Enormous Flywheel: Teaching Psychological Science

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My name is Scott C. Bates and I am an associate professor of psychology at Utah State University. I earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from Whitman College, a Master's degree in general experimental psychology from Western Washington University, and a doctorate in experimental (social) psychology from Colorado State University. I was the recipient of the 2008 Early Career Teaching Excellence Award from the American Psychological Association, Division 2, Society for the Teaching of Psychology. I was also awarded the 2007 Teacher of the Year award from the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education & Human Services at Utah State University.

After graduate school I worked in industry, where I was tasked with teaching problem-behavior prevention specialists and sales representatives the "best practices" of prevention science. However, my primary career goal was always to enter academia and in 2003, I took a tenure-track position in the department of psychology at Utah State University. In 2009, I was promoted and tenured.

At the undergraduate level, I have taught introduction to psychology, research methods in psychology, and orientation to psychology as a major and career. I have also taught a graduate level social psychology course and conducted graduate-level seminars.

Finally, I have also been very involved in providing mentorship to new teachers (both graduate students and new faculty) and have been involved in many other teaching-oriented service activities at the department, university, and national levels.

My Early Development as a Teacher

I attended a liberal arts college and strongly believed in the idea of education for its own sake. This belief, coupled with a passion for psychology, led me to one conclusion: I

was interested in an academic career in psychology. Partly because of the setting I was in, I saw teaching as a fundamental element to the life of a scholar.

In graduate school, I received a measure of more formal training in college teaching. Drs. Frank Vattano and Jack Avens at Colorado State University had established a cross-disciplinary course for graduate students who were interested in becoming teachers. The course was not required. In that class, I found 25 other graduate students who were "from my tribe" (i.e., people who both wanted to be effective teachers and wanted to talk about teaching as much as I did). The course included some of the fundamental operations of being a college-level teacher (e.g., constructing a syllabus, assessment design), along with professional training in skills and strategies for effective lecturing and classroom management. Some of those experiences (e.g., video-taping a lecture and then reviewing it with rest of the class) were very important to me and set a foundation for thinking about teaching as a scholarly activity.

I would say, however, that my informal training as a teacher has been more substantial. Early on, as a graduate student at Western Washington University, I was awarded a teaching assistantship position for an undergraduate statistics course. The format of the course included two lectures per week and a one-hour lab session per week. I was assigned complete control of a lab section. As I remember, I was provided with little instruction, little training, and little guidance, but there were senior teaching assistants—my first teaching colleagues. I learned much from watching them (we shared a large office): how to use lab-time, how to interact with students, and how to say "I'm not sure, let me find out." Ultimately, from those peers, I learned to seek other teachers and to learn from them.

My first experience of having sole responsibility for a course was at Front Range Community College, in Fort Collins, Colorado. There, I taught introductory psychology to a few dozen students. The nature of those students, particularly the variance in their motivation, skills, and preparation, was very important to my development as an instructor. In every one of those classes, there were highly motivated students, students who apparently lacked all motivation except to sleep, students in high school, students who were in their 50s, students who spoke English as a second language, and students with tumultuous backgrounds. It was this diversity of students that set the stage for my growth as an instructor; I had to work hard to make connections with students and to have students make connections with course material. Certainly I walked into those classrooms with raw skills and plenty of content knowledge, but after a few semesters, I walked out of those classrooms a more fully formed and skilled teacher. Over time, I grew more capable of explaining content, I became better at designing course activities (i.e., lectures, assignments, etc.), and I became much better at intentionally structuring a classroom discussion. To this day, I believe that it was the diversity of the students in those early courses that provided the best training in classroom instruction.

I have had many teaching mentors along my way. Some of them are aware of their impact on my development, others perhaps not. Drs. Eacker, Rubin, and DuNann-Winter at Whitman College, Drs. Dinnel and Trimble at Western Washington University, and Drs. Loomis and Bell at Colorado State University all provided mentorship through conversation and, more importantly, through modeling what it meant to be a good teacher. In each of them I saw an engaged scholar who cared about student learning. To this day, I've never seen a college teacher work as hard, be as creative, or be as effortlessly engaged as these

mentors. In each of them, I observed intellectual rigor and above all commitment to the field and to their students.

I am dedicated to teaching today because I was fortunate to have these sorts of mentors.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

A few years ago, my then six year-old daughter asked me what I did at work. I did not hesitate. I did not say that I was a "psychologist" or "professor," though that would have been accurate. Likewise, I did not say anything about social psychology, environmental psychology, or hint at my work in the field of problem behavior prevention. Those identities, for me, are secondary. I told her, simply, "I am a teacher." My professional identity as a teacher of psychology is reflected in my research and service activities, professional affiliations, and in the classroom. Luckily, I was fortunate enough to find an academic position that played to my interests in this regard.

Many of the formal contingencies of reinforcement are not well aligned for teachers at research-oriented institutions. Promotion, tenure, and merit are formally and informally more closely related to research productivity than difficult-to-define teaching productivity. I have colleagues who have said that they do not assign writing to students because "Having students write would require more work on my part. I need to publish, not grade essays." While teaching is theoretically valued, it is less often observably valued.

I believe that I am a good instructor because I love to learn. These days, with the advent and wide availability of blogs, podcasts and listservs, as well as electronic dissemination of scholarly journals, I am able to sift through a tremendous amount of information about what is happening across the landscape of psychology. I monitor these

sources consistently, trolling for new findings and new approaches to answering questions. By doing this, which I very much enjoy, I feel capable of conversing across a wide variety of sub-domains in psychology. This love of learning is, of course, useful in research and service activities too. I do not believe that academic work is a zero-sum game and would argue that the skills that I have in a classroom also make me a good collaborator and committee member. On the other hand, I have sacrificed the sort of razor-focus that I believe is required of tenure-track faculty at many research-oriented universities. I tend to live up to the saying: he is a jack-of-all-trades, while a master of none.

Besides this structural obstacle, I have faced personal obstacles that have limited my potential as a teacher. Until a few years ago, I had never been particularly well organized. For most of my life, I found success by relying on my brain, which was apparently of sufficient firepower to keep tasks appropriately juggled. Then, in my second year of the tenure process, the juggled-balls began to fall, everywhere. I was teaching three classes (Intro, Methods, and our Careers course), trying to get a fledgling research program off the ground, and trying to be a good departmental citizen. My old ways of dealing with work and productivity were no longer appropriate for that situation. I needed to adapt. For me, the catalyst for adaptation was a book: David Allen's (2001) book *Getting Things Done*. Implementing the strategies outlined therein was a literal life changer for me. It allowed me to capture the inexhaustible requests for my attention, prioritize them, and then never fall too far behind in responding.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

I find time spent in a classroom to be very rewarding. I also find interacting with individual students, outside the classroom, very rewarding. Helping a student who is

struggling accomplish a goal—be it large (e.g., to graduate) or small (e.g., to pass an exam)—is very fulfilling for me. Similarly, providing an avenue for conversation to a student who is keenly interested in some part of the field or who is seeking deeper knowledge is very fulfilling for me. I also find thinking about teaching very rewarding; I think about teaching constantly. Indeed, I have found that my teaching role tends to expand to fill every available nook and cranny of my attention. Over time, thinking about teaching has led to the development a philosophy of teaching, which provides me an excellent vantage-point from which to answer questions like: How should I spend class-time? Which course should I teach? How can I find out if students are learning anything? How should I approach a new course? How can I improve a course?

Four principles form the foundation of my teaching philosophy. Every decision that I make and everything I do as an instructor is influenced by these principles. First, I try to engage every learner, to capture and hold his or her attention. Second, I try to develop and support critical thinking skills among students. Third, I am interested in helping every learner translate knowledge into action—to help him or her build personally and professionally relevant skills. Finally, I believe that high quality evaluation and assessment of teaching and learning are central tools in achieving high quality teaching and learning.

The first principle in my philosophy of teaching is about engaging students. I teach large sections (often over 250 students) of introductory psychology and keeping them engaged over the course of a single lecture is critical for their learning. I think that every college teacher is simultaneously a storyteller and comedian. Over time I have developed a better sense of pacing, a better sense of how to lead learners through a narrative, and a better sense of the importance of my personal style. I have also learned how to deliver a

punch line, be it for humor or for drama, in order to serve this principle of engagement. I also think that a well-delivered and successful lecture is akin to a well-delivered and successful play, except that the instructor serves as director, stagehand, and most of the actors! I have improved at these skills too, though mostly through brute-force practice and experience.

The second (critical thinking) and third (personal/professional skill building) skill-oriented principles are also very important. A positive learning environment obviously nurtures the development of these skills in a classroom. The recipe for creating a good learning environment, in my mind, includes one-part parenting skill and one-part lawyering skill. That is to say, I also think that every college teacher is a parent of sorts and I have become a better "parent" over time. A good parent establishes a relationship with a child that includes fairness, consistency, empathy, and warmth. I believe that these are also fundamental to good teaching. A teacher that provides fairness and consistency creates a structured, predictable learning environment that encourages students to flourish. Likewise, a teacher that establishes a relationship with students that includes empathy and warmth creates a positive learning environment. But every college teacher is simultaneously a lawyer and I have become a better lawyer over time. A syllabus is a contract between a teacher and his or her students. My skills in both writing and negotiating that contract have improved over time.

The fourth principle of my teaching philosophy is focused on continual assessment and, hopefully, improvement. I ask for feedback frequently and consistently. I get feedback from students, from peers, and from any other source. I also do my best to take feedback to heart and mind. For instance, in reviewing the American Psychological Association's (2007)

published guidelines for the psychology major, and attempting to align them with my introductory psychology course, I realized that most of my assessment activities were focused on knowledge acquisition or application. As a result, I started to make adjustments so that I could better assess growth in critical thinking skills, including using critical-thinking oriented writing assignment and classroom discussions.

Advice for New Teachers

I have two broad suggestions for people who are looking to become good teachers. First, find your colleagues—find your tribe. There are so many great instructors. Seek them out in your department, in your institution, and outside of your institution. Specifically, I would suggest that new teachers attend teaching conferences like National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP), where teaching-oriented academics can be found at an alarmingly high-density. NITOP, despite being a national conference, exudes all of the best things about small conferences: sharing and collaboration. Including participant idea exchanges, poster sessions, and social events, activities that encourage and engage attendee interaction are the norm. Generally speaking, I am not a person who walks up and says “hello” to people that I do not know. At most conferences, and as a closeted introvert, I prefer context for new introductions. However, at teaching conferences, the breaks, meals, social and professional events provide that sort of context. It is rare to go to a place where so many people of “like minds” and (as a fellow-attendee at my first NITOP noted) “like hearts” gather in one place. There are times, I think, that being on the “dedicated” end of the “teacher dedication” distribution gets lonely. At NITOP, we were everywhere. I have been attending professional conferences for somewhere near 15 years and NITOP ranks

among my favorite. It is special and it ought not to be missed by anybody who is interested in growing as a teacher-scholar.

My second suggestion for new teachers is to take time to capture, consume, and digest content from books, blogs, journals, conferences, YouTube, Twitter, conversations with students, and conversations with colleagues, as this content provides both material for class and material for your continued development as an instructor. Capturing this material is important. I use software (e.g., DEVONthink, http://www.devon-technologies.com) that allows me easily to store and broadly to organize this material for later consumption. However, capturing this sort of content is the easiest of the steps. Consuming and digesting information, thinking about how it can work in your classroom, or your future classroom, is of even greater importance. Provide yourself a place and time to think about what you are going to do with this captured content. If you see an interesting blog-post, YouTube video, listserv post, or TV show, take time to consider how it works (or does not): Does it belong in a class discussion? A lecture? Is it a good example? Does it change your teaching style or approach? Should it?

Examples of information to be consumed and digested are everywhere. They should be captured, nurtured, processed, used, evaluated, modified, and used again. Consume and digest the science of teaching. And, if you can, create it as you go. Consume and digest your own experiences as a teacher. If you leave class in a state of psychological flow, spend the few minutes on the way back to your office examining what sparked the state of flow. I can remember coming out of a class session feeling like I could teaching anything to anybody. Upon further thought, it was because students were deeply engaged in the topic of discussion. The same advice for reflection holds if you feel as though your students left the

classroom with fewer IQ points than they had when they arrived. Consume and digest the feedback that students provide you at the end of every semester, but also on a minute-by-minute basis with their faces, which are telling us everything that we need to know about our teaching.

Final Thoughts

My teaching autobiography is not complete because I have not retired (if, indeed, that is the end of one's teaching career). Actually, I'm not even sure that I have arrived at the mid-point yet! So, over then next few decades, I hope to accomplish a lot. I will continue to be mentor of new teachers and I also hope to be continually mentored by new teachers. I intend to be a good colleague to other university teachers at every level and will continue to be an advocate for college teaching. Teaching at the college level is in need of advocates these days. Critically, I will contribute to the empirical literature on college teaching. One of the great weaknesses in college teaching is that we tend to say one thing "psychology is obsessed with observable, replicable, data!" and do another "I think that I'll try this, this semester, just because." So, I will continue to support an evidence-based practice of teaching in an effort to create and nurture observable, and replicable, data that can impact the field. Through all of these things, I intend to improve—certainly myself, and hopefully my profession.

References

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