

A Fortuitous Life Path

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My life has followed a quirky pattern in that virtually all my biggest disappointments have worked out for the better in the long run. So it was with my entry into a career in teaching. It was 1972 and I was wrapping up my undergraduate education at Bradley University. I was excited about moving on to a PhD program, which seemed like a simple matter. I had a stellar GPA, inexplicably high GRE scores, and a journal article accepted for publication. The wrinkle was that I was so utterly naïve and overconfident, I only applied to *two* blue-chip (top 15) PhD programs—both of which sent me polite rejections. I was totally crushed. I hasten to add that this monumental stupidity was purely my own fault as I had not bothered to seek any advising from the department about getting into graduate school.

Humbled and devastated, I obtained a last-minute admission into Bradley's Master's program. That fall, two weeks into my graduate training, the local community college (Illinois Central College) called the Psychology Department to see if it had a graduate student who could take over two sections of introductory psychology from a professor who had moved into administration. For some unknown reason, the department chair recommended me. So, with one weekend to prepare, I took over two classes that were already under way. Much to my surprise, I found teaching absolutely exhilarating, and I have never looked back. By summer, at the age of 22, I had finished my Master's degree and secured a tenure-track position at LincolnLand Community College. That's how I unexpectedly migrated into the Illinois Community College system, where I would stay for almost 20 years. In the space of 15 months, I had gone from devastation to exhilaration—and the difference was teaching.

After two years at LincolnLand, I moved to the College of DuPage, an exceptional community college in the suburbs of Chicago. This move allowed me to enroll in the doctoral program at UIC—the University of Illinois, Chicago (while teaching full-time at DuPage), where I earned my PhD in social psychology in 1981. While at DuPage, I became interested in the challenge of how to build a better textbook. I published a volume on the psychology of adjustment in 1983 and an introductory text in 1989 (Weiten, 1983, 1989). I subsequently moved to Santa Clara University, where I greatly enjoyed teaching during most of the 1990s. Since 2002, I have taught at the

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where, among other things, I teach a graduate course on the teaching of psychology.

Over the years, I have been fortunate to receive distinguished teaching awards from the College of DuPage and Division Two of the American Psychological Association (APA), and an outstanding young graduate award from Bradley University. In 1991, I helped chair the APA National Conference on Enhancing the Quality of Undergraduate Education in Psychology, and in 1996—1997, I served as President of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP; Division Two of the APA). Perhaps my greatest career thrill occurred in 2005, when STP named its award for teaching excellence in two-year colleges in my honor.

My Early Development as a Teacher

Given that I had barely begun my Master's program when I was thrust into teaching, I obviously had no preparation whatsoever prior to my first teaching assignment. In retrospect, I should have been terrified, and it should have been a disaster. But it went surprisingly well. Looking back, I am sure that my teaching was far from exemplary, but I was good for a laugh-a-minute while covering copious amounts of material with unbridled enthusiasm. I would continue to rely on the combination of enthusiasm, humor, and a knack for assimilating lots of content throughout my early years of teaching. During these early years, I was not an outstanding *teacher*, but no one complained because from day one I was a pretty talented *lecturer*, and most people do not appreciate the difference.

In graduate school, I had very little mentoring relating to teaching, per se. That said, I had a number of mentors, such as Rick Stalling and Claire Etaugh at Bradley, and Harry Upshaw, Shari Diamond, Roger Dominowski, and Lee Wilkinson at UIC, who clearly conveyed to me that teaching is an important responsibility, that students merit one's respect and support, and that high expectations for students are crucial to fostering learning. These were valuable lessons.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

My gradual evolution as a teacher unfolded in an interesting cultural milieu, as community colleges were just emerging as a significant force in American higher education. Almost 500 community colleges were founded across the nation in the 1960s. They were new and they were determined to be different. There was palpable excitement among faculty and administrators who saw an unprecedented opportunity to craft more student-centered models of undergraduate education. Quality teaching was what it was all about—research was barely an afterthought. Innovative approaches to instruction were

welcome, interdisciplinary collaboration was nurtured, and active learning became the Holy Grail. Located in an affluent and growing area, the College of DuPage succeeded in attracting many outstanding, creative teachers who were inspirational role models and fertile sources of ideas.

Although it was an exciting time, there were, of course, obstacles and difficulties. In addition to the challenges found at any college, we had to deal with remarkable diversity in student ability and preparation, and with the fact that most of our students had real lives—lives saturated with stress from their responsibilities as parents and full-time employees. While at DuPage, I taught a Psychology of Adjustment course in which I required students to keep a stress diary for a week. These diaries were very eye-opening and served to make me a lot less cynical about student “excuses” for work undone.

I adapted to my students’ stress-saturated lives reasonably quickly. I learned to be very flexible about deadlines, missed assignments, sleep-prone students and so forth, without compromising my academic standards. I learned to give students second and third chances—sometimes it paid off, sometimes it didn’t. But if they failed, I knew it was because they couldn’t or wouldn’t do the work, and not because I rigidly enforced arbitrary deadlines.

The students’ enormous diversity in academic ability proved to be a more daunting challenge, one that I still struggle with today. Over the years I have probably tried to cope with this diversity in an endless variety of ways. Most of these strategies have involved coming up with ways for students to acquire the skills and knowledge they need and a multiplicity of ways to assess their learning. My other response to the diversity issue has been a conscious commitment not to let my standards erode or my expectations diminish. Over the years, I have had colleagues who, lamenting the problems of their less talented students, have acknowledged that they have lowered their expectations for students. I have worked very hard at not giving in to those feelings. I am convinced that if we have low expectations for our students, these expectations become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Beginning my career in a community college environment meant that I did not have to struggle with the tension between research and teaching that creates difficult dilemmas for so many faculty at research-driven universities. I conducted a modest amount of research on a variety of topics, such as jury functioning (Weiten, 1980), attribution theory (Weiten & Upshaw, 1982), educational measurement (Weiten, 1984), and the nature of stress (Weiten, 1988), but there was no pressure to do so. Recognizing that it was not realistic to try to mount a systematic research program in a community college, I cast about for other professional challenges and seized upon the idea of writing

a textbook. I was extremely unhappy with the textbook choices available for my Psychology of Adjustment course. So, I set out to write my own. I did not anticipate it, but the process of writing a textbook had an enormous impact on my evolution as a teacher. Working on the text forced me to go back to square one and think about (a) what I wanted to accomplish in the Adjustment course, (b) what other teachers wanted to accomplish in the course, (c) what students hoped to get out of the course, and (d) how to best realize and balance these diverse goals. I found myself mulling over matters of content, pedagogy, and assessment like never before in ways that surely contributed to my maturation as a teacher.

The other development in the 1980s that contributed to my defining myself as a teacher was that I started attending teaching-related conferences, most notably the Mid-America Conference for Teachers of Psychology (MACTOP), founded by Joe Palladino at the University of Southern Indiana. MACTOP quickly became a magnet for savvy, creative psychology teachers from the eastern half of the United States and a model for similar conferences around the country. I learned a great deal at these conferences from both the formal presentations and the informal dialogues that lasted late into the night. The personal relationships forged at these conferences led me to become much more actively involved in STP, where I met many talented teachers whose inordinate dedication to their craft humbled and inspired me.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

Although I have taught a variety of courses over the years, there are certain threads of consistency among them that represent the core of my teaching philosophy. Chief among them are the following general principles.

Focus on Skills More Than Content

It is easy to fall into the trap of obsessing about how many facts and theories one can cover in a course. But today's "facts" may be out-of-date before students make it to graduation and they will forget most of them anyhow. In my estimation it is far more important to design course experiences that are likely to enhance students' skills. In particular, I try to help students develop their critical thinking skills, their information-gathering skills, their research design skills, and their writing skills.

Emphasize Applications to Students' Lives

We are fortunate to teach in a discipline that has an enormous amount of relevance to people's everyday lives. It is foolish not to take full advantage of this wonderful asset. I constantly try to demonstrate how psychology's principles, theories, and findings relate to students' everyday experiences. Applications make abstract principles come alive.

Connect Psychology to Contemporary Sociopolitical Issues

The science of psychology is also germane to an endless array of hotly debated sociopolitical issues. Venturing into this territory can be a risky business, but I think it is worth it. I consciously try to highlight the connections between psychological research and controversial issues in the news. What I hope to show is that many of these controversies center on empirical questions about behavior. Ultimately, I hope to convince students that being sophisticated about psychology will make them more sophisticated citizens.

Take Assessment Seriously

I have known professors who put a huge effort into their teaching, but treat assessment as a trivial afterthought. Their philosophy, I think, is that teaching and learning are far more important than grades. The problem with this approach is that sloppy, ineffective assessment undermines students' motivation, which ultimately undermines learning. Assessments of students' achievement need to be crafted with just as much thought and care as teaching activities.

Use Diverse Approaches to Assessment

The last time I checked the classified ads for job opportunities, none of the employers were looking for superior test-taking ability, yet our assessment methods tend to place an inordinate emphasis on this skill. I think students are better served by diverse assessment methods that reward speaking, writing, and information-gathering skills. In my classes, I try to incorporate a variety of papers, presentations, and projects that measure student achievement in different ways.

Try to Have Fun

Learning and fun are not incompatible. I try to approach class meetings as opportunities to have some fun. I strive to be humorous and I strongly encourage students to add their humor to the affair. As long as they are not offensive or hurtful, wisecracks are welcomed with open arms. The pursuit of fun may appear to be a frivolous classroom goal, but I am convinced that a little fun can enhance students' motivation.

How has my approach to teaching changed over the course of my career? Looking back, I can discern two intertwined trends that I think are pretty common among veteran teachers. First, as the years have piled up, I have steadily reduced my reliance on lecture. Second, I have gradually overcome my compulsion to cover as much content as possible. I eventually realized that it makes more sense to use class time to engage and excite students. Today, I am much more selective about what I cover and I strive for depth more than breadth.

Evaluating teaching efficacy is a complicated, daunting challenge and I won't pretend that I have an elegant solution. We all have a vested interest in what we do and objectivity is hard to come by. I think that student ratings of instructional efforts can provide useful feedback, and I pay attention to them, but students are too kind. Their ratings seem to bunch up near the top of the range for all but the bottom 10-20% of faculty, allowing the vast majority of us to retain extremely favorable, although perhaps delusional, beliefs about our teaching effectiveness. In an effort to make student feedback more valuable, I beg students for written comments in addition to ratings. In the final analysis, I rely on my highly subjective impressions, gleaned from students' performance in the course, their attendance, enthusiasm, and erudition in class, their comments outside of class, and their success in subsequent educational endeavors.

One thing I love about teaching is that there is always room for improvement. Fortunately, my textbook writing forces me to update myself constantly on research findings and to think incessantly about better ways to explain important concepts and principles. I read the journal, *Teaching of Psychology* faithfully, as well as the teaching features and columns in the *APA Monitor* and the *APS Observer*. I eagerly gobble up new books on teaching, such as those recently published by Forsyth (2003), Goss Lucas and Bernstein (2005), and Buskist and Davis (2006). I attend the teaching-related sessions sponsored by the Society for the Teaching of Psychology at the annual meetings of APA and APS, and I rely heavily on the Society's marvelous Web site. I also attend psychology teaching conferences as often as possible. I hasten to note, I am amazed at the bountiful wealth of opportunities for professional development that are available to psychology teachers today. The teaching materials and programs available to us today utterly dwarf what was available when I began teaching in the early 1970s.

Advice for New Teachers

It is not like there is one "right" way to teach. In my Teaching of Psychology course, I constantly emphasize to my graduate students that they should tailor their teaching strategies to their personal strengths, their knowledge, and their interests. That said, I can offer some general thoughts that might prove helpful for novice teachers.

1. *Preparation is critical.* Effective teaching requires extensive preparation; you can't wing it. Novice teachers tend to assume that entertaining lectures are the key to quality teaching. But quality teaching depends far more on careful planning and compulsive attention to detail.

2. *Examples rule.* A key part of this preparation involves thinking up concrete examples to illustrate abstract concepts and principles. Real-life examples make abstract concepts come alive and greatly enhance students' understanding of these concepts. You

can't count on being able to dream up these examples on the fly as you cover material. Novice teachers need to compile mental libraries of concrete examples of concepts such as placebo effects, sensory adaptation, conditioned responses, stimulus generalization, source-monitoring errors, and so forth.

3. *Enthusiasm is a huge plus.* Not everyone is capable of delivering compelling, scintillating lectures. But everyone should be capable of walking into class meetings with genuine enthusiasm. Students register this enthusiasm, which usually is contagious. And if you are enthusiastic, students tend to be pretty forgiving if you stumble in a lecture or flounder in a demonstration. Enthusiasm can compensate for a lot of rough edges when one is new to teaching.

4. *Don't be afraid to admit it if you do not know the answer to a question.* New teachers seem to live in morbid fear of student questions they can't answer. Many seem to assume that they should fake answers to these questions until they gradually develop the omniscience to answer everything. Unfortunately, that omniscience is not really attainable. Even those of us who write the textbooks are routinely confronted by questions we can't answer. It is better to admit that you don't have an answer than to transmit misinformation. And your display of humility will humanize you in the students' eyes.

5. *Try to run a casual, relaxed classroom.* This strategy may not work for everyone, as I think it has to fit with one's personality, but I strive to nurture a very "laid back" classroom atmosphere in which students are free to come and go as they please, deadlines are generally open to negotiation, and there are very few rules. Although there is an inescapable power disparity between teachers and their students, I try to make as little use of it as possible. I don't have a well-thought out rationale for this strategy, as much as it is just my natural style. I don't know if this casual style should get the credit, but I have taught for 34 years without a single memorable confrontation with a student.

6. *Have realistic expectations about students' motivation and performance.* I have already noted that it is important not to let your expectations and standards slide as the years go by. But it is also important to start with reasonable expectations. New teachers are often surprised when their students do not find synaptic transmission and signal detection theory as exciting as they do. And new professors often forget that they wouldn't have become professors unless they were elite students. It is not reasonable for new faculty to expect unselected undergraduates to be as bright and motivated as they were when they were students.

Looking back on a career that continues to be an immense source of fulfillment, I find myself echoing the thoughts of Albert Bandura (1982), who once wrote a compelling article on how chance events can have a powerful impact on the course of people's lives. It is strange to contemplate that my life probably would have evolved in an entirely different direction if that professor at Illinois Central College had not decided to accept an administrative position in the fall of 1972. I will always be profoundly grateful for that fortuitous event, which sent me careening along a fortuitous life path.

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