

Running head: LESSONS LEARNED FROM A CAREER

Lessons Learned from a Career as a Student of Teaching

William E. Addison

Eastern Illinois University

Mailing Address:
William Addison
Psychology Department
Eastern Illinois University
600 Lincoln Avenue
Charleston, IL 61920

Word Count: 3124

Lessons Learned from a Career as a Student of Teaching

Although it is difficult for me, at this point in my career I must face the cruel truth that I am undoubtedly considered a member of the “old guard” by my colleagues. This distinction is based on my 27 years of college teaching, 5 years at Saint Peter’s College (SPC) in New Jersey, and the last 22 at Eastern Illinois University (EIU). But to me, it seems like just a few years ago that I was a junior faculty member, seeking advice from my seasoned colleagues on such issues as effective teaching techniques; the proper balance among teaching, research and service; and the appropriate response to the student who asks, “I wasn’t in class today—did I miss anything important?” Now that I am one of the “veteran” faculty members frequently asked to respond to similar queries, I find myself reflecting on the lessons I’ve learned about teaching over my 30-plus years as a student and teacher of psychology.

The educational history that helped prepare me for my career as a psychology teacher began in 1971 at Shippensburg State College—now Shippensburg University—in Pennsylvania. After receiving my bachelor’s degree in psychology, I went on to earn a master’s degree in general/experimental psychology from Marshall University, and a doctoral degree in experimental psychology from *the* Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. A major step in my development as a serious psychology teacher occurred when I joined the American Psychological Association (APA) shortly after I took my first teaching job at SPC in 1982. As someone who enjoyed virtually all aspects of teaching, I was pleased to discover that there was a division of APA (i.e., Division 2) devoted to the teaching of psychology, and that this division even published a *journal* on the subject.

When my wife Jayne and I moved from New Jersey to Illinois in 1987, I found the Midwest to be a hotbed of teaching-related activity, thanks in large part to Joe Palladino’s Mid-

America Conference for Teachers of Psychology (MACTOP). I attended my first MACTOP in 1988, and I returned every year through 2002, the final year of the conference. Perhaps the most important lesson I learned from my 14 years of MACTOP attendance was the value of developing relationships with like-minded colleagues. The individuals I met at MACTOP, particularly in my first few years, became mentors and friends, and they opened doors for me that led to countless opportunities to further develop my interests in teaching, as well as to sharpen my own skills as a teacher. My associations with these individuals led directly or indirectly to the professional credentials of which I am most proud, including, President of Division 2, the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP); consulting editor for the journal *Teaching of Psychology*; faculty consultant for the annual Advanced Placement Exam in Psychology; participant in the National Forum on Psychology Partnerships, sponsored by APA; participant in the National Conference on Undergraduate Education in Psychology: A Blueprint for the Future, also sponsored by APA; and multiple university teaching awards.

My Early Development as a Teacher

The idea of pursuing a teaching career first occurred to me during my second or third year as an undergraduate student. As a naïve 20-year-old, my notion of the job description for a college teacher was something like this:

- Hang out with groups of bright, motivated, young people
- No tie or jacket required; sneakers preferred
- Have complete autonomy; plan your own schedule
- Work no more than 12 hours per week, with summers off

Obviously, I was *extremely* naïve about the job of a college teacher; such phrases as “class preparation,” “scholarly activity,” and “university service” were completely unfamiliar to me.

What I knew about being a college teacher was what I observed as a student, which I presume is true of most undergraduates. It was some years before I learned about the amount of work involved in college teaching, as well as the potential for reward.

It was probably not until my final year as an undergraduate that I truly became serious about the discipline of psychology. The person who was key in this development was Dr. Ralph Payne, who taught the “dreaded” sequence in statistics and experimental psychology. Although neither Dr. Payne nor I realized it at the time, he was my first teaching mentor. The attributes that he demonstrated in the classroom on a regular basis—enthusiasm for the material, concern for his students’ success, the use of appropriate humor, and his clearly organized presentation—not only stimulated my interest in learning, but also formed the foundation for my views of effective teaching practices.

Many of the dedicated teachers I have met over the years can name the specific point in time when they just *knew* the teaching profession was right for them. For me, this “aha experience” occurred the first time I had responsibility for my own class, as a graduate teaching assistant at Marshall University. Although I was never very comfortable giving speeches, the training that I received in Steve Mewaldt’s teaching seminar thoroughly prepared me for my first actual teaching experience. The weekly meetings included, among other things, discussions of class preparation, participation in the selection of a textbook for the introductory course, and feedback on videotaped teaching sessions with a small group of students. As a result of this training, I felt composed and confident in front of my own class of about 40 introductory psychology students. The experience of presenting material about which I was passionate in a manner that I thought would stimulate the students’ interest instilled in me a surety of purpose that I continue to experience on a daily basis.

Due mainly to the guidance and encouragement provided by Elaine Baker, my thesis advisor at Marshall, I continued my graduate career in the doctoral program at Miami University. At Miami, I took my second teaching seminar, this one taught by Ed Simmel, my graduate advisor. The ostensible purpose of the seminar was to introduce prospective TAs to the “nuts and bolts” of teaching the undergraduate statistics lab for majors, but in actuality it accomplished so much more. Simmel viewed the seminar as all-inclusive career preparation for future academic psychologists. The course included coverage of all the responsibilities of a typical college professor, including teaching, research, and service. We discussed the kinds of activities in which most professors routinely engage, but that are generally not included in the job description; for example, writing letters of recommendation, serving on search committees for faculty positions, and providing academic advising for psychology majors. There was even a session devoted to the discussion of what to expect when we interviewed for an academic position. Given the excellent instruction I received in the two teaching seminars combined with my on-the-job training as a TA, I considered myself fairly well-prepared for my first teaching position.

Although I had yet to finish my dissertation, I left Miami University in 1982 when I was offered a position in the Psychology Department at SPC in Jersey City, New Jersey. Because the department was relatively small—it consisted of five full-time faculty members, every member of the department taught a wide variety of courses. By the time I left SPC 5 years later, I had taught a total of 12 different courses! In addition to broadening my teaching experience (which made me much more “marketable” for another position), my time at SPC contributed to my development as a college teacher in another respect. SPC and Jersey City were (and probably

still are) remarkably diverse, and I learned firsthand lessons on the importance of cultural diversity in human behavior.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

I tend to define myself as a teacher in the broadest sense, as a *scholar* of teaching rather than simply a classroom teacher. Consistent with this definition, I see myself as a psychologist who applies the methodological principles of our discipline to the study of teaching, with the ultimate goal of maximizing my effectiveness as a teacher. That is, I subscribe to the scientist-educator model of teaching outlined by Dan Bernstein and his colleagues (2010) in the second chapter from the book, *Undergraduate Education in Psychology: A Blueprint for the Future*. As Bernstein and colleagues suggest, the central theme of this model is “the systematic collection of evidence regarding the effectiveness of teaching and use of these data to guide the development and refinement of both the conceptual understanding of teaching and its practice in an iterative, recursive fashion” (p. 30).

Not surprisingly, as I have applied this approach over the years I have found that my most rewarding research activities generally involve teaching. Consequently, most of the articles I have published and the presentations I have made at professional conferences over the past 20 years have been related to teaching. And based on my experience, it seems that pedagogical research is more acceptable as a “legitimate” area of research than it was 20 years ago. Two decades ago, when I met someone for the first time at a professional conference, I was often asked, “What’s your research area?” My reply of “teaching” was typically met with a quizzical look and a follow-up question that went something like this: “I understand that you’re interested in teaching, but what’s your *research* area?” More recently, I find that a declaration that I do research on teaching is less likely to be met with the dismissive follow-up questions;

unfortunately, the quizzical looks are still fairly common. Overall, I take this development as a sign that the scholarship of teaching is becoming more widely accepted as a valid area of research among academic psychologists, at least those employed at teaching-oriented institutions. Although this view is less likely to be accepted by faculty at research-oriented institutions, I am optimistic that even these folks will eventually come around. Hopefully, it will not take another 20 years.

Although the scientist-educator model has served me well over the years, I continue to struggle with the balance between providing fundamental information to students, and encouraging them to develop the critical thinking skills that will help them to make the most of their post-graduate opportunities. Thanks to the work of Diane Halpern and others, we are all well aware of the importance of critical thinking in our students' future success. But as one of my statistics students told me recently, "Thinking is *hard*, Dr. Addison." Like most people, many of our students would prefer to take the easy way out; they would rather record and memorize the key terms from the PowerPoint slides than make the effort to consider the conceptual bases for these terms, and to apply them to other situations and examples. And unfortunately, this mechanistic approach to learning has worked for them in the past. If grades are a measure of academic success, then these students have "succeeded" in many of their high school and college classes by simply recording and memorizing information.

Thus, the challenge for me has been to get students to use and develop their thinking skills even though they have been successful in the past without having done so. And because thinking is *hard*, these attempts are frequently met with resistance. My approach to this challenge has been to emphasize repeatedly to students the importance of these skills to their success as

future graduate students, employees, and citizens. Although there will always be a few holdouts, the lesson I have learned is that most students respond favorably to this approach.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

My philosophy of teaching is derived mainly from three sources: (a) my own experiences as a student, (b) observations of colleagues recognized as outstanding teachers, and (c) my research on student evaluations of teaching. My 10 years as a college student provided me with numerous opportunities to observe effective teaching as well as ineffective teaching. For example, during my second year in college my American government professor decided my final course grade by flipping a coin! The lesson I learned from that incident was that fairness is an essential characteristic of a good teacher, and that flipping a coin is not a fair way to determine a student's grade.

As a result of my regular attendance at various teaching conferences, and my long-time association with STP and the Advanced Placement program, I have had the good fortune to observe and learn from the best and brightest teachers in the discipline. For example, from the inimitable Charles Brewer, I learned about the importance of communicating clearly with one's students. To paraphrase from "Brewer's Ten Commandments of Teaching," effective teachers communicate with clarity and conciseness; it is a simple task to make things complex, but a complex task to make things simple (Brewer, 2002, pp. 503-506).

Over the years I have conducted a number of studies on student evaluations of teaching. In reviewing the vast literature in this area (e.g., see Frey, 1978; Isaacson et al., 1964; and Marsh, 1991), two general factors tend to emerge as key characteristics of effective teachers: skill in the presentation of material, and the ability to establish and maintain rapport with students. The main lesson here is that good teachers concern themselves not only with the practicalities of teaching

(e.g., organization and presentation of material), but that they also emphasize the relationship-building element of teaching. As a number of recognized authorities on teaching have reminded us, teaching that includes such qualities as respect for students, helpfulness, and openness to questions is not only good practice because it is the right thing to do, but also because students will respond positively to such behaviors, likely resulting in an increased motivation for learning (e.g., Buskist, Sikorski, Buckley, & Saville, 2002; Lowman, 1995; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2005).

Perhaps the cardinal principle in my philosophy of teaching is an emphasis on assessing my teaching through the eyes of my students. I regularly ask myself such questions as: “If I were a student, what attributes would I value in a teacher?” “What examples would help me understand these concepts?” “What type of feedback would be the most helpful to me?” It was relatively easy for me to answer these questions when I began my teaching career; after all, I had recently been a student myself. But as I grew older and my students stayed the same age, I found it more difficult to relate to them based on my own experiences as a student. Their backgrounds were different than mine. They listened to different music, enjoyed different films and television shows. They were natives in the use of technology, whereas I was an immigrant. Clearly, I was a victim of the maturation effect.

Fortunately, as I was getting older, so were our children; as they approached college age, I discovered that I began to understand my students better. Now that two of our three children are in college, I find myself relating to my students not because they are similar to me, but because they are similar to my children.

Establishing working relationships with students is one of the more enjoyable aspects of my job. Throughout my career, I have found the greatest satisfaction in supervising students

conducting independent research projects. Working closely with small groups of bright, motivated students on research questions of mutual interest is a stimulating experience; and in my view, it is the ideal setting for teaching and learning to occur. To those “veteran” teachers who feel that they are just going through the motions in their teaching, I would strongly suggest that they seek out opportunities to mentor a small group of motivated students in the conduct of independent research.

Additionally, I have learned much about teaching from formal and informal conversations with colleagues. The formal “conversations” may take the form of presentations on teaching at professional conferences, sessions sponsored by the University’s Office of Faculty Development, or “brown bag” sessions with department colleagues. The informal conversations are usually of the “water-cooler” variety in which one or two of my colleagues and I discuss some specific teaching-related issue we happen to be dealing with at the moment. In recent years, my colleagues and I have discussed such issues as approaches for dealing with a disruptive student, limits in the amount of course material we make available to students online, and techniques for improving students’ writing. Although we typically do not resolve these issues in a 20-minute discussion, it is generally helpful to hear the perspective of colleagues who have experience with the same issues.

As I continue to work on improving my teaching, I find that regularly attending teaching conferences is an excellent way to learn about new developments in the use of technology in teaching, see compelling demonstrations of active learning exercises, and cultivate and maintain relationships with colleagues who share my views on the importance of teaching. In addition to attending annual meetings of the Midwest Institute for Students and Teachers of Psychology (MISTOP), the professional “offspring” of MACTOP, I frequently attend teaching-related

sessions at the annual meetings of APA, MPA, and APS. Although I have been attending such meetings for years, I invariably come away from them with new ideas about teaching, and a rejuvenation of my enthusiasm for the teaching enterprise.

Advice for New Teachers

In extrapolating from the lessons I have learned about teaching during my career, I offer the following pieces of advice to new teachers, or experienced teachers who are interested in improving their teaching:

1. Attend a regional or national teaching conference, even if teaching is not your “research area.” If you have not done so, I guarantee that you will find the experience to be informative and invigorating.
2. Talk to your colleagues about teaching issues, particularly those colleagues who are recognized among peers and students as exceptional teachers. You can learn a great deal about effective teaching strategies from these informal conversations.
3. Take the feedback from student evaluations seriously. Despite the psychometric limitations of student ratings, I believe they can be useful for gauging students’ satisfaction with aspects of your teaching. Encourage your students to make written suggestions about ways to improve the course. Consider administering informal student evaluations at about mid-semester; the feedback provided could be for your own formative use.
4. Reflect on your teaching. Assess the results of your teaching (e.g., student learning, student satisfaction) the way you would the results of your research. That is, apply the principles of the scientist-educator model to your teaching.

And finally, try to examine your teaching through the eyes of your students. In doing so, you should ask yourself, “What kind of a teacher would *I* like to have?” The answer to this question might surprise you, but it will undoubtedly make you a better teacher.

References

- Bernstein, D., Addison, W. E., Altman, C., Hollister, D., Komarraju, M., Prieto, L., Rocheleau, C. A., & Shore, C. (2010). Toward a Scientist-Educator Model of Teaching Psychology. In D. F. Halpern (Ed.), *Undergraduate education in psychology: A blueprint for the future of the discipline*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Brewer, C. L. (2002). Reflections on an academic career: From which side of the looking glass? In S. F. Davis & W. Buskist (Eds.), *The teaching of psychology: Essays in honor of Wilbert J. McKeachie and Charles L. Brewer* (pp. 499-507). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Buskist, W., Sikorski, J., Buckley, T., & Saville, B. K. (2002). Elements of master teaching. In S. F. Davis & W. Buskist (Eds.), *The teaching of psychology: Essays in honor of Wilbert McKeachie and Charles L. Brewer* (pp. 27-39). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Frey, P. W. (1978). A two-dimensional analysis of student ratings of instruction. *Research in Higher Education, 9*, 69-91.
- Isaacson, R. L., McKeachie, W. J., Milholland, J. E., Lin, Y. G., Hofeller, M., Baerwaldt, J. W., & Zinn, K. L. (1964). Dimensions of student evaluations of teaching. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 55*, 344-351.
- Lowman, J. (1995). *Mastering the techniques of teaching* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Marsh, H. W. (1991). Multidimensional students' evaluations of teaching effectiveness: A test of alternative higher-order structures. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 83*, 285-296.
- McKeachie, W. J., & Svinicki, M. (2005). *McKeachie's teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers* (12th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.