

Changing Course: A Teacher in Transition

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I have taught psychology and Advanced Placement (AP) psychology at Viewmont High School in Bountiful, Utah since 1992. My educational background didn't exactly prepare me for this assignment. I earned a BS in Political Science with a minor in psychology at the University of Utah. Although I remember wanting to be a teacher in the second grade, I really hadn't pursued this early ambition until I decided to teach during my senior year in college. After receiving my degree, I entered a graduate program in education and began preparing for my future as a teacher. At that time, I envisioned teaching students to differentiate the branches of government and to remember the order of the presidents, not how a neuron fires! However, after I had been teaching for a few years, the opportunity arose for me to teach psychology. Because I had loved my psychology courses as an undergraduate, I jumped at the chance. It was a fortunate personal change for me because teaching psychology has afforded me experiences and allowed me to develop professional relationships that I never would have had otherwise.

Since my start in psychology education, I have been privileged to serve on the AP Psychology Test Development Committee and as a Table Leader and Reader at the AP Psychology exam annual readings. I currently serve as Chair of the National Standards for the Teaching of Introductory Psychology Committee for the American Psychological Association (APA), and I have served as member-at-large for the Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools (TOPSS). In 1998, I was part of a small group of teachers who organized Utah Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools (UTOPSS), and I have been the Program Director for the annual UTOPSS Fall Institute since then.

Along with the UTOPSS Fall Institute, I have had the opportunity to present at numerous teaching conferences and workshops across the country. Most recently I presented at the Hawaii International Advanced Placement Summer Institute and the "Taking Off: Best Practices in Teaching Psychology Conference: Critical Thinking" in Atlanta.

I have also written a number of articles and other teaching materials geared for use by psychology educators. For example, I recently finished writing the latest *AP Psychology Teacher's Guide*, and I edited and co-authored a set of teaching materials entitled *A.P. Psychology Theme Materials: Special Focus on the Brain, the Nervous*

System, and Behavior for the College Board. In addition, my background with the APA's National Standards provided me with the opportunity to tie the Standards to the content of a high school psychology textbook in the Teachers Edition of *Thinking About Psychology* (Blair-Broeker & Ernst, 2003).

I have been honored to be recognized for my work. In 2005, the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP) awarded me the Moffet Memorial Teaching Excellence Award. That same year APA presented me with a Presidential Citation.

My Early Development as a Teacher

My development as a psychology teacher may be backwards compared to other teachers of psychology. Traditionally, psychologists pursue teaching as a secondary goal. For me, becoming a teacher was my primary goal and psychology was second. My earliest memory of wanting to teach comes from the second grade when my elementary school principal asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. My answer was a fitting tribute to my mother, who was a wonderful teacher. However, as a high school student I developed an interest in history, philosophy and the law. Although thoughts of teaching lingered, I decided to pursue pre-law at the University of Utah.

As a senior in college, I enjoyed my major courses, but I wasn't happy with the plan I had for my professional life. At the heart of my dissatisfaction was a desire to make a difference. I really wanted to affect others in a positive way. I felt at the time that a career in law would not have allowed me to have the kind of lasting influence I wanted to have on others' lives. After many months of serious soul-searching, I went to speak with an academic advisor in the Education Department.

The first thing the advisor handed me, after I stated my ambition to teach, was a pay scale. What an introduction to the field! Undeterred, though, I filled out the application to graduate school and declared my intention to earn an advanced degree in education with a specialty in "Teaching and Learning Strategies." I remember asking a respected professor for a recommendation letter in support of my application. He looked at me with sadness and said, "What a waste."

Still undeterred, I was happy to be accepted into the graduate education program at the University of Utah. I felt at home in the Education Department and believed my career change was a positive one. The program was designed to allow students to take basic education classes, such as classroom management and educational theory, while earning a teaching certificate and graduate degree. We moved through the classes as a cohort with two professors as our guides. After the first semester, we began observing junior and senior high classrooms in preparation for our student teaching experience.

My student teaching experience was invaluable to my early development as a teacher, particularly because I was fortunate to be assigned to a superb master teacher, Carolee Coleman. She was a veteran instructor who had taught at both the elementary and secondary levels. She was enthusiastic, warm, and loved students and teaching. Carolee believed that students learned best when actively engaged in creative and thought-provoking activities. Her teaching philosophy reflected my own developing beliefs. I watched and crafted my teaching style after hers. I remember hoping to be like Carolee, with such enthusiasm and joy for her work after teaching as many years as she had.

The thought of doing my student teaching petrified me. Even with careful preparation and numerous classes on theory and management, nothing adequately prepares one for the classroom except being there. My greatest fear was to run out of material in front of 35 thirteen-year-olds! My fear fortunately led to some good habits. My early teaching strategy was to be over-prepared, and I spent a great deal of time developing classroom activities and assignments based on active learning. Although I made many mistakes as a new teacher, I learned the importance of collaborating with other educators and being able to adapt to a constantly changing environment.

Shortly after completing my student teaching, one of my education professors asked me if I had an analogy for teaching. The first thought that came to mind was a juggler. Each ball tossed high in the air represented a different aspect of the teacher's role: one for developing classroom activities and lectures, one for classroom management, another for grading and paperwork, one for communication with parents, another for school committee assignments, and yet another for school-wide duties and demands of the administration, district, and community. The teacher, like the juggler, has to keep all of these competing demands balanced and aloft to succeed. Although I think my analogy captured the basic complexity of teaching, I think it may be too simplistic. It is not the juggler who is the focus of the act, but those for whom we are juggling. What I left out of my analogy was the basic reason I entered teaching in the first place: the students. As I've gained more experience, I've redefined myself as a teacher in relation to how I view the learners in my class.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

One of the greatest obstacles I have faced as a psychology teacher has been my own lack of knowledge about the field of psychology. There was (and still is) so much for me to learn. With a background in politics and history, my knowledge of psychology was very limited. During my first year of teaching psychology I was always only one small step ahead of my students. More often than I would like to admit, I was writing

lecture notes the class before I was to give them and struggling with the pronunciation of terms. I felt that I was learning the science of psychology right along with the students in my classroom.

Some of the best advice I received during the early years came from my principal. He suggested that I contact a fellow psychology teacher for help. This teacher provided me with activities, support, and friendship. From this initial contact, a spirit of collaboration has shaped my professional life.

Early in my teaching career, I had the great fortune of attending a National Science Foundation Psychology Institute, directed by Ludy T. Benjamin, at Texas A & M University. The impact of this experience on my teaching was invaluable. This experience meant more to me in my day-to-day teaching than my Master's degree. Beyond strengthening my understanding of psychology, the Institute created links with my fellow psychology educators. As participants, we left the Institute with a network of colleagues across all educational levels, ready to help each other with invaluable advice.

At the conclusion of the Institute, Dr. Benjamin challenged us to “do something” upon returning home to improve psychology education in our state. I took his plea to heart. In 1998, a small group of teachers met to organize UTOPSS, a grass-roots organization with the goals of promoting the scientific nature of psychology courses, increasing communication among high school teachers, assisting teachers with their professional development, and developing partnerships with psychology teachers at all educational levels in Utah. Each year teachers anticipate the annual UTOPSS Fall Institute, which provides academic resources and a chance to network with others. We also have established a state-wide electronic discussion list providing teachers with lines of communication to one another. It has been an extremely rewarding part of my teaching career to watch this organization grow and have a positive impact on teachers in our state.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

Part of my philosophy of teaching stems from my early days as a student teacher and part of it is based on the experiences and lessons I've learned over my years of interacting with students and juggling the many responsibilities of a high school teacher. I believe that students learn best when they are active participants in the learning process. I believe students need to be challenged to think about and to question their understanding of the world. Students need to be provided with opportunities to be exposed to concepts and allowed to consider the relevance of what they are learning to the context of their own lives. I am fortunate that teaching psychology provides the perfect content that allows students this type of self-discovery.

This view of learning helps to define my role as a teacher. I believe it is my responsibility to create an atmosphere where active learning can happen. Considering the different learning styles of my students and the academic demands of the content area that I teach, I believe my role is to research, create, and present methods that facilitate an active learning atmosphere to accommodate all styles of learning. In any given class I may use a variety of methods and activities such as demonstrations, discussions, simulations, writing exercises, interactive lectures, in-depth reading of articles, debates, group presentations, video clips, or experiments.

I believe the use of these types of activities increases student involvement and interest in the topic, as well as their intrinsic motivation to succeed. I also believe that students need to see the link between the activities they do in class and the content of their textbook. I believe a demonstration shouldn't be done just for its own sake. Students need to see the relevance of the activity and how it ties to the goals of the course and their lives beyond the classroom.

I would like my students to develop an appreciation for the science of psychology. For many of my students my course will be their only exposure to this discipline. I hope that by learning more about psychology they will become critical thinkers and better consumers of information. I attempt to instill a curiosity in my students about the world around them and encourage them to be life-long learners. I try to teach them practical skills, for example, to become better writers and communicators. I believe these are skills that will most benefit them throughout life. I hope that my students feel successful in my class, and at the end of the school year I hope they consider their hard work worth the effort.

One of the most rewarding aspects of teaching for me is watching my students "turn on" to a concept I am teaching and sensing that their enthusiasm and curiosity about psychology has grown as a result. I love the feeling when I know that students are totally engaged in what is happening in class and they leave my class feeling that it has been a valuable experience.

I also believe that an important element of a well-functioning classroom is that well-established expectations exist for both teacher and students. Students need to know what they can expect in terms of homework assignments, participation, exams, grading, and discipline. I believe that students also need to know what to expect of me. I believe students need timely feedback on assignments, tests, and other course work. In addition, I want them to feel the enthusiasm I have for what I teach. I want them to know that I am prepared and organized and that each time they come to my class, I have something valuable planned for them.

I believe that students learn best in an atmosphere of respect. I try to be a positive role model for my students. Because I want them to be life-long learners, I want them to see that I am learning alongside them as well. I readily admit when I don't know an answer to a question, which creates a wonderful opportunity for us to learn together. I don't see myself so much as an "expert" but as a guide to stimulate their learning.

This perspective has evolved over time. As a new teacher, I saw myself as the primary source of all knowledge! As I reflect on my early years, I sometimes wonder if the control one has as the "sage on the stage" gives a teacher security. Over time, I've learned the importance of allowing others to share the stage. Although this risk can still be hard for me sometimes, the result has been increased learning for both the students and me.

My classroom is an evolving place. My teaching style and methods have changed over time with experience and feedback. Every year my students complete anonymous surveys about their experiences. I have learned to have a tough skin and to consider their suggestions with the ultimate goal of improving their educational experience. Assessment, whether it comes from my students or my principal, isn't something to be feared, but a chance to continue to grow. Based on the wise advice of my students and others I have continued to change and improve how I teach.

I like to stretch my abilities by continually learning new things and by keeping involved professionally. I enjoy attending workshops, conferences, institutes, and conventions both locally and across the country. I have learned so much from watching master teachers present at these events. I've also enjoyed my work as a Table Leader and Reader at the AP Psychology exam readings each summer and feel it is a wonderful opportunity to interact with fellow teachers and to learn something new. I always come away from the experience feeling energized. In addition, I appreciate my membership both in TOPSS and in STP. The materials they provide, such as lesson plans and journal articles, are invaluable and help me to continue my professional development.

Advice for New Teachers

As a new teacher, don't be afraid to ask for help. As a high school teacher, find out who else is teaching psychology in your building, district, or nearby. Consider organizing an after-school meeting of teachers to share ideas and concerns about teaching. Break out of your isolation and join the community of psychology teachers across the country by subscribing to available electronic discussion lists, such as PsychNews and AP Central. (To join PsychNews, send an e-mail to LISTSERV@LISTSERV.UH.EDU and in the body of the message place the following: SUBSCRIBE PSYCH-NEWS (Your Name); to join AP Central go to

<<http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/Controller.jspf>> and click on “AP Community.”) And don’t forget the valuable resources you may have in your own building. If you are weak in teaching biology or statistics, contact teachers in those areas and don’t be afraid to ask them questions about those areas in which you have limited knowledge. Find the time and the means to communicate with others. It is well worth the effort.

Join professional organizations such as TOPSS and STP and take advantage of the resources they have to offer both in print and online. Attend all available teaching workshops and conferences that your schedule and finances will allow.

Create classroom activities based on active learning. Get students involved in their own learning and you’ll see them turn on to the concepts you are teaching.

Most importantly, don’t forget why you went into teaching in the first place. Enjoy the challenge of being an educator and focus on the positive impact you can have on those you teach.

References

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