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Learning to Teach, Teaching to Learn

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After completing liberal arts coursework at a two-year branch campus of Pennsylvania State University, I earned my bachelor's degree in the double major of psychology and political science at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania. Upon graduation in 1981, I was awarded the Arlen G. and Louise Stone Swiger Doctoral Fellowship as part of my acceptance into the doctoral program in educational psychology at West Virginia University. I completed my master's degree there in 1983 and doctorate in 1987.

For several years after receiving my master's degree, I was employed full time as an educational supervisor in a social services setting, while concurrently teaching undergraduate psychology courses on a part-time basis at a nearby four-year college in northwestern Pennsylvania. After leaving my job as educational supervisor, I held a one-year administrative faculty post at a private liberal-arts institution in South Carolina as I continued to teach adjunct at both four-year college and university settings.

I am presently professor of psychology at Gordon College, where I have served in a combination of administrative faculty and teaching positions since 1989. Gordon College is a two-year unit of the University System of Georgia with burgeoning baccalaureate-degree programs in early childhood education, nursing, and the liberal arts. In addition to teaching multiple sections of both introductory psychology and life-span developmental psychology each semester, I have opportunities to teach other psychology courses such as applied psychology, psychology of adjustment, and special topics in psychology (e.g., historical foundations of psychology).

My ongoing research on pedagogical applications has been published in various peer-reviewed journals, including *Teaching of Psychology*, *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, *Constructivism in the Human Sciences*, and the *Southeastern Journal of Psychology*. I also present at regional and national teaching conferences, serve as guest speaker for teaching workshops, and contribute to the *Psychology Teacher Network* (the quarterly newsletter published by the American Psychological Association's (APA) Education Directorate). Based on my ongoing commitment to the scholarship of teaching and learning, I was chosen the recipient of the 2003 Board of Regents' Research in Undergraduate Education Award for two-year and state colleges throughout the

University System of Georgia. More recently, I was selected by the Society for the Teaching of Psychology to receive its 2005 Two-Year College Teaching Excellence Award. In April of 2005, I was appointed by the APA's Board of Educational Affairs to the Task Force for Strengthening the Teaching and Learning of Undergraduate Psychological Sciences, which is charged with bridging the gap between the *National Standards for the Teaching of High School Psychology* (APA, 1999) and the *Undergraduate Psychology Major Learning Goals and Outcomes* (APA, 2002).

My Early Development as a Teacher

During my freshman and sophomore years as an undergraduate, I remained a liberal arts major, although I was drawn to multiple history courses taught by the same professor, Dr. Eugene Miller. Dr. Miller took a broad conceptual approach to teaching history, linking events across time by exploring the social, political, economic, and personal significance of historical milestones from the dual perspective of the times in which they occurred and within the context of the contemporary world. In this way, Dr. Miller "brought history to life," de-emphasizing rote learning in favor of real-world situations, which pushed students in the direction of more meaningful application and synthesis of knowledge. Dr. Miller's efforts represented a concerted lesson in authentic teaching and learning that resonates loudly in my own instructional methodologies.

My first personal experiences with teaching at the college level came in my undergraduate junior year while I participated in a work-study program. Based on my earlier performance in his educational psychology class, my work-study supervisor, Dr. Donald Campese, assigned me a measure of responsibility in the design and implementation of this same course. As my first teaching mentor, Dr. Campese guided and encouraged me, but at the same time he allowed me the freedom to mine the breadth and depth of a "teaching assistantship" early in my academic preparation. He also involved me in his classroom-based research, culminating in my co-authorship of a methods and techniques article appearing in a 1982 issue of *Teaching of Psychology*. These formative intellectual experiences, both inside and outside of the classroom, solidified my growing interest in becoming a college educator.

Another seminal influence on my subsequent career as a college teacher was Dr. John Baird, who taught me undergraduate life-span developmental psychology. As part of his course requirements, Dr. Baird assigned a Life Analysis project in which students analyzed their individual lives in theoretical terms over both its historical and hypothetical span. This project was the most inherently rewarding assignment that I had completed up to this point in my undergraduate education. As a testament to the powerful impact of this assignment in shaping the future direction of my own instructional

methodology, I have modified, extended, and empirically tested the pedagogical efficacy of the Life Analysis in teaching introductory life-span development for more than two decades.

My graduate training in educational psychology was slanted heavily toward learning and development with a quantitative emphasis. Under the capable tutelage of Dr. Richard Walls, my major professor in both the master's and doctoral programs, I had the opportunity to complete numerous courses and research projects that were invaluable in my preparation for teaching. In my mind, Dr. Walls remains the consummate model of the teacher-scholar, exceeding lofty research expectations at his university while maintaining a genuine passion and enthusiasm for classroom teaching. By example, he taught me how to balance the competing demands placed on college educators, without sacrificing total dedication to classroom success in the process.

Although I had decided as far back as my junior year of college that I wanted to attend graduate school, even after completing my graduate preparation I remained uncertain about the precise level of college teaching to which I aspired. In searching for my first full-time college teaching job, I interviewed at two-year, four-year, and university institutions. Despite attractive job offers elsewhere, I accepted a tenure-track position at a junior college. Why? Despite the fact that my parents stressed the value of education, neither of them had the opportunity to attend college. As a first-generation college student with limited financial resources, my initial exposure to higher education came at a two-year college environment. With caring and accessible professors and generally small class sizes, my educational experiences there rated among the very best in my college years. This lasting favorable impression motivated me to accept a junior-college faculty position where I hoped to make positive contributions to future generations of college students with personal backgrounds similar to my own.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Particularly relevant to the open-access junior college environment where I have worked over the past 18 years, the biggest challenge in undergraduate teaching continues to be formulating an approach to pedagogy that accommodates for the wide range of aptitudes, interests, and commitment to learning evidenced among my students. In addressing this concern, I have reached a delicate balance between seemingly dichotomous viewpoints. On the one hand, I take nothing for granted when it comes to the entry-level skills of my students. Even when my students have completed introductory psychology as a prerequisite to taking a more advanced psychology class, on important concepts I do my best to avoid saying: "As you already know from introductory psychology ...". Instead, I try to flesh out from them what they know and

what they don't, and then take the time necessary to fill in their knowledge gaps. On the other hand, I hold my students to realistically high performance standards, encouraging them to succeed and offering my guidance to those who are willing to seize the opportunity. I emphasize from the first day of class onward that they must assume *personal responsibility* for their academic success, even though I am always available to assist those who expend the effort to succeed. As I explain to them, I hope that they will learn in my classes because of something I do, but it is more important that they learn because of something *they* do.

For a decade beginning in the late 1980s, my work schedule combined administrative and teaching responsibilities in the sequential capacities of assistant dean at a four-year institution followed by division chair and then interim dean of the faculty at my present junior college. Aspiring to teaching excellence in the face of significant administrative demands on my time made it difficult for me to accomplish everything I wanted to in my classes. Consequently, in the late 1990s I made the then-difficult decision to relinquish all of my administrative duties in favor of moving back into the classroom on a full-time basis. I have never regretted this decision.

Although the emphasis at my junior college is on teaching five classes per semester and engaging in various types of institutional service and outreach efforts, I have still carved out considerable time in recent years to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning. The primary aim of my research is to examine empirically the instructional efficacy of authentic teaching applications in the context of my own classes. Rather than approach my research activities as an added and unnecessary professional burden, I have embraced the perspective that they stimulate my intellectual curiosity and creative energies, enhance my pedagogical effectiveness, and allow my students to ultimately benefit from exposure to instructional strategies that have undergone rigorous testing. I have come to view my heavy teaching load as a plus in that it provides me with plentiful opportunities to investigate new teaching and learning techniques systematically with a large and generally receptive student audience.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

At the heart of my teaching philosophy lies the belief that students hold the potential to be “architects of knowledge” in real-world contexts. This view is consistent with a constructivist educational perspective that stresses the co-active importance of self-discovery and life experiences throughout the learning process. From a cognitively and socially centered constructivist stance, learners actively and interactively formulate changes in their understanding by integrating new knowledge with knowledge already present in long-term memory.

As my teaching career has unfolded, I find that I am increasingly willing to afford students opportunities to go beyond the conceptual applications that I offer in class. I routinely push my students to search for personally relevant illustrations of psychological principles being applied in their own lives and in the lives of others. For instance, I recommend that while they are taking notes, they should write down the everyday life examples that I provide in class, discover the psychological principles underlying each example, and leave a blank space in their notes next to each topic to include one or more examples of their own creation later. I explain to my students that if they cannot think of examples on their own, they are merely memorizing information in place of understanding the practical applications and implications of important concepts.

Although I have always believed that my course grades should reflect behaviorally stated student competencies instead of glorified indications of rote learning, I have moved progressively closer in recent years to the comprehensive use of authentic assessment in my classes. Authentic assessment is direct and performance-based, requiring students to demonstrate proficiency by actually *doing* something in contexts that replicate the priorities and challenges faced in daily life. Teaching and learning are integrated in the practice of authentic assessment (Mueller, 2003). At the same time that students learn to encounter real-life problems and teachers facilitate this process of authentic task involvement, the insights and solutions offered by students gauge their abilities to learn on a deeper and more applied conceptual level. Each rooted firmly in the constructivist pedagogical tradition, among the authentic teaching and learning applications that I have successfully implemented in my classes are journal writing and life-story narration (e.g., Mayo, 2003), case-based instruction (e.g., Mayo, 2004b), analogical reasoning (e.g., Mayo, 2001), concept mapping (e.g., Mayo, 2005), dialogue and role playing (e.g., Mayo, 2002), peer critique (e.g., Mayo, 2006), and the repertory grid technique (e.g., Mayo, 2004a) as grounded in Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory.

Advice for New Teachers

Unfortunately, there is no cookbook formula for becoming a successful teacher. Every teacher is different in personality and instructional style, and every teaching environment holds its own special advantages and challenges. Nonetheless, drawing from my own reflective classroom experiences over the past 25 years, I will offer several pragmatic suggestions toward pursuing excellence.

Avoid Procrastination

Use mental imagery to battle procrastination. One image that I have conjured up many times involves the thought of chilly water in an outdoor pool at the start of swim

season. There are two ways to approach the dilemma of how to enter the water. You can submerge your big toe and then agonizingly proceed to your feet, ankles, shins, knees, thighs, and if you're really brave, your upper torso. Or, you can simply jump into the pool head first, and after a short while spent adjusting to the chilly conditions, the water will start to feel warmer. This latter image captures the sequence of events that we likely encounter when we "jump right into" tackling a challenging teaching task and soon realize that it wasn't so daunting after all.

As we often suggest to our students, we can also break down large jobs into a series of smaller, more manageable ones. For example, if we have 50 research papers to grade over a 5-day period (say, Wednesday through Sunday), we could consider grading an average of 10 a day instead of cramming all of our grading into one marathon session over the weekend.

We can also avoid procrastination to the extent that we are action oriented. We can actually *do* something, not just *think about doing* it. For example, in an ongoing journal, we might record every instance of a teaching-related task that we have completed successfully. Our journal record will then serve as verifiable and self-motivating evidence that we are doers. At the same time, this record of accomplishments can also double as an invaluable source of information in composing self-evaluations as part of our annual, promotion, tenure, or post-tenure performance appraisals.

Don't Sweat the Small Stuff

Too many teachers (especially those at the start of their careers) obsess over the details of classroom life. "Was anyone sleeping during class?" "Did everyone catch the drift of today's lecture or class activity?" We should accept the facts that (a) we can't control *everything* that goes on in our classes; (b) the only person we *can* control is ourselves; and (c) we can't please *everyone*. The best we can hope for with our students is that the majority of them are self-motivated, enjoy our classes, and comprehend course content.

Learn From Our Students

Realize that in the process of teaching, learning is a two-way street. Yes, our students will ideally learn much from us; however, listen closely to our students. We can learn a great deal from them if we are receptive to the possibilities, which include adopting a fresh outlook on the same old material, gleaning an intriguing idea for a new class assignment, or gaining a novel insight into a pre-existing dilemma.

Revel in the Unexpected

We should look for unexpected developments that lift our classes beyond what we had originally planned. As examples, the unexpected might manifest itself in an

unusually fruitful class discussion or a thought-provoking personal anecdote offered by a student at a critical juncture in class.

Seize the Moment

We should not dwell too long on the past—what happened in yesterday’s classes is old news. Similarly, we shouldn’t live too far into the future—we can easily get caught up in the trap of thinking that the ultimate classroom successes are out *there* somewhere, dangling elusively yet intoxicatingly just within reach. Rather, we should learn to seize the moment: We will always hold the power *right now* to create our teaching successes for ourselves.

Challenge Ourselves

As a classroom teacher, we shouldn’t become a creature of comfort, tradition, or habit. Instead, we should push ourselves toward something new and different in our teaching. We shouldn’t be afraid to take some risks. After all, the real risk is gravitating in the direction of stifling inertia in our teaching.

Learn from Successful Role Models

Our role models should do more than inspire us. We should strive to uncover what exactly our mentors did (and how they did it) that translates into classroom successes. We should pose probing questions to our mentors and ask them to critique our classes, and observe theirs. Following in our mentors’ footsteps we learn to adapt their strategies for success in our own classes.

Expand Our Knowledge Base

We should never stop learning. We should continue to take college courses, attend teaching conferences and continuing education workshops, and read everything on instructional content and methodology on which we can get our hands. We should research our classroom practices, and learn from and share the results with our colleagues as our unique contribution to the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Final Thoughts

Teaching is profession filled with both triumphs and tribulations. If we aspire to teach as an avocation more so than as a job, we should never lose sight of the many intrinsically rewarding aspects of our work. We should commit to discover the “natural highs” in our work that we need to get and stay motivated as a teacher. When work serves as its own reward, it isn’t that hard to derive ongoing intrinsic motivation that holds the likely potential to translate into a personally enriching and successful teaching career.

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