

From Play to Passion: A Journey to Becoming a College Teacher

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I am honored to have the opportunity to share my journey of becoming a college teacher. During 29 years at James Madison University (JMU) teaching was my passion. My courses in statistics, research methods, social psychology, and introductory psychology gave me many opportunities to share with students my excitement about psychology and the research enterprise and to help students develop skills that would allow them to pursue their own professional passions. In my current role as Executive Director of Psi Chi, The National Honor Society in Psychology, I still consider myself a teacher. Although I do not interact with students in a classroom, my activities provide opportunities to inform students about the discipline of psychology and to foster students' development as scholars, professionals, and citizens.

My love of psychology began at the University of Waterloo where I earned a Bachelor of Mathematics degree (with a major in computer science) and a Bachelor of Arts degree (with a major in psychology). I honed my teaching and research skills at the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill (UNC) where I earned my MA and PhD degrees in social psychology. As I progressed through these programs I became more enthralled with teaching and more determined to share my excitement and awe for psychology.

Teaching was the center of my professional life, but I believed that scholarship and professional service were integral to teaching excellence because they informed what I did as teacher. Consequently, over the years I collaborated with colleagues and students on a variety of research projects, many of which resulted in publications and presentations with student co-authors. My professional service involved leadership at many levels, including founding president of the Virginia Academy of Academic Psychologists, an academy of the Virginia Psychological Association; president of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP), Division 2 of the American Psychological Association (APA); member of the APA's Board of Educational Affairs and chair of its Psychology Partnerships Project: Academic Partnerships to Meet the Teaching and Learning Needs of the 21st Century; faculty liaison on the APA's Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools Committee; and member of the Steering Committee for the American Psychological Society's Fund for the Teaching and Public Understanding of Psychological Science.

Throughout my professional life I tried to integrate teaching, scholarship, and service but my zeal for teaching was paramount. Consequently, I am proud of the awards I received

for my teaching and contributions to psychology education. These awards included the 1981 JMU Distinguished Faculty Award, selection as the APA 2000 Harry Kirke Wolfe Lecturer, and the APA 2002 Distinguished Contributions to Applications of Psychology to Education and Training Award. This point in my career is an opportune time to reflect on the journey that led to these accolades.

My Early Development as a Teacher

My early development as a teacher began well before any training to become a college professor. I wanted to be a teacher from the time I was a child playing school with my sisters and neighborhood friends. What I enjoyed most about playing school was playing teacher. I found delight in every aspect of this role, from organizing my classroom, preparing my lesson plans, teaching my students, to grading tests. My commitment to becoming a teacher persisted and the fun, enthusiasm, and pure joy of *playing* teacher led to the exhilaration, satisfaction, and passion of *being* a teacher.

So how I did I get from play to passion? My initial interest in teaching was sparked by my elementary school teachers, but it was not until high school that the goal became more concrete and focused on becoming a mathematics teacher. Gary Flynn, one of the many exceptional mathematics teachers I had at Royal York Collegiate Institute in Toronto, was instrumental in this decision. His enthusiasm for mathematics and more importantly for *teaching* mathematics was contagious. He fostered in me a love of mathematics and analytical thinking that persists today. His persistent challenge to extend ourselves beyond what we thought we could do, his thoughtful attention to organizing lessons to engage and guide us through this process, his unwavering encouragement as we struggled to do so, and his obvious delight when we succeeded are etched in my memory. Although neither of us realized it at the time, he was in fact my first teaching mentor simply by giving me the opportunity to observe a master teacher at work. At every stage of my teaching career I have held Mr. Flynn up as my role model—the ideal teacher I hoped to become.

With Mr. Flynn's encouragement, in 1967 I entered the cooperative mathematics and computer science program at the University of Waterloo. I enjoyed my courses and work terms immensely and continued to prepare to teach high school mathematics, but two opportunities changed the focus of my teaching goals. During my first semester I was enrolled in the introductory psychology course and became enthralled with psychology. Every class period captured my attention and imagination. The second fortuitous event was the invitation to serve as Harold Miller's undergraduate teaching assistant in a mathematical psychology course. This unique opportunity combined my love of teaching, mathematics, and psychology. To teach even a few classes was an exhilarating experience for an undergraduate novice. I

later became one of Miller's research assistants and found myself captivated by the world of research. From that point on, my career goals solidified and I set out to pursue a career of college teaching and research in psychology.

In 1971, I entered the social psychology program at UNC, eager to combine teaching and research but still clearly focused on my long-term teaching goals. I am grateful to John Thibaut, my master's thesis and dissertation advisor, and to all the social psychology faculty members for their constant encouragement and support of my interest in teaching. Early in the program I had the opportunity to teach classes under the supervision of Thibaut and Stephen Worchel. Eventually I became an instructor for the undergraduate social psychology course. Although the program did not offer any formal training or preparation for teaching, all of the faculty members were readily available to provide guidance and assistance when I needed help with teaching-related issues. Along with their own words of wisdom, they steered me to an early version of McKeachie's book *Teaching Tips*, an invaluable source of information and inspiration. In fact, my most recent copy (McKeachie, 2002) still holds a place of honor in my collection of teaching resources. The UNC faculty members also served as role models for extending teaching beyond the classroom to supervision of research. They welcomed undergraduate students to their research teams and gave graduate students the opportunity to develop research supervision skills that integrated their teaching and research.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

By the time I became a faculty member at Madison College in 1975 (now James Madison University), I thought of myself first and foremost as a teacher of psychology. I was fortunate that my JMU colleagues provided an environment that encouraged, supported, and valued teaching excellence. Even with this exceptional support system, however, I struggled to find a balance among teaching, scholarly activity, and professional service. I tended to see them as separate areas of responsibility, with each area requiring its own set of skills, time commitment, and focus. It took me a few years of frenzied shifting from one activity to another to realize that I could organize my scholarly activity and service in ways that would complement and not distract from teaching. I began to structure my research so that it involved collaboration with teams of undergraduate students, thereby extending my teaching beyond the classroom and giving me the opportunity to mentor students on a more meaningful level. More recently, work by Boyer (1990), Halpern et al., (1998), and Lynton (1995) helped me realize that the scholarship of teaching and the scholarship of service are viable and valuable scholarship areas. This realization further reduced the tension surrounding the struggle to balance teaching, scholarship, and service by giving me a sense of freedom to pursue scholarship in teaching and service.

I also reframed how I viewed my professional service and recognized that it could be a vehicle for improving my teaching. Through my service I developed a network of psychologists who shared my enthusiasm for teaching. As I carried out my service activities with these colleagues, I had many opportunities to discuss teaching strategies with master teachers; share and get feedback on my own teaching experiences; learn about new pedagogical tools to improve my teaching; become more knowledgeable about issues confronting teachers at the national level; learn how to be a better academic advisor; and broaden my understanding of the challenges and issues that confront psychologists who provide mental health services. The knowledge I gained through my service contacts undoubtedly helped to make me a better teacher, mentor, and advisor.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

The transition from viewing teaching, scholarship, and service as distinct entities to viewing them as integrated components of my teaching profession was just one of many changes that occurred over my teaching career. My approach to teaching and the strategies I used in the classroom also changed over the years.

When I first started teaching, I did not have a coherent vision that guided my teaching activities. I focused on the course content, trying to make sure that I covered the basic concepts, theories, and research orderly and clearly. I wanted students to learn what they needed to know, but I did not consider to any great length what they brought to the classroom to facilitate this learning or how my teaching style and their learning styles interacted to influence their learning. Then, in the mid-1980s I discovered Perry's (1970) theory of the developmental stages of college students and ways to apply his concepts to my teaching (Widick, Knepfelkamp, & Parker, 1975; Widick & Simpson, 1978). I started to think about students' cognitive level and the structure and pedagogy that would be most appropriate to facilitate learning at each stage of development. My course planning became more thoughtful and purposeful. In first-year courses, where students were more likely to be in the dualistic stage, I provided more structured teacher-led activities. In upper level courses where I tried to help students make the transition to the relativism and commitment stages, I used less structure and provided more flexibility and student-led activities.

My discovery of Perry went hand-in-hand with my discovery of the literature on critical thinking and active learning. As I searched for ways to tailor my upper-level courses to students in the relativism and commitment stages, I realized the value of incorporating more critical thinking and active learning activities in all of my courses. Books by Brookfield (1988), Halonen (1986), and Halpern (1996) became invaluable resources. I moved away from the 50-minute lecture with some attempts at discussion to mini-lectures punctuated by

hands-on demonstrations, small group activities, and opportunities to work on problems. I made a more concerted effort to engage every student actively in each class period.

Another trend that took root in the mid-1980s was assessment. I had always conducted course evaluations at the end of each semester and tried to use students' feedback to improve my teaching, but as I became more involved in and committed to the campus-wide assessment program at JMU, I embraced a broader view of assessment in my own courses. I spent more time developing learning objectives for each course, articulating these objectives to students, and defining measurable outcomes. I screened my class activities, demonstrations, and assignments more carefully to determine if these activities were valuable aids in helping students achieve the objectives. I also examined the way I evaluated student performance and searched for ways to make the assessment process more frequent, more authentic, more developmental, and more relevant to providing feedback about the extent to which students were meeting the course objectives.

My ability to incorporate active learning and meaningful assessment into each class was enhanced by the technological revolution that took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Given my background in computer science, I was particularly enthusiastic about using computer-based multimedia materials in my classes. In 1992, I was one of six psychology faculty members who worked with technicians to design JMU's first multimedia classroom that included electronic keypads at every seat. Not only did this technology change the way I organized and presented material, it also created a new array of active learning opportunities in which all students could participate. For example, I incorporated non-graded quick quizzes (multiple-choice questions to which students provided answers using the electronic keypads) into classes at least once a week to get an immediate assessment of students' understanding of important concepts. Using the increased access to the Internet and the just-in-time teaching technique (Novak, Patterson, Gavrin, & Christian, 1999), I created weekly on-line pre-class questions to determine students' understanding of major issues and concepts, and then used their pre-class responses to tailor my class presentation to address the concepts students did not understand.

As I examine the major changes in my teaching style, I realize that these changes reflect the development of a philosophy of teaching that was not present early in my career. My philosophy comprises four basic principles. The first principle is that it is just as important to know my students as it is to know the content I am teaching. This principle motivated me to consider students' developmental stage; ask them about their goals for my course; ascertain the knowledge, skills, beliefs, and experiences they brought to the class; and take into account how the demands and stresses of their personal lives might influence their performance in my class. The second principle in my teaching philosophy is that every course

should have learning goals and outcomes that are clearly defined and conveyed explicitly to students, content and activities designed to help students achieve these goals, and frequent assessment (both graded and non-graded) with timely constructive feedback to inform students about the extent to which they are achieving the desired outcomes. The third principle that guided my teaching was the importance of engaging students in the learning process and challenging them to extend themselves intellectually through activities that involve active learning, critical thinking, practice, and self-assessment. I believe these activities are most effective in promoting learning if they are tailored for the developmental and cognitive level of the students and if they occur in an environment that provides support and encouragement while reinforcing the value of hard work and challenge. The fourth principle underlying my teaching philosophy is that I must model the behaviors and attitudes I want students to acquire. Included in these behaviors and attitudes are treating others respectfully, engaging in professional development, being willing to take risks in my efforts to acquire new knowledge or skills, and using setbacks as opportunities for learning.

I believe I matured as a teacher when these principles became the guiding forces of my teaching. It took a concerted effort over many years to articulate these principles and incorporate them into my teaching, however; and I did not do it on my own. I participated regularly in JMU workshops designed to enhance teaching. Every year I attended at least one (and often several) state, regional, or national conference and sought out the sessions related to teaching. It was at these sessions that I was first introduced to many of the concepts that helped me to improve my teaching. I am particularly grateful to my colleagues in STP because they played a pivotal role in organizing and leading sessions that stimulated thought-provoking discussions about teaching, provided resources I could use in my classes, and inspired me to examine my teaching and dedicate myself to improving it. Books and journals related to teaching, particularly STP's journal *Teaching of Psychology*, have been invaluable resources along the way.

My journey to becoming a college teacher has been an exciting one. Being a teacher has been even more fun than playing teacher. I have found every aspect of teaching intellectually stimulating and immensely rewarding. By being a teacher I have also become a life-long learner, garnering new perspectives, experiences, and knowledge from each new group of students.

Advice for New Teachers

In looking back over my own career as a teacher, I realize that there are many paths to becoming an outstanding teacher and many role models to emulate. I do not believe there is one teaching style or one set of techniques that are the hallmark of an outstanding teacher.

The best advice I can give to new teachers is to know yourself and be yourself in the classroom. Be open to learning about new teaching strategies from your colleagues and your students, but spend some time selecting the ones that best fit your own teaching philosophy and style. If you bring your passion for teaching, your excitement about psychology, and your enthusiasm for learning to your classroom and share them with your students in a way that is comfortable and engaging for all of you, you will become an outstanding teacher.

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