

*The Fears and Joys of Teaching High School Psychology*

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On the filing cabinet in my classroom, I have a picture of my first teaching job. I am three years old playing school with my 6-month-old sister. She is sitting in a desk my grandfather had from the school where he had taught. She is gripping a fat pencil and waving a piece of paper in the air. I am holding a notebook, pointing at some important concept I'm sure she needs to learn before moving on to her next developmental milestone.

I have been teaching professionally since 1995. I earned my bachelor's degree in psychology and English (with teaching certifications in each subject) from Samford University in 1994. In 2000, I completed my master's degree in educational administration, also from Samford University. I am now "all but dissertation" toward a PhD in educational psychology from the University of Alabama. In addition to formal schooling, I also attended a month-long NSF-funded summer institute for psychology teachers at Northern Kentucky University. Further, I have been fortunate to share my knowledge and experience at several psychology and social studies conferences.

I am the only psychology teacher in the Social Studies Department at Spain Park High School in Hoover, Alabama. In 2003, I started a psychology program at Spain Park, Hoover's new high school. The psychology program has grown to three AP Psychology classes and two regular psychology classes catering to juniors and seniors. I have served as member-at-large and chair of Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools (TOPSS), the high school teacher affiliate program of the American Psychological Association (APA). Through my work with TOPSS, I have served on the working group that revised the *National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula*. I am a Table Leader at the AP Psychology Reading, and I wrote the College Board's *Teacher's Guide for AP Psychology* (Fineburg, 2003d). I am the author of the *Instructor's Resource Binder* (Fineburg, 2003a) and *Teacher's Edition of Worth Publisher's Thinking About Psychology* (Fineburg, 2003c), a high school psychology textbook written entirely by high school psychology teachers. I wrote a 7-day unit plan for teaching positive psychology (Fineburg, 2003b). I have also authored book chapters, articles, and essays about teaching high school and positive psychology. I have been named the 2005 Secondary Teacher of the Year for Hoover City Schools and the 2006 Moffett Memorial Teaching Excellence Award winner for the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP). Throughout my career, my husband Ben and my son Micah have been supportive and encouraging of my growth as a professional teacher.

### My Early Development as a Teacher

I entered college majoring in psychology. I loved psychology, but was not quite ready for graduate school. Upon learning about the certification program to teach psychology in high schools, I changed my major to secondary education and added English to be more marketable. I enjoyed my English courses, but my heart became more endeared to psychology, and my desire became more fervent to teach psychology in high school. I hoped that if I could not find a school with a psychology program, I could start one, building toward teaching only psychology.

Certification requirements to teach in high schools include a certain number of credit hours of content-specific courses in addition to courses in pedagogy, school law, educational psychology, special education, and technology. The pedagogical courses focused on equal parts theory, anecdote, and application. Much of the theory presented in the courses was exactly the same as the theories I learned in psychology. I prepared lesson plans for my certification area subjects. These lesson plans followed a specific format: lecture outlines, classwork, homework, formative and summative assessments, and remediation activities. Working on these plans required thinking through the information and how to present it, which was valuable, even if the volume of information I thought could be included in a day's lesson was completely unreasonable. My early lesson planning was very ambitious, cramming way more information into a day's lesson than I could teach. I would then be frustrated because I couldn't cover everything I thought I should in a particular day. I've learned to over-plan, but to be flexible about the directions my students take each class. I am more a director of the learning than a dictator.

All teacher education candidates in Alabama must complete 14 weeks of student teaching in their certification areas. I did my student teaching at a high-performing suburban high school working with the AP Psychology and the advanced-level English teacher. I was supposed to teach my first 7 weeks in psychology and the remaining time in English. On my first day, the psychology teacher informed me that the English teacher's son had committed suicide the previous spring, and he had been in his mother's class. This English teacher was renowned for her teaching, and she was coming back to work only because she would have a student teacher. I took over her junior-level American literature course and taught two AP Psychology classes and one regular psychology course. I went from carefree college student to full-time teacher in one day. I had to introduce myself to a class of overachieving students who had expected a fully qualified, experienced teacher. Baptism by fire would not have been as tough as my first few weeks of student teaching.

My psychology cooperating teacher, Barbara Gajewski, was the best mentor I could have asked for in this stressful situation. She was an award-winning psychology teacher who advised me to join TOPSS and go to an NSF workshop, both of which I did within the next 3 years.

Barbara helped me comfort and encourage my English cooperating teacher as she grieved the loss of her son and tried to move forward. Perhaps it was fortunate that I was a psychology major. I may have been more sensitive to her mood swings, frustrations, and attempts at strength. Despite all of the stress and struggle that semester, my student teaching prepared me for “real” teaching more than any other experience I could have had.

#### Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Teaching is a non-stop profession. People who work in traditional lines of work get to leave their work at the office. Teachers never stop thinking about and working on school. Papers always need to be graded. Lessons always need to be planned. I find the volume of work to be the most overwhelming obstacle in teaching. In my early years, I did not manage my workload very well. I gave so many assignments that I could not keep up with the grading. Students can smell busy work a mile away, so I have tried to avoid giving them work that did not serve my objectives. I used to bring papers home to grade, but would end up spending time with my family instead. I decided to avoid the guilt and just not bring work home. Now I spend time each day after school grading papers so they do not pile up.

The pace of my lesson planning has not changed. I still find myself involuntarily waking up at 4:00 am planning the next day’s lesson. Nothing is worse than a classroom full of aimless teenagers. Their keen sense of smell extends to knowing when teachers are just filling time. I learned early on to over plan for each day. I plan for an entire unit, sketching out what needs to be taught in a window of time. That way, if a lesson goes more quickly than I had anticipated, I know what I need to teach next with activities ready to go. Rarely do my classes give students “free time.”

My work as a teacher does not afford me time for extracurricular activity. When I get attached to a project, I work on it during each undistracted waking moment. Unfortunately, the structure of high school does not give me many undistracted moments. I teach five 50-minute class periods each day, with two 50-minute class periods to plan and take care of other school duties. I have 20 to 30 minutes each day to get anything done that is not related to Spain Park High School. My teaching responsibilities and school-related duties must come first. Hoover City Schools is paying me to educate the city’s young people, and I am committed to doing my best for my students. I would love to spend more time mentoring student research, promoting professionalism for psychology teachers, and engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning. I do carve out time for these things. I believe that all my efforts outside the classroom make me a better teacher, and I prioritize these other activities based on the contributions they can make to my students and my profession.

#### The Examined Life of a Teacher

I believe all students can learn. On some days, I want to see a relatively permanent change in behavior that occurs over time. On other days, I just want my students to know how to spell “psychology.” Some students come with the knowledge and skills to enable them to do well. Other students barely realize what it takes to succeed. Because both types of students—and all types in between—participate in the same lessons, the challenge to teach all of them taps my resources. I keep us all on our toes by varying how I teach. I reveal why we are learning a particular concept in a particular way. Students respond to sincerity and appreciate being partners in their learning experiences.

I believe failure is good for the learner’s soul. School, though, has taught many students that failure is unacceptable and irreversible. We spend little, if any, time working through misunderstandings students have about the information we teach. Students look at their failures as obstacles rather than challenges. To combat this mindset, I give make-up tests. Students can take the make-up as many times as they’d like to earn the grade they want. The higher grade always prevails. By offering make-up tests, students can take control of their grades. They can learn the material via repetition. They must study in ways that will enhance recall rather than recognition. Sadly, few of my low-performing students ever take advantage of these make-up tests. They claim the make-up tests are too hard because they are short answer rather than multiple choice. Only my high-achieving students return to earn the highest grade possible. They are not thwarted by failure. This phenomenon spurred my research into the role of explanatory style in teaching and learning. If we can discover the mechanisms that differentiate those who give up from those who persevere, we can help students understand the value of periodic failure in a successful life.

In the beginning of my career, I thought I had to tell the students everything that was going to be on the test. However, being the sage on the stage became too exhausting. Through the years, I have changed my teaching approach to alleviate the pressure to cover everything and to instill good habits in my students. I focus on concepts that have proven to be difficult, less obvious, and easy or fun to demonstrate. I give reading comprehension quizzes on textbook chapters before we begin each unit so the students will be held accountable and discuss more deeply during class. Instead of just viewing psychology as a set of knowledge to be learned, I try to use psychology to make my teaching better.

People outside of teaching think that summers off and an 8 to 3 work schedule are teaching’s greatest rewards, yet they are actually teaching’s greatest myths. I spend almost every summer day attending workshops, planning lessons, and taking graduate courses. I arrive at school at 7:30 in the morning and leave at 5:00 in the afternoon each day. I do not get to go to the bathroom when I want to or have a lunch break that lasts longer than 25 minutes. I must call parents every 4.5 weeks if their child is doing poorly, and I have to accommodate students with

special needs. Yet all of this effort is worth it when students tell me they want to major in psychology now that they have taken my class. I revel in the moments my students tell me that psychology is their hardest course, but it is also the one they look forward to most each day. I rejoice when my students tell me they talked to their parents about the effects of split-brain surgery when it was shown on *Grey's Anatomy*. I can take a bad parent phone call and frustrating administrative paperwork when learning is happening in my classroom. I see in those moments that all my hard work and dedication to my profession are paying off as students' lives are being transformed.

As a young teacher, I relied on personal reflections to evaluate my practice. But as I taught my students about confirmation and hindsight bias, I realized I needed to engage in more systematic examination of my practice. I learned ways to analyze the mounds of data that I collected each day. Do students who missed the review day do worse on the test? Do students who take make-up tests do better on the final exam? Do quiz scores correlate with test scores? Because I teach psychology, I am equipped to analyze these sorts of data in meaningful ways. I believe all teachers should be so equipped. Teacher education programs focus mainly on practices over evaluation. Perhaps educators are overwhelmed by the number of variables in a given classroom environment, which makes empirical study of teaching challenging at best. Perhaps we are stymied by other duties and responsibilities and cannot focus on formal evaluation of our teaching. Teachers should be committed to evaluation of what goes on in the classroom. If we are not, we will continue in an endless cycle of fads and other practices that may not work. Fortunately, calls for accountability have heightened our attention on evaluation, but the skills to do proper assessment need to be an integral part of teacher training and professional development.

I constantly think about how I can improve my teaching. I tell my students that everything they do is being studied by psychologists somewhere in the world. I, too, see how psychology plays a role in life, and I share those anecdotes with my students. I ponder constantly how I can make my lessons better. One day, I hope my students will tell me that there was not one day that they were bored, uninterested, or confused about what I taught them. A girl can dream.

I am always on the look out for opportunities to mold my identity as a professional psychology teacher. I am the only psychology teacher in my building, so I do not get to bounce ideas off flesh-and-blood colleagues. I have to seek out others who share my passion for psychology. Fortunately, I have found them as a member of TOPSS, STP, and electronic discussion lists. I count the days until the AP Psychology Reading each year, relishing-the camaraderie and intellectual stimulation I get that week in June. I also attend and present at conferences both at home and across the country. I love finding high school psychology teachers

who are eager to make their courses significant. Through networking, I become a better teacher. I “steal” activities from others, giving my students an experience they wouldn’t have had if I had stayed home. I learn about others’ philosophies and reflect on whether I should take on a new perspective. For high school psychology teachers, I could not recommend more highly the importance of establishing contacts with others who teach psychology, whether they are around the corner or across the country.

#### Advice for New Teachers

Outstanding teaching is a skill that can be learned. I reject the notion that “those who can’t, teach” or that “teaching is something one is born to do.” I have known outgoing, gregarious people succeed mightily at teaching—and fail miserably. So, what might it take to be a successful teacher?

- Become a student of teaching. Learn all you can about different theories and practices, and then try them out. Evaluate systematically whether they work.
- Be flexible each and every moment of the day. Students who were on fire for learning one day may not be so the next. Having multiple plans for teaching each day’s lesson helps give students the learning environment they need.
- Be the authority, but not the overlord. Students appreciate structure in their classes, but they resist restrictions. Be a partner with them in their learning—just be the senior partner.
- Admit when you are wrong. When I mix up retroactive and proactive interference, I am not afraid to admit it the next day—or even when students point out my mistake at that moment.
- Overprepare for each day. You never want to run out of things for your students to learn, so plan for more than you could possibly teach in a day.
- Choose your battles wisely. Federal law may mandate accommodation of your rules. Federal regulations may require you to accept late work or extend time on tests for some students. Although you may feel your rules are important for students, their rights trump your rules. If you fight the battle to keep your rules, you will lose.
- Difficult situations may force you to rethink your policies. These situations are not failures of your policy, but testaments to your fairness, compassion, and respect for individual differences.
- Always enjoy your teaching moments. If there comes a day when you dread facing the students, stop and reconsider what you’re doing. Do you need to work on different classroom management techniques? Are your lessons boring even to you? The moments interacting with students should be the pinnacle of each teaching day. Figure out how to make those moments the best they can be.

### Final Thoughts

I love being a high school teacher. Because I have a certification in administration through my master's degree, people ask me when I plan on becoming a principal. I have interviewed for administrative positions a few times, and some day I may eventually leave the classroom. But if that right job never comes, I will not be disappointed. Every class period of every day offers new challenges. I have to convince 16- and 17-year-olds that what I have to say is both important and interesting when they have already decided that school is neither. My greatest professional joy occurs when my students tell me they look forward to my class all day long. My greatest pain happens when their eyes glaze over during a lesson. I work daily to make the former happen more often than the latter. The intellectual challenge my job provides me keeps my back to the whiteboard facing each class with a sense of joy, excitement, and satisfaction.

### References

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