

Living, Learning, Teaching

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As a developmental psychologist, I believe that it is very useful to plan carefully for each stage in the life course. However, as my own life journey demonstrates, careful plans are often trumped by external events in the form of obstacles or serendipitous opportunities. When my original career plans (to teach classical languages and study ancient manuscripts) hit a snag in 1973, I entered graduate school in psychology with no way of knowing how favorable the outcome would be. But that decision, coupled with wonderful support from my colleagues over the years, has resulted in a very satisfying career.

I received my PhD in development and aging from Washington University in St. Louis, and have been a faculty member at Hope College since 1977, reaching the rank of Professor in 1991. My primary teaching assignment includes courses in introductory psychology, developmental psychology, and gerontology. I've been active in community service throughout my career, primarily as a long-time advocate for senior citizens in West Michigan.

I am perhaps best known as a technology pioneer who has been using computer-assisted instruction in and out of the classroom since 1980. I have co-authored a dozen computerized study guides and an extensive multimedia resource for developmental psychology courses, and have published four award-winning instructional technology projects for introductory psychology: *PsychSim*, *PsychQuest*, *PsychInquiry*, and *PsychOnline*. My latest project, a co-authored multimedia classroom resource called *ActivePsych*, was published in August 2006.

I've also become identified as an enthusiastic advocate for good teaching at Hope College and at the national level, especially in terms of the appropriate use of technology in teaching. In 2005, I co-authored two reports for STP's Pedagogical Innovations Task Force (Goolkasian, Ludwig, & Froman, 2005; Ludwig, Daniel, Froman, & Mathie, 2005), and also co-authored a chapter in *Best Practices for Teaching Introduction to*

Psychology (Ludwig & Perdue, 2005). In 2003, Hope College presented me with its Provost's Award for Excellence in Teaching, and the American Psychological Foundation named me the recipient of the 2005 Charles L. Brewer Distinguished Teaching of Psychology Award.

My Early Development as a Teacher

Formative Influences

Looking back on my childhood and adolescence from the perspective of middle age, it seems almost inevitable that I would pursue a career as an educator. I've always loved learning—exploring ideas, finding connections, gaining a deeper understanding of the world around me. By the time I reached my early teens, I had discovered that I could communicate what I had learned to others. I frequently tutored other students in math, languages, and history, and found it to be very rewarding.

I also had many role models within my family. Although my father and both grandfathers were Christian ministers, many other family members were educators. Two uncles and an aunt were university professors. Three of my sisters became teachers, and two of my brothers have recently retired after long careers as professors.

Plan A and Plan B

By the time I entered high school I was planning a career in post-secondary education, most likely as a professor at a Christian college or seminary. My experiences as a college student fostered a growing sense of my vocation as an educator. But my first love was languages, so I expected to pursue a PhD in Greek or Hebrew. External events in the early 1970s made that path less attractive to me, so I moved to plan B: psychology. The aspect of psychology that held the most interest for me was gerontology, in part because of my family circumstances. When I was born, my mother was 45 and my father was 51. My father retired at age 65 as I completed 8th grade, so I spent my high school years in the home of a retired couple. This experience gave me some insight into both the joys and the challenges of the retirement years, and later spurred my interest in pursuing a PhD in human development and aging.

Learning About Teaching

In high school and college I experienced a wide range of teaching styles and methods, and I noticed that some of those methods were more effective than others.

Because I was already planning a career as an educator, I paid special attention to the techniques that seemed effective, and filed this information away for future use. Unfortunately, what I learned from my high school teachers was mainly in the form of negative examples, as I reacted against the methods and techniques that they employed.

I had a much better experience in my college courses. I admired many of my professors, particularly those who were knowledgeable about their subjects, were well organized and well prepared for each class, made an effort to build rapport with students, went beyond the readings to draw connections and make applications, and planned opportunities for hands-on learning.

Like most other graduate students in my era, I had no formal training in teaching methods or in classroom management. I learned the skills of teaching mainly by observation of others and through reflection on my own teaching. During graduate school I had several research mentors, but no teaching mentors. My research mentors, especially Martha Storandt and Jack Botwinick, impressed upon me the importance of personal integrity in all my professional activities, and also the importance of balancing the various roles required of a professor.

Finding My Place

As I interviewed at several schools in 1977, I learned that university administrators of that era were not particularly interested in the teaching potential of faculty candidates. As one dean confided to me, “Good teachers are a dime a dozen. What we want is someone who can publish consistently and boost our national visibility.” Although I was focused on my research program at the time, I found this message a bit discouraging, because I believed that good teaching was important, and I expected that I would become an effective teacher.

My interview at Hope College conveyed a different impression: Hope was a place where research was encouraged and supported, but good teaching was also valued highly. When I arrived at Hope I discovered that my faculty colleagues took teaching very seriously, and I realized immediately that I could learn a lot from them. For example, Jane Dickie helped me understand the important role of class discussions, and showed me some effective techniques for nurturing small group discussions as well as full-class discussions. John Shaughnessy modeled techniques for pushing students to examine evidence and think critically about behavioral claims. Dave Myers encouraged me to add

more visuals to my class presentations, and also encouraged my efforts to harness the power of computer technology in my teaching.

Hope College now has a formal Teaching Enhancement Workshop for all new faculty members. Unfortunately, it was not available when I arrived in 1977. However, each year Hope's Pre-College Faculty Conference included an extensive session on teaching and learning. One especially influential session in the early 1980s featured the noted educator Parker Palmer, who helped me catch a broader vision of teaching as "creating a space" for learning (or more precisely, "creating a space where obedience to truth is practiced").

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Early Challenges

Although I believed that I had some natural abilities as a communicator, my first years of teaching did not go as smoothly as I had expected. I am basically a shy person, and I found that being "on stage" in front of students every day was quite stressful. I had been very comfortable in the role of a student, but it took some time before I became comfortable in the professor's role. Because I had had no formal training as a teacher, I felt especially insecure about my teaching methods. I tried to improve my skills by reading books and articles on effective teaching. Fortunately I was able to attend a number of workshops on teaching, including several National Institute for Teaching of Psychology (NITOP) conferences and a very useful Pew conference at Carleton College.

Early in my teaching career I also struggled with issues related to course organization and planning—particularly with the issue of how much content to cover in each class session. I also found it difficult to strike the right balance among lecture, discussion, and demonstration activities. I settled those issues to my satisfaction after about 10 years of teaching, but other issues involving the appropriate methods of evaluating student performance continued into my second decade of teaching.

Evaluation System

Even now I occasionally wonder whether I am doing a fair job of grading student papers and lab reports. But I no longer agonize over the choice of evaluation methods for each course because I have formulated an evaluation system that is keyed to the developmental status of my students as well as to the objectives of the course. In my first-year introduction to psychology course, I administer five exams consisting of multiple-

choice questions to assess recognition familiarity with the major principles of psychology and research findings, and use lab reports to assess understanding of basic research methodology. In my developmental psychology course (a second-year course), I use four exams containing a combination of multiple-choice questions and essay questions to test comprehension of course content, and use journal entries to assess performance in an off-campus field placement. In my third-year seminar on adult development and aging, I use two essay exams combined with oral presentations and a literature review paper. Finally, in my senior seminar course there are no exams. Instead, students write integrative essays, make substantial oral presentations, and write a 30-page paper.

Continuing Challenges

Another continuing issue for me is maintaining an appropriate balance among teaching, research, and service (e.g., advising, committee work, and leadership roles in the community and in my academic discipline). I feel a definite tension between teaching and service. During advising week I have a great deal of difficulty keeping up with my classes, and committee work definitely cuts into my time for teaching preparation and grading.

At Hope there is perhaps less conflict between teaching and research than at some other institutions. Empirical research and other scholarly activity is definitely valued and rewarded at Hope, but much of my research has been done in the context of mentoring upper-level undergraduate students, so it really became an extension of my teaching rather than in competition with it. At Hope the psychology professors take turns teaching an advanced research laboratory course that allows the professor to get teaching credit for doing research in collaboration with a team of students.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

Teaching Principles

Across the years, three general principles have guided my decisions about what to teach, how to teach, and how to interact with my students.

1. *Integrity.* I've tried hard to be honest and fair with my students, and to teach what I really believe to be true about human behavior.
2. *Humility.* I've tried to remind myself and my students that there is a great deal we don't know about human behavior, and that any one person's knowledge and insight is limited.

3. *Common Purpose.* I've tried to engage my students in the shared pursuit of knowledge and understanding to help them see that we are on the same team.

Teaching Style

The field of psychology has evolved over the decades that I've been teaching, and my teaching style has also evolved as I've learned more about psychology and more about teaching. I don't want to exaggerate the changes, but I believe that they have been significant. Here are four examples.

1. *A shift in the balance of lecture and discussion within each class session.* From the beginning of my career I have tried to include occasional class discussions, but over the years I've increased the frequency of these discussions. In a typical course I include several extended discussion periods on controversial topics, and I have added many more brief discussion sessions (perhaps 2 to 4 minutes) on the applications of the principles we are covering in that class period.

2. *A steady increase in my use of technology in the classroom.* During my first two decades of teaching I moved from relying on the chalkboard to a progression of media technology that included filmstrips, slides, overhead transparencies, 16 mm movies, videotapes, videodiscs, PowerPoint™ lecture outlines, CD-ROMs, and DVDs. I'm now moving to class sessions centered around digitally projected video clips and interactive animations programmed in Flash™.

3. *A steady increase in my use of technology in homework assignments.* In 1980 I wrote my first computer activity for student use, and as I became more heavily involved in developing instructional computer activities, I began to understand the power of computer technology as an aid to instruction. I now frequently assign computer activities that simulate classic experiments or demonstrate complex principles in a self-paced interactive format.

4. *A shift from "covering material" to "problem-based learning" as the focus of each class session.* I'm still in the midst of this transition, but it has already had a major impact on my teaching and the way I see my role as an instructor.

Rewards and Frustrations

I've derived substantial rewards from my career as a psychology professor. Perhaps the greatest rewards come from my contact with students—seeing "the light come on" as they catch the excitement of studying human behavior, and then (in the case

of our graduate-school bound students) mentoring them as they prepare for careers as professional psychologists.

I've also appreciated the opportunity to continue engaging new ideas about behavior, and discussing those ideas with my colleagues at Hope and at professional conferences. It's difficult to imagine another career that would be as satisfying as the one I have.

But even the best job has times of disappointment and frustration. My greatest frustrations have involved *time pressure*—the constant deadlines for preparing lectures and exams and grading papers. I often feel that, given more time, I could have done more to prepare for a class session or could have spent more time giving feedback on student papers. I've also been frustrated and disappointed by individual *students who didn't connect with the course material*. Fortunately, the new course management technology allows me to keep closer tabs on the progress of each student and to intervene sooner when a student's performance begins to falter.

Still Learning and Growing

I spend a lot of time preparing for my courses and in reflecting on what I've learned from each course. An important part of this process is collecting student evaluations at midterm and at the end of the course. After almost 60 semesters of evaluations, I can predict how most students will respond to the course and to me as an instructor. But I always learn something new from each set of evaluations, and they always make me think about ways I could improve my teaching.

Because I teach the same rotation of courses year after year with similar methods of evaluating student learning, I am able to make comparisons across semesters in both student performance and student satisfaction. When I see major fluctuations on any of these dimensions, I know that it is time to take a close look at what happened that semester to try to identify the reason for the changes in these measures.

I often make notes to myself whenever something goes very well or very badly in a class session. The Moodle course management system <<http://moodle.org>> makes it easy to create a private instructor's journal in which I can store my thoughts about the course. Then, when I set up the next semester's course, these notes flow into that course's area for ready access as I am preparing for each class session.

I've also benefited from periodic peer observations of my teaching. Although it takes courage to invite a colleague into my class, I've gained valuable new insights both from senior faculty members and from my new colleagues fresh from graduate school.

I've tried hard to keep myself aware of trends in pedagogy, especially in terms of new uses of technology. Technology for teaching is a major area of interest for me, so I regularly attend conferences and read books and articles on the topic.

Advice for New Teachers

If there is anything I've learned from 30 years of teaching, it is that there is no magic recipe that will make someone a good teacher. There are many pathways to teaching effectiveness, and many ways to fail. I believe that new faculty members need to evaluate their own individual strengths and weaknesses as communicators, motivators, and classroom administrators, and then find their own unique path to success as an instructor.

However, I do believe that every professor, even those who are seasoned instructors, can find ways to improve. A good place to start would be to explore the many resources available online through STP's Web site <<http://teachpsych.org>>. I also recommend seeking advice from, and perhaps observing, instructors who have a passion for teaching (and they can be found in every college and university). I also believe that I have learned a lot from reflecting on my own teaching (see Ludwig, 2005), and with suitable humility I offer these suggestions:

- Effective teaching requires consistent effort, even on those days when it's hard to get motivated.
- Effective teaching requires planning and organization, coupled with enough flexibility to enable on-the-spot changes to capture the "teachable moment."
- Effective teachers convey enthusiasm and have good communication skills. Every professor could benefit from some time with a speech or drama coach.
- Effective teachers maintain high expectations. They set high standards for themselves and for their students, and hold everyone accountable.
- Effective teachers make appropriate uses of technology. 'Nuf said.
- Effective teachers never stop learning.

Final Thoughts

Across my decades as an academic, I've invested many thousands of hours in research and in teaching. My published work has brought promotion and the respect of my colleagues, but these benefits are small compared to the personal rewards I've derived from teaching.

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