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Intention and Commitment

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Once upon a time a skinny, quiet little boy who wore glasses lived in upstate New York. His dad, who owned a candy factory, always brought home lots of broken lollipop pieces, making the little boy's house the most popular place in the neighborhood. Despite the frequent sweet-toothed visitors, the little boy did not have a lot to say to them—he was too embarrassed by his stuttering to try to speak. The little boy kept to himself a lot and lived in a dream world in which he imagined himself becoming a pitcher in the major leagues.

He loved baseball and played it every chance he got. He became pretty good, but not great, at it. Eventually, after many years of hard work, he earned a baseball scholarship to college. By then he had conquered most of his stuttering problem, although he rarely participated in class unless he absolutely had to—he was still too self-conscious to risk the chance of stuttering before his classmates. However, he made some new friends, and he got to play a lot of baseball with some very talented teammates. He never made it to the major leagues, though—a shoulder injury cut his college baseball career short and fatally wounded his dream.

Of course that stuttering little kid was me. I share this story with you because it reveals a key ingredient to my life as a teacher: working hard. I worked hard to learn not to stutter and harder still at learning to speak with confidence in public. It was my practicing baseball day in and day out as a kid that led me out of my home town of Jamestown, New York to a far college away in Provo, Utah to play baseball. It was at Brigham Young University (BYU) that I met two people who influenced my life as it had never been influenced before. First, my wife, who inspired me to become a better human being, and second, a remarkable teacher, Hal Miller, who inspired me to become a college professor. Their guidance, combined with my hard work as a student, has afforded me more good fortune in my career than I ever imagined possible. To borrow from the late, great New York Yankee, Lou Gehrig, on the occasion of his famous farewell speech in July, 1939: "I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth."

My career did not exactly get off to a smooth start, though. I completed all the requirements for my PhD in 1980, but I couldn't find a job, so I deferred my dissertation

defense to the next year, but I couldn't find a job then either. Over these two years I applied to 53 different positions and in return received 53 letters of rejection. That may not be any sort of record, but it was enough to make me start doubting myself. Finally, through a series of unusual, but happy, last minute events, I landed a temporary position at Adams State College, a master's level school in located in south central Colorado. From there I moved to Auburn University, a doctoral level university in east Alabama.

Except for a wonderful year that I spent teaching at Appalachian State University in western North Carolina, I have spent my entire career at Auburn where I currently am the Distinguished Professor in the Teaching of Psychology and where I direct the Psychology Department's Teaching Fellows Program. The Psychology Department's unflinching support of my work as a teacher has permitted me the opportunity to win several teaching awards, including the 2000 Society for the Teaching of Psychology's Robert S. Daniel award, and Auburn's first Gerald and Emily Leischuck Endowed Presidential Award for Excellence in Teaching in 2005. Although I am eternally grateful, and indeed, humbled, by the recognition my teaching has received, my greatest reward centers on the success of my students—both undergraduate and graduate. I am particularly proud of my graduate students who themselves have worked hard to become outstanding teacher-scholars.

My Early Development as a Teacher

As a graduate student I had no training for college and university teaching, but I did have multiple opportunities to teach. During my first year in graduate school, I served as a teaching assistant. I mostly created and graded exams. I seldom had the chance to do any real teaching, except for some one-on-one tutoring during my office hours. During my second year and beyond I taught upper division courses such as research methods, learning, and sociobiology without faculty supervision. I shudder to think of what a horrible teacher I probably was in those early years. I am sure that my students' learning would have been greatly enhanced had I any clue as to what I was actually doing.

A teaching assistantship at BYU in the late 1970s paid about \$225 per month, which was not quite sufficient support for a young married couple with a small family. After working for a year or so at an odd assortment of part-time jobs, including custodial work in the local mall and unloading and reloading semi-trucks on a loading dock, I landed a position with BYU Extension Services. This job entailed teaching psychology courses to military personnel at Dugway Proving Grounds, a military installation located about two hours from BYU near the Utah-Nevada Border. I learned a whole new appreciation for the word "intimidation" at Dugway—students showed up for class in

military fatigues and sometimes carried their weapons. I was extra careful to be respectful to all my students!

My teaching at BYU and Dugway was simply a means to an end. At the time, I liked teaching, but I did not love it. It was a way to make some money to help support my family and so I could do what I really wanted to do in graduate school—learn to become a laboratory researcher. In hindsight, though, I realize that graduate school was a type of intellectual foreplay that set the stage for me to get so excited about teaching. One person in particular had a strong influence over me: Hal Miller, whom I've already mentioned.

Hal portrayed psychology as *the* essential discipline for identifying and solving the world's greatest mysteries. Hal didn't give us any definitive answers to why psychology is such a powerful lens through which to view all aspects of life. Instead, he gave us questions, and those questions challenged us, in the most compelling ways, to seek our own answers. Many of us found his questions so irresistible that we became undergraduate research assistants to work on the answers. His intelligence, engaging style, candor, and sense of humor nurtured my growing fondness of psychology and helped solidify my idea to go to graduate school in psychology.

I had the good fortune to stay at BYU and complete my PhD under Hal's direction. Our relationship centered almost wholly on our research. He never observed my teaching. In fact, I don't recall even ever talking with him about my teaching. What Hal did do, though, was to become my role model for becoming a teacher-scholar. He demanded excellence from himself in his research, teaching, and in his interactions with others. His deep commitment to and passion for psychology, teaching, and his students was nothing short of spectacular, and that's led me to want to be like him—to become a college professor.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

I left graduate school focused on a research-centered career. Hal and I had much success in publishing our work together, and I was certain that I would find my deepest professional fulfillment in the laboratory. But careers are messy things; despite the best laid plans, careers take on trajectories of their own through changes in circumstance and chance occurrences. Mine certainly did.

I had been at Auburn for five or six years when Peter Harzem, who was Department Chair at the time, asked me to help him redesign the way our introductory psychology course was taught. In those days, graduate students taught the course with almost no supervision. To make a long story short, we revamped the course so that faculty taught it, using graduate students as teaching assistants who led small discussions sections of the course once a week.

During the process, I became fascinated by some of the inherent problems involved in teaching large sections (450-plus students) of the course well: what topics to cover and in what depth, how to keep so many students engaged during class, how to encourage thoughtful discussion during the class, how to train graduate student teaching assistants, and so on. Eventually this curiosity led me to ask a simple personal question: How might I become a more effective teacher?

Naturally, seeking an answer to that question led me to the library. While studying the literature on college and university teaching, I was struck by how much psychologists and educational researchers didn't know at the time about the basic elements of effective teaching. Because I was trained as an experimental psychologist, I started developing research questions, and before I knew it, I had a whole new program of research.

At the time I first asked myself how I might become a more effective teacher, I had a strong program of research focused on developing operant analogs of human cooperation and competition in the laboratory. However, I gradually lost interest in my laboratory research and surrendered to the allure of teaching and research on teaching. Some of my colleagues were surprised, if not disappointed, with my decision to leave the laboratory—and I can understand their dismay. Why give up promising laboratory research for a teaching career, especially at a research institution like Auburn?

That is a tough question, and one with which I struggled mightily before I became wholly committed to the change in my career trajectory. I was torn—should I stay in the lab or should I commit fully to the classroom? I knew that I was neither smart enough nor energetic enough to do both well. I took my dilemma to my good friend and trusted advisor, Peter Harzem. I posed the question to him, and as is his style, he answered with a question: “Which audience is more important to you?” Taken aback by this question, I asked him what he meant. He replied, “Figure out which audience matters more to you—the people who read journals or the people who take your classes—and everything else will take care of itself.”

I thought about the question for a long while and eventually decided that although I might influence a few people over the long run with my laboratory research, I had the chance to influence hundreds of students on more important matters every time I stood before them in class. Rather than influence a few researchers about the nuances of operant competition and cooperation, I had the chance to influence students on what I now consider much more important matters, such as the value of psychology to society, whether to seek a psychologist's help in the face of pressing personal issues, or how to manage better their own psychological resources in order to lead satisfying lives.

The struggle ended late one morning when a quiet, calm feeling came over me as I walked into Haley Center 2370, then a 450+seat classroom. That feeling left me with a clarity that I've rarely experienced when making weighty decisions. To this day, not even a twinge of regret or doubt about that decision has entered my thoughts. The decision to teach has been the single best career decision I've made outside of deciding to go to graduate school. I am not saying that laboratory research is not important—indeed, it is essential to advancing knowledge our discipline. Rather, for me, my preference became, and will likely remain, teaching.

Although I am happy beyond measure as a teacher, teaching well remains a constant challenge for me. To be sure, I've walked out of the classroom many times with my head hung low. Making errors of fact, getting off track, misunderstanding a student's question, rushing through material simply to get it covered, uttering an off-hand remark that unwittingly hurts a student's feelings, are all things that contribute to less than stellar teaching.

Unfortunately, such mistakes do happen and will continue to happen. There is probably no such thing as a perfect class session let alone a perfect class. Although I do my best to try to teach well, teaching is live, and I do not have ultimate control of what will transpire over the course of a class period. I find such uncertainty exhilarating—not knowing how a class may turn out helps keep me motivated to give each class my best on any given day.

The one problem with which I wrestle most is the same one that all academics struggle with, and that is time. There is just not enough time in a day to do all things we would like to do in our jobs as academics. I attempt to deal with the zero sum nature of time by making careful choices as to where best to allocate my energies. Because my two top priorities are classroom teaching and the training of graduate student teachers, I tend to devote the bulk of my time in these two arenas. I devote the little professional time that is left over to research and writing in the area of teaching. Through trial and error, I have found the best way to keep productive as a researcher and writer is to block out a small parcel of time each day for these activities. Two hours is not a lot of time, but two hours multiplied by, say 300 days, is 600 hours or roughly 25 full days or almost a month each year that can be devoted to carrying out research, analyzing data, and writing it for publication. Viewed this way, two hours a day really adds up to a large chunk of time!

The Examined Life of a Teacher

One of my favorite movies, "The Natural" (Levinson, 1984), is about baseball (of course). It's a wonderful story of a very talented young baseball pitcher named Roy Hobbs, who as a middle-aged man, finally gets his chance to play major league baseball.

Early in the movie, when he is still a boy, Roy's father tells him that he has a "great gift," but that it is not enough—to become truly great, he must work hard to develop his natural athletic ability. I believe that the same is true of teaching. As I noted in my Harry Kirke Wolfe (2005) address,

No one ever achieves excellence in teaching by accident. Excellent teachers are made, they are not born. Sure, it may be true that some of us may have natural propensities that lend themselves to good or even excellent teaching, but it is no less true that excellence in teaching requires extraordinary effort and hard work.

Working hard at becoming an effective teacher centers on leading a thoroughly examined life as a teacher, which means becoming fully aware of one's motivations, actions, goals, and foibles. It means reading and thinking about effective teaching and observing the teaching of individuals known for their teaching excellence. It necessarily entails tinkering with the elements of our teaching and taking calculated risks in expanding our repertoire of teaching skills. Finally, it requires constant monitoring and assessment of teaching and being totally open to student and peer feedback regarding how it might be improved.

In my case, I subscribe to several journals on teaching, including *Teaching of Psychology*. Although I do not read every single article in each issue of these journals, I try to read as many as I can that I think will either help me improve my teaching or be useful in helping conduct teaching research. I keep copies of McKeachie and Sviniki's (2006) *Teaching Tips*, Perlman, McCann, and McFadden's *Lessons Learned*, and a few other books on teaching (e.g., Davis & Buskist, 2002; Buskist & Davis, 2005) within an arm's reach in my home office. I attend every teaching conference that I can—and without fail, I find at least one or two ideas at each conference that I can modify to use in the courses I teach. I frequently observe colleagues known to be excellent teachers in and outside my department, and I often "steal" ideas from them and use them in my own teaching. Every semester I try to revise my courses in some way—sometimes remaking them completely and sometimes making only subtle changes. I experiment with new demonstrations, lectures, in-class activities, and PowerPoint slides nearly every semester. I generally assess my teaching formally twice a semester—once at midterm and once at the semester's end. I also frequently do less formal assessments, particularly in-class assessments of student learning and student reactions to demonstrations and other class activities I am experimenting with for the first time.

All this hard work keeps me busy, but I have found that I don't perceive it as genuinely hard work because I am having so much fun teaching. After 25 years in the classroom, I am still very much motivated to teach well. I still look forward to preparing

for class, interacting with students in and outside the classroom, and reading student essays and portfolios. I still get just a tad nervous before each class, knowing that I am putting myself on the line and that I might fail. But even failure is not all that bad because it teaches me something about what I may need to do to become a better teacher. That's the challenge I enjoy most—finding new and more effective ways of teaching.

Advice for New Teachers

Young academics aspiring to become effective teachers need not look far to find “how-to” books and articles chock full of excellent advice on teaching. In the past 20 years, the teaching literature has exploded with such writings. For example, in addition to continued revision of the “bible” of college and university teaching, *Teaching Tips* (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006) and Volumes 1 and 2 of STP's e-book *The Teaching of Psychology in Autobiography: Perspectives from Exemplary Teachers* (Benson et al., 2005; Irons et al., 2007), books by Buskist & Davis (2006), Curzan & Damour (2000), Davis (1993), Davis & Buskist (2002), Dunn & Chew (2006), Forsyth (2003), Goss-Lucas & Bernstein (2005), and Perlman, McCann, & Buskist (2005), and Perlman et al. (1999; 2004) are excellent resources for learning more about becoming an effective teacher. My best advice to new teachers is to get a hold of at least one of these books and read it from cover to cover.

Other than that, I don't have any new advice to add beyond the many good words of wisdom offered in these volumes, but I do wish to underscore one point that is omnipresent in them. Teaching is primarily about opportunity and influence. Effective teachers create opportunities for students to acquire new knowledge and new skills within an academic domain and within the larger framework of life. Effective teachers also create opportunities for themselves to deepen and broaden their knowledge base and skill levels within and across academic fields and to mature as educated individuals.

Final Thoughts

Taking advantage of these opportunities is the chief means by which a good teacher becomes a great teacher and a great teacher becomes a master teacher. As a teacher's skill level increases, so does the likelihood that he or she will have lasting influence on how students think about psychology and how they personally connect to it. It is in this way that teachers alter the future of their students and their discipline—effective teachers inspire many of their students to work incredibly hard and earn good grades in their courses. Some of these students decide to major in psychology and many of these students will go on graduate school in psychology. Charles Brewer (1996), one of psychology's most famous and articulate master teachers, speaks of this process as “bending twigs and affecting eternity.” I think he's right on the money.

Good teachers never stop being students. They intentionally continue learning the facets and nuances of their discipline, and they tinker with unique ways of sharing this knowledge with others. This sort of commitment to the discipline and to teaching is the best way to prepare for the opportunities that lie ahead of us to exert positive influence over our professional futures and the futures of our students. Indeed, it is the only way.

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