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College Teaching: My First Few Years

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I began my undergraduate experience at Ricks College, a private junior college in Idaho, where I was attracted to the field of psychology after visiting a friend's introductory psychology class. The topic that day was problem solving and the teacher presented the often used candle problem. Because I enjoy solving these types of problems, it sparked an interest in me to take the class. However, my first psychology course did not begin well—I failed my first psychology exam. Nevertheless, I persevered and earned an associate's degree in psychology. I completed my Bachelor's degree in Psychology at Brigham Young University (BYU), graduating magna cum laude. I fully anticipated attending medical school, but it was not to be. Thus, I returned to BYU to enter a general master's program in psychology, after which I completed my PhD in psychobiology at The Ohio State University (OSU). My doctoral studies focused on areas of the brain involved in the cardiovascular responses to fear and anxiety in rats. It was during my time as a graduate student at OSU that I began teaching introductory psychology.

After earning my PhD, I continued my training at OSU for another year as a post-doctoral researcher in Dr. Janice Kiecolt-Glaser's laboratory where I directed a large study on the relationship between marital stress and wound healing (ouch!). Since that time, I have been at Eastern Illinois University (EIU), where I recently earned tenure and the rank of Associate Professor. At EIU, I regularly teach introductory psychology, psychology of learning, and biological psychology. I have received several teaching awards including the College of Sciences Teaching Excellence Award (2005), Excellence in the Use of Technology Award (2004), the Psychology Department's W. P. McGown Outstanding Faculty Award (2004), EIU Achievement and Contribution Awards for Teaching (2004, 2003, 2001), the Distinguished Honors Faculty Award (2002), Psi Chi Chapter Faculty of the Year Award (2002), and the Society for Teaching of Psychology Early Career Teaching Award (2006).

My Early Development as a Teacher

I did not have any formal training for college-level teaching before teaching my first introductory psychology course. Being at a large research institution, my adviser was more concerned about my research productivity than encouraging my development as a

teacher. However, during the middle of my undergraduate education, I spent two years as a church missionary, which gave me many opportunities to teach in a variety of circumstances. It was during this experience that I learned the importance of adapting material to my audience, how to ask good questions, and how to resolve the concerns of those I was teaching. These concerns were often related to questioning the source and veracity of what I was teaching. I feel these experiences continue to influence my teaching today, as I enjoy providing the historical context for the things I'm teaching.

At OSU, graduate students teach nearly every section of introductory psychology. Each teaching assistant received a textbook and a common syllabus, which usually included nearly every chapter in the textbook for the 10-week course. In conversations with other graduate students, I would try to learn what others were doing in their classes to teach particular topics. We also had access to a faculty development office that was available to provide valuable feedback on our teaching skills. On at least one occasion, I had their office videotape my lecture so I could reflect (painfully) on my teaching.

I did not have a particular mentor in my teaching, but from the time I arrived at EIU, I felt like I have had strong support from my colleagues in the Psychology Department. In addition, I had a few memorable teachers from my own undergraduate and graduate courses who served as models for excellent teaching. From early on in my teaching career, my goal has been to be like them. I don't wish to copy their teaching, but I hope that when my former students reflect on the best teachers of their undergraduate days, they consider me to be one of them.

To further my teaching abilities, I frequently attend conferences and workshops on teaching. I love attending them because I get to meet other people who are excited about teaching—and I get to copy freely their ideas. When considering a new teaching technique or activity, I try to visualize myself implementing it to see if it fits my style. Of course, the adoption of new teaching methods ultimately depends on how well it goes in class, in terms of my own comfort as well as the reaction of my students.

I became a university professor because I did not get into medical school. When I was forced to reconsider my options, I realized I felt more comfortable around psychology graduate students than I was among pre-med majors. I also realized that the flexible work schedule of a university teacher would allow me to spend more time with my family. I am so thankful that I did not end up in medical school. Having always enjoyed school, I feel comfortable in an academic setting. A sign hanging in my office says, "Blessed are they who go to college and never get out, for they shall be called Professors."

I am still not the type of teacher I want to be. I am always looking for new ways to improve my teaching. For example, I continue to implement more active learning exercises in place of standard lecturing. I figure that if I make the class enjoyable for me, it will likely be enjoyable for my students. I have to be excited about what I am teaching because my level of enthusiasm is clearly visible to my students. Fortunately, I get to teach about the most exciting topics on the planet.

In trying to deal with covering a large amount of material, which I was forced to do as a graduate student, I resolved to sacrifice breadth for depth. I have accepted the fact that I cannot teach it all. I would rather focus on the main ideas and enhance my students' critical thinking skills than spoon feed them all the facts.

I have always enjoyed my time in the classroom. Of course, it helps being at an institution whose mission matches my values. I feel that time devoted to teaching reduces my time for research but I do not feel bad about that, because I love teaching and my institution highly values it. However, I must acknowledge that I have also learned ways to improve my teaching through some of my research and service opportunities. For example, I serve on a university technology committee that allows me to hear about and provide input on new technology initiatives on campus that I can incorporate into my teaching. In my research, I recently conducted a study on the use of classroom response systems (clickers) to facilitate student participation and increase accuracy of student feedback. Based on these findings, I plan to extend their use to other settings as well.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

My teaching philosophy is based on a quote by Plutarch, "The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled." I know that much of what I teach will soon be forgotten, except maybe being conditioned to salivate to the "YMCA" song. Thus, I focus on getting students to question and think critically about not only psychology, but their world. Secondly, because psychology is such an applicable field of study, I relate as much as I can to their past, present, and future lives. My role is to create an atmosphere conducive to learning, and my students' role is to take the responsibility for their learning. If they are willing to work, they will succeed.

The single most important change in my teaching has been in the use of technology. I consider myself an early adopter of new technology, which requires first, an effort to keep up with the changes in technology, and secondly, the wisdom to know how or when to use it. In the "old days," I was writing on the chalkboard or overhead transparencies. Today, I use PowerPoint™ and classroom response systems. In fact, some of my current research on classroom response systems has further strengthened my commitment to use them. These systems increase student participation and the accuracy of

student feedback, and students enjoy using them. I wonder what technology will bring next.

When I first started teaching, the fact that students were actually writing down something that was coming out of my mouth bewildered me. It was important to them, and, suddenly, I felt important. Now, the most rewarding aspects of teaching are seeing my students' faces light up with understanding and seeing them really "get it". I also treasure the rarer occasions where a student will say that I have had an impact on an important life decision. Being in a position where I can influence decisions with life-long consequences is humbling.

However, teaching is challenging for me. One of my frustrations is when students are not motivated sufficiently to do well in their courses. I realize that I can only help them if they are willing to help themselves. I try to convey that I genuinely care about their success, and that I am on their side. Early in the semester, I announce that students who are not doing well after having taken the first or second exam should come talk to me and discuss ways to improve their performance before it's too late. I know they are willing to help themselves if they make the effort to come see me. In my online courses, I e-mail students who have missed a quiz or two to encourage them not to fall behind. Often students are facing challenges with which I can help them.

After nearly every lecture, I take time to reflect on how well it went and what I would change. Then I change it. If I wait until I am preparing for the same lecture the next semester, I usually forget what I wanted to change. I have also found ways to collect anonymous feedback from students about my teaching techniques. Around mid-terms, I ask students to write down what they like about the class, the textbook, my jokes, or anything else on which they wish to comment. Often, I find that things are going well, which is reinforcing, but it also gives me the opportunity to provide some rationale for why I have purposely chosen to do certain things in my class. It gives me time to introduce some of my teaching philosophies, and inherently my personal values, which are not stated explicitly on the syllabus. I feel that sharing my teaching philosophy with my students helps them to understand the challenges that teachers face and how I have chosen to deal with them.

Aside from constantly trying to think of ways to improve my teaching, I attend several conferences every year that promote the teaching of psychology or the use of new technology in education. I also attend workshops on our campus sponsored by our faculty development office. Finally, I read *Teaching of Psychology* and am a member of the PsychTeacher electronic discussion list.

I don't feel old enough to provide deep thoughts of wisdom to new teachers, but in my limited experience I have learned a few things that may be helpful. The first is don't try to implement every possible teaching technique that you learn all at one time. Doing so will make you feel overwhelmed and inadequate. Different teaching techniques suit different students and different instructors. I have had teachers who taught in very different ways, but what made them excellent in my mind was first, their genuine interest in my learning, and second, their mastery of the subject. Thus, in some way, you must convey to your students that you care about their learning and that you know what you're talking about.

Next, teach in a manner that is consistent with your own values and beliefs. In other words, be genuine. Academic freedom allows you to provide commentary on what you're teaching and this can be a model for students to reflect on what they are learning. In addition, it helps students see that you are a real person with your own thoughts and not just a transmitter of information. Being 'real' is also evidenced when you share your own life stories to help relate the content to everyday life.

Finally, never become too comfortable with your teaching; otherwise, you will find teaching boring and so will your students. Periodically take time to evaluate yourself and look for ways to improve. Students are also a good source of this information if you're willing to be humbled.

Final Thoughts

If this time is just the beginning of my teaching career, I am really looking forward to the next 30 years. With how much my teaching has changed already, I can hardly fathom what I may be doing between now and then. However, I expect one unchanging aspect will be my love for teaching psychology.