

Striving for Excellence

Maria Lynn

New Jersey City University

I am currently the Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs (Interim) at New Jersey City University. I am an associate professor in psychology and will teach full-time beginning Fall 2007. Since completing my doctoral work in psychology at Saint Louis University in May 1998, I have continued to teach on a part-time basis and work in administrative roles as a director of a teaching center, a director of an accelerated weekend-program, and as an assistant dean.

I had the opportunity to attend two exceptional higher educational institutions. For my undergraduate education, I attended and graduated from Washington University in Saint Louis where I majored in economics. I then received my Masters of Social Work from Saint Louis University where I continued my education and later earned my PhD in psychology.

My research interest is in examining classroom process. Specifically I want to better understand the dynamics that take place which result in engaging classroom experiences and how that can inform teaching methodology. One paper I published in collaboration with Dr. James Korn on this subject explored the role of diversity in a summer course that I taught. The paper described my initial fears and concerns as a novice teacher and how I partnered with my students to work collaboratively with them (Lynn, 1999). I remain baffled and teased by how one approach works in one situation and fails in another.

My Early Development as a Teacher

Although the graduate program that I attended did not have a formal teaching program, I was given an abundance of teaching opportunities beginning my second semester of graduate school because I entered the program with a master's degree. By the time I completed my doctoral program, I had taught 17 different subjects including research methods, statistics, developmental psychology, small groups, and learning theory. Class sizes varied from 3 to 250 students. The institutions varied in mission and size. I had the opportunity to teach at a small private institution, a medium size private institution, and later at a large state institution. I taught in day, evening, weekend, and summer programs that were diverse in student body. The terms ranged from 3-week accelerated programs to traditional 15-week semesters. By the time I graduated I knew

where I would most likely succeed and be satisfied. I strongly urge all graduate students not only to seek teaching opportunities but to try to teach at diverse institutions so they can discover the best fit for their talents and aspirations.

Another dimension to my early development as a teacher was scholarship. My mentor, Dr. James Korn, was aggressive in recruiting students to attend and participate in teaching conferences. As a result of his influence, I attended numerous conferences and presented and co-presented papers on topics such as small groups and teaching portfolios. My early engagement in the scholarship of teaching produced two important results. First, I was introduced to a network of outstanding teachers including Drs. Jane Halonen, Drew Appleby, Charles Brewer, and Wilbert McKeachie. All of these individuals truly radiated a love for teaching and took an interest in my teaching career. It was reinforcing to me that these master teachers were so approachable and supportive. The second aspect of conducting research on teaching was that I learned how to integrate research and teaching. No longer were they dichotomous, competing forces.

Although having the opportunities to teach and be involved in the scholarship of teaching helped shape me as a teacher, I also had the chance to take a teaching of psychology course with Dr. Korn. This course had not been offered in our program for a number of years, but due to Dr. Korn's efforts, the psychology department reintroduced this course. In this seminar-style course, Dr. Korn encouraged us to discuss the ups and downs we experienced as novice teachers. We read an array of material on topics such as student-centered discussions, ethics, grading, syllabi, lecturing, and teaching portfolios. By the end of the term, all students had completed a teaching portfolio. Furthermore, I began seeking classroom observation opportunities. Not only did I learn how important it is to be observed, but I was invited to observe faculty across diverse disciplines such as business, health sciences, and psychology. The most important thing I learned from observing faculty was that few were expert lecturers and that it was not unusual to see that what worked for one teacher failed for another. Through such observation I experienced the dynamic flow of the classroom.

Defining Myself as a Teacher

For me, obstacles are the reason we never attain excellence but merely strive for it. I'm always facing obstacles—unmotivated students, under-prepared students, overburdened students, self doubt, etc. In my experience, teaching is filled with obstacles, old and new. When I first began to reflect on what challenges I faced in teaching, I thought of a book entitled *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry: How the Heart Grows Wise on the Spiritual Path*, written by a Buddhist author (Kornfield, 2001). The simple message of this book so effectively communicated in the title is that joy is followed by pain and

vice versa. Such has been true for me in my teaching. Have we not all experienced the joy of teaching when everything seems to come together or when students are so engaged that they don't want to leave when class is over? When it happens we leave inspired and eager for the next class. Unfortunately, we too often discover that we simply can't recreate such experience over and over again. We leave perplexed and disappointed. Accepting that the highs will not last and that troubles will surface has helped me to remain hopeful and motivated as a teacher. I have found that experience is the best teacher in guiding me during these times, especially if I take the time to stop and reflect on the particular class and then trust my judgment as to how to move forward. I used to quickly reference how-to books on teaching when I encountered problems in my teaching. Rarely was this strategy helpful because books often oversimplify the process of teaching and are too often devoid of the complexities of human interaction. Learning to accept the natural cycle of a course and trusting my own instincts and opinions has helped me grow as a teacher.

I wrote this section of this essay last because I feared being negative or discouraging. But what I realize is that in fact it is inspiring. I say so because I know for myself that, despite facing obstacles in my teaching, my commitment to my students and their education grows. I talked to numerous colleagues in preparation of this section to get a perspective outside of my own. What I discovered was that all of my colleagues openly admitted to struggling with a multitude of teaching-related issues, yet their commitment to teaching is still there. All of them agreed that they would never change careers. I believe the commitment to teaching that we have goes beyond enjoying the autonomous professorial lifestyle. I believe it has to do with an increasing sense of responsibility and commitment to our students as human beings. We experience the failures and struggles, yes, but we also experience the satisfaction of helping shape the minds and attitudes of our students. We have the opportunity to help open the world for those who are seeking a new way of being. I believe the joys we experience in the classroom help balance the inevitable negative experiences that we all have as teachers.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

My approach to teaching is guided by my teaching philosophy. I do not believe that one can be comfortable teaching without knowing what one believes, what one values, and what one wants to offer one's students. My teaching philosophy, at this time in my career, contains several components. First, I believe that each teacher has a talent and that no teacher can do everything well. I learned this lesson the hard way over numerous years of failure and frustration. During my graduate training, I was surrounded by excellent teachers. Many were outstanding lecturers with brilliant insights and an

ability to craft each class into an art form. I tried hard to mimic them, believing that I could not be a good teacher until I, too, mastered this art. The harder I worked at crafting the perfect lecture the less effective I became, no matter the class size or subject. The process began to change me in to a tense, judgmental, and impatient person who had no tolerance for the human element in the classroom. Despite the support of my mentors and some kind-hearted students, I just couldn't see what I had to bring to the classroom. Once I learned about different roles that teachers play, I had an "ah ha" moment. I realized that I was a facilitator of student learning and not a lecturer or expert. This insight revolutionized how I structured and delivered my classes. Each of us has a gift and a unique personality that shapes who we are as a teacher.

Closely related to my belief that each of us has a unique gift to offer our students is that I believe that one critical element to good teaching is being genuine. Roger's theory and practice of teaching described in his 1969 book *Freedom to Teach* outlines the importance of being genuine. I don't believe that we can impact other people without our being genuine. We may shape the mind to some degree, but not the life. I believe it is important to operationalize how this value gets played out for me. First, my years of experience as a teacher have provided me with ample feedback as to what I do well and what I don't do so well. I share this information with my students at the beginning of each semester. I let them know that I have terrible handwriting and that this could influence them because I will provide written feedback on their papers. My feedback is important because I give students the opportunity to revise their papers. I invite their help on how to best deal with issues such as this one. One semester my students came up with the idea to use large margins so I have plenty of space to write. On my part, I committed consciously to slowing down when writing. I tell my students that I am creative in constructing a student-centered learning environment and facilitating discussions but that they should not anticipate brilliant lectures. My students agree to do their best to be prepared for classroom discussions, and I agree to plan, to the best of my ability, engaging questions and exercises.

My teaching practices are rooted in my role as a facilitator. As a facilitator, I am not responsible to "feed" information to my students, nor am I responsible to entertain them. My role as a facilitator is to expose my students to rich sources of information, to create diverse learning opportunities, to provide feedback on homework, and to role model a love of learning. An important personal characteristic for me to work continually toward as a facilitator is to understand my students and examine the expectations and judgments that I have of them. I have struggled to adapt to the 21st century student. The students that I have now are not the same kind of students that I had 10 years ago. Unlike

the past, I compete with cell phones and headphones. Most of my students attend school full time, work at least one full time job, and are responsible for a family. All have hurried lives and overcrowded schedules. Too many seem to be racing to the finish line to get their degrees in order to secure a better future. Too often learning for learning's sake seems to be a luxury of the past.

In an effort to adapt to the realities of my students' lives, I've had to work to remain open and to not place my educational values on them. One way that I've adjusted to the changed classroom is that I've built in greater flexibility. For example, I have campus and virtual office hours throughout the week and use several forms of communication. Homework can be submitted through e-mail, hard copy, or fax. I allow students to do as many revisions of their assignments as they want and I assign diverse types of course requirements. Both give students an opportunity to do their best while balancing their life's demands. Students seem to relax once they understand these processes; more importantly, I believe my efforts to be flexible helps build trust and openness in my relationship with them.

Advice for New Teachers

I know that what is meaningful must be experienced directly. Reading the words of another has limited value. I offer my few tips in hopes that they will resonate with readers and help them along the way.

First, enjoy the process of teaching. If you become attached only to the outcomes of a particular class or course, you will lose some of the joy of teaching. You will cut yourself off from a very enriching, dynamic process that takes place in the classroom and through your communication and connection with your students. Second, free yourself to be you. I found a tremendous amount of freedom when I accepted my limitations and focused on my strengths. Third, don't overload your semester and expect to be effective in the classroom. You must decide if you want to devote the time required to be a good teacher and then protect your time like it is a precious treasure. Fourth, although we may find well-written books on teaching to be inspiring, you won't become a good teacher simply by reading them. Becoming a good teacher, like any other goal, requires time, patience, reflection, and experience. Expect things not to turn out as planned, despite your hard efforts, but expect magical moments to surface even when you did not plan for them.

References

Kornfield, J. (2001). *After the ecstasy, the laundry: How the heart grows wise on the spiritual path*. New York: Bantam Books.

Lynn, M. (1999). Teaching through diversity. *College Teaching*, 4, 123-127.

Rogers, C. R. (1969). *Freedom to learn*. Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company.