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Passing the Torch to Others: The Importance of
Mentoring

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Passing the Torch to Others

Growing up, I witnessed many adults having a midlife crisis and I was determined to avoid that by ensuring that I chose a career that I loved. I was always attracted to the idea of teaching and being in an office surrounded by books (that I had read)! During college, when people would say, “Wait until you get into the real world,” I realized that for me the “real world” was academia. Interestingly, my high school grades and intense fear of public speaking would never have led me to predict that I would one day be an educator. Thanks to the support and modeling of family, friends, colleagues and, importantly, students, I continue to develop as a teacher.

I am currently an associate professor of psychology at Cerritos Community College in southern California. I have been at Cerritos for 10 years—ever since I completed my PhD in 1999 at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) in social psychology. I began my education at a community college before transferring to the University of California at Santa Barbara where I received a BA in 1991, with a year abroad at York University in England. In my current position, I regularly teach five classes a semester including Introductory Psychology, Research Methods, Social Psychology, and Critical Thinking. I have served as department chair and advisor to the Psychology Club and Psi Beta, the National Honor’s Society in Psychology for Community Colleges. I mentor students in the research process and annually accompany students to regional and national conferences. I continue to conduct research, but my areas of investigation have shifted from basic social cognition research on stereotyping to research on teaching issues and mentoring. I received the Harry Upshaw Teaching Award

at UIC, the Outstanding Faculty Award at Cerritos College, and I was recently honored by APA's Division Two with the Wayne Weiten Teaching Excellence Award.

My Early Development as a Teacher

Like many teachers before me, I did not really receive any direct training before being “thrown into the classroom.” I remember on my arrival to my graduate program, another first-year student and I were asked if we would like to teach a section of a psychology course. Although I was terrified and completely unprepared, at the urging of my future best friend and colleague, Amy Blickenstaff, I jumped right in. I'm not sure how effective I was that first semester, but I knew that even though I was nervous to be in front of a class, I loved the experience of sharing in the learning process.

My graduate program was a research program, and I had many great mentors and role models in my research endeavors. Without the support and advice of my graduate school mentor, Len Newman, I would not have developed the courage to pursue my teaching ambitions. Although he was primarily my mentor in the research process, sitting in on his classes taught me how to incorporate the love of research into teaching. Other faculty members like Bette Bottoms and Linda Skitka were also instrumental as role models. Their support provided me with the confidence to pursue my passion. While I was a graduate student, I sat in on a teaching workshop by Dr. Phil Zimbardo on our campus and then attended an intimate dinner with him, reminding me that good food and animated conversation are, thankfully, part of an academic life. To say that he was a dynamic lecturer is an understatement. Although I understood the importance of engaging students, until I saw him “teach” that day, I thought that the role of the teacher was to remain at the front of the room and (albeit engagingly) lecture on one's expertise to the

class. His workshop was a turning point for me as a novice teacher; he showed me how to have fun with teaching and to take risks in the classroom by trying new approaches to actively engage students in the learning process.

At UIC, students could complete a minor in teaching, with one of the requirements being a seminar in teaching. With the support of other faculty, I petitioned the department chair to allow me to teach the course, and the subsequent semester, I found myself trying to impart my undeveloped teaching philosophy to new graduate students. I also learned that our university had a Council for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. Under the mentorship of Dr. Susan Peverly, I became involved in campus-wide graduate teacher training meetings and workshops. I credit her with developing an environment that facilitated discussions about the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Unfortunately as a graduate student, I was not aware of all of the great teaching resources that were available, which was partly due to the fact that I was primarily engaged in research activities. I had no idea that there were teaching resources available, let alone evaluation tools with established reliability and validity! However, today with the Internet, it is a lot easier to find out what resources are available and to connect electronically with other faculty and potential mentors.

Once I left graduate school, my first few years of teaching were spent trying to model the “good” teachers (i.e., the ones whose classes I most enjoyed attending and from whom I learned the most) and to avoid the teaching style of “bad” teachers. It was during these early years that I realized I could also learn from my students (and I continue to learn from them today). Students come up with contemporary examples of psychological concepts and often see applications of psychological material in areas that

professional psychologists overlook. I've also come to rely on my senior students to share their experiences (academic and personal) with newer students, and many of these students develop mentoring relationships that last after the students leave the college.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

When I first arrived at Cerritos College, I assumed that I would teach my five classes, grade papers, and maybe participate in some campus committee work. However, what has kept me at Cerritos College are the inspirational teachers across disciplines who have developed programs like a Global Studies program where students teleconference with individuals at other American and non-American universities, a certificate in Women's Studies, and the ability to work with faculty around the country on scholarship of learning projects. I never would have imagined that on a daily basis I would be working closely with economists, philosophers, and many others on curricula; conducting research on the scholarship of teaching; and being involved in many other professional activities across disciplines. I have been fortunate to benefit from so many wonderful role models and mentors outside of my own discipline on my own campus. Observing what other faculty have been able to accomplish has continued to fuel my excitement for new projects. During my first couple of years at Cerritos I was so overwhelmed with my teaching responsibilities that my lectures were my main focus. Since then, however, I have found a happy balance between teaching and research: I simply conduct research with my students on pedagogical issues. I am interested in assessing the effectiveness of teaching techniques and investigating how students learn. And of course, teaching a research methods laboratory course always keeps me on my toes!

Because I work at a community college, I have been able to devote time to

committees and projects that focus on interdisciplinary teaching. Much of what I have learned about effective teaching has come from faculty outside of my own discipline. For example, Randy Bass (an American Studies Professor from Georgetown University) worked with faculty from our college on a nationwide project called the “Visual Knowledge Project” and the “New Media Classroom,” which encouraged faculty, through discussions and research, to examine the impact of using technology in the classroom. I benefited immensely from Randy’s insight into great teaching and his enthusiasm. Randy was a great role model because he dared to take risks in his teaching by regularly trying out new activities in the classroom, implementing cutting edge technology, and most importantly, assessing the effectiveness of his new practices.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

When I began teaching, I couldn’t imagine undergraduate students visiting my house, let alone inviting multiple students over for a relaxing dinner. However, because I have created a network of former students with whom I regularly stay in touch, once a year I invite over 30 former teaching and research assistants for a get together to which my whole family looks forward. These continued relationships with former students, who are now becoming colleagues, have been one of the most rewarding aspects of my tenure at Cerritos College. Remarkably, most of my students are first generation students and only stay at the college for a couple of years. However, there is a sense of community that we’ve built with them, and many of our alumni continue to return to campus to mentor new students.

Due to my continued relationship with former students, I have had the opportunity to develop a successful program of mentoring for psychology majors. Using students as

my best resource, I developed a Web site called “Mentoring through Alumni in Psychology” (www.cerritos.edu/kduff/map). This Web site is a compendium of resources for students interested in psychological science, including biographies of former students who can be contacted through e-mail to serve as mentors. Because most of our students are first-generation college students, this resource has been very useful and students report that it is inspiring to read about the successes of former students. For me, seeing my former students serve as academic mentors for new, first-generation students is the epitome of higher education.

Although my goals for teaching remain consistent, the methods that I use to accomplish them have changed over the years, and I expect them to continue changing. The heart of my teaching philosophy is to show students that learning is applicable to their own lives. Toward this end, I ask students to bring real life examples of psychological concepts to class, such as how they use the operant conditioning principle of shaping to modify their loved ones’ behaviors. Or I ask students to try out a persuasion technique, like the foot-in-the-door technique, to get something that they want from their friends. If I can show students that psychology has relevance in their lives, then they are more likely to devote the time to studying the course material, and actually use the psychological concepts from class.

One of my other classroom goals is for students to have fun with the material so that it engages them. The best compliment that I get from students is when they tell me that my enthusiasm inspired them to learn more about psychology. When I began teaching, I structured my lectures very closely to the outline of the textbook. Now I modify all of my lectures by thinking about presenting each chapter as a best “last

lecture”; if I only had one chance to present information about a particular concept, what would be the most interesting method of presentation? For instance, if you attended a guest lecture about memory, would it just be a discussion of key terms or would there be a compelling story about memory loss or biases that drew in the audience before discussing the concepts in more detail? After watching many great presentations in psychology and other disciplines, I realized that if I thought of my lecture for the day as a presentation, I would devote more time to the structure and organization of the material. Some great resources for cross disciplinary presentations include the TED Talks (<http://www.ted.com>) and the Skeptics Society (<http://www.skeptics.com>).

Of course, when we watch a guest lecture, the presenter does not cover all subjects in detail and that is how my teaching has changed over the years, too. I used to feel a heavy burden to cover every concept in every chapter. However, based on interactions with my students and colleagues, I have found it actually more informative to cover less material, covering it in more detail, and showing how material across chapters is related. For example, I do not cover a whole chapter on developmental psychology in my introductory psychology course. However, while teaching about neural cells in the brain, I talk in detail about embryonic and newborn brain development and how that is affected by environmental factors. Or when I cover social psychology, I talk about developmental research on stereotyping and how that influences how information is stored in the brain.

One of my other main goals, regardless of which class I teach, is to illustrate to students that psychology is a scientific discipline. To enliven my lectures, I present demonstrations that are replications of actual experiments so that I can show students

psychological science in action. Ask anyone what they remember best from a class, and they will recall participating in some type of active learning exercise. After conducting a demonstration with my students, we spend time as a class discussing the logistics and purpose of the demonstration to ensure they understand the concept that was illustrated.

To determine if my method of teaching facilitates student learning, I regularly assess whether I meet my classroom goals. In addition to end of the term evaluations, I provide students with evaluation forms mid-semester to determine if our classroom format is working or if it needs to be modified. I ask students to report on what aids in their learning and what activities or assignments have best contributed to their understanding of a concept. Because each course has different goals, evaluation forms are individually tailored to each class. For example, the goal in one course might be to develop the ability to be a wise consumer of research (e.g., an introductory psychology course), whereas the goal of a more advanced course might be to develop producers of research or strong methodological skills (e.g., a research methods course). The evaluations that I provide students focus on the particular goals or learning outcomes specific to each course.

To maintain currency in teaching methods and in the discipline, I regularly attend regional and national conferences. Some of them, like the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology, are in the field of psychology, but others are multidisciplinary, like Technology in Education. Even if I do not have institutional funding, I still attend these conferences for professional development, because the information I learn and the connections that I make at conferences are what motivate me and perpetually stimulate me to try new techniques in the classroom.

Advice for New Teachers

It is hard to develop any skill without a mentor or role model. Therefore, my first piece of advice is to seek out individuals who are great teachers and extract as much as you can from them. Contact them, read their work on the scholarship of teaching, and if you can, watch them present or teach a class. I think sitting in on a class is a great way to “feel what it is like to be a student,” which may enhance your own teaching. If you can’t find a mentor on your campus, reach out to the teaching community at large, both in psychology and across other disciplines. I have found that attending teaching conferences is a great way to connect with teaching colleagues. The connections that I have made with faculty at regional and national conferences have often led to great working relationships that are renewed each year when we meet up at the conference site. Joining the Society for the Teaching of Psychology and Psychology Teachers at Community Colleges (PT@CC) has also allowed me to reach out to colleagues at other campuses. Finally, being an advisor for our local chapter of Psi Beta has provided me with a network of psychology teachers that I can connect with at Psi Beta sponsored events around the country.

Treasure the support you receive from friends and family. I could not have worked so hard, faced so many challenges, and celebrated accomplishments without them.

Stay involved and connected with your students. The most rewarding aspect of my job is getting to know my students, who come into my classroom with such unique cultural backgrounds, and staying in contact with them over the years. Additionally, my

students have taught me to be a more effective teacher and mentor—I am more patient, less judgmental, and better educated because of my interactions with them.

Go to teaching conferences, not just in psychology, but interdisciplinary conferences where you will have a chance to connect with other faculty and maybe collaborate on a project together. Read *Teaching of Psychology* and the *Teaching Tips* in the Association for Psychological Science's *Observer* (www.psychologicalscience.org/teaching/tips/) to learn about new teaching techniques and stay current in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Be the consummate academic: continue to learn more about our wonderful field and stay current in the discipline. Be willing to try out new teaching techniques. Develop interdisciplinary connections with faculty on your campus and around the globe. Assess the effectiveness of your teaching methods and contribute to the research on the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Surround yourself with positive individuals who are doing what you would like to do and who support your endeavors. Always remember the passion that initially led you to teach and nurture it. Finally, share this passion by mentoring your students; it will facilitate their academic success and the relationships that you develop will continue to remind you why you became a teacher of psychology.

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