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Random Error: An Appreciation of the Chance of Teaching

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If "men are seldom blessed with good fortune and good sense at the same time" (Titus Livy, *Annales*, c115), then the odds of finding value in this essay are low indeed. For mine is a tale of immense good fortune. At its heart are three remarkable institutions and a series of arguably random influences that led me to them. The first institution is Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, a gem of a liberal arts college where I have taught for over 30 years. The second is the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP), that extended collection of dedicated and talented teachers whose virtual and occasionally face-to-face meetings have enriched my professional career. The third is Harvard University, where I had the opportunity to work with outstanding graduate colleagues and undergraduates and where I first cut my teeth on teaching.

My association with Carleton began in 1974, where, having left the social psychology program at Harvard and, at age 25, fairly fresh out of the womb, I assumed an appointment as Instructor in Psychology. That was a humbling experience. Carleton has had an outstanding teaching faculty and for generations has attracted eager, talented, and caring students who take to academic challenges like wolves to a pre-global warming Minnesota winter. I was forced to adapt quickly, move fast, work prodigiously, invent imaginatively, and forsake sleep. I take the fact that I am now a full professor as evidence that I have survived (so far). However, these skeletal facts leave much unsaid about how being in this place has nurtured and shaped my teaching career, and that is a rich part of the story I will tell.

The other major strand of that story originates from STP. For me, being exposed to people who approached the teaching of psychology in so dedicated, respectful, and considered a way was an inspiration, even a revelation. This group provided a professional anchor and constant stimulation, and, perhaps most importantly, an entertaining and loving network of friends. How someone as dispositionally disagreeable as I am could find a home in such a place is one of the mysteries of the story.

This story is an essay about what my curriculum vitae does not say, but I am obliged to summarize pertinent background material. I teach Social and Personality Psychology, laboratory courses associated with those topic areas, Introductory Psychology, Statistics, and advanced seminars. Over the years, I have had research interests in gerontology, the cross-situational consistency of behavior, attitudes and actions, personality traits, and self-perception, but my professional life has centered on what we now call the scholarship of

teaching. That scholarship has been supported by grants from the National Science Foundation, the Department of Education FIPSE program, the Mellon Foundation, Carleton College, and other sources. I have been active in STP, serving as President in 1998-99, and have participated in professional activities (conferences, reviews, American Psychological Association [APA] and American Psychological Society [APS] groups) related to teaching. In 2001, I received the Walter Mink Outstanding Teacher Award given by the Minnesota Psychological Association. The late Walt Mink of Macalester College was an exemplar of all that I hold dear in teaching and was a generous role model. I have, as I said, been most fortunate.

My Early Development as a Teacher

Both of my sisters and I became teachers, which suggests shared environmental influences or genetic ones on our career choices, but what the former influences might have been is not clear. We invested considerable time watching television shows like the Mickey Mouse Club; we read few books about something other than *The Hardy Boys* or *The Bobbsey Twins*. My parents were bright and hard working, but neither had college degrees. My father was fiercely independent, realistic, and waggish; my mother more fluent, well-read, and informed. I would like to think that some of those qualities rubbed off on me.

I would locate my roots in teaching (or see a resonance of those roots) in the impact of three childhood teachers. One, a school principal, Miss Hartman, organized occasional sessions on arithmetic for a small group of pupils behind the heavy stage curtains of our elementary school auditorium. Miss Hartman taught us how to play with numbers, how seemingly complex mathematical problems could be addressed using deft strategies. I found it both satisfying and useful to develop the cognitive flexibility she demanded. Another influential teacher, Rabbi Newman, led classes I attended after school at a local Jewish Community Center. In contrast to other teachers who emphasized the memorization of religious stories and rituals, Rabbi Newman enjoyed sparking discussions about moral issues and opened up a more philosophical vein for serious intellectual play. A third teacher, Mr. Grossman, introduced my junior high school classmates and me to theories of history that yielded fresh and sometimes startling contrasts to conventional understandings of our civic heritage. What I was beginning to appreciate, and what blossomed further during my time as an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, was that I loved ideas, the insights and possibilities they could raise, and the careful and critical evaluation they required. So I applied to graduate school, less out of keen desire to contribute to psychological science and more because I believed graduate school to be the most intellectually open of the other

possibilities—law school (the parentally endorsed path), the military, or secondary school teaching—before me.

I do not think I would ever have been accepted to graduate school if it were not for *Esquire* magazine. At Wharton, I majored in political science, and so I had a weak background in psychology when I applied to PhD programs. What I did have was a gift: designation as a Woodrow Wilson Fellow. Selection for this fellowship, awarded by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation to students considering careers in college teaching, required an interview with a panel of faculty. My committee included a local liberal arts college faculty member who had read about Stanley Milgram's research in a recent *Esquire* magazine article. I could handle a credibly intelligent conversation about research on obedience at the *Esquire* level; I doubt I could have done more than that. I received the fellowship, and off I went to study social psychology and eat Elsieburgers in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I wish I could convey adequately the gratitude and wonder I felt and still feel for having had the chance to go to Harvard for graduate school after being the first person in my family to have graduated any college or university. I do know the experience left me with a keen sense of our responsibility to maintain and widen educational opportunity.

Harvard's Department of Psychology and Social Relations offered little in the way of systematic training in teaching at the time, but it is clear to me that the foundations of my life as a teacher were established there. Major courses at Harvard, like Personality and Social Psychology, were taught by prominent faculty lecturing once or twice a week and by graduate students, like myself, who met with smaller sections of 20-30 students regularly. The 6-10 graduate students involved in any one course worked together to swap ideas and handle responsibilities, but each of us had his or her own syllabus and led individual sections under the umbrella of the main course. In this setting, with the help of creative peers, conscientious faculty, and eager students, I learned how to organize a lecture, lead a discussion, and write a syllabus—and, perhaps, most importantly, I was not only beginning to learn how to teach; I was discovering how intellectually engaging and personally rewarding I found teaching to be.

My passion for teaching, however, was not enhancing my conventional prospects for an academic position, because my publication record was standard deviations below the norms for aspiring social psychologists. In an odd way, struggling with the belief that my efforts as a teacher would have little impact on my fate in psychology helped gird me for my career. I persevered despite my deviance from the research prototype, and that, eventually, gave me the chance to discover that the research prototype is itself unrepresentative of the varied ways in which academics make professional contributions. At the time, it came as a surprise to me and, perhaps, to my advisors as well, when I happened upon an institutional (and geographical) outlier. I had never heard of Carleton College before seeing a notice for a

job there, but when I visited, I felt as if I had fallen into Eden, a "Harvard of the Midwest" solely focused on excellence in undergraduate education. If Carleton College had not sought to add a social psychologist to its program in 1974, I am not confident I would be in academia today. It was one of the great fortunes of my life to have been given the chance to settle a career in teaching on the prairie plateau.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Establishing myself as a teacher at Carleton was a daunting and exhilarating challenge. I was surrounded by legendary professors and a highly supportive staff. Every day in class, I stood before the most intense, conscientious, and inquisitive students, eager to learn and think and to figure out the relationship between what they were now doing and the lives before them. I faced high expectations and extraordinary possibilities. What fertile soil! My teaching and career were also beneficiaries of a colleague's NSF grant designed to promote student involvement in empirical social science research. I was able to use some of that funding to support research with students and to develop research modules for my courses. The former resulted in empirical contributions to psychology (e.g., Mischel & Peake, 1982), the latter in my first involvement in the scholarship of teaching (Lutsky, 1986) and an associated exposure to the keen mind and sharp pencil of Charles Brewer, then the editor of *Teaching of Psychology*.

What turned out to be the central struggle of my teaching career was defining myself as a psychologist. How can someone committed to teaching psychology in a local context develop an identity as a psychological scientist? I held such an identity locally and personally. I believed teaching to be central to public understanding of science and to the future development of science and to be an inherently scholarly activity, but I lacked a confirming social identity as a scientific psychologist, especially when attending national conventions or in social comparison to many peers. Eventually I forged that social identity as my participation in the teaching of psychology community became recognized in its own right and as it meshed with the growing appreciation for teaching by academics in scientific circles. For the former, I would blame a lapse in judgment by the otherwise good people of STP. I was introduced to STP because John Bare, a Carleton colleague, happened to be active in it, but it did not take long for warm, thoughtful, and committed colleagues like Jane Halonen, Charles Brewer, Maureen Hester, Bill Hill, Drew Appleby, Wayne Weiten, Ginny Mathie, Randy Smith, Marky Lloyd, Jim Korn, Sam Cameron, Diane Halpern, Joe Paladino, Bill McKeachie, and many others to capture my respect and love. I had not only gained a reference group for upward comparison and rich lodes of teaching stimulation to mine; I had found a home in psychological science as supportive and challenging as my home at Carleton.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

I have found it renewing to reflect on my teaching over the course of my career but equally important to have had the time and resources to make these examinations productive. In my circumstances it would have been difficult to avoid the hall of mirrors decorating my travels, ranging from required self-assessments at Carleton (e.g., annual reports addressing teaching, periodic senior faculty reviews) to automatic social comparisons to those outstanding teachers I was exposed to locally and nationally. I found it particularly humbling to encounter heroic colleagues at institutions with meager resources, often when I visited to assist in department reviews. Most such faculty are unrecognized, and they give their time, creativity, and even personal funds in order to maintain high level psychology programs for their students. *Teaching of Psychology* has also been a constant source of ideas over my career and represents a host of resources (e.g., books on teaching and education, teaching conferences, electronic networks, discussion groups at Carleton, grant-funded initiatives, the APA Education Directorate) that have prompted my thinking about teaching.

In addition, I have had a crucial luxury, the freedom to play with teaching. I have not been subject to rigid teaching requirements or monitored by constant student or institutional evaluations, so I could experiment with teaching and continue my education. I could play with how I teach (e.g., developing laboratory courses, using new technologies). I could develop new areas of teaching expertise (e.g., statistics) and new seminars (e.g., Positive Psychology, Cross-National Psychology, the Psychology of Endings) as I pursued questions of interest or literatures I wanted to read. I have even had the opportunity to teach a course on the Theatre of London as part of Carleton's off-campus program there. I have had room of my own and opportunities to be enriched by teaching.

My goals as a teacher were well-articulated—as most things are—by Charles Brewer: "The fundamental goal of education in psychology, from which all the others follow, is to teach students to think as scientists about behavior" (1993, p. 169). Above all else, I have wanted to engage my students in thinking, which is what they were eager to do. My job was to hone that thinking, to help it become more critical and systematic, to anchor it in evidence and reason, and to highlight its meaning and significance. Psychology has proved to be a rich, important, and challenging venue within which such work was possible.

Over my 30 years in teaching, the surface content of psychology as a field has changed significantly, and I have come to believe that our greatest potential impact on students is not via the content that students retain but through the intellectual values we might affect. For my senior faculty review in 1999, I sketched out my values as follows:

After my classes, do my students think more coherently and systematically? Do they appreciate the insights and perspectives of various historical and contemporary traditions and communities? Are they more likely to evaluate claims on the basis of argument, evidence, and reason rather than authority, stereotype, and popularity? Do they seek to voice and test their ideas? Do they recognize and challenge what is spurious and injurious? Do they respect uncertainty? Do they express themselves more clearly, effectively, and engagingly? Do they appreciate quantity, complexity, time, and beauty? Are they better prepared to lead grounded, honest, responsible lives? Do they leave with a deeper sense of perspective and a richer sense of humor? Are they any more likely to rely on sober and expansive reason, despite its frailties? Do they find pleasure and value by engaging life in thought?

That agenda has kept me busy over the years. Whether I have been successful in making some contribution to the remarkable students I have been given remains one of the uncertainties I have learned to respect.

Advice for New Teachers

The singer John Prine wrote a delightful piece about advice columnist Dear Abby (Prine, 1975). I recommend listening to it before taking any advice, mine included, too seriously. What I will offer are two sets of suggestions, one relevant to the immediate teaching situation and the other to careers in teaching.

A teacher in a classroom faces a continual nemesis—lack of student attention. A necessary but not sufficient condition for effective teaching is getting and recovering that attention, repeatedly. I use a variety of means to attract attention: an engaging introduction to a topic, a well-structured presentation that builds understanding, arguments highlighting the significance of literatures or findings or values being addressed, questions to the class, quick student-to-student discussions, demonstrations, video clips, cartoons, and a coherent summary of the progress made in a class session. I believe, most of all, that student interest can be captured by powerful ideas, compelling phenomena, and well-grounded arguments. What students do not need are lists—of famous names, concept definitions, or findings. They do not need their time occupied. They need meaningful and stimulating arguments, data, and examples that get them thinking; they need us to respect their minds. What happens next—what we do with the opportunities attention brings us—is crucial. We have to help students work to organize, temper, ground, and question their thinking. Eager activity (e.g., vigorous discussion) does not always accomplish this; a structured and directed task or purpose (e.g., involvement in research) often does.

I also believe pleasure is infectious. I enjoy being in class, talking about psychology, and thinking about arguments and evidence, and I hope students see that. I am manifestly

happy in class if I share an enjoyable (and provocative) cartoon, present a stimulating literature, make a connection between psychology and other fields of study or endeavor, or begin to think about something in a new way based on student responses and questions. I also take pleasure in discussing with students how what they are doing in psychology (e.g., writing, thinking quantitatively, learning about a specific topic) may have broad value in their lives. What I convey in class reflects what has always been personally true: I am a teacher first and a psychological scientist second.

I was drawn to a career in teaching because I anticipated it would provide an intellectually challenging and invigorating life, and it has done so for me. What has enriched my work as a teacher, first of all, is engagement with students. An almost equal source of stimulation is that old standby, reading, including reading beyond psychology. I have also treasured the opportunities I have had to play, for example, with new teaching responsibilities, professional roles, technologies, and ideas in education. Finally, I have stolen from the best, the finest teachers, and most thoughtful work on teaching I could find. (Carleton, after all, is in Northfield, Minnesota, the site of a famous Jesse James bank robbery.) STP and *Teaching of Psychology* have been rich sources of such wealth, and they are lightly guarded (i.e., easily available to all).

There is no guarantee that a random variation will survive in academia; I almost did not. Moreover, the opportunities and constraints that I experienced as a confluence of career random errors are unlikely to be replicated—but, if my story suggests anything, it is that blind investment in a loving pursuit of teaching does have a chance of survival in supportive and freshening environments and that we all need to invest deeply to make such environments available to others.

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