

Epiphany in Schenley Park

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My father dropped out of high school to work in his parents' tailor shop. Later he became an industrial pattern maker, a highly skilled woodworking craft. My mother attended a technical school in Ukraine. They were pleased that I finished high school and went to college, but were puzzled when in my junior year at Miami (*the Miami in Ohio*) I decided to switch from accounting to psychology as a major. They knew what accounting was; you could get a good job. Psychology was a mystery to them, but things worked out pretty well for me and for my family.

I think my parents were pleased when I decided to attend graduate school at Carnegie Institute of Technology, which sounded like a school that could get me a job. Now that school is Carnegie-Mellon University (CMU), but in 1960 it was "Tech." At that time I was interested in what we called verbal learning. My undergraduate mentor, John Jahnke, said Tech had some good people in that area and I completed my master's thesis on immediate memory (now called short-term memory): Nonsense syllables were too complex. I studied consonants.

I took my first course in physiological psychology with Kenneth E. (Keck) Moyer (Korn & Gibbons, in press). This really was science. I loved working in the rat lab, not only with Moyer on psychoendocrinology, but also with Wayne Ludvigson on Spencian animal learning, and later with Leonard Jarrard on brain mechanisms in learning. We all published quite a few articles together, which led to my appointment to the CMU faculty in 1966.

But it was the 60s, man, and things were happening that had a great effect on my life. Before I tell that story, here are some basic facts of that academic life. My interests changed from animal research to education, and I was supported for a sabbatical year at Stanford where I worked on program evaluation with Lee Cronbach, who may have taught me more per minute of contact than any other teacher I had. However, I was denied tenure, so had to look for a different job.

I had been Associate Department Head and enjoyed administering the undergraduate program in psychology, so I applied mostly for positions as department chair. I was fortunate to get that position at Saint Louis University (SLU) where I moved in 1974. I was chair until 1979, then again from 1988–1997. I retired July 1, 2006.

Before leaving CMU I had a meeting with Herb Simon, later a Nobel laureate, who told me, "Jimmy [yes, the Great Man called me Jimmy], you will be much happier

in St. Louis.” He was right. I had the flexibility to change interests often, and in 30 years moved from program evaluation to adult development, to research ethics, to history of psychology, and throughout that time maintained my commitment to teaching teachers. For several years I had an appointment in a creative American Studies Program and in the last 10 years was involved with our Center for Teaching Excellence. Outside of SLU, my primary service was to the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP), for which I served as President in 1988-89.

Early Development: Research Comes First

Most academics in my generation entered graduate school with no idea of becoming a teacher. We wanted to become professors, which meant having a career that included teaching but that was built on research. Almost no thought was given to preparing us to teach, even though we did that occasionally to fill in for our advisors. These first experiences typically were horrible (Korn, 1995).

I became a teacher at CMU because that was part of the job. My only preparation for teaching came from using my mentor, Keck Moyer, as a model. He was an excellent lecturer, charismatic and well organized, who often was applauded by a class of mostly drama students. I tried to copy my style after his, even to the extent of putting my notes on 4 by 6 cards like he did, and making projector slides from the same books that he used. It worked and I became a confident teacher, and I also received applause after one of my lectures.

Although I overcame my shyness to become a confident teacher, I do not think I was a particularly good teacher at the beginning of my career. I relied too much on lecturing and mastery of content, rather than active learning. I got very good student ratings and acquired a reputation that filled my classes. That took care of teaching, so I could get on with research and get promoted to Associate Professor.

Becoming a Teacher: Epiphany in Schenley Park

All that changed on April 7, 1968, the day my first son was born and two days after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. I had spent all night in the hospital with my wife. While we were focusing on the painful process of birth, the night shift came to the hospital in police vans and we heard sirens outside. One of the nurses said the National Guard was on the way. Then we went to the delivery room where Joe was born.

A few hours after that at 6 am I left the hospital and drove into Schenley Park to the place that overlooked the city of Pittsburgh. Smoke was rising behind the hospital that held my son. Occasionally out of the quiet came the sharp crack of a gunshot. We had given our son a world of violence, prejudice, and fear. Dr. King was dead and I was astonished by the fact that I was alive and had a son and by the awareness that my life

would change. That change was from trying to build a reputation doing physiological research to a commitment to students' education.

For many in my generation it was the events of the 1960s and early 1970s that had the greatest impact on our lives: the assassinations, the images from Viet Nam, Selma, and Kent State. As individuals we reacted to these events in different ways. We became different as individuals and as a culture, and these events affected who we were as teachers, and how and what we taught.

In the summer of 1968 I spent a lot of time thinking about what to do with my academic life. Fortunately, there were a lot of opportunities; unfortunately, these led to my demise at CMU. Higher education was going through its own revolution with numerous experimental colleges springing up. At CMU we designed a new liberal arts curriculum with no grades. We did away with the introductory psychology course and replaced it with "development of the self" in which I taught small discussion classes with a broad range of readings outside of mainstream psychology. We met on the lawn, sat in circles, had students lead classes—radical stuff in those days. I designed a course on Psychoactive Drugs that was extremely popular, and led to my winning the University Teaching Award. The day after I won that award, a note appeared on my door: "the kiss of death."

In spite of all the turmoil of that time, CMU was fixed on its mission to be a top 20 university. If you were not famous, you were gone. Because I was not the next Bill McKeachie, I was not granted tenure. I did gain some local notoriety after that tenure decision with a full-page article in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* headlined: "You're a good teacher. You're fired!" That symbolized the fixing of my identity as a teacher.

Change and Reflection

In the 31 years that I taught at Saint Louis University, my approach to teaching has changed along with my other scholarly interests. I rely much more on discussion and other forms of active learning, even in large classes. I am convinced by the evidence that lecturing is not as effective as other methods for accomplishing the objectives I have for my courses (Bligh, 2000). There are a few really good teachers who have helped me learn how to use these methods. Barbara Nodine taught me how to use writing assignments, Jane Halonen taught me about using critical thinking activities, and I learned about managing small group discussions from Tom Kramer. I would have become a better teacher much earlier in my career if I had begun attending teaching conferences sooner. Even more than the tips and tricks, these conferences provided support for my commitment to teaching and stimulation for new ideas.

The most significant change in my teaching came relatively late. I resumed my course on the Teaching of Psychology in the 1990s and included an assignment that students write a teaching philosophy. This assignment was just an exercise for students until the day one student asked to see my philosophy and I had to confess that I did not have one. So I wrote one and have rewritten it three times. It became the core of what teaching was about for me. My teaching philosophy includes some practical principles:

- First, do no harm.
- Be enthusiastic and get to know your students.
- Be organized.

Those principles are practical, but there is no soul to them. In the first version of my philosophy I wrote about my passion for teaching. I may have been writing to please some imaginary teacher because passion is not quite what I was feeling. As I reflected on this statement with the help of a colleague, I realized the heart of my teaching was “the excellence of desire.”

“This excellence of desire means wanting something with all your heart, and continually trying to find it. But what you want is unreachable so it is the wanting, the desire, that is excellent, not some outcome. It is about being and doing; about living the teaching life. It shows itself in teaching most often in the daily work we do, not only in those too rare peak experiences of glory in the classroom, and not in the prizes for excellence that some of us receive. I want to be a good teacher at the mundane level of class preparation, teaching methods, and relationships with students. I *want* this. *That* is the excellence of desire.” (Korn, 2002).

After I discovered the value of having my own teaching philosophy I came to appreciate the need for regular reflection on how those ideas were implemented in my teaching. Soon after the end of each semester I would sit quietly and reflect on what happened, remembering high and low points during the semester, thinking about how various students did on their exams and papers, and reviewing the data from my evaluations. Then I would write my self-evaluation, which was a personal statement, not the more carefully worded one I submitted to my department chair for the annual salary decision. In it I confessed to the sin of pride, expressed joy and disappointment, and revealed my ignorance, although I sometimes hid it from my students. I would promise to do better next time. This reflection continued beyond confession and emotion to discovering what the data showed me about the extent to which my philosophy was validated by what I did in the course. The discrepancies told me that something should change, either the theory (my philosophy) or the practice or both, and I worked with the rationale and design of the next edition of that course.

I often say that it is a wonderful thing to be a teacher, but it also is demanding, challenging hard work. The greatest rewards for me are in the students who show that they have learned something important and appreciate my effort in helping them do that. Even when students did not appreciate my efforts, I could be rewarded by the realization that I had done something creative and that I did my best to make learning happen. That may have been the reward my father got from turning a piece of wood into a pattern for a machine part; no one saw the pattern, only the product.

I have had many disappointing incidents in teaching over my 40 years, but relatively few compared to the high points and the satisfaction of just doing my job. I have been a bit frustrated by the fact that I talk too much in class and I am disappointed that so few students would show up for my office hours. Large classes, technology, and distance learning frustrate me, not because they are inherently bad, but because they hinder closeness learning.

Advice to New Teachers

The selections in the previous volume of autobiographies contained a lot of good advice, and I trust that this volume will too, so at least read a sample of those. I apologize if I repeat some of what others have said. One recommendation that I saw often was that you become part of the community of psychology teachers by joining STP and attending teaching conferences. Not only will you learn about teaching, but you also will find acceptance and generosity. If you do not have the means to travel, then join the virtual community of teachers electronically. I bet that everyone who has written one of these autobiographies would respond to your e-mail.

Read the books and journals on teaching. My mentor used to say that if you want to learn how to do something there probably is a good book on the subject. He learned to slaughter hogs that way, and I found many good books on teaching. Teaching is a scholarly profession and good professionals master the literature in their field and keep up with that literature just as you should in your area of research or practice.

Write your philosophy of teaching (Korn, 2003) and use it. It should help you select the goals for your courses and your teaching techniques. At the end of each semester use your philosophy as the context in which you reflect on your performance.

Final Thoughts

As a heart patient, I would have preferred a less ominous sounding title to this section than the one the editors have provided, but I proceed. The selections in these two volumes provide a view of teaching experiences and thoughts across a broad spectrum of teachers' careers from those who are relatively new to those of us in retirement. For many of us the teaching life will continue well beyond our terms of formal employment. I know

some retired psychology teachers who did shut the door and not look back, but most at least have academics as a hobby in retirement, and some are just as involved as ever. One of the great things about the teaching life is that the choice is yours. For myself, I look forward to continuing to work with developing teachers (young and old) and to writing about teaching.

Another thing I note about these collections of autobiographies is that they represent the lives of hundreds of fine teachers who did not win national awards or get elected as President of STP. With all due respect to the other authors, most of these teachers may be just as deserving of these honors. We all belong to this larger community of teachers that provides support for the demands of our craft. Perhaps the greatest satisfaction of my career is the awareness that I am part of this larger community. What a wonderful thing it is to still be a teacher.

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