

Swimming Against the Tide: Journey of a Peace Psychology Professor

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My first foray into teaching was over 40 years ago. I remember standing in front of the class, my knees shaking, terror building, scanning my mentor's face for encouragement, and then I read my essay to the first-grade class. I was in second grade and my first-grade teacher had invited me back to "teach" that day. I remember the students sitting there listening intently to the "older girl" who had come in to present. I am not sure how much I really taught that day but it was fun. Forty years later, it is still fun.

My graduate education began at Saint Louis University in applied-experimental psychology with a focus on adult development and aging. However, over the years, my professional identity has changed dramatically. Today, I consider myself to be a peace psychologist and I have completed coursework in Israel and Eastern Europe related to understanding the psychosocial roots of the Holocaust and other forms of mass violence.

Currently, I am a Professor of Psychology at Webster University, and I teach a broad range of courses including courses on the Holocaust, genocide, political psychology, women and global human rights, war, terrorism, and peace psychology, all from a psychosocial perspective. Additionally, I teach more traditional courses such as statistics, personality theory, and history of psychology. One of the truly great things about my university is that there are opportunities to teach and conduct research in a range of interdisciplinary areas. Thus, my courses are often cross-listed with the women's studies, multicultural studies, and international human rights programs, which facilitated my ability to expand traditional psychological coursework and curriculum development into new areas.

I feel fortunate to have been honored several times for my work as both an educator and a scholar. I received the McKeachie Early Career Award for Teaching from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP; Division Two) of the American Psychological Association (APA). Since then I have been honored with additional teaching awards including the Emerson Electric Excellence in Teaching Award (Regional Teaching Award) in 1990 and 2000 as well as the Kemper Outstanding Teaching Award (University Teaching Award) in 2000. Additionally, I have been the primary author on two Office of Teaching Resources in Psychology, Instructional Resource Award projects: *Expanding Student Boundaries with International Psychology: Textbook Evaluations, Strategies for Integration, and Resource Guide* (2000) and *Genocide, Ethnopolitical Conflict, and Human Rights: A Path to Internationalizing the Psychology Curriculum and Promoting Social Responsibility* (1999).

Professionally, I am also a Coordinator for the Center for the Study of the Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights at Webster University, 2006 President of the Society for the Study of Peace, Conflict, and Violence: Peace Psychology (Division 48 of APA), 2003-2005 Secretary for STP, member of the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP) program committee, and an editorial board member for H-Genocide.

My Early Development as a Teacher

Imagine standing at the edge of an ocean cliff, staring wide-eyed at the cold, swirling waters below, and being told to jump. Also, imagine that you have never had any swimming lessons and there are no lifeguards to assist with that first swim, although there do appear to be sharks circling. This picture describes my first experience as a teaching assistant while in graduate school. I was put in charge of a physiological psychology laboratory course, a laboratory course I had never had the opportunity to take while an undergraduate. I was to coordinate sheep brain and other dissections, run estrous studies with rats, teach stereotaxic surgery and perfusions, and other assorted activities—all of which I had never done before. It was clear that I was on my own and I was panicked. Fortunately, a fellow graduate student, who had taught the course previously, bailed me out by volunteering to assist me during that first semester.

I received little teacher training or mentoring while I was a graduate student. However, I was provided many teaching opportunities. Based on my success with that first physiological psychology laboratory course, I was offered the opportunity to teach additional laboratory courses followed by more traditional courses. I then began teaching as an adjunct faculty member at a number of universities in the St. Louis area.

All of these opportunities were important; I knew from the first day of graduate school that my primary goal was to prepare myself for a career as a psychology professor. I have always found psychology, with its underlying theoretical and philosophical ambiguities, its methodologies, and its concern for human beings, a challenging and important discipline. I love studying, exploring, researching, talking about, and teaching psychology. I think students can sense my intense commitment, excitement, and wonder, and it serves as a catalyst for their own developing journey. Fundamental to my passion for teaching is the belief that what I teach is important; it has value to people's lives individually and collectively within a multi-cultural global community. I knew that teaching psychology would allow me to blend these loves and interests into one career path.

Although I had the goal and the opportunities, I was not a "born teacher." In essence, I still had to learn to teach while on the job. I employed five strategies in my efforts to become a more effective teacher. First, I worked hard. I spent more time on the classes that I was

teaching than the classes that I was taking. Teaching involves a responsibility to others and inevitably any time I have tried to "cut corners," the students have paid the price. Second, I tried out lots of new activities and methods. I was prepared to see what worked and also what failed. Third, I listened. I listened to my students and my fellow teaching assistants. They did not always say what I wanted to hear but more often than not, their comments were beneficial. Fourth, I reflected on the good and bad teachers I experienced through the years and then endeavored to model my teaching style on those professors who exemplified excellence in teaching. Finally, I allowed myself to have fun in the classroom. I began my undergraduate career as a theatre acting major and I enjoy letting the ham out of the closet every now and then. Of course, I should add that the quest for teaching excellence never ends.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

I sometimes joke that I do not have too much on my plate because I have expanded it to a tray—and yes, I probably have too much on my tray as well. Finding a balance between teaching, writing, research, professional obligations, and the other aspects of life is my most challenging struggle as an academic. There simply is not enough time to do everything that I want to do or to do what is expected of me. Therefore, it has been important for me to learn time management skills and also to learn to say “no.” With regard to the latter, there will always be another committee, another task force, another project that either someone else thinks you should do or that looks incredibly enticing professionally. However, it is important to learn to be selective about where to place one’s efforts. For me, the criteria upon which I select projects include not only what will bring the most meaning to my life and perhaps, open the most doors, but also those projects that translate back into creating a more dynamic classroom.

Some individuals I know approach the issue of overload by cutting back on one aspect of their professional identity. For example, they may scale back their teaching or reduce their efforts towards research and writing. For me, this strategy does not work. It is much more important to achieve an active identity that includes all facets of my work and to balance them. I find that I am a much better teacher when I am involved in research, writing, and other professional activities. Conversely, I think my teaching improves the work I do in other arenas. If nothing else, my students ask questions and challenge my worldview, causing me to reexamine my hypotheses and theories. In a nutshell, I define myself as a teacher, but I would be a shadow of a teacher if my work did not expand beyond the classroom.

Another challenge that I have had to overcome through my years has been the lack of mentoring. Many graduate programs have designed programs to assist, guide, and mentor graduate students and early career teachers. Such a teacher-training program did not exist in

my graduate education and the old boy network may also have still been in place. During my assistant professor years, I think the issue became a bit more complex. Because I did or at least appeared to do things well, my colleagues assumed that I needed no assistance or mentoring. I sometimes wonder how much quicker my career and abilities would have advanced if I had been mentored. Ironically, I think I have received more mentoring in recent years as a result of my affiliation with divisions within the APA as well as other professional organizations. Thus, the lessons learned may be: Ask for assistance, develop positive interactions with your colleagues, and seek out resources through organizations such as the STP for professional growth and development.

My greatest challenge in defining myself as both a psychologist and a teacher has been the result of my focus on peace psychology, a nontraditional area of study. It is difficult to swim against the tide of tradition, and it can be lonely. For many years I would regularly be asked at both research and teaching conferences, "What does 'this' have to do with psychology"? The "this" being genocide, terrorism, war, peace, or other topics related to mass violence that I happened to be presenting on that day. Since September 11, 2001, the relevance of psychology to the understanding of terrorism, war, torture, and other topics within the realm of peace psychology has become transparent. However, during my early years, support for my teaching and scholarship related to peace psychology was infrequent and I had few collegial relationships within peace psychology. Support and relationships have grown dramatically over the years, but it would not have been possible had I decided to give up my nontraditional identity and focus.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

Three primary principles rest at the heart of my personal philosophy of teaching: Diversity, global human rights, and teaching students the "how" of learning. We live in a global community marked by increasing interdependence and mutual influence. Incredible diversity, both locally and across borders, exists within this global community. Issues of diversity include: race, national identity, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical and cognitive abilities, religion, economics, ideologies. The list goes on, and all create an ever-changing and evolving tapestry called humanity. Psychology teaches us about the commonalities within this tapestry, but can also teach us about our differences, the impact of culture, and both the benefits and challenges that human diversity brings to relationships and communities. Therefore, in all of my classes, I strive to address issues of diversity.

I feel strongly about integrating concerns of global human rights into the psychology curriculum. Psychology has much to offer as a science toward the promotion of universal human rights, the documentation of benefits or risks for individuals, families, and

communities associated with the maintenance or violation of essential human rights, respectively, and the development of models aimed at the promotion of more peaceful communities. With knowledge, our students may be more likely to accept the mantle of social responsibility and become actively involved as citizens and future psychologists within the global community. For this reason, I have developed and teach several unique psychology courses including Holocaust; Genocide; Nazi Science: Human Experimentation vs. Human Rights; Women and Global Human Rights; Psychosocial Roots of Terrorism; War and Peace; and the Psychology of Peace and Conflict. I integrate issues of social responsibility, global concerns, and human rights into all of my courses.

Learning should be an incredible journey marked by sparks of insight, emotion, and imagination. As Abraham Joshua Heschel (1951) wrote, “Wonder, rather than doubt, is the root of knowledge” (p. 11). Thus, one of my teaching goals is to spark this wonder and to foster the development of independent, critical thought, evaluative skills, and depth of learning. Much of my class time is spent critically evaluating theories and research, examining the philosophical biases inherent in each. In addition, I encourage students to think for themselves, to explore ideas, and to question. Anyone can simply parrot information, but doing so does not demonstrate learning. Independent thought applied to acquired knowledge represents learning and opens the door to discovery. Therefore, during assessment, the answers are rarely “in the book.” Students must know complex information, trust their understanding of this knowledge, and create unique problem-solving applications. Through this process, students learn how to learn and thus open the world up to themselves forever. I believe that individuals who critically evaluate information, independently analyze situations, and who know how to learn and self-teach are better equipped to face the challenges posed by our rapidly changing society and world.

The kernels of these three principles were visible in my early teaching but have evolved over time. Moreover, changes have occurred in my approach and methods of teaching. For example, I worry less about cramming in all of the details on a topic and focus more on a broader understanding of concepts. Ultimately, the details are easier to comprehend within the context of a concept. Second, I am less critical of my students’ work and seek to build more on their strengths. In other metaphorical words, the red pen has been replaced by pink and on occasion blue. I find that students have greater skill development and learn more by stressing what they have done right than a focus on marking everything they have gotten wrong. Additionally, I have learned to listen more in class and to examine why a student may have questions about a particular concept. I have come to recognize that students’ questions are not always directly about the material. Although I strive to maintain focus on the course material and topic, I am more sensitive and careful in my answers than I think I used to be. In

other words, I am getting better at recognizing my students as individuals beyond just their "student" identity.

Of course, technology has also changed my teaching. Advances in technology have opened new doors within the educational process. Multimedia, if used well, can foster a highly dynamic classroom. I am still learning and exploring, succeeding and failing, as I seek to discover best practices for technology in the classroom. Additionally, for each of my classes I have developed Web sites and e-mail discussion lists. Thus, I am able to remain in contact with students throughout the semester by sending them relevant news articles, questions or study guides, and highlight information from around the globe concerning course material. Students also engage in the dissemination of information, discussion, and inquiry. Class no longer ends at the threshold of a university building.

Although I do not engage in a high degree of self-assessment beyond my, at times, extreme introspection, I do work to improve my teaching. First, I strive to improve my teaching in the classroom. Thus, I never cease to try out new teaching methods and activities and I continuously update my class materials. In other words, I rarely teach the same class twice. Second, I study the current scholarship of teaching in forums such as the STP journal, *Teaching of Psychology*, and conferences. Third, I engage in the scholarship of teaching through my own research, conference presentations, and curriculum development. Finally, I network and regularly converse with colleagues around the globe who also share a passion for teaching.

Advice for New Teachers

Study the scholarship of teaching. Approach the scholarship of teaching as one would the learning of any discipline. Read journal articles, books, and other sources of research related to teaching and if possible take a class on teaching.

Be a joiner. Professional organizations such as APA and STP are a great way to network, particularly if one attends the various conferences and conventions. Additionally, the publications are invaluable. They provide the budding academic with information about everything from jobs to teaching tips!

Find mentors. Teaching mentors are invaluable and can aid in finding direction, avoiding pitfalls, and working through classroom and student difficulties.

Get experience. Look for opportunities to teach and then get feedback. Although it is important to not get locked into a "professional adjunct" status, it is also important to gain teaching experience. Look to other local universities and colleges for opportunities to teach and invite colleagues to sit in on your classes to provide feedback.

Attend and present at local, regional, or national teaching conferences or institutes.

These conferences provide unique opportunities to learn from a variety of individuals ranging from graduate students to experienced “pros.” Some of my most valuable mentoring experiences have taken place within the context of these conferences.

Break the Rules. Okay, I am not advocating doing anything illegal or fundamentally stupid. Rather, I am encouraging you to be innovative. Much of my career has involved breaking the implicit rules about what is appropriate within psychology to study and to teach. Certainly, most psychology programs do not include coursework on genocide. Innovation in relation to what you teach, the methods used to teach, your research, and so forth come with risks but it also opens the doors to great personal and professional rewards. If you are always comfortable with what you are doing, chances are you are not testing your limits or expanding your abilities.

Find your passion. If you love what you teach and you are excited about it, students will find themselves caught up in the learning process.

Reference

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