

We've Come A Long Way, Baby

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As district/lead/high school science department chair for the past 18 years in the Bellmore-Merrick Central High School District on Long Island in New York, and as an educational consultant, I have enjoyed the privilege of working with thousands of students, hundreds of teachers, and scores of supervisors and administrators. Before working in Bellmore-Merrick, I taught for 20 years in New York City, mainly at Benjamin Cardozo, Francis Lewis, and Jamaica High Schools. To prepare for my current position, I earned a Bachelor of Arts in Biological Sciences from Douglass College of Rutgers University, a Master of Science in Secondary Education from Queens College of the City University of New York, a Master of Arts in Psychology from Stony Brook University of the State University of New York, and a Professional Diploma in Administration and Supervision from C.W. Post College of Long Island University.

For as long as I can remember, teaching and learning processes have fascinated me and have probably consumed more of my waking hours than any other single topic. From observing my newborns grow into wonderful adults; conducting action research with my classes; and collaborating with colleagues in my department to participating in professional workshops with such noted educators as David Berliner, Linda Darling-Hammond, Jacqueline Grennon-Brooks, Heidi Hayes-Jacobs, Spencer Kagan, Louis Mestre and Joseph Novak; and working on committees with such dedicated psychologists as Irwin Altman, Cynthia Baum, Barney Beins, Ludy Benjamin, Charles Brewer, Jane Halonen, Gregory Kimble, Bill McKeachie, Anthony Puente, Charles Spielberger, Robert Sternberg, and Kenneth Weaver; and high school colleagues including Marty Anderson, Charlie Blair-Broeker, Mary Colvard, Randy Ernst, Alan Feldman, Caren Gough, Rob McEntarffer, Peter Petrossian, Marissa Sarrabando, Allyson Weseley, and Kristin Whitlock, I learn more about how we learn every day.

Among the awards bestowed upon me, I most value the American Psychological Association (APA) Presidential Citation for leading the effort to create *National Standards for the Teaching of High School Psychology*, the APA Division 2 Moffett Teaching Excellence Award, and the Tandy/RadioShack National Outstanding Teacher “Champion of the Classroom” Award. The latter two revealed the incredible support and respect esteemed colleagues have for me. What a validating experience!

My Early Development as a Teacher

Much like other biological sciences majors in college who wanted to help other people, I planned to become a medical doctor. One day I realized I might make decisions that could kill patients, and that possibility terrified me. Because I loved tutoring, working as a camp counselor, babysitting, volunteering in the pediatrics unit of a hospital, and because I came from a family of educators, teaching was the natural alternate career path to take. I enrolled in introductory history and philosophy of education courses, then sought a student teaching placement for the spring semester of my senior year in college. Surprisingly, the science department chairs at the two schools I visited offered me paid regular substitute teaching positions instead. Having earned all of the necessary credits for graduation, I filled out papers for my diploma, and embarked on my career as an educator.

The first Monday in February of 1967, I was officially a teacher with five subject classes, a homeroom class, a study hall, and tons of homework. When one colleague told me, “It’s sink or swim,” I became determined to do the crawl, but more often found myself just treading water. Instead of feeling flattered or respected when asked if they would share their lesson plans with me, some experienced teachers said they considered using someone else’s lesson plans as stealing their work. Fortunately, one teacher let me read her plans and my chairperson provided me with a detailed curriculum guide for a second subject. I thought about spending my preparation period in the faculty room to develop friendships, but the tobacco smoke was too dense to navigate. Instead, I spent preparation periods in a classroom with friendly students who had unassigned periods and who gladly helped with clerical work, which left me with more time to prepare lessons.

During those first weeks, my principal told me, “You should hear a pin drop in your classroom; no students should be talking.” Instruction and support from my department chair, Herman Gillary, good subject area knowledge, enthusiasm, amiable students, and a belief in the importance of helping to educate the next generation kept me afloat. At the end of the semester, a teacher returned from sabbatical leave, and I was excessed to another school. I officially matriculated for a master’s degree in science education in the evenings so that I could work towards credentials for permanent certification and a tenure-track position.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

In September, I arrived at the junior high to which I was assigned at the same time as a young man who was labeled “an instant teacher.” He had majored in political science, gotten a limited number of education credits over the summer in a special program, and never taught before. He admitted to me that he only wanted to teach in order to avoid the draft. Although he had only 16 credits in science, he was initially given advanced science classes to teach, and

I was assigned to teach general science to seventh-graders. Although I had been excused from the first school when a male teacher with a less desirable record was retained, I had not entertained the notion that my sex had anything to do with the choice until my new colleague and I were given our assignments. I asked the principal about the criteria used for his assignments and was told that my new colleague was bigger and more likely able to handle ninth-graders. I brought up the point that I had already taught ninth-graders and older students. My new colleague said that he would be happy teaching the other program, so the principal reassigned our programs. My classes were a delight to teach, so I did not want to shortchange them. Without a department chair in the junior high school, I asked an experienced science teacher if I could visit his classes, and he was delighted. From him I learned more of what I did not want to do with my classes than what I did want to do, which was valuable, but disappointing. That December I married a teacher from the first school, and at our wedding my first principal invited me back. I accepted his invitation without hesitation.

In February, I returned to Jamaica High School with a year of teaching experience, several graduate courses that filled voids in my scientific background, and an excellent methods-of-teaching science course under my belt. The professor for the methods course had urged the students in the class to become active in professional associations and to attend meetings, so that is what I did. The New York Biology Teachers Association was a group of enthusiastic, knowledgeable teachers eager to share whatever they knew with me, and together with the National Association of Biology Teachers and National Science Teachers Association, provided as many helpful publications as I could read each month. Now a less needy teacher with lots of materials to share with my colleagues, I found the colleagues with whom I was again working were much more willing to share their lesson strategies. My students benefited with enriched opportunities to learn. Teaching became more rewarding than before, and I realized that I was in love, not only with my new husband, but also with the career I had chosen.

The early years passed quickly. Before it seemed possible, I was awarded tenure, earned a master's degree, advised student clubs, helped students conduct research, began to present workshops, was assigned a student teacher, helped get a faculty room designated for nonsmokers, and was given premium classes including the children of teachers, chairs, an assistant superintendent, and the borough president. Some of that changed as soon as I told my department chair that I was pregnant. The principal called me to his office, told me, "A pregnant woman should not be teaching students, should not be seen in public," and then sent me to the New York City Board of Education to be examined by a physician. Although I wanted to teach until the end of the school year, I was told that I had to leave before Memorial Day. I was assigned five general science classes for the spring term. I joined a class action suit

to prevent women from being forced to take maternity leave before they want to. The second time I was pregnant, teachers no longer had to leave sooner than they wanted. When that same principal who had recently retired saw me pregnant, he told me that my husband and I should have more children. I reminded him what he had previously said. He responded, "Then, I was only concerned with the school community, now I'm concerned about the world." When my daughter was 16 months old, I was exsessed again.

Fortunately, the good news is that I was welcomed to teach at the high school from which I graduated. The better news, although I did not realize it immediately, was that I would have to teach Psychobiology. With a weak background consisting of only nine credits in psychology, I sat in on a class taught by Marc Robin, the teacher who had initiated the course, for several weeks. We developed a great professional relationship. I bartered effective instructional strategies for his reference materials. I enrolled in psychology courses and found them much more captivating than I had as an undergraduate, and I went on to earn a master's degree in psychology. Because there was no New York association of psychology or psychobiology teachers, I contacted teachers at other New York City schools to start one. Can anything be more blissful than teaching and learning about teaching and learning?

The Examined Life of a Teacher

If a tree falls in a forest and there is no one there to hear it, has a sound been made? That's a familiar question to most of us. Analogously, if a teacher teaches and someone does not learn, has the teacher taught? If a teacher thinks she knows or knows she knows something, and her knowledge is a misconception, how can she know that?

These questions have concerned me since I started teaching. The only way I have found to minimize the chances of teaching without students learning is to align curriculum, instruction, assessment, and student learning. The alignment process requires tremendous time, energy, expertise, and effort, and is never-ending. Put simply, the process involves designing curriculum goals and objectives keyed to standards, then creating unit plans with instructional strategies that will enable the teacher to discover what students already know and understand, the learners to attain the goals and objectives, and both the teacher and learners to measure changes in conceptions through formative and summative assessments.

The only way I have learned to uncover my misconceptions so that I do not pass them on to my students is to collaborate with colleagues, conduct practitioner/action research, read subject matter, participate on committees; take part in conferences, workshops, and conventions; join listservs; and communicate with experts as often as possible about what I teach. This effort consumes as much time as I can possibly spare, and probably explains why

my husband bought me a t-shirt that features an ad for a movie, “The job that ate my brain!”—but, isn’t that a great way to go?

Long since many of us have forgotten what the advertising campaign was hawking, we remember the slogan, “You’ve come a long way, baby.” What we know about learning has come a long way since 1967, and as a result, so has teaching. If an observer could hear a pin drop in my classroom these days, the observer would think that something was terribly wrong. Although some students can sit through lectures or Socratic-type discussions and learn well, not everyone thrives in that kind of classroom environment. Whereas my lessons years ago typically consisted mostly of short lectures, demonstrations, whole class discussions, and individual students writing answers to worksheets I created, my lessons today are more student-centered. Typically lectures have been replaced by Webquests and video clips, demonstrations by hands-on activities, whole class discussions by discussions in cooperative learning groups, and worksheets I created based on reports of research conducted by individuals or cooperative groups. Working together, students frequently seem to create better products and learn more than they do by working individually. However, because some would rather have others do their work, we teachers need to monitor groups so that each participant contributes to the group effort.

What can be more rewarding than seeing students grow into lifelong learners with dreams that evolve into goals they can achieve and knowing that we have helped them in some small way? Getting a call from a former student who came from an abusive household, and who now has children that no one hits because she says she learned from me, “People are not for hitting,” is more rewarding than I could have imagined. Hearing from others that they became psychologists or are pursuing other worthwhile careers because I helped them realize that they had the ability is also very satisfying.

As wonderful as achieving this ideal is, not all of my students set high standards for themselves. Some become afflicted by “senioritis” early in their last year of high school. By the time most college acceptances are received, more students have flagging motivation and declining levels of achievement. Nothing is more frustrating for me than working my hardest to help students learn only to have them resist and get turned off. How to turn them back on has consumed lots of my effort and energy. Although I have not been able to excite all afflicted by senioritis, I have been successful in motivating some by getting them involved in their own research projects.

Somewhere inside most students is a question they really want to answer. However, uncovering that question can be challenging. Although sometimes burning questions can be exposed through discussion, more digging is often required. One strategy that has proven successful is offering students lots of questions that other students have explored, mixed in

with hunches of what I think may interest these particular students. Often this approach triggers an “aha” response.

Getting them started on a road to research excites us all. Then, of course, there is the Advanced Placement (AP) examination for those enrolled in the AP Psychology course. Keeping all students, including reluctant learners, striving for success necessitates establishing individual accountability. Fortunately, technology has come to the rescue. A new system of wands hooked up to a classroom computer and LCD projector quizzes students instantaneously, providing immediate feedback that is reinforcing to students.

Because such a system is costly, it is not available all of the time. Even if it were more available, using a variety of instructional and assessment strategies makes teaching and learning more interesting. Years ago, I did not know much about formative assessments, nor did I recognize that students come to me with preconceptions about how the world works, many of which are different from those that scientific research has revealed. As a result, my checking for student understanding was limited. I would ask questions during class, review homework and laboratory reports, and grade quizzes and tests. Today my repertoire of effective formative and summative assessment strategies is considerably larger. During a typical month, I will use anticipation guides, think-pair-share or think-write-pair-share, carousel brain storming, focused free write, topical barometers, concept mapping, KTW (What I Know, What I Think I Know, What I Want to Learn), analogies, role playing, graphic organizers, metacognitive split page writing, paraphrasing, reflection logs, structured academic controversies, and problem based learning as both instructional and assessment strategies in addition to the old tried and true methods of assessment. Probing for understanding frequently tells me how students’ conceptions are changing. When students are not learning, then I am not teaching them successfully; I need to try something else. When I am feeling especially brave, I will videotape a lesson, then analyze it moment-by-moment.

As well as using these strategies with my classes, I work with different collegial groups to which I belong to employ some of the same techniques for evaluating our own work. We create or revise units cooperatively, or construct concept maps. Occasionally we peer review lessons. Although each group does not meet frequently, I participate in at least one or more groups each month to keep my teaching skills current and fresh. In 38 years, this job has never become boring!

Advice for New Teachers

If you want to be a good or even outstanding teacher, be the kind of teacher that both you and a friend of yours who does not learn the same way as you would want to have as a teacher. To keep your enthusiasm, associate with other passionate teachers. Stay away from

the malcontents who often lurk in the corners of faculty rooms. Team up with teachers who are instructors for similar courses; share everything—give and you shall receive. Do not be afraid to ask for advice. Ask accomplished teachers questions and they will generally tell you much more than you knew you wanted to learn, but you will not be sorry for asking. Join local, regional, and national professional associations. Read their publications and attend their meetings. My fourth-grade teacher, Leah Lieberman, used to say,

Good, better, best,
Never let it rest,
Until the good is better,
And the better is the best.
P.S. We never reach the best.

Final Thoughts

The other day, a colleague of mine who also started teaching in 1967, said that teaching has not changed much. When we started teaching we did not have calculators; my yellow slide rule was guaranteed for life. We used typewriters, but “white out” did not exist. We cranked out purple copies of handouts using a ditto machine. Setting up a 16mm film projector took so much time and effort that showing a 30-second film clip was out of the question. Female teachers were not permitted to wear slacks to school. Offices were filled with cigarette smoke. Pregnant teachers were not supposed to be seen in school. Observers were supposed to be able to hear a pin drop in the classroom. We knew much less about how students learn. We’ve come a long way, baby. Thankfully!

[†] 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. 200-206). 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>