did—full time. At a community college, everything centers around teaching. That is what we are hired to do; that is what we are evaluated on; and that, I discovered, is what I loved. Moreover, because no one expects us to perish if we do not publish, I had no sense of obligation that I should be doing research in some psychological specialty, such as perception, memory, or development.

By contrast, professors at the university level, I am told, are typically hired with the expectation that they must engage in research and publication, along with their teaching duties. Even though they may have lighter class loads than we at the community college, teachers at the university must decide how to allot their time between instruction and research. For them, the conflict is between developing an identity as a teacher and an identity as an expert in some psychological specialty.

For community college psychologists, on the other hand, the conflict between teaching and research does not exist. A typical teaching load at a two-year college is 15 to 20 contact hours each term, plus the usual faculty committees, office hours, and requirements for community service. For those who require some sleep, that schedule leaves essentially no time for research and publication. Nevertheless, it is important to note that we have not turned our backs on our specialties in psychology. We who teach at the community college see the teaching of psychology as a specialty in its own right. Rather than comparing us with university teacher/researchers, a more useful model for community college teachers might be that of clinical practitioners.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

One of the great impediments to good teaching is a compulsion to "cover" everything in class. Instead, I believe, it is the text's job to cover the subject; it is the teacher's job to focus on the core concepts and to facilitate learning. Any residual guilt feelings have been alleviated by my conviction that, at the introductory level, there is only one concept that students must learn in order to succeed in more advanced psychology courses or in life as a critical consumer of psychology in the popular media: *Good psychology is based on good science.* If students fully understand that concept, they will be well prepared for both psychology and life—even if they remain clueless about the James-Lange theory, the process of transduction, or the real meaning of negative reinforcement.

Once teachers get beyond the need to cover everything and begin to focus on just a few core concepts, they can begin to experiment—guilt free—with class activities that involve

students and get them thinking critically. Eventually, teachers develop their bags of tricks—often borrowed, as I have noted, from instructor's manuals, how-to books, *Teaching of Psychology,* conferences, and conventions. At some point, though, the bag overflows, and it becomes apparent that teaching is not about finding the right pedagogical gimmicks. Development of a broad teaching philosophy, then, becomes a way of simplifying one's approach to instruction and also finding new directions and renewed energy.

I believe that I can capture the most important elements of my pedagogical philosophy by describing the two main lessons about teaching to which I alluded at the outset. First, I have learned that the best place to begin teaching a new concept is at the psychological beginning: with the ideas, right or wrong, that students already have in their heads. Usually this point is not the *logical* beginning from the point of view of the professor, who wants to begin with the fundamentals and build up to general principles.

Second, I have also learned that students are more interested—and so are more likely to learn—when we *involve* them than when we *tell* them. Any cognitive psychologist will testify that active learning is more effective than passive learning.

For example, in the introductory course, a logical approach to the chapter on the nervous system might begin with the properties of the neuron, move on to essentials of axonal and synaptic transmission, and culminate with a model of how the various circuits, modules, and lobes of the brain interact. Taking a more cognitive approach, one might capture students' interest with a story that is vivid enough to implant itself in episodic memory. Accordingly, ever since my father's brain tumor was discovered and removed, I have begun the study of the nervous system by telling his story. I always followed that by asking for the students' own stories about people they knew who had suffered brain damage. These shared experiences, then, became the departure point for our discussions of neurons, transmitters, lobes, and all the rest.

I can illustrate the second important pedagogical lesson by describing a class session that, despite my initial enthusiasm for the topic, fell utterly flat. I had been reading about Pidgin and Creole languages and could not wait to tell students how these amazing hybrid tongues support Chomsky's nativist theory of language. Unfortunately, my enthusiasm was not as contagious as the students' yawns. So, after some serious reflection and the re-inflation of my self-esteem, I began the next class period by teaching students the rudiments of Pidgin grammar, following this by an exercise in which they generated their own Pidgin sentences. This much more active approach then led easily to a discussion of commonalities among Pidgins and Creoles and the nativist view of language.

Such little victories, I suspect, are what keep us excited about teaching from one day to the next. However, I also suspect that the greatest reinforcer comes from being present at

the moment of insight—when the light goes on—and knowing that we helped make that happen. In the longer term, another source of teaching reward, of course, comes from seeing students go on to be successful professionals in their own right.

What makes it work for students can be the counterparts of our own reinforcers: the thrill of insight and the reward of using what they have learned in their own professional lives. The foundation that supports those reinforcers, however, is sound pedagogy that is congruent with learning. One of the most exciting trends in modern psychology involves the development of knowledge about teaching and learning. Today we are in a better position than ever before to use psychology to teach psychology.

For one thing, we know something about getting information into long-term storage by making it meaningful. For another, we have a broad-brush understanding of concept formation, which says that we build new knowledge on old knowledge. We also know a bit about how cognitive development occurs in college students—for example, that they begin their academic careers with the naïve expectation that we will teach them the "Right Answers" (Perry, 1970, 1994). We also know that learners respond much better to a meaningful lesson that grows out of their own experiences than to a lecture that proceeds relentlessly from basic principles to grand conclusions.

We also have some new research on college teaching with which we should all be familiar. Specifically, I would call your attention to the work of Bill Buskist (2004) and of Ken Bain (2004). In parallel studies, both found that the best teachers, those who were identified by students and colleagues as the most outstanding teachers on their campuses—with no exceptions—spent most of their class time engaging students in solving problems. Now, when I look back on those classes that went exceptionally well, I realize that I was usually doing exactly what Bain and Buskist recommend. Conversely, when things went poorly in class, I was usually *telling* students, rather than *involving* them.

How do we know when our teaching is successful? A good class response is obvious—although that may be too subjective to serve as a proper dependent variable. Test results, peer evaluations, video taping, and end-of-course student evaluations can provide valuable feedback, too, but if you suspect that something is wrong—something you cannot identify—the single best method of evaluation for a mid-course correction is the SGID: Small Group Instructional Diagnosis. It is a brief evaluation process, led by a colleague, whereby students are asked, in small groups, to identify the factors that helped and hindered learning in your class (Center for Academic Excellence, 2001; Center for Instructional Development and Research, 2005; Floren, 2002).

Advice for New Teachers

Unfortunately, perhaps, I will never have the opportunity to teach introductory psychology again, because I have retired from the classroom. You might think I would be sad about not being able to teach anymore—and I could be, if I were to dwell only on the remembrance of classes past—but retirement has actually presented an opportunity to become even more involved in teaching, although in different ways. My new career path involves writing an introductory text (with Phil Zimbardo and Ann Weber). In retirement I have also had the opportunity to help lay the foundation for PT@CC (Psychology Teachers at Community Colleges), a new APA affiliate for 2-year-college teachers. I also have recently taken on the responsibility of editing the Division One (Society for General Psychology) newsletter, *The General Psychologist*. In my spare time, I pursue an interest in what Shakespeare had to say about psychology—which I hope to turn into a book. In all of these activities I see opportunities to contribute to the teaching of psychology in different ways.

What advice might I have for other teachers—especially those at the beginnings of their careers? I offer the "to do" list that I wish someone had proffered on my first day as a teacher of psychology. It begins with the two principles that I designated earlier as the most important:

Spend as little time as possible *telling* students and as much time as possible *involving* them with problems, projects, and demonstrations.

Resist any obsession with making lessons excessively logical. Rather, design classes *psycho*logically, so they connect with students' interests, beliefs, goals, and developmental level.

Attend workshops, conventions, and conferences where you can pick up new teaching ideas. I particularly recommend regional psychology conventions and conferences and any of the Great Teachers Seminars held across the country every year. And do so as an active learner: Present a poster, volunteer to help with the teaching program at the next year's conference, write an article on your best teaching innovation.

Read books and journals on teaching. You might start by reading the books I have mentioned in this chapter.

Join groups, such as PT@CC and STP, that promote the teaching of psychology.

Try some new techniques in your classes, and see what works for you and your students.

Make yourself available to mentor some of your best students.

Evaluate your teaching in multiple ways, such as peer reviews, videos, end-of-course evaluations by students, and SGID.

Final Thoughts

Beyond those recommendations I can't resist one more: Don't spend your whole life on psychology or the teaching of psychology. Devote some of your time to extending your reach across disciplines and leisure activities, where you will nurture relationships, stay mentally and physically fit, and perhaps find that Shakespeare, Van Gogh, and the people you meet at the gym can teach you something about psychology that our field has not yet discovered.

References

Bain, K. (2004). *What the best college teachers do.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Buskist, W. (2004). Ways of the master teacher. *APS Observer, 17*(9). Retrieved February 23, 2005 from the Web site: http://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/getArticle.cfm?id=1637

Center for Academic Excellence. (2001). On "Small Group Instructional Diagnosis" (SGID). Retrieved February 23, 2005 from the Web site: http://ase.tufts.edu/cae/occasional_papers/SGID.htm

Center for Instructional Development and Research. (2005). Midterm class interviews (also known as the SGID). Retrieved February 23, 2005, from the Web site: http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/SGID.html

Floren, G. (2002). Evaluating teaching through SGID: Small Group Instruction Diagnosis. Retrieved February 23, 2005 from the Web site: http://www.miracosta.cc.ca.us/home/gfloren/sgid.htm

McKeachie, W. J. (1999). *Teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers* (10th Ed.). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Perry, W. G., Jr. (1970). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years: A scheme.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Perry, W. J., Jr. (1994). Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years: A scheme. In B. Puka, (Ed.), *Defining perspectives in moral development: Vol. 1. Moral development: A compendium* (pp. 231–248). New York: Garland Publishing.

---

† 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. 172-178). 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