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Fortuitous Foundations for a Vivacious Vocation

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Fortuitous Foundations for a Vivacious Vocation

My dad has a favorite saying: “It is better to be lucky than smart.” I can think of no better way to summarize my teaching career—I feel I have been incredibly lucky to have the opportunities and experiences I have had thus far. It is strange to talk about my “career” as a teacher because it has really just begun. Although I can certainly trace the many things I have learned and the ways in which I have grown as a teacher, I find it hard to imagine that I will not continue to grow and change in new and unexpected ways.

I began my psychology career at Knox College, where I earned a BA in psychology and classics. The liberal arts approach to education allowed me to explore my curiosity in many subjects and to relate ideas across disciplines. From there, I attended Auburn University where I earned an MS and PhD in clinical psychology. I have been humbled to be recognized by my department, college, and by the Society for the Teaching of Psychology for my teaching during graduate school. I am now in my first year as an assistant professor at Mississippi State University where I teach both graduate and undergraduate courses.

My Early Development as a Teacher

My development as a teacher really started in high school in the most unusual way. In high school, I was a member of the school’s fencing team. I was not a terribly good fencer, but through the influence of my brother, I had experience previous to joining the team, which meant that I was the most experienced member on the team. In that role, almost by default, it fell to me to help the coach teach all the other members the basic skills of the sport. Fencing is a very precise sport that involves combining small movements into a graceful gestalt. Initially, many students struggle with the complexities

of the coordination. I quickly learned that the same method of explaining something did not work for everyone. I had to adapt my methods for each student and vary my explanations until I found something that resonated with that person. The coach must have liked what she saw, because she arranged for me to attend a national coaches' college where the best coaches in the sport trained future coaches. Their most important lesson, and one that I still carry with me today, was to think about the lesson from the student's perspective, not from my own. I had to construct all of my actions and motions not as I would like to do them, but in a way that would lead my students to learn what I wanted to teach. It is that method of purposefully and reflectively guiding a student towards learning that most defines my current teaching style.

I have had the astounding luck to have had some truly excellent teachers throughout high school, college, and beyond. I have tried to mirror their successes in the classroom in my own teaching style. For example, at Knox College, I had the great fortune to work with Tim Kasser. During my time at Knox, I took three classes from him, he selected me to be his teaching assistant (TA) for his Abnormal Psychology course, and he was my mentor for my honors thesis. I can still vividly remember my introduction to Tim when I arrived at 8:00 AM for my first Abnormal Psychology class. He stormed into the room in a huff, ranted and raved for a few minutes, then said he was not in the mood for this today and stormed back out, leaving all of us sitting in that dark room wondering what just happened. After letting us stew in our juices for a minute or two, he returned to the room and lead us in a Socratic discussion about our reactions to his behavior and how we might define it as abnormal or not. He followed this sort of engaging and challenging style throughout the course, and led me to fall in love with the subject matter that would

later become my career. A year later as his TA for the same course, for the first time I saw teaching from the other side of the podium. It was a very eye-opening experience, because from my perspective everything occurred behind a veil, and I had no conception of what went into teaching a course. Tim let me into that world by including me in his decision process as he thought about the course and what he wanted his students to get out of it. I began to see that, just like my coaching, teaching could be a process that was very purposeful and reflective.

At this point, I knew that I enjoyed teaching and I hoped to be able to continue to teach in some way, shape, or form. Again, I was more lucky than smart by finding my way to the graduate program at Auburn University. There, I lucked into one of the best teaching training programs in the country along with one of the best teaching mentors, Bill Buskist. All first year graduate students were TAs for Introductory Psychology, we all shared one big office, and we all took a year-long course in the Teaching of Psychology. In that class, we were exposed to the wisdom of two sages: Bill McKeachie through his well known book *Teaching Tips* (soon to enter its 13th edition; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2010) and Bill Buskist through his wealth of knowledge and experience in the field. At Auburn, I found a home for my notion that teaching could be a purposeful, reflective process and so much more. The structure of that first year immersed us in the teaching experience. We each helped with large lecture sections of the introductory course, which were then split into individual recitation sections that we taught directly, so that we had a hand in preparing material, creating quizzes and tests, encountering “difficult students,” and all the other things while simultaneously reflecting on the problems we encountered in our teaching course.

Also at Auburn, I found a research group that resonated with my already ingrained notion that teaching can be a reflective, examined process. Bill Buskist led the Excellence in Direction and Guidance of Education (EDGE) research group, which engaged in a catch-phrase that was music to my ears: “the scholarship of teaching and learning.” Being a good psychology student, I was solidly grounded in a belief in empiricism; we are able to come to know and better understand the world around us through gathering data. We test our hypotheses and direct our future actions from those conclusions. Why ever would we not do the same when it comes to our teaching?

Coming from clinical psychology, I had already been introduced to the idea that practice should be informed by science, and vice versa. Even further, from a scientist-practitioner model, it is impossible to divorce the two. The mindset of a clinician is that of a scientist; when working with a person, the clinician forms hypotheses about what is wrong and how to improve it and then gathers data in the service of testing those hypotheses. Thus, I was delighted to find Boyer’s (1990) *Scholarship Reconsidered*, as it gave me a way of applying this broader notion of “scholarship” to all of my professional activities, including teaching. To me, a scholar is one who uses a critical method of examination to improve his or her professional work and then disseminates the findings so that all may benefit from the knowledge gained. I constantly strive to be that sort of scholar, especially in my teaching.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Every teacher, at some point or another, encounters obstacles to his or her teaching. For me, this experience happened early and often. As I prepared to teach my first course, I was bubbling with excitement. I felt like I had received excellent

preparation through the variety of teaching courses I had taken. I had seriously considered my goals for my students through the reflective process of writing my teaching philosophy. I was ready to instill critical thinking skills in my students and had cooked up a cornucopia of clever exercises to illustrate those principles. I had the best of advice in planning out my syllabus and ensuring that all the important elements were represented. I was armed with an empirically-supported set of principles about how human beings best learn material through active engagement. My class was going to change lives. After so much excellent preparation, what could go wrong?

As I began to teach the course, everything was going beautifully to plan. My lectures were interesting. My students were engaging in discussions and struggling with important ideas. All the contingencies I had set in place were having their desired effect. And then they had their first test, and my students revolted. Why would they do such a thing when I had clearly set up everything for their best benefit? In my zeal, I held my students to very high standards. My students felt like they were putting forth tremendous effort for my class, much more than was its due. Only a handful of students even finished the test. This incident began a tension with which I continue to struggle.

I think of it as the Goldilocks problem of academic achievement. I believe that if you set the bar high, students will strive to reach it and achieve more than they thought themselves capable of producing. If that bar is set too low, students will lose motivation and in the end achieve less. However, if the bar is too high, then students lose motivation as well and enter a state of learned helplessness. The level of challenge has to be “just right.” An important part of any challenge is that the student must perceive it as useful and achievable. I tried to make the challenge achievable, but I had forgotten to explain

why it was useful. That began a dialogue with my students about my goals for them in the class and explaining why I had constructed the course as I did. This process only strengthened the rapport between me and my students, and as I made adjustments, so did they, making the course a success from both of our perspectives.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

At its core, my teaching philosophy returns to my roots: a liberal arts sensibility paired with that first lesson from my fencing mentors. My primary goal for my students is to instill and foster a scientifically skeptical attitude along with the critical thinking skills necessary to ask the right questions and to understand the answers. To me, higher education is not about what you learn. Knowledge, by its very nature, continually changes and updates. Knowing a set of facts will not help in life nearly as much as a flexible ability to learn and evaluate new knowledge. Therefore, I strive, through my own enthusiasm, to promote a passion for learning that hopefully taps what I believe to be an inherent curiosity in every human being. I attempt to use the same method that worked previously in my fencing lessons. I strive to guide my students towards a set of skills by carefully constructing an environment and a set of contingencies that will foster critical thinking and interest in the topic. All the while, I try to maintain the understanding that each individual student will have his or her own way of approaching the material, so I try to provide multiple modalities and opportunities for all elements of a class.

Practically, this philosophy translates into a variety of teaching techniques that I attempt to use with more or less success. I do my best to keep my students actively engaged through the use of discussions, activities, demonstrations, and assignments, hoping that one or another modality will strike home for each student. For example, in

teaching statistics, I might develop a lesson over regression that includes a guessing game designed to illustrate errors in prediction and the concept of the mean as a “best guess.” This game would lead to a discussion about factors of prediction and practical concerns. I would verbally and visually demonstrate how to calculate a regression while also demonstrating some of the concepts graphically. My students then would complete a problem on their own while I circulate among them and help as I can.

As the scholar I hope to be, I also find ways of evaluating my own and my students’ performance so that I can improve the course the next time. To me, this process is more than the ubiquitous end-of-term paper and pencil evaluations. I want feedback from my students throughout the course and thus solicit it on a regular basis through formal evaluations, quick responses after class, or even casual chats as I walk out of the building with a student. These candid approaches have given me some of the best insight into what students find valuable (and annoying) about class, and students often have excellent ideas about how to improve the course. I also invite feedback from my peers, who offer a different perspective from what my students are able to give, especially in terms of content, presentation skills, and style. Finally, I engage in regular self-reflection, much like the opportunity to write this essay, on where I have been, where I am going, and how well my efforts are matching my goals. The process of self-reflection often calls my attention to broader, global issues of my teaching that I might overlook in the more specific feedback from students or peers. For example, moving to a new institution has led me to reflect upon the nature and composition of the student body and how students’ goals, motivation, and expectations are different from other places I have been, leading me to alter some of my approaches.

Advice for New Teachers

For those who are just embarking on their own teaching career, I have a few words of advice:

1. Never underestimate the value of reflection. Take some time every now and again to think about your goals for your students and yourself, your methods, what has worked, and what you would like to change.
2. Be purposeful in what you do. When you create an assignment or include a demonstration, it should flow directly from your goals for the course. If you expect students to be familiar with a particular set of knowledge, make sure that it is reflected in your choice of assessments (i.e., quizzes and tests). However, if you are more interested in developing critical thinking skills, you might choose a paper, or a service learning project for awareness of practical and social implications.
3. Be aware of the relationship you have with your students. Your courses do not occur in a vacuum. If possible, learn your students' names and something about them. Circulate around the room and talk to them before class. The interaction can not only be satisfying on personal and professional levels, but also it can have an impact on how your students perform.
4. Don't forget what it is like to be a student. By virtue of striving for and (hopefully) attaining a graduate degree, we are not "typical" students. Many of our students will not approach a class in the same way you did, nor will they hold the same values and goals for their education. Meet your students where they are, and try not to lose sight of what it is like to encounter this information for the first time.

5. Most importantly, enjoy yourself. You likely chose to teach for a reason. As a vocation, it has the potential to be one of the most rewarding activities in which someone can engage (at least in my biased opinion). Have fun, and your enthusiasm will be infectious. If you find yourself bogged down, do something to revitalize your passion for teaching: reflect on your teaching, read one of the many excellent books on teaching (including these volumes of *Teaching in Autobiography*), or attend a teaching conference.

Final Thoughts

I began this essay by highlighting my great fortune to have had some wonderful opportunities that have allowed me to follow my current path. However, in our hectic lives it is easy to let some of those opportunities slip past us as we face “the tyranny of the urgent,” as one of my professors was fond of saying. Teaching has the fortuitous characteristic that those opportunities have a way of resurfacing with every new semester and every fresh set of eager young minds. I encourage all of us, as teachers, to take advantage of those opportunities to improve our craft and to learn about the field that inspired us to teach.

References

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