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*With a Little Help From Our Friends: Teaching in Community*

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I am currently a Professor of Psychology at John Brown University in Siloam Springs, AR where I have served as chair both of the Department of Psychology and of the Division of Social & Behavioral Sciences during my more than 25 years there. I earned my PhD in experimental social psychology at the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville, where in 1979 I received the Rolland H. Waters Teaching Award for excellence in teaching by a graduate student. In 1999, I received the Distinguished Alumnus Award and was inducted into the Fulbright College Alumni Academy at the University of Arkansas. I am a past president and a Fellow of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP; Division 2 of the American Psychological Association (APA)). I have been a strong proponent of active learning, and with Mark Ware, co-edited a 3-volume set of demonstrations and activities for the teaching of psychology. I also served as a Consulting Editor for the journal *Teaching of Psychology (ToP)* and currently serve as News Editor of *ToP*. My primary research interests are in pedagogy, attribution theory, and counterfactual thinking.

#### My Early Development as a Teacher

As the title of my essay suggests, I intend to address, along with other issues, one of the more interesting ironies of teaching (at least, in my opinion!). We sometimes talk of our involvement in “learning communities” in which both students and teachers strive to master academic material and develop professional skills. We occasionally participate in wonderful collaborative programs that stress our connections to one another as teachers (e.g., Psychology Partnership Program; Andreoli Mathie, 1998). Yet, more often, I suspect that we view teaching as a distinctly solitary activity. We stand or sit in front of the class by ourselves unless we are involved in that rare team teaching opportunity. We spend countless hours alone preparing for classes. We grade papers and assign grades alone. Teaching awards hail individual achievement. In many ways, teaching is a solitary endeavor. But I would argue that we should not view it as such. How did I come to this conclusion? I hope to make my case by demonstrating the value added to my teaching career by colleagues and by citing research that suggests the critical role colleagues play in avoiding disillusionment with academia. We benefit greatly from our contacts with colleagues in person, over the Internet, or by using teaching-related materials developed by

fellow teachers.

I did not envision myself in the role of teacher as I began and finished my undergraduate program. Due to my naiveté, it was only in graduate school that I considered teaching as the most likely outcome of my degree-seeking endeavor. Fortunately, my graduate program was teaching friendly compared to many other programs at the time: Students frequently served as pre-masters teaching assistants in upper division courses taught by full-time faculty. The department usually limited graduate students to assisting faculty in the mechanics of day-to-day course activities such as grading papers, helping with classroom demonstrations, etc. In general, once a graduate student obtained the master's degree, the opportunity to have full responsibility for a course became available. All graduate students teaching courses (typically the general psychology course) enrolled in a one-credit hour Teaching Seminar. At the time, responsibility for the Teaching Seminar rotated among a handful of full-time faculty. The weekly meetings with faculty and other graduate students proved to be useful adjuncts to our preparation. We discussed teaching approaches and commiserated with each other about the difficulties of teaching. It was during one of these teaching seminars that I was introduced to the fledgling journal *Teaching of Psychology (ToP)*, which afforded me the opportunity to improve my teaching by using tried and true methods developed by colleagues worldwide. The “community” of teachers, both locally and beyond, began to have an impact on my teaching.

In my time as a graduate student, my teaching style evolved as I observed several of my graduate instructors modeling excellent teaching. The aspects of their teaching that had a profound impact on my own teaching involved (a) being dynamic in the classroom, (b) providing a well-organized class schedule, and (c) fostering a comfortable atmosphere. My major advisor, Dr. David Schroeder, proved to be an excellent model for these aspects of good teaching. So, too, did Dr. Jeffrey Stripling and Dr. Richard Dana. Each proved to be influential in one way or another to my development as a teacher.

Those were the days before demonstration/activity handbooks (Benjamin & Lowman, 1981; Ware & Johnson, 1996, 2000) and instructor's manuals that fill up huge 3-ring binders. The primary mode of classroom communication was through lecture. Even so, I began to believe that there were alternatives to lecture that would prove to be useful. My department owned several 16mm films that allowed me to vary the class format and give students perspectives that were difficult to reproduce “live” in class. Students seemed to appreciate the diversion, and their increased interest and attention motivated me to continue thinking about new ways to present material.

Even though I had good role models in graduate school, moving into my first academic

position required many adjustments. In 1980, I began my first full-time faculty position with all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities associated with that position. My new role involved the development of a fledgling psychology department at a small institution. I was to be one of a 1 ½ person department. I took the lead administrative role in the department, which required considerable time in addition to new preparations.

Unlike my days as a graduate student, in my new position I attended committee meetings and spent significant time planning for the development of this new department. Campus culture dictated involvement with students in our Psychology Club. Although I attempted to maintain a small research program, it became clear to me after a few years that there simply was not enough time to prepare for a 12 credit hour per semester teaching load, attend the required committee meetings, develop the department, and engage students on a personal level at the same time (not to mention have a personal life). As is often the case in an institution whose primary orientation is teaching, the default option for faculty members is to terminate their content research program. Because I didn't want to drop my research, I found myself becoming increasingly isolated in order to fulfill all the "obligations" I believed important for my success as a college professor.

In fact, after just a few years in academia, I considered other career alternatives. Academia had become drudgery compared to my experience in graduate school. However, several events conspired to keep me in my position. All of these events involved a community of colleagues, even though not all of the colleagues were local. Through my contacts with this teaching community, I began to evaluate who I was as a teacher and what I wanted to accomplish in that role.

#### Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

In the 1980s, the Zeitgeist for teachers changed. In many ways, it was the decade in which psychology teachers began to engage in activities that promoted fundamental changes in their classroom teaching methods. Some of these changes probably occurred as a result of increasing calls by politicians for greater accountability for student learning. Becoming more student-focused also seemed to be the order of the day. Textbook authors began to write in more conversational styles and attempted to make their texts more student-friendly. Instructor's manuals (IMs) became a necessary ancillary, and they began to grow eventually to fill large 3-ring binders for the courses with high enrollments (e.g., introductory psychology, developmental psychology, social psychology). *ToP* now had several years of psychology pedagogy that psychology teachers could use. The first volume of the APA-published activities handbook became available (Benjamin & Lowman, 1981). Teaching and the effectiveness of pedagogical methods used in the classroom began to take on greater importance.

In another important development, teaching conferences began to spring up around the country. The National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP), the long-standing national conference, moved to Florida and became more visible drawing from a country-wide constituency. The Mid-America Conference for Teachers of Psychology (MACTOP) marked the advent of regional teaching conferences. Teaching conferences became an important vehicle for sharing teaching techniques and discussing the topic that occupied so much of our time. Even more important for me was the fact that these conferences afforded me the opportunity to network with my peers. I attended one of the early MACTOP conferences. It was the first of many trips to southern Indiana to attend this gathering of teachers. It was at MACTOP that I met individuals who were active in STP. Little did I know that the contacts I made at my first MACTOP were to continue to this day, 20 years later. As a result of my attendance, I became involved in reviewing manuscripts for *ToP* and I began a long-standing participation in STP activities. At last, I had found my niche! It became clear to me that there were many colleagues “out there” who were interested in teaching and improving the teaching enterprise through research on pedagogy and by developing teaching resources and methodologies.

The 1990s brought more of the same. Publication of Ernest Boyer’s (1990) *Scholarship Reconsidered* provided much-needed motivation for me to continue a path that began in the 1980s. Boyer's conception of scholarship encompassed four overlapping types of scholarship: discovery, integration, application, and teaching. Research on pedagogy and developing teaching materials became potential sources of legitimate scholarship. In my own case, I gladly joined this community, which began a long history of professional activity supporting teaching and pedagogy.

#### The Examined Life of a Teacher

Over the course of my career, my teaching experienced considerable evolution. I began with the common view of “Teacher as Imparter of Knowledge.” Although this view is a legitimate perspective, it is much less visible today in my teaching compared to earlier years. Now, I view myself as both teacher and student. I am a resource for students, but I’m also a student of psychology. I try as best I can to let students know that I am right there with them trying to master the content of psychology. I am trying to understand the complexities of behavior and mental processes. My background gives me the opportunity to act as a scaffold for my students’ development of skills and knowledge, but I continue to be a student nonetheless.

My classroom behavior also has changed in several notable ways. I no longer try to “teach everything” in class. I hold students more responsible for learning the textbook material and I try to spend more time developing integrative themes that tie the content together. Seeing the “big

picture” is now more important to me than whether students remember an isolated fact about psychology.

I also try to engage students more actively and I use many visual aids to elaborate issues that are not particularly suited for verbal description alone. Short video clips allow me to bring topics to “life” that would otherwise suffer only bland verbal description. Teaching demonstrations and classroom activities also serve to promote active learning and I make liberal use of them.

My reward for these changes in teaching methods and style is seeing students “getting” it. I feel gratified when students make connections between the course content and their personal life experiences. I am delighted when students see connections between psychology and other academic disciplines, something that I view as essential in a liberal arts education. Seeing graduates of my department working as professionals is particularly rewarding. One of the most rewarding situations is when I form collegial relationships with those former students.

Virtually all of my evolution as a teacher was facilitated by contacts with other colleagues that occurred in a variety of ways. Reading the literature on pedagogy is essential. This work is produced by a large contingent of colleagues around the world, some of whom I know personally and count as my distant colleagues.

Conference attendance is also an important part of my efforts to improve my teaching. When I attend a conference (teaching or otherwise) I rarely return home without bringing with me at least a few new ideas to try in the classroom. Teaching conferences provide both the knowledge and impetus to implement new methods.

#### Advice for New Teachers

Over the years, I found that several things contributed to my enjoyment as success as a teacher. Hard work and long hours are a given for the instructor. Schedules of academics often permit some flexibility compared to working in business or industry, but long hours are required to keep up to date in the content of psychology, grade assignments, perform committee and other administrative duties, and maintain some semblance of professional activity. It is not a 40 hour per week job.

Consistent with the title of this essay, I suggest that new teachers develop a network of colleagues and maintain both professional and social contacts with them. Why? It appears that many successful academics thrive on these relationships. For example, in her 1977 book, *Scientific Elite: Nobel Laureates in the United States*, Harriet Zuckerman notes that Nobel prize winners usually maintain many ties to colleagues and are frequently the center of many mentoring relationships. John Creswell, in his monograph, *Faculty Research Performance:*

*Lessons Learned from the Sciences and Social Sciences* (1985), found that productive researchers maintained regular and close contact with colleagues on and off campus who have similar research interests. Creswell cites additional evidence that these contacts are not sporadic, but often occur daily.

Some research also suggests that not having collegial contacts is potentially detrimental to academics. In a large body of data collected over many years, Robert Boice (1988, 1992, 2000) pointed out that social isolation by academics is often related to academic dysfunction. He found that faculty who became disillusioned with academia experienced collegial isolation or neglect. They often perceived their colleagues and students as disapproving. Boice's research showed that new faculty who "make good starts" and avoid disillusionment tend to find useful social supports or networks among colleagues. He also found a high correlation between social isolation and low publication productivity. One of the most detrimental feelings expressed by new faculty was the feeling of isolation; that there was little personal and professional support. Unfortunately, our academic system often promotes isolation. Trower, Austin, and Sorcinelli (2001) characterized the relationship between the academy and new faculty as "Paradise Lost." They suggested that the academy transforms eager new teachers into academic hermits who isolate themselves from students and colleagues in an attempt to meet standards for attaining tenure and promotion. Many of these new faculty members do not believe that they have enough information to navigate this process successfully, let alone form a network of collegial relationships.

My advice to new teachers is to refrain from isolating themselves from colleagues. There is much to learn from colleagues whether they have just a few years of experience or many. Although contacts with colleagues may be professional in nature, I suggest that new faculty not rule out time spent in less "official" settings. Three times each week I attend a "coffee hour" with colleagues from a variety of departments across campus. The conversations of this group span the profound to the profane. Sometimes we discuss teaching, but just as often we discuss other issues. I always leave the group feeling reenergized and much more ready for teaching than if I spent that time alone in my office. This gathering has become so important for several of its members that we rarely miss a "meeting" and may even try to schedule other official duties around it.

#### Final Thoughts

Over my career as a teacher, the worst of years were those in which I tried to "go it alone" and I isolated myself from my colleagues. I take full credit for those years. My best years to date involve sharing my work and the pleasures and joys of that work with my colleagues, and those I expect to experience in the future. My successes in teaching were not the result of a little help

from my friends, but the result of a *lot* of help.

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