

What a World, What a Life, I'm in Love!

Jeremy Ashton Houska

Like many children of the pre-Wii era, my days consisted of hard-fought backyard wiffle ball battles with my younger brother and friends in the neighborhood. When we were out of objects that resembled baseballs, either by confiscation or loss, we took the game indoors and even swung textbooks at ping pong balls. Many hours of my adolescent period were spent in my backyard batting cage. Needless to say, baseball was my life throughout high school and directly influenced my choice of college.

I entered the University of La Verne (ULV) in Fall 1996 a double major: English and “Kinesiology,” which I interpreted as “majoring in baseball.” The plan was to get on the mound and log some innings for the La Verne Leopards, who had won the NCAA Division III national championship the year prior. I believed that if I wasn't in a position to be drafted or sign a minor league contract, I could always fall back on teaching English and serving as a pitching coach somewhere. Those plans quickly did not come to fruition. The ligaments in my right shoulder and rotator cuff didn't allow it. I spent my freshman season a medical redshirt to lengthen my sports eligibility another season, but I never returned to baseball. In the process of having one of the largest aspects of my identity taken from me, I was introduced to another path: the wonderful world of teaching in a college environment.

Because I found my niche, experimental psychology, in my last year of undergraduate study at ULV, I entered the General Experimental MA program at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). I expected to gain the necessary research experience, preparation for doctoral coursework, and eventually some teaching. What I didn't expect to

feel was the strong call to teach. In the process of handling Sprague Dawley rats, putting them in mazes, and putting students in the tip-of-the-tongue state, I fell unabashedly in love with teaching psychology. I knew teaching was the life for me.

After I finished my MA in General Experimental Psychology, I applied to a variety of doctoral programs. Some of the schools supported my developing identity as a teacher, but most did not. The University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) was my choice for this reason in particular: I could teach Introduction to Psychology in my first semester there. Now, nearly 5 years later, I have taught 21 sections as an instructor of record, 6 laboratory sections, and am in the final days as a doctoral candidate in Experimental Psychology. I have been extremely humbled by the recognition of my teaching efforts. These awards include CSUSB's Outstanding Graduate Student Teaching Award (2004); the UNLV Teaching and Learning Center's GA Excellence in Teaching Award (2007); Part-Time Instructor of the Year, School of Liberal Arts & Sciences, Nevada State College (2008); and most recently the Society for the Teaching of Psychology's (2009) Wilbert J. McKeachie Teaching Excellence award.

My Early Development as a Teacher

Looking back, I can say that I was always a teacher of some sort, or I at least tried to be. My first teaching assignment at age 14 was on my father's Little League team of 9 to 12-year-olds. I enjoyed working with the pitchers especially, and reveled in the camaraderie of being on a team. I took that same enthusiasm to the classroom every time I had to do a presentation in my junior high and high school classes. There were many teachers who appreciated my irreverent humor and puerile attempts to get a rise out of the audience, but most didn't. I would be remiss not to acknowledge Cindy Wetzel, Barry Gannon, and Eric Malstrom (Serrano Junior High School, Montclair High School) who all gave me an early

taste of what it was like to stand in front of a classroom, for better or worse. By my senior year of high school I knew that if baseball wasn't my life's work, I would teach *something*.

After I started coming to terms with the noodle that was my right arm and that my baseball days were over, I became involved in student life. My short stint with student government gave way to deeper involvement in my fraternity. My fraternity advisor, Bob Rivera, had a reputation as both a silver-tongued orator and a kindhearted teacher. He knew how to have a good time in the classroom without sacrificing content. As I was taking Bob's classes, I was maturing a great deal personally and intellectually. Soon I knew that I wanted to teach at the university level to give students what was given to me. The question became "what subject?"

Another ULV professor I greatly admired was Glenn Gamst, but in distinct ways from Bob. Glenn's wry humor, attention to detail, and intellectual rigor are what stuck with me from his Cognitive Psychology and Experimental Psychology courses. I found that the basic theories in cognitive psychology he taught resonated with me, but I found myself continually thinking about direct applications of those theories to improve student learning. As I was finishing Glenn's Experimental Psychology course I began to realize that the *something* I wanted to teach at the university level was scientific psychology. One class demonstration of Craik and Lockhart's (1972) levels of processing theory was all it took! This a simple manipulation of deep processing (i.e., "think of how the word relates to money"), shallow processing (i.e., "cross out the vowels"), and a free recall task led me down a new path. At least where I was at the time, it seemed that the profession focused on helping people in a clinical sense. I looked past the literal class demonstration and realized that one could also

help students learn more effectively. Who knows where I would be today if Glenn had chosen the Stroop Task instead?

I brought this interest in becoming a teaching coach to California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) as a Master's student. I received my first formal training in teaching through a Teaching of Psychology seminar at CSUSB. As a requirement of that course, I had to film my psychology lessons in a video studio and submit them to the instructor. Talking to an empty room was a bit disconcerting, as I derive a great deal from my students such as the glazed looks, the light bulb going on, and especially the back and forth of classroom banter. After numerous takes and "do-overs," I also developed a lecturing pattern with varying intonations, rate of speech, and volume. Of course, lecturing shouldn't be all about theatrics and style, but enthusiasm and variety engages the student audience. I was able to practice these techniques under the auspices of a master teacher, Allen Butt. My first lecture was an especially memorable one.

Allen's Introductory Psychology course was housed in a large auditorium. My assignment was to teach the social psychology unit. As to be expected, I was a bit nervous out of wanting to prove my mettle to an instructor whom I admired, and represent my research lab (Robert Cramer's Social Learning & Evolutionary Research Group) well. Allen had an uncanny ability to weave in and out of formal lecturing and infuse class sessions with course-relevant humor. He also had an original way of utilizing PowerPoint. During that time, most instructors I had come into contact with were filling their slides full of text. Allen would use minimal text and instead use a photo, image, or diagram. I tried to emulate this technique in my first lesson on persuasion. Some of the slides and topics in my initial lecture went over well. The audience was quite respectful. In fact, they were so respectful that they

didn't tell me that I had a black streak across my forehead for the first half of the lecture.

After noticing the streak from the back of the auditorium, Allen came up to the stage and alerted me to my faux pas. I felt the blood immediately rush to my face. My cheeks became beet red and I playfully chastised the audience for not alerting me to the black streak on my forehead for the last 20 minutes.

After that experience, I went on to teach junior high and high school SAT test preparation and writing courses at the Advanced California Innovative (ACI) Institute in San Marino, California. ACI was my proving ground. ACI Director, Simon Kuo, allowed me a great deal of latitude in how I presented the core content, and so I frequently experimented with class activities, discussions, and class formats. I figured that if I could gain the attention of preoccupied, hormonal adolescents, I might do fine with more focused and serious undergraduates.

At UNLV I took another Teaching of Psychology seminar with Wayne Weiten. Because I had amassed a few years of teaching experience at CSUSB and ACI, I had already committed my rookie mistakes. I had become comfortable in my own skin while in front of a class. Our discussion of topics in *McKeachie's Teaching Tips* (2006) and *Teaching of Psychology* journal articles was what I needed at the time. I was wrestling with my identity as a budding teacher-researcher, and I was relieved to find out about others like me. Soon after, I attended my first National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP) and felt further validated. Wayne's seminar was instrumental in cultivating my interest in the scholarship of teaching and learning, and exposing me to the teaching of psychology world—for that I will always be grateful.

I continued to take courses on teaching and learning within the realm of psychology, and outside of it. After meeting Victor Benassi at a NITOP meeting, I learned more about the University of New Hampshire's Teaching Excellence Program and enrolled in the popular online GRAD 980 course. My professor, Stephen F. Davis, taught me about the importance of reflection upon my teaching practices. At UNLV, I worked as an intern at the Teaching and Learning Center under Leora Baron, a savvy administrator who exemplified how teaching and leadership can be one and the same.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

As much as my current teaching practices and philosophy were shaped by my early experiences at the University of La Verne and all those great teachers with whom I crossed paths in graduate school, I have embarked on a path of defining myself as a *teacher* – not a professor. Teaching is my foremost priority, and what I think about every morning as I drive to campus. Teaching students in the classroom and in the laboratory is a passion that I hope to realize in the next year as a newly appointed assistant professor. I am truly fortunate to have been given a taste of this role as a part-time instructor at Nevada State College with Tony Scinta. Being in the company of Tony and others who see teaching as their passion, not an activity that takes away from research, is especially validating. I can only hope that I end up at an institution where this philosophy prevails.

Another significant obstacle, and source of cognitive dissonance for me, is the balance of teaching, service, and research. As someone who has been heavily involved in student life, departmental service, institutional and system-wide leadership, and service to the profession, I admit that I seek out new challenges and have a hard time saying “No.” The other necessary balance in academia, often bemoaned by others, is the balance of teaching and research.

Leora Baron once told me that teaching and research should be seen as an iterative process. That is, research should inform your teaching, and your teaching practices and reflections should lead to research. This conceptualization was much more useful for me than the previous model I operated under during the dog days of graduate school.

During one particularly challenging semester I took one seminar course, taught five classes, served as the President of the Association for Psychological Science Student Caucus, and worked on my dissertation. I had often remarked to disbelieving colleagues that if I could survive all this, I can handle a 4:4 teaching load. My model was one analogous to workout regimens. After fatiguing one muscle group, one can train another body part and later go back and do another set when the exhausted group recovers. Instead of continuing with this model of cross-training, I find myself enjoying my journey as a graduate student teacher much more under Leora's model.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

At the core of my teaching philosophy is the coach and team analogy. I aspire to be a good learning coach, not a friend, authority figure, or talking head. I believe that teachers should let their students see them as similar beings with much in common. However, it can be dangerous for a teacher simply to be warm and approachable; they must also be firm. As a wayward undergraduate, only those teachers with that particular combination gained my respect. By the same token, those baseball coaches who adopted a similar mentality got the best performances out of their teams. I wouldn't be an effective teacher or learning coach if I were simply fun to be around. Creating this environment of rigor and fun is a priority for me in teaching.

Another priority when structuring a course is how best to integrate activities, discussion sessions, and group projects for a given course. Some courses may seemingly feature content that better lends itself to activities than others. For instance, I had once believed that it would be relatively easy to stand back and facilitate learning in a Social Psychology course and difficult to do so in a Statistics or Research Methods course. I have changed my tune across my courses as a whole. A theme of unpredictability and novelty underlies all of my classroom activities and discussions.

Teachers often give students activities that they cannot solve alone, but only through collaboration with their teammates. This approach has always been one that I have admired through observation of master teachers. It is, however, a difficult approach for a new instructor to be at peace with. In fact, I am still coming to terms with my role as a facilitator and the balance between giving students freedom and providing them direction. As I sit back and read my informal student evaluations at the end of a class session from the “2 Minute Drill” or from the midterm evaluation, I find that students enjoy and learn most from each other. As much as I would like to believe a well-practiced lecture with vivid examples is going to get through to my students, it probably is not the most effective pedagogical technique. Standing back and facilitating student learning is an approach I prefer and will refine in the years to come.

One of the ways I assess my own teaching practices, besides through informal and formal student evaluations, is through dialogue with other teachers of psychology. The many conversations I have had in the halls or in the office with mentors such as Robert Cramer, Wayne Weiten, Tony Scinta, David Copeland, and colleagues such as Ryan Lipinski, John Meteer, and Paul Schroeder have stimulated a process of continual self-reflection. Moreover,

I have found that the research and topics discussed at NITOP, the APS-STP Teaching Institute, the Society for the Teaching of Psychology's (Division 2) programming at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, and the various regional teaching conferences resonate with me and also stimulate the reflective process. As much as I consume teaching research in the form of journal articles, I find these conferences and meetings especially worthwhile.

Advice for New Teachers

The many master teachers of the *Teaching of Psychology in Autobiography* series have provided many nuggets of wisdom, and I would encourage all new teachers of psychology to consider them. I will provide two suggestions especially relevant for graduate students wrestling with their professional identities. Establishing my own identity as a teacher-researcher in psychology is a work in progress, and this process has been most assisted by two actions: *attending teaching conferences* and *finding a teaching "safe zone."*

I have found that keeping current with teaching and learning research through devouring journal articles and books on pedagogy has provided me some direction on where I am, where I should be, and who I would like to become. Even being part of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology's PsychTeacher listserv contributes to my identity formation. However, as I alluded to earlier, attending teaching conferences has provided me the greatest benefit. I have always found a way to attend my favorite meetings whether it is through travel grants or setting aside my graduate pittance. Every time I go to a teaching conference, I feel validated and energized to begin a new semester.

Another suggestion for budding teachers of psychology would be to find a "safe zone." That is, surround yourself with people who respect the time and effort you put into your

teaching and do so themselves. These mentors and colleagues will be a source of support in the midst of others who may not be able to relate to your passion for teaching. I am very fortunate to have found a few safe zones as a graduate student. One of them was outside my own department in the university's Teaching and Learning Center.

Final Thoughts

A song from the Great American Songbook, "I've Got the World on a String," nicely encapsulates my love affair with teaching. The chorus reminds me of the feelings I had when I was first introduced to the teaching of psychology, when I realized the great life one could have at a teaching institution, and my eventual recognition that this career path is the one for me. I only hope that graduate students who find this world and life alluring will allow themselves to fall in love with it as I have.

References

Craik, F. I. M. ,& Lockhart, R. S. (1972). Levels of processing: A framework for memory research. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, *11*, 671-684.

McKeachie, W. J., & Svinicki, M. (2006). *McKeachie's teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers* (12th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.