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The Road Not Taken

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I am currently a professor of psychology at Prince George's Community College (PGCC) in Largo, MD. PGCC is a very large community college (40,000 students). I also teach part-time at the University of Maryland University College (UMUC). In 2005 I received a Teaching Recognition Award from UMUC. In 2006, I was honored to receive the Society for the Teaching of Psychology's (STP) Teaching Excellence Award for teachers at two year/community colleges.

I earned my BA in English with minors in education and political science at the College of Notre Dame (NDC) in Baltimore. I began college at Boston College with the intention of being a political reporter. After one semester, I decided college was not for me. I was going to drop out of college and work on Capitol Hill. My father had other plans and so I ended up at NDC. It was the first twist in a series of many detours I took to get where I am today.

While at NDC, I majored in English, still planning to be a writer. At the urging of my father, I student-taught and I discovered that I actually enjoyed teaching. After graduation, I taught at a small, private high school. I enjoyed those years of teaching but the desire to be a writer was still strong so I enrolled in the Creative Writing program at the University of Florida.

Before I could begin my thesis, however, life intervened. My father was transferred, so I moved back to Maryland and took custody of my youngest brother so he could finish high school. I found a job teaching English at a large public high school. It was there I encountered a student who had been thrown out of her home. I was at a loss as how to deal with such a situation. In my experience, parents did not throw their children out. I decided then I needed some training in counseling and that began my journey into the world of psychology.

My Early Development as a Teacher

I earned a Master's in counseling at Louisiana State University. After completing my degree, I was offered a job as a counselor and campus minister at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. I realized that what I really enjoyed most about my work were the workshops I conducted, not the counseling. I also discovered that I enjoyed working with college students. I knew that I would need a doctorate to teach at the college level,

so I went back to school.

I completed my PhD in human development with a minor in sport psychology at the University of Maryland College Park (UMCP). After graduating, I taught at Presbyterian College in South Carolina. Family issues brought me back to Maryland once again where I served as an adjunct faculty member at several local colleges. During one term I taught introduction to psychology at four schools using four different textbooks! Finally, a full-time position at PGCC became available, and I was fortunate enough to obtain it. Once again, a twist brought me to where I was supposed to be.

I have been at PGCC full-time since 1999. I teach five courses per term. I usually teach Introduction to Psychology (regular and honors), Abnormal, Adolescent, and Educational Psychology. Occasionally I teach Human Development and Child Psychology as well as Sport Psychology. Much of my teaching lately has been online. Our online program has grown exponentially, and a student can earn their entire degree online. Learning to teach online has energized my teaching.

I have been active in STP as well as in Division 47 (Exercise and Sport Psychology) where I am currently the Secretary-Treasurer. I have served as national President of the Council of Teachers of Undergraduate Psychology. I have presented at numerous conferences, and I have authored the *Grade Aid Study Guide for the 5th edition of Psychology: Core Concepts* (Zimbardo, Weber, & Johnson, 2006). These professional activities keep me connected to the larger professional community.

My preparation for teaching is atypical for many psychology professors. I earned my teaching certificate as an undergraduate and later qualified for an advanced certificate. I undertook formal coursework on teaching. Student teaching in the inner city of Baltimore was probably the best preparation for teaching I could have had. I learned to teach without resources and to be creative. I learned that students' lives outside of school have a great impact on their learning.

As a graduate assistant at UMCP, I did not have very much formal training in college teaching. We met monthly as a group, but those meetings were more like a support group than a formal introduction to the professoriate. Without my secondary experience, I would have had the same difficulties in teaching that many of my fellow TAs had.

Although I did not have any formal teaching mentors, I learned a great deal from my department chairs in my early teaching experience. I found unofficial mentors and colleagues who were interested in teaching excellence when I became a Reader for the Advancement Placement Psychology Exam. During my first reading, I met people such as Charles Brewer, Randy Ernst, Martha Ellis, Sam Cameron, Jim Freeman, and Randy

Smith who were not afraid to talk about teaching and share their secrets about what works well and what doesn't work so well. These interchanges were also my introduction into the community of teachers that is STP, a community that continues to mentor me today.

My formal training in teacher education and my early high school teaching, have served me well. Although there are some differences in teaching college students, the basics of good teaching that I learned while preparing me for high school teaching are the same. I learned about planning and assessment and teaching with different types of students.

I moved to teaching college for several reasons. First, I had more freedom in the classroom to develop teaching techniques. Although some secondary schools allow teachers such freedom, often there are more constraints. Second, I liked the flexibility of time offered in college teaching. Third, I had moved into the field of psychology and there were few opportunities to teach psychology at the secondary level at that time.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

All teachers face obstacles and I am no exception. I find dealing with large classes in which many students are unprepared for college level work to be challenging. It is a constant effort to find time to work with students individually so that they can succeed. I also find it a challenge to work with unmotivated students. It is frustrating when students will not do their work and do not respond to queries about ways I could help. I continue to try to find new ways to reach these students by asking previous classes for advice on ways to best motivate students. There are also financial obstacles so I cannot purchase all of the materials I want or take advantage of more professional development opportunities.

I have never viewed teaching as a zero sum game. I feel fortunate in that I have not had pressure to publish (one of the joys of teaching at the community college). However, we are expected to develop professionally and to participate in committee work as well as to be involved in the community in some way. I feel obligated to stay connected professionally with my peers around the country, partially to benefit my students and partially so I can give something back to the profession.

I sometimes feel pulled in multiple directions with all of these obligations, but I think that meeting each one makes me a better teacher. Understanding how the college functions enables me to give better advice to my students. Professional connections let me give students contacts at a transfer school. Community service helps me understand the contexts in which my students live. I see all of these activities as pieces of a large and

complicated puzzle. Individually, these pieces reveal little about the larger picture of teaching and learning, but put together, that picture becomes much clearer.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

I believe that teaching is the most important component of the professor's role. Teaching involves imparting knowledge about the discipline as well as helping students learn to think critically about that knowledge. It includes showing students how psychology affects their lives and their world. Good teaching excites students and arouses their curiosity. Good teaching helps students see the interplay among all disciplines and how this interaction plays a role in their everyday lives. Good teaching involves more than standing in front of a classroom or checking an online classroom once a week. Good teaching involves students in their own learning, a process that requires a great deal of the teacher's time and resourcefulness.

I strongly believe, as research shows, that we learn best and retain the most when we are actively involved in the learning process (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Bonwell & Eison, 1991). As a constructivist following the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky, I require students to become involved in the material and to think critically about the concepts that they are learning. I make students stretch their comfort zones and wrestle with concepts such as prejudice, cognitive dissonance, and obedience. Students often simply want to memorize definitions. I challenge them to apply psychology to their worlds. Such application can cause them discomfort, but I think much learning occurs as students struggle to understand why concepts such as these are important.

It is important that students understand how the discipline of psychology applies to their lives. Psychology has much practical information to offer students that can help them understand the world. I also think that it is important for students to learn how to learn. Learning to learn is a skill that transfers to other settings and sets the stage for lifelong learning.

I believe that teachers need to help students advance through Bloom's levels of thinking (Woolfolk, 2007). As a teacher, I need to help students acquire the basic knowledge they need for thinking at progressively higher levels. I want them to comprehend the material, analyze it, and apply it in new domains. I want them to synthesize what they have learned, and to be able to evaluate sources of information. I want students to learn to think and express themselves as psychologists.

I also believe that it is important that I maintain high expectations for all of my students and that I challenge them to meet those expectations. This belief can cause consternation among students who are not used to being so challenged. I have found that helping those students persist yields great rewards. Students demonstrate critical thinking

and bring in newspaper articles that relate to psychology. They come back from 4-year colleges and share their academic successes.

I believe that it is important for teachers to stay active in their professional organizations because such involvement energizes them as well as establishes connections with other professionals. Such involvement exposes me to new ideas, trends, and research that are not easily found elsewhere. My involvement allows me to give back to the profession, and on occasion, to help shape the direction the discipline is taking. I am able to share teaching techniques and mentor new faculty. My involvement in professional organizations provides a model for students and gives me credibility when I encourage them to join such organizations and spend their own money on membership dues. Besides, this interaction is great fun!

There are three important ways in which my teaching has changed over the years. First, I have become much less didactic. I give only mini-lectures now rather than lecturing straight for 50 minutes. Second, I have incorporated much more active learning activities into my assignments. Third, I attempt to cover much less material and I cover that material in more depth. I am more comfortable in the classroom and feel less pressure to know all of the answers. I am no longer the “sage on the stage,” but I have become the “guide on the side.”

There are many things that I find rewarding about teaching; it is hard to narrow them down to just a few. One of the greatest joys of teaching is watching a student who did not believe he or she could succeed academically graduate and go on to a four-year college. One of the best things about teaching is watching a student grasp a difficult concept such as “negative reinforcement.” Another reward is receiving letters or e-mail from former students in which they let me know that they have used something they learned in my classes. I recently received an e-mail from a student I taught during my second year as a high school teacher. I still marvel that she found me! She was completing a program to become a science teacher and said she modeled her teaching after mine. I still view that e-mail as one of the most significant compliments I have ever received.

However, there are frustrations in teaching as well. I continue to struggle with how to reach students who make little effort to learn. Students who could perform better and choose to waste their academic talents are another source of frustration. Although I earned good grades as a student, I had to work hard. I get very frustrated when I see students who have enormous innate ability refuse to cultivate it. I constantly try new ways to motivate these students and I consciously encourage small successes.

I think it is incumbent upon teachers to evaluate their teaching on a continual basis. I use student evaluations that include several questions I construct as a starting place for reflecting on the strong and weak aspects of my teaching. I do quick assessments such as minute papers or activity feedback throughout the course for ongoing feedback.

At PGCC our teaching is observed by both our Department Chair and Dean as part of the College's evaluation process. I try to view these observations as collegial and as opportunities to learn how to better my teaching. It can be difficult not to get defensive during these observations, but it does help to have another set of eyes look at how I structure and run my classes.

I have seen many changes over the years in how assessment is used. I think that many of the changes are good and move us in the right direction. We now routinely begin with our goals and objectives and then assess our success in achieving them. I don't remember really thinking about what I wanted students to do and learn in much detail in my first years of teaching.

Another change in assessment has been the increase in ways we assess student learning. I now use portfolios, case studies, and other creative ways to evaluate student learning. In my early years of teaching, my assessment techniques for student learning were primarily multiple-choice and essay tests.

I continue to work to improve my teaching. I am a faithful reader of *Teaching of Psychology*. I glean new and interesting techniques from its pages. I also read *Psychology Teacher Network* as well as books on teaching. I also find the free STP e-books to be a valuable resource. I am a member of several teaching-related electronic discussion lists. I attend at least one professional conference each year, and I eagerly await the sessions on teaching. I have found such sessions particularly useful at the Eastern Psychological Association annual meeting, but most regional conferences feature similar teaching-related programs. I think that it is critical to stay connected to the teaching community and to stay current in the field of college and university teaching. Teaching conferences can also be energizing as I meet with other teachers and we share our experiences.

Advice for New Teachers

What do I have to say to someone who wants to teach and wants to become a good teacher? First, I recommend examining the reasons for becoming a teacher. Teaching is a calling, not just a job that pays the bills and occupies the hours of 9 to 5. Second, I recommend shadowing someone for several weeks to see what life as a teacher is really like. Third, I recommend being realistic about the time needed to be a good teacher. Although there are those talented individuals who become great teachers right

away, most of us do not. For most teachers, it is a long and twisting journey with no fixed end point. Fourth, I recommend reading everything available about teaching. Bill McKeachie's *Teaching Tips* (2006) is a great resource. I reach for it on a regular basis and find it immensely helpful. Finally I would say, do it! Teaching is a great life. It is not without its struggles but nothing worth doing is without some struggle.

Final Thoughts

I also have a few final lessons I have learned on my journey as a teacher that I want to share:

- First choices are not always last choices.
- Stay open to new possibilities.
- There is always someone better than we are but that knowledge does not have to be devastating.
- We can change our minds and it won't be the end of the world.
- Family is more important than any job!
- We end up where we were meant to be.
- Success can be defined in lots of ways.

There are many routes we can take to get us where we want to be and where we are meant to be. We should be open to those roads that take us in new directions. We have to keep our eyes on what is really important in life. We have to keep trying to reach those reluctant students. We have to continue to be open to unexpected opportunities and we need to continue to develop professionally.

I want to conclude with this thought that is attributed to Annie Sullivan, Helen Keller's great teacher:

Keep on beginning and failing. Each time you fail, start all over again and you will grow stronger until you have accomplished a purpose—not the one you began with perhaps, but one you'll be glad to remember.

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