

*Teaching Psychology Can Be Magical*

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Several years ago, I presented an invited address at the annual meeting of the Western Psychological Association in its *Last Lecture Series* (Vernoy, 1999). The title I chose for that address was *Teaching Psychology Can Be Magical*. I have chosen that same title for this chapter because I still believe it to be true both for me and for my students. Most of my life has been spent as a psychology professor, and at some point every semester, I realize that my students, by some magical means, have taken the information I have imparted and transformed it into their own knowledge. I continue to be awed by the process.

You might say that my life as a professor began years before graduate school in Downey, California, a suburb of Los Angeles. What I remember most about growing up in Downey is wandering through orange groves, watching my father coach high school football, actually playing football when I was older, going 2 for 4 while losing to Mexico in the final game of the Senior Little League Baseball World Series, experiencing the joy of learning mathematics, and getting to know my wife, Judy.

Fortunately for my career in psychology, I injured my knee during a high school football game and subsequently failed the physical for the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, where I had intended to continue my football career and major in mathematics or engineering. Instead, I enrolled as a freshman at Occidental College (Oxy) in Los Angeles and changed my major from mathematics to psychology. It was as an undergraduate at Oxy that my psychology career began, with the presentation of my first paper at the Western Psychological Association Convention (Franklin & Vernoy, 1970), the publication of my first research article in *Teaching of Psychology Newsletter* (Vernoy & Cole, 1971), and my membership in Psi Chi. In 1971, I received my AB with honors in psychology from Oxy.

Four years later, I received my PhD in psychology from the University of California, Irvine (UCI). My graduate years were funded by a Public Health Service fellowship and a University of California grant, and I gained professional experience as a research assistant, a teaching assistant for the year-long experimental psychology sequence, and a bona fide teacher with my own class in sensation and perception. In 1975, I was awarded a postdoctoral research associateship at the Naval Submarine

Medical Research Laboratory in Groton, Connecticut. Most of my predoctoral and postdoctoral research related to visual perception and human factors. I worked mostly with divers at the Sub Base and I investigated unintended acceleration in automobiles as a visiting professor at UCI.

In 1976 I began teaching Introduction to Psychology, Physiological Psychology, Research Methods in Psychology, and Statistics at Palomar College. From 1987 to 1989, I was a visiting associate professor of psychology at UCI, teaching Experimental Psychology and Computers in Psychology. I have published research articles and presented numerous papers on human factors, visual perception, and the teaching of psychology. I am the co-author of two college textbooks: *Psychology in Action* (Huffman & Vernoy, 2003) and *Behavioral Statistics in Action* (Vernoy & Kyle, 2002).

At Palomar College, I am currently a professor of psychology and the Dean of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Division. I have also served as the Chair of the Behavioral Sciences Department and the President of the Faculty Senate.

My teaching and research efforts have resulted in several awards. In 1986 I was the recipient of a *Master Teacher Award* from the National Institute of Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) at the University of Texas, Austin. In 1996 I received the Palomar College Research Award, and in 1997 the NISOD Excellence Award for contributions to teaching and learning. In 1998 I received both the Association of Community College Trustees Pacific Region Faculty Member Award and the Society for the Teaching of Psychology's Teaching Excellence Award for Community/Junior College Teachers of Psychology. I was elected a Fellow of the American Psychological Association in 2000.

#### My Early Development as a Teacher

My PhD program at UCI offered no formal instruction on teaching, but I did have a mentor there who was an excellent teacher, and fortunately I had a chance to learn much about teaching before entering graduate school from my father. He was an extremely successful high school football coach. While growing up, I had observed him for literally hundreds of hours teaching his players and preparing for games. The four things I learned from observing him were to (a) prepare (know what you are doing), (b) try new things, (c) steal teaching ideas from others, and (d) care about students. Another experience that helped develop my teaching skills occurred during my undergraduate years when I was a water safety instructor for a Red Cross-approved swimming program at the local high school pool. The Red Cross training taught me how to organize my lectures and demonstrations and how to feel comfortable in front of a class, even though the class consisted mostly of frightened 5- to 12-year-olds. This job was also the first

time that I experienced the magical feeling that occurs for both the teacher and the student when the student actually learns something that they did not know before, in this case how to float or swim across the pool. Although I had never taught adults, I was comfortable talking to groups of people by the time I got to graduate school. At the beginning of my second year in graduate school, I became a teaching assistant (TA) for my mentor, Dr. Myron (Mike) Braunstein, who taught experimental psychology. I attended all his lectures and taught one of the labs. From observing Mike teach, it was clear that he spent countless hours looking for examples and organizing his class, and that he expected only the best from his students and TAs. As a TA in the experimental psychology laboratories, I applied what I had learned about the importance of careful preparation. I also learned to appreciate the importance of a sense of humor and not to fear student questions. Clearly, observing my father and my mentor, as well as serving as water safety instructor, contributed to my development as a college-level teacher.

#### Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

It seems as though I was always a relatively good teacher. My swim students and their parents liked me, and I got very good evaluations as a TA. During my last two years as a graduate student, my department asked me to develop and teach a course on sensation and perception. I received positive teaching evaluations, so I believe the course turned out to be a good one. My experience with this course taught me that I had a knack for making difficult concepts comprehensible and how to be accessible to my students. I also learned that demonstrations, class discussion, humor, and magic can make a class much more interesting for my students and for me.

That one magical moment, the moment I decided to focus mainly on teaching rather than on research, came during my postdoctoral work at the Naval Submarine Medical Research Laboratory. I enjoyed the research, but one day one of my colleagues asked me to give a guest lecture in one of his classes that he taught at a local college. I gave the lecture, had a great time with the students, and decided that night that I really wanted to teach for the rest of my life. I have never regretted the decision to become a teacher because it turned out to be the second best decision I ever made. (The decision to marry my wife, Judy, was the best decision that I ever made.)

#### The Examined Life of a Teacher

I think that the most significant change in my teaching over the years has been to be more concerned about teaching key concepts in depth while not attempting to be as encyclopedic in my lectures. I learned that my students *can* read and I *can* teach a class without lecturing on each of the chapters in a book or all the topics within a chapter. I

now try to give my students more of a feel for what it is like to be a research psychologist or a statistician rather than just lecturing to them about psychology or statistics.

There are several obstacles I have encountered in becoming a good teacher, the major obstacle being time. It takes a lot of time to become a good teacher. It takes time to conduct good research. It takes time to be a good faculty member. It takes time to be a good administrator. It takes time to be a good husband. It takes time to be a good father. It takes time to be a good citizen. Often, it seems like there are just not enough hours in the day to be good at all the important things in life.

In graduate school, the major obstacle to good teaching was conducting research. I became a graduate student to get a research degree and in my attempt to conduct exemplary research, I had to devote a lot of time to the process. During my graduate years, time spent on teaching always seemed like time stolen from my research. When I became a faculty member at Palomar College, I was expected to teach 15 units each semester and was evaluated solely on my teaching, so time spent on research seemed like time stolen from teaching. I quickly realized that if I wanted to become a really good teacher, I would have to teach and prepare during the school week and do my writing and research on weekends and during summer and holiday breaks. I still worked 12-hour days, but I made sure that I found 4 or 5 hours for my family every day. As in any occupation, you just have to develop good time management skills, be innovative and creative, and have a sense of humor or you will go crazy. (Or more formally “nuts,” as we say when covering the clinical psychology chapter in the introductory course.)

My philosophy of teaching is to enjoy myself and make my classes educational and enjoyable for my students. For me teaching is truly a magical experience. I have fun teaching. I continually try new ways to get concepts across to my students. I do not let small failures, like a bad lecture or a failed demonstration, get me down. I live for that magical moment in my students where the light bulb goes on or grows brighter in their heads. I really *do* wake up nearly every morning and say to myself, "Mark, you are one of the luckiest people in the world. You have a great family, a great dog, you drive a 1965 Corvair Corsa, and you get to teach two-way analysis of variance today." I love to teach. It is a lot of work, but I would never consider doing anything else. (Well, I am now a Dean, but I continue to teach my Statistics class at 7:00 a.m.) I really do get to do something that I love doing, and at the end of the semester my students have learned a lot and many have actually begun to love (or at least hate less?) statistics.

#### Final Thoughts and Advice for New Teachers

There is nothing I can tell you that will guarantee that you will become a good, let alone, a great teacher. All I know is that I am a much better teacher today than I was

when I walked into my first class at UCI, and I believe that I get better every year. So, if you want to be a successful teacher, my advice to you is to: (a) get into the best graduate program you can; (b) learn as much about psychology as you can; (c) find a mentor who believes that it is his or her job to be a good teacher; (d) search out good teaching models and steal ideas from them; (e) continue to try new things; (f) learn from your failures but do not be deterred by them; (g) join the Society for the Teaching of Psychology; (h) subscribe to and read *Teaching of Psychology*; (i) join electronic discussion lists for teachers; (j) go to psychology teaching conferences; (k) go to psychology research conferences; (l) understand that no one ever goes into teaching psychology to make a lot of money; (m) remember that in order to be great at anything, you really have to love doing it, so strive to make your classes fun for both your students and yourself; (n) and finally, to be a great teacher, you need to practice teaching, over and over and over again. Teaching psychology really has been magical for me and many of my colleagues and my students, and it can be magical for you, too.

#### References

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