

A Career Lived Forward, Understood Backward

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I received my undergraduate degree in economics and finance from Stetson University in DeLand, Florida in 1992, after which I completed an M.B.A. with a specialization in organizational behavior from Southern Methodist University in Dallas. I received my Ph.D. in 1999 with a specialization in social/personality psychology from the University of Florida under the guidance of Barry Schlenker. While at Florida, I also worked extensively with Richard Griggs conducting research on the introductory psychology course. After graduating from Florida, I taught for two years at Anderson College in South Carolina, where I was named Teacher of the Year in my first year there. Since coming to Albion in 2001, I have taught Introductory Psychology, Organizational Psychology, Research Design and Analysis, Social Psychology, Research in Social Psychology, Senior Research Seminar, a first-year seminar titled Social Psychology in Cinema, and a college-wide seminar titled Black Swans and Everyday Life. In 2003, I was named Teacher of the Year. In 2003 and 2009, I was named Phi Beta Kappa Scholar of the Year. My current research interests include ideological predictors of sexism, belief in a just world and risk taking tendencies, the imposter phenomenon, and the Protestant work ethic. In addition, I continue to conduct research on the teaching of psychology, with a particular interest in issues related to introductory psychology, statistics, and research methods. I am the current editor of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology's journal, *Teaching of Psychology*. My research has appeared in journals such as *Teaching of Psychology*, *Personality and Individual Differences*, *Learning and Individual Differences*, *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, and *Psychology of Women Quarterly*.

My Early Development as a Teacher

I think that life should be defined as the process of adjusting or not adjusting to one's circumstances. As an undergraduate at Stetson University, I was an economics and finance major. In fact, I only minored in psychology because a data entry clerk mis-entered my second semester first-year course schedule. I wanted to take Introduction to Philosophy (PY 101), but instead, likely because of my egregiously poor handwriting, got registered for PSY 101 (Introduction to Psychology). As a stereotypical first-year college student, I did not bother to check the hard copy of my spring schedule when it arrived via intracampus mail during registration. So, on my first day of classes that spring, when I checked my schedule to remind myself what I was taking, I was surprised to see that Introduction to Psychology course on my schedule. I tried to get into the philosophy course, but it was closed. No other interesting classes were still open, naturally, so I was stuck in a psychology class. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. My teacher, Richard Kindred, was clearly obsessed with the field, and I caught his enthusiasm. The following semester, I took his personality course, and sure enough, I found it fascinating, especially that "stuff" about conscientiousness and emotional stability. Still, I was an economics major and continued on that path into my senior year. One evening during our senior year, my roommate, Alex Farquharson, and I were playing hallway baseball, when seemingly out of nowhere, he asked me why I was an economics major. I told him that I liked it, to which he asked me another, life-changing question, "If you like econ so much, why do you spend so much time studying and talking about your psychology classes?" Hearing that question, I knew pursuing a career in psychology was my calling.

Of course, graduate work in psychology can lead one to many different places. I started my Ph.D. program at the University of Florida with the aim of doing research in government or private industry. Then, on the night of Saturday, June 4, 1995, after having just completed my

first year of graduate work, I received a phone call from Winnifred (Winnie) Cooke, who was the Chair of the Teaching Center. She asked if I would be able and willing to teach a section of “Introduction to College” for provisionally-admitted first-year students. At this point, I had no idea who Winnie was, nor did I know how she knew me. However, I was a graduate student (i.e., I needed experiences and of course, money), so I said “yes,” after which I learned that the class started two days later. Winnie and I met on Sunday to prepare me to teach my first-ever class. At that meeting, she told me that another teacher had to back out of teaching another section of the course, and she wanted to know if I could teach it in addition to the section I was already scheduled to teach. I figured two sections of the same course, how much extra work could it be? Little did I know it then, but that weekend was the foundation for my career.

To this day, I cannot articulate why I enjoyed teaching these classes so much. Maybe it was helping people find their strengths; indeed, self-confidence was in short supply with some of these students. Maybe it was meeting twice each week with teachers of the other course sections and discussing issues we were facing. As exhausting as that summer was (I was also responsible for research, of course), I knew after the class was complete that I wanted to teach for a career. Having graduated from a small school, and having had wonderful teaching role models there such as Richard Kindred, Susan Wilson, Dan Hale, and Larry Belcher to name but a few, I decided that a small liberal arts college was my professional calling.

Admittedly, “socially adept” is not a term many people would use to describe me, particularly early in my career. For instance, at a research-intensive school such as Florida, a graduate student probably should not advertise his career goal is to teach at a small liberal arts college. Of course as soon as I knew this was my calling, I told my advisor, Barry Schlenker, about this revelation, never stopping for a second to think such a goal may not be congruent with

my current professional station. However, as was the case throughout my time at Florida, Barry was most receptive and supportive of my goals (indeed, in retrospect, I was lucky, as such disclosures aren't always welcomed so warmly). In fact, he even went so far as to encourage me to contact Richard Griggs, a cognitive professor at Florida, who was and continues to be extensively involved in pedagogical research. It would be too simplistic to say that Barry was my "dissertation mentor" and that Rich was my "teaching mentor." In reality, Barry and Rich each contributed greatly to my successes in both teaching and research. Working with them allowed me to learn not only how to formulate ideas and test them, but perhaps more importantly, how to make sure projects are completed. As Barry once said, it's better to have three projects completed than to have six projects half-baked. Neither man was shy about scheduling tasks for completion, and from their habits, I learned how to juggle multiple tasks and complete them in a timely, quality fashion.

My desire to pursue a college teaching career was solidified during the Fall semester in 1996, when I taught Introductory Psychology for the first time. As terrified as I was that summer preparing to teach it, I really enjoyed the opportunity to explore different areas of psychology that I never dealt with in my daily social/personality research. One factor that enhanced my enjoyment of teaching this class was taking a teaching seminar from Rich Griggs. In this seminar, graduate students who were teaching the introductory course read and discussed issues of textbook selection consideration, syllabus development, designing valid assessments of student learning, teaching philosophies, and dealing with various classroom management considerations. Fourteen years later, one of my fondest professional memories continues to be those discussions with other neophyte teachers as we made our way through the introductory course, most of us for the first time.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Mark Leary, a former student of Barry Schlenker, told me during my second year of graduate work that the best thing about academia is also the worst thing about academia. Specifically, you get to do work you love to do, but because you love it, you keep seeking out more and more of it to do. No one will stop you from taking on more tasks. I've subsequently learned certain people will even "encourage" you to take on more work, especially if your prior work was good. As my career rolls on, I seem to think back to Mark's sage words more frequently. Indeed, without question, finding balance between my teaching, research, and service, to say nothing of integrating a personal life, is my most persistent struggle.

The good news is that I have developed a method to assuage this struggle. At Albion, the tenure requirements, though not explicitly stated as such, are assumed to be 50% teaching, 40% research, and 10% service. Balancing these three areas of work is challenging, assuming one can easily distinguish between them. As an example of this challenge, it might be assumed that time devoted to teaching is not time devoted to research or service. Perhaps it is simply a cognitive coping mechanism on my part, but I am unable to so easily distinguish between these three areas of work, particularly teaching and research.

With respect to presenting research at a conference, in a journal, or serving in an editorial capacity, when teachers write papers for publication, they are in fact *teaching* information. Clearly, it is a far different type of teaching than what most people think of when they hear the word "teaching," the prototype of which likely involves verbally disseminating and discussing information with 18-22 year-old undergraduates. When attempting to publish papers, I am simply *explaining* why I conducted a particular study, how I conducted it, what I found, and what those findings mean to the discipline and perhaps other disciplines. To accomplish these

goals, I find I need to engage in the same processes needed to teach my students. Specifically, I need to organize information and present it in as concise a manner as possible so that my audience can easily comprehend my message. Whether it is a conference presentation or a manuscript to be reviewed for publication, such endeavors only strengthen my classroom teaching. Because so much of my research involves collaborating with my students, I am forced to teach them how to publish a study and present it at a conference. Of course, my classroom teaching only strengthens my ability to conceptualize, conduct, and communicate research findings to different audiences.

Regarding service, being a member of the departmental curriculum committee was extremely helpful with academic advising, a very basic teaching responsibility. I learned a great deal of information about other majors and how they contribute to a liberal arts education, which is the core mission of my college. Serving on the Institutional Review Board is a perfect manifestation of my desire to stay involved and involve my students in research. Without question, discerning synergies in one's different professional responsibilities is essential to maintaining some perception of balance that Mark Leary warned me would be difficult to find. Teachers need to undertake those service activities that most interest them (toward this end, having tenure helps).

The Examined Life of a Teacher

One of my colleagues at Albion, Jacque Carlson, once said that "research is mesearch." Indeed, as I reflect on my own research presentations, they are on topics in which I can see some of my own cognitive and behavioral tendencies. We all, I hope, teach classes that interest us. However, sometimes it is possible to get too "into" a course we are teaching by focusing on our own interests, not on our students' needs and interests. For example, I find students are never as

enthusiastic about learning statistics as I am about teaching statistics. Particularly early in my career, I had to hold back tears in class because it was obvious students did not share my exuberance for that subject matter. I now understand that I felt that way because I was entertaining myself more than teaching my students. Unlike research perhaps, teaching cannot be about oneself; it must always be about the students.

Sometimes the material we love the most is the material we might teach least well because we put our own interests and passion ahead of the students' collective interest and passion for that material. Indeed, when I teach Introductory Psychology, students indicate their favorite part of the class, without fail, is the neuroscience section, which is the material I know least well in that course. Early in my career, I was hurt that the personality/social part of the course was not their favorite material. After all, it is what I know the best, so therefore it must be what I teach the best. After reflecting on this recurring theme and discussing it with colleagues both at Albion and elsewhere, such as the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology and the APS Teaching Institute, I slowly made an important realization. Specifically, teaching material I was relatively uncomfortable with forced me to relinquish control over class meetings to some extent. Barry and Rich always taught me the importance of preparation in one's professional endeavors; however, I've come to realize that although class preparation is critical, a teacher must not be so rigid as to stifle student interest in particular topics. Material that teachers know "too well" may in fact be more difficult to teach because that material is almost too much a part of us. This is not to say teachers shouldn't prepare for class, but I do think that there is an optimal, not maximal, level of preparation that most effectively facilitates student learning. When I can confidently discern what this optimal level of preparation is, I will report back at that time. Until then, I will continue to seek it out.

Advice for New Teachers

One of the best parts about teaching, especially teaching psychology, is that there is almost nothing one does in a daily routine that cannot be used in teaching. For instance, mundane tasks such as cooking dinner provide a smorgasbord of ideas for material related to cognitive psychology. For example, some meals I cook require use of implicit memory, whereas others (i.e., those I make rarely) require the use of explicit memory. As a social psychologist, I cannot watch movies for pleasure. No matter the movie, I take notes on it for clips to use as the basis for class discussions. Indeed, it is easy to get overwhelmed by the ubiquitous class discussion material around us. Staying open to learning is perhaps the most critical thing one must do to be an effective teacher. If the teacher doesn't seem interested in learning, why should his or her students want to learn?

There are formalized ways to stay open to learning, particularly learning specific to improving one's teaching. I've attended the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NIToP) 10 of the past 12 years. Every year, I walk away with new ideas to take into the classroom upon returning to Albion. Likewise, there are several excellent teaching-focused conferences held throughout the year in different parts of the country. The Association for Psychological Science Teaching Institute is another great formal mechanism to keep one's teaching updated and to learn from colleagues with similar teaching interests. Because all of the venues provide numerous opportunities to interact with other attendees outside of formal presentations, these informal interactions are often every bit as valuable as the formal presentations. I try to remind myself of something Charles Brewer espouses, that is, to keep in contact with colleagues of all experience levels. Your more experienced colleagues can serve as role models of both what to do and what not to do and provide sage counsel. Colleagues with

experience comparable to you can be wonderful sounding boards for ideas and provide empathy as you progress through your career. Finally, your less-experienced colleagues are excellent sources of the “latest and greatest” information and methods in the field and are full of wonderful ideas and energy. In the 11 years since completing my dissertation, I am realizing just how insightful Charles was in this regard (then again, when has Charles ever been wrong?).

As I reflect on my time as a college teacher, I often wonder who made that call to Winnie Cooke to recommend me as a teacher during the Summer 1995 semester. I still don't know. Then again, during my first year of college, had my handwriting been legible, had my roommate not been an astute observer of my behavior, had....well, the list of “had only's” could go on. When it is said that life is lived forward and understood backward, that describes my professional journey perfectly. When I am having a bad day, I do sometimes wonder what my career would have been like had I pursued a career in finance. I realize such bad days are ubiquitous no matter one's career (and my performance in day-trading stocks confirms this belief). Being well-versed in the law of small numbers, I know bad days are transitory, almost necessary to truly enjoy all the good days that keep me in this career. Whether you are preparing to teach your first class this fall or you are a master teacher such as Bill McKeachie, author of the famous book *Teaching Tips*, now in its 13th edition, staying open to changing circumstances, regardless of whether they appear desirable or undesirable at first glance, is essential to success as a teacher, or in my case, even becoming a teacher in the first place.

Reference

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