

Running Head: IN PURSUIT OF BECOMING EXTRANEOUS

In Pursuit of Becoming Extraneous

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### **In Pursuit of Becoming Extraneous**

Well, it happened again! The first day of school came and I was up at 3:00 a.m. No, the problem was not nightmares, night terrors, a bitty bladder, or the neighbor's cat. My issue was anticipatory enthusiasm! After 38 years of teaching, I still cannot sleep the night before school starts. I am never able to appear blasé at the prospect of a new beginning. Given my philosophy of education, one would think that I would be able to relax at some point, for my goal as a teacher is to become non-essential in the lives of my students. I agree with Montessori that experiential education is in the best interests of the student. The teacher's task should be to arrange those experiences that impel the student to act. In short, students must be the primary catalysts in their own education. When students enter my AP Psychology classes, this philosophy is posted on the bulletin board.

Most people do not wish to become extraneous at their jobs. After all, they need a paycheck! I seek eventual obsolescence for my desire is that my students become life-long learners and self educators. To that end, the first day of class I invite all students to partake of the multi-colored Skittles that I spoon into their little cups, and then, I tell them that today is the last time I will spoon feed them. Henceforth, they are in charge of their own learning. They will get out of it what they put into it. There has been some initial resistance to this philosophy in my classes at Kellam High School in Virginia Beach, Virginia, as you might imagine.

### **My Early Development as a Teacher**

It was my 3<sup>rd</sup> day of student teaching. My cooperating teacher was a nice person, I think, and I gladly arrived at school early in anticipation of learning what he could teach me. The principal met me at the door. "Mr. \_\_\_ has scheduled foot surgery for today. He will be out for the next 3 months. He said you would prepare the lessons and teach all of his classes. We will

have to hire a substitute for liability purposes, but you are now in charge of these 8<sup>th</sup> graders.” Talk about trial by fire! I was on my own and with absolutely no warning. I have, perhaps, rationalized the experience, but, in retrospect, I feel this experience was a fabulous opportunity to test my mettle. If my choices were to sink or swim, I intended to swim.

After swimming through 38 years of teaching, I have much for which to be grateful. The 4 months spent teaching kindergarten in a private school in Atlanta taught me that those child development classes had it right! Who knew? The year I spent teaching American Government in Durham, N.C. to special education students taught me to see the world from an entirely different perspective. The time I spent in a one-on-one tutorial private secondary environment in Midland, Texas teaching English to at-risk teens showed me the value of alternative education. Teaching Western Civilization, US Government, and US History in a community college setting, first in Durham and then in Midland, prepared me for the joys and challenges of teaching in a higher education venue. Teaching retirees at our local Institute for Learning in Retirement gave me hope that my own mind does not have to be constrained with the passage of a particular calendar date. I have taught History and English in middle school, and Geography, Sociology, World History, Government, Humanities, US History, European History, Psychology, AP Psychology, and Criminal Psychology on the secondary level. Having one of those wonderfully marketable Social Science undergraduate degrees from Baylor University has come in very handy.

### **Working to Define Myself as a Teacher**

Although my MAT (Master of Arts in Teaching) from Duke University provided me with an exemplary foundation of teaching techniques and helped me to complete an English minor, there has been nothing quite like experience to refine and redefine my strengths as a

teacher. After moving to Virginia Beach, my sole focus became the teaching of psychology at Kellam High School. Additional course work at the College of William and Mary, the University of Virginia, Old Dominion University, Texas A&M, and Norfolk State helped me to round out my professional skills.

In 1993, I became aware of the College Board AP Psychology Exam, and I knew I needed more training if I wanted to implement the program at my school. I began the course work toward gifted certification and was soon selected by Dr. Ludy Benjamin, mentor par excellence at Texas A&M to participate in his NSF-funded AP Psychology Teacher Training Institute. This month-long workshop and return retrospective 2 years later brought together some of the best minds in psychology to serve as our instructors, and Ben managed to collect thousands of dollars worth of materials to send home with us. The impact of this institute on my skills and enthusiasm for AP Psychology was tremendous and resonates to this day.

Additionally, 12 of Division 2's Moffett award winners since 1994 have been graduates of Ben's institute. We were all inspired by his efforts. Later, when Ben directed the APA Summer Science Institute at Johns Hopkins which gave rising college sophomores the chance to explore psychology as a discipline and potential career, I was given the opportunity to serve on the staff. Our collaborative article, "Academic Challenge: A Review Activity" (Cole, Fuqua, Kopacz, Self, & Weiss, 1999) appeared in Dr. Benjamin's *Activities Handbook for the Teaching of Psychology, Volume 4* (Benjamin, Blair-Broecker, Ernst, & Nodine, 1999), and was featured in the city-wide AP Psychology Quiz Bowl which I initiated in 1994. *The Psychology Teacher Network* also published my "*Significant Moment in Teaching*" contribution (Cole, 2008).

I have taught brand new teachers at our new teacher's institute, career switchers moving into education from the military or business world, and at district, state, and regional

conferences. I was thrilled to present a favorite teaching activity in front of our textbook author, David Myers, at the Eastern Conference on the Teaching of Psychology in June 2009 hosted by James Madison University. I initiated the teaching of criminal psychology in 2000 to gifted students throughout our city, and was awarded the Henry C. Lee Award by the Virginia Institute of Forensic Science and Medicine in 2003 for having the best high school course in Virginia related to criminal science. Today, with the generous support of my school administration, this course has been moved into our regular high school curriculum. My school has honored me with a Distinguished Educator Award and as Teacher of the Year 2010. But the loveliest surprise was being selected as a Moffett Memorial Teacher of Excellence by the Society for the Teaching of Psychology in 2008. Upon hearing this news, the Virginia General Assembly honored me with a Senate Joint Resolution 482 Commendation for my teaching efforts.

### **The Examined Life of a Teacher**

I learned early on that teaching can be all consuming. Balancing the demands of teaching and family life is tough. After bringing work home for years only to have it languish in my briefcase while I saw to dinner, baths, homework and bedtime stories, I decided I would stay at school until my work was done so that family time remained sacrosanct. Although the demands of being a soccer mom, piano lesson attendee, and chauffeuring band parent often cut into my after school professional life, and grading research papers sometimes encroached on my vow, in general, I was able to keep that commitment. Now that my children are prospering young adults, I'm able to use my evenings for professional growth endeavors and personal interests. Being there for your students is a necessity, but being good to yourself is also vital. You must draw from a deep personal and professional well if you want to provide sustenance for your students. We must all be our own best friends.

Our second best friends are fellow teachers! Building up a plethora of activities, ideas, lessons, and technology tools to support my teaching has been a result of brain storming with colleagues, combing all manner of support sites, attending and learning from conferences and workshops, and trying to stay current with the young adult world in order to motivate students. Listening to and learning from my students has also been paramount. They quickly let me know what works and what needs to be tossed.

Those internal and external files of institutional memory help me to stay flexible when power outages, computer crashes, the occasional mouse, inebriated students, impending hurricanes, or recalcitrant students spice up my teaching days. Flexibility is key for a teacher. I have taught all manner of social sciences in five different states. Meeting the various certification demands of those states, the varying philosophies of individual school districts and principals, and the varied socio-economic levels of my students has helped me to embrace diversity. Rolling with each new “salvation” of educational theory that has come down the pike as the ultimate answer to solving the problems of public schools has also been quite a ride.

However, I find that I still relish new challenges, never want to get stale, and actually want to practice what I try to teach my students. I love a day when I learn something new and rarely does a day pass that it does not happen. The young girl I was at age 7 who started reading encyclopedias for fun really hasn't lost that drive for knowledge. Yet, in the knowing, I am constantly being transformed. Isn't education wonderful?

I remember the early days of teaching when I thought I had to be the source of all knowledge for my students. I would tell them all they needed to know. Lecturing, therefore, was a skill to be carefully nurtured so I could become the most interesting object on their horizons. My teaching incorporated music, art, and culture into whatever subject I was teaching, and my

story telling became a *raison d'être*. Students would remember the concept because they remembered the story. I loved the feeling of telling a story to illustrate a concept, looking around the room, and seeing that I had the undivided attention of every one of my students, or so I thought at the time. It can be quite a rush when you think students are hanging on your every word. Motivation and memorization were, of course, the point, weren't they? The greatest teachers I have personally ever known were also the greatest lecturers I have ever heard. They truly inspired me.

However, with the problem solving demands of today's workplace, I felt that I needed to extend my teaching arm to incorporate more strategies to help pass the power for self-education on to my students. Perhaps by focusing on analysis and synthesis, I could move from being the "sage on the stage" to the "guide on the side." I discovered that I was not the most important player in the educational equation; my students were. They might be better able to take this wonderful content of psychology into their own lives and make personal changes if they had more ownership of the process. They could fly higher, stronger, and farther if they became the primary agents in their own education.

It can be frustrating when you insist that students redefine their concept of what constitutes a teacher and their own roles as students. When you encourage students to look for support first from their peers, each is reinforced in their knowledge base. When you ask students to search and find answers for themselves, they become more curious and retain what they learn longer. When you ask them to see their teacher as a later resort, they grow as learners. I have had so many students return to visit from college who told me that they learned a lot of psychology in my classes, but they learned even more about how to be a college student which

they defined as being an independent learner. Whatever the method, students should be able to leave high school knowing what will work for them in terms of assimilating knowledge.

I want to produce critical thinkers for the workplace, but I also want to have a hand in helping to foster and nurture those concepts in psychology that can simply help to make life better for someone. Students don't have to make an A on my tests if what they have learned in child development helps them to become better parents. If they learn enough about disorders to recognize a possible undiagnosed learning disability in a sibling and point it out to their parents, my time is well spent. Making a difference in the lives of my students is a valuable and eminently attainable goal.

I am sometimes able to assess both my effectiveness as a teacher and my students' progress toward accepting their role as life-long learners through a couple of evaluation strategies. This year's students write letters anonymously to next year's students at the end of the course giving advice on how to be successful in the course. They discuss assignments, the methods of preparation, what they liked, what they didn't, and, of course, my role as instructor. They also fill out a course evaluation for which I compute the data to help me in my preparation for next year. The object of this constructive criticism is to help me to help others, and I must be open to it.

I cannot ask only that my students grow as learners. I must continue to grow as a teacher. God forbid I should ever think I have arrived. If one has arrived, one has no place else to go. I want this journey into self revelation to continue. I want more than to finish a professional teaching career saying that "I survived". "Playing school" when I was 6 years old has not only been a destination, it has become a way of life.

### **Advice for New Teachers**

New teachers might be helped by the following thoughts:

- Be prepared every day. Know your content and plan wisely to get it across to your students.
- Be firm but fair. Don't hesitate to admit when you have made a mistake.
- Go to your students' school events. If you want them to be excited about your class, they want you to be excited about their lives outside on your classroom.
- Your librarian's budget can extend your department's budget. Always value the extent to which your librarians can assist your course.
- Be a team player. Support your colleagues and administration to the best of your ability. They can make life easier or harder for you.
- Never ever stop learning. Your discipline will pass you by as will your students.
- Never underestimate the impact of your words and actions. You touch lives daily.

### **Final Thoughts**

Teaching is not what I do. 'Teacher' is what I am. This career has turned into a lifelong love affair with gathering, using, and disseminating not just knowledge but those experiences that can speak personally to my students and to me. As I seek broadening, strengthening, and engaging in my students, I seek the same in myself. Is that, then, the real secret of teaching? Do we seek to teach psychology to others not only for the altruistic betterment of humankind, but also for the elucidation of our own lives? Is teaching, like life, all about giving and getting? I would like to think so.

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