

Surely They Don't Expect Me to Teach

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## **Surely They Don't Expect Me to Teach**

I never wanted to teach. At various points in my life, I have wanted to be a philanthropist, a lawyer, a clinical psychologist, and a researcher, but I never once wanted to teach. That is, of course, until I taught for the first time. After earning my BA and MS degrees at Augusta State University in Augusta, Georgia, I decided to pursue graduate school in experimental psychology to study health risk behavior. The summer before I packed my belongings and moved from Thomson, Georgia to Auburn, Alabama, I received a package from Bill Buskist, one of my professors for the upcoming fall at Auburn University. Bill sent some readings about being a teaching assistant, notes about the introductory course I was to help teach, and a few other odds and ends. My first reactions were these (in no particular order): “Surely they don’t expect me to teach,” “I am not a teacher,” “I don’t want to teach,” “When they say ‘teach,’ they mean grade, right?” I held tightly to these ideas until the first week of classes at Auburn when I met Bill Buskist, and perhaps more importantly, I met my very first class. It was at Auburn when my life changed—when I changed—and I became a teacher.

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

Auburn University’s PhD program required that first year students earn their keep as graduate teaching assistants (GTA) by teaching small recitation sections for introductory psychology classes. The department also required that first year students who function as teaching assistants enroll in a teaching course taught by Bill Buskist. During this two-semester teaching of psychology course, we covered topics related to teaching content in introductory psychology, teaching skills in general, and professional development. We taught in front of our classmates, and Bill provided feedback. He observed us in our classes and provided feedback. He read over our teaching evaluations with us and provided feedback. He required written work

related to teaching and—you guessed it—provided feedback. Bill worked tirelessly to support us in our roles as new teachers. He was open and truthful, supportive and encouraging—even when he was “bleeding” (with his pesky red pen!) all over the words we had written. I became comfortable with Bill as a mentor and, in my first semester, I approached him about a teaching conference with which I was familiar—the Southeastern Teaching of Psychology conference in Kennesaw, GA. Bill immediately asked me if I was interested in working with him and another graduate student, Jared Keeley, to prepare a talk for that conference. I hesitantly accepted and, from that point on, Bill and I, along with several others, have worked closely together to write many talks, papers, and chapters related to the teaching of psychology.

After that first year at Auburn, Bill appointed me to work as the Head GTA, a position that would allow me to serve as a mentor for upcoming first year GTAs. The Head GTA position came complete with the opportunity to teach my own large section of Introductory Psychology as the teacher of record. I accepted the opportunity and, under Bill’s guidance and supervision, developed my first course. After that course, I had many more opportunities to teach at Auburn. I taught Introductory Psychology courses, a Drugs and Behavior course, and Research Methods courses. I also sought out teaching opportunities at other schools including teaching Abnormal Psychology at LaGrange College, a small liberal arts school in LaGrange, Georgia; and teaching Introductory Psychology at Southern Union, a small community college in Opelika, Alabama.

While at Auburn, I had the opportunity to enroll in the Preparing Future Faculty program led by James Groccia and the Preparing to Teach a Psychology Course (Grad 980) taught by Victor Benassi through the University of New Hampshire. I attended teaching conferences, and I learned as much as I could about teaching and research on teaching. I also began to mentor students in the laboratory in which I studied my primary area, health risk behaviors. My major

professor, Chris Correia, was a great mentor not only for research but also for teaching students about research in the lab. He gave me the opportunity to start working with my own small group of students under his supervision, and I modeled his work in mentoring and teaching. In addition to working closely with Bill and Chris, I also received mentorship from the chair of our department, Barry Burkhardt. Barry taught me an important lesson about giving students the benefit of the doubt and what he called “humanity” in teaching. He also facilitated many of my teaching opportunities. All of my mentors realized and respected that teaching had touched most every aspect of my graduate career. I am so lucky to have trained in a department with the kind of support for teaching and research that Auburn provided.

After several classes, I came to the conclusion that teaching was integral to my identity. I loved it. I loved teaching. I loved talking about teaching. I loved studying my own teaching. I loved teaching so much so that I began to think about changing my plans to become a researcher. I was, in fact, a teacher-scholar, and I wanted to—and could—do both teaching and research. When I completed the requirements for my degree, I applied for both post-doctoral positions and academic jobs. I struggled with the decision to pursue a post-doc or a faculty job. I struggled with which post-doc or job to take. If I took a post-doc, surely they did not expect me *not* to teach. If I took a faculty job, surely they did not expect me *not* to do research. I was just not sure what to do. I struggled with my identity as a psychologist. Those months on the job market were among the most difficult times in my life to that point. I ultimately decided that teaching was too important in my life to walk away from and I took a job as an Assistant Professor at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, where I am today. When I began my job at James Madison, I found that my transition from graduate life to the life of a professor was made seamless by my myriad teaching experiences. I was able to immediately begin working on

research, publishing, training laboratory students, and other research-related activities because I had already prepped courses and taught them as a graduate student.

I would not be an effective teacher or researcher today had it not been for the wonderful mentors and training opportunities I had while at Auburn. I was also fortunate that my mentors supported my work and made it possible for me to win several teaching awards including the 2007 Society for Teaching of Psychology's Wilbert J. McKeachie Award, the 2005 Auburn University College of Liberal Arts Teaching Assistant Excellence in Teaching Award, the 2005 Auburn University Department of Psychology Outstanding Graduate Teaching Assistant Award, and Teaching Fellow status at Auburn University in the Department of Psychology. I am exceedingly humbled by the recognition I have received for my teaching and I consider these awards a testament to the amazing mentors I have had in teaching and research. It is through great opportunities and the invaluable wisdom provided by my mentors that I am able to do this job that I love so much.

### **Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

My first experiences with teaching were positive and I had great mentorship, but I did not begin my teaching career as a "natural" teacher—I had to, and still have to, work very hard. Like most students of psychology, I was very enthusiastic about most of what I taught in classes so the content came easily. Also, I enjoyed the challenge of developing interesting ways to teach ideas and concepts. The biggest barriers for me as a teacher (I am embarrassed to say) were some aspects of my personality and my communication habits. I was sarcastic. I talked too fast. I was impatient and often tactless. As you can imagine, students often do not appreciate those characteristics in a teacher! As a result I was not developing rapport in such a way that facilitated learning among my students. I began to take on a teaching persona that was very truly and

genuinely me but better—more articulate, respectful, patient, and encouraging than before. I decided I would “fake it until I make it.” Eventually I became the teacher I wanted to become. I learned that patience is virtue in the classroom, and I even started to become more patient in general. My teaching persona helped me become a better person all of the time! I found that students appreciated my enthusiasm for psychology, teaching, and their welfares, and that establishing rapport was essential to mutual respect in the classroom. I am still very much me—students call me Jessica, I laugh and tell jokes, and I am clumsy and silly sometimes. I am a better teacher by working to become a better person. Or maybe I am a better person by working to become a better teacher.

Another challenge I experienced as a novice teacher was related to expectations for students. I expected that all my students should be able to read, write, and think critically. I discovered that the level of preparation of my students varied well beyond what I could have imagined. I encountered students who struggled to read their texts, students who struggled to answer essays that required complete sentences, and students who simply did not know how to study or to formulate good questions to ask for help. I also encountered students who were very advanced in reading, writing, and critical thinking skills. It was a struggle to find a balance of content and skills to teach that challenged my advanced students without alienating and discouraging other students. It was perhaps a bigger challenge for me to change my expectations for students. Instead of expecting students to come prepared and excited about class, I realized that it was my responsibility as a teacher to show students that psychology was exciting and to provide contingencies to reinforce behaviors consistent with student success strategies. I also learned that you can lead students to knowledge but you cannot make them think. My job is to

lead well, and I worked (and continue to work) very hard to do so. Finally, I learned that sometimes I may not reach a student, no matter how hard I try, and that is ok.

With all the time spent focused on teaching and learning, it may seem as though research has taken a backseat in my career. I have been fortunate to train and work in places that very much prize both teaching and research so that I could focus on both pursuits. Also, I find that my teaching influences my research and vice versa. My best teaching occurs in the laboratory. My best examples in class are born from successes and failures in research. I also collect data on my teaching when possible—after all, each class is like an experiment, and it is an empirical question whether what I do in the classroom is effective. Despite my efforts to integrate teaching and research, certainly a few minutes spent on my teaching are a few minutes not sitting in a laboratory or writing. I find, though, that the most productive situations are those in which I can provide learning opportunities to my students in the laboratory and through writing proposals, papers, and grants. Surely, the process may be a little slower with training, editing, and feedback, but in the end the work is done, the students have learned, and I have a product I am prouder of than if I had done every step of the work myself. I believe that my true influence as a teacher and a researcher will be realized in the work of my students, many of whom will undoubtedly go on to be great researchers, great teachers, or great teacher-scholars.

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

As I noted previously, I was not a natural at teaching. Public speaking made me nervous. I embarrassed easily. I talked too fast and I was (am!) clumsy. Students occasionally thought I was abrasive or indifferent. But I loved psychology. I loved learning. And I loved to be good at what I do. Although seemingly not an ideal situation, my circumstance of having to teach those first Introductory Psychology sections (despite my fervor that I was not going to do it) was

serendipitous. My personal passions for my discipline and for doing good work created a perfect storm for me to become a teacher, despite my pitfalls. I made it a personal goal to show students how great psychology is and can be. In order to do that, I knew I had to work very hard and to take advantage of opportunities and resources available to improve my teaching.

My first step was simply to think about my teaching. What were my goals for my students? What were my goals for myself? How could I achieve those goals? How had others achieved those goals? I thought back to all my old teachers, both good and bad, and considered how they had helped me learn, piqued my curiosity, or facilitated ambivalence. I consulted Bill or Chris (and still do!) when I had questions or concerns. I read the journal *Teaching of Psychology* and other resources from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology. I attended teaching conferences every year. I talked to others about their teaching. I found all of these efforts helpful in improving my teaching, and I still engage in each of them. Today I also work closely with my teaching assistants to talk about teaching and how we might improve what we are doing to help students in and out of the classroom. I find that talking about my teaching energizes me for even more teaching! I am never satisfied that I have finished improving my teaching so I am always looking for new methods and inspiration.

I no longer get physiological sensations of nervousness before speaking, and I certainly do not embarrass easily anymore. I still talk a little fast when I am really excited, and I am still clumsy, but my ability to laugh at myself is a strength in the classroom. I had to work to become a technically good teacher but, without my love for psychology, I am not sure I could have ever done it. Through teaching I discovered a new love—a love for my students. Students know that I genuinely care about them as both students and as people.

### **Advice for New Teachers**

When I began teaching I was impatient with my students. I learned how to be patient with students when I realized how much I cared for my students and how much I loved teaching them. I then had a new challenge—to be patient with myself. I want to be good at what I do and I want to be good immediately. I had to work hard to learn to be a good teacher; that took time and still does. Based on my experiences, I advise new academics to have dynamic expectations for their teaching and to be patient with themselves when striving to meet new goals. Good teaching does not happen overnight. Good teaching today is not necessarily good teaching tomorrow. So it is important to re-evaluate goals and progress toward those goals and to accept and embrace that perfection in teaching is virtually unattainable. I would also suggest that talking about teaching is integral to maintaining vigor and passion for teaching and for developing ideas. In particular, seeking advice and support from more experienced teachers can lead to invaluable learning and encouragement. If new academics are not fortunate enough to find themselves in a department that discusses teaching openly, I advise them to find a confidant (either within the department or in another department or even another school), to attend teaching conferences, and to join the Society for the Teaching of Psychology in order to find a family with which to share their passions for teaching. Finally, I would advise teachers to consider working with teaching assistants (graduate or undergraduate). Students often have creative and interesting ideas about ways to teach, learn, and assess; and they can offer perspectives that we often fail to remember from our days as students.

### **Final Thoughts**

Charles Brewer and colleagues (1993, p. 169) said that “the fundamental goal of education in psychology, from which all others follow, is to teach students to think as scientists about behavior.” I wholeheartedly agree with this assertion. In order to meet this goal effectively,

I believe that good teaching is essential. But what is good teaching? I suppose this depends on whom you ask. I certainly do not have the definitive answer, but I suggest that good teaching starts with learning from those who came before us. Bill Buskist says in his teaching philosophy that “if teaching is about anything, it is about opportunity” ([http://www.auburn.edu/~buskiwf/teaching\\_philosophy.htm](http://www.auburn.edu/~buskiwf/teaching_philosophy.htm)). By my estimation he is absolutely right. Having the opportunity to teach is a great responsibility and a great honor. Having the opportunity to learn is just as great a responsibility and honor. Good teachers will provide opportunities to their students and will seek opportunities to challenge themselves and to improve their teaching. Parker Palmer says that “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (Palmer, 1997, p. 10). Good teachers will embody informed enthusiasm for both their content and their craft. It is through opportunities to teach, to learn about teaching, and to learn my true passions in psychology and teaching that I have become a teacher. I never wanted to teach. But today being a teacher is not what I do, it is who I am.

## References

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