

Learning to Step Aside

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By the time I completed my first year of formal education at the ripe age of five, I knew I wanted to become a teacher. But it wasn't until I experienced transformative teaching while enrolled at Nebraska Wesleyan University (NWU) that I set my sights on becoming a professor at a liberal arts college. After receiving my BS in Biopsychology from NWU, I headed east to Stony Brook University, where, in addition to receiving my MA and PhD in social/health psychology, I received an introduction to college teaching. I served as a teaching assistant for a couple years, and then started teaching independent courses. By the time I graduated in 2002, Stony Brook's psychology department honored me with the Departmental Award for Excellence in Teaching.

After receiving my PhD, I headed to George Mason University to pursue a three-year research fellowship. I received counsel that taking a fellowship would take me out of the running for the kinds of teaching jobs I wanted. So, I kept a proverbial oar in the teaching waters by adjunct teaching for George Mason and also mentoring a cadre of undergraduate students in the research lab.

After three years in the fellowship, I accepted a tenure-track position as the sole psychologist in the highly interdisciplinary Department of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Arts at Harvey Mudd College (HMC), a liberal arts school of science and engineering. Since joining the HMC faculty in 2005, I received recognition by the Social Psychology Network for an action teaching activity I designed, was named the HMC Critchell Assistant Professor in recognition of my mentorship of students, and received the Jane S. Halonen Award for teaching excellence during the first five years of full-time teaching (awarded by Division 2 of the American Psychological Association).

My Early Development as a Teacher

The people who most influenced the form and function of my teaching were my teachers—namely the stellar faculty in NWU’s psychology department. Whether analyzing media representations of women under the guidance of Heather Bullock, applying operant conditioning principles to train rats under the tutelage of Ken Keith, or identifying sub-cortical structures in dissected sheep brains with Jodi Meerdink, I was engaged. I discovered that this discipline was relevant to my life, that my life represented a minute slice of the possible, and that there existed a world of questions much more profound than I could have thought to ask before these individuals stirred my intellectual curiosity.

I put some of these learned-by-osmosis lessons into practice in graduate school. Our research lab employed a multi-level mentorship model. Graduate students worked directly with our faculty advisor, each graduate student recruited, trained, and supervised undergraduate research assistants, and more senior undergraduate students helped supervise the most junior members of the lab. In those early years, I worked closely with undergraduate students Nancy Cuilwick, Diana Millilo, Mark Portugal, and “the twins” Ken and Rich Johnson to design and conduct research.

I enjoyed the time I spent with the research assistants largely because my roles as teacher and learner blended together; we all brought skills to the table, trusted each other enough to take risks, and expanded our mastery of psychological ideas and methods. Those research students were my teaching mentors—they guided my development by revealing the rewards of flattening the power hierarchy often present in student-teacher interactions.

Although my interest in teaching swelled during graduate school, this enthusiasm stood in contrast to the message I heard from some of the faculty—and parroted by some students in

the program—that I shouldn't get distracted by teaching, that I should keep my eye on the research ball, and that future employers wouldn't consider me a serious scholar if (gasp!) I was also a serious teacher. I recall being told that teaching is something professors *have* to do, that there are ways to get out of teaching, and that it is okay to cut corners because nobody will deny you tenure for bad teaching (a flat out lie, I now know). Comments like these went a long way toward marginalizing this pursuit I found so intensely gratifying. Thankfully, there were teaching allies lurking in the hallways—faculty and fellow graduate students I could turn to for practical and moral support.

John Robinson was one such faculty member. John taught the teacher training course, a one-semester, three-unit course designed to introduce graduate students to the nuts and bolts of teaching. We talked about course design, planned a semester course, critiqued mini-lectures, discussed theories of classroom management, and tried out different grading strategies. John's interest in teaching, and his willingness to share that interest so openly, served as a salient signal to me and other graduate students that teaching was, indeed, a worthwhile pursuit.

After completing the teaching course and serving as a teaching assistant for a couple semesters, I was—in the eyes of the department, if not in my own—qualified to teach an independent course during the summer session. During this first teaching experience, I tapped into another invaluable mentoring resource: other new teachers. We started a teaching-focused support group that met once a week to vent, strategize, and discuss papers drawn from the pedagogy literature.

Thanks to the experiences and mentors mentioned above, by the time I left graduate school I had shaken the socialized sense that my interest in teaching was somehow “less than.” I embraced myself as Teacher.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

To say I embraced myself as a teacher might be a bit of an understatement. More accurately, I became consumed. I worked late into the night developing clever assignments and in-class workshops. I started using teaching-related activities as my reward for slogging through tasks I perceived as more onerous. Eventually, I realized this mode of engagement was not sustainable, especially if I also wanted to tend relationships, pursue hobbies, and take care of my physical self.

Before I could relax my grip, I needed to figure out what motivated the intensity. Two answers presented themselves. First, I genuinely love developing courses, class sessions, and assignments. These teaching activities engage me fully; I revel in figuring out how to creatively piece together readings, experiences, and content to bring psychology to life in a logical, holistic, and accurate way. Second, having rarely heard a teacher say, “I don’t know,” I was under the mistaken impression teachers are suppose to know everything. Having a modicum of self-insight, I realized I did not know everything. I unwittingly turned to course preparation as protection against being discovered as an imposter. If I over-stuffed my class sessions with content, then there would be no room for questions about and digressions into areas I knew less about; if I maintained a forceful linear drive from A to B, then I wouldn’t have to reveal to my students that I don’t know everything.

Upon taking the tenure-track job at HMC, I quickly realized there weren’t enough hours in a week to engage in the time dumping to which I had become accustomed. For the first time, I found myself teaching multiple courses at a time (in addition to setting up a lab and taking on service obligations). I became frustrated with myself for biting off more than I could chew with my courses. Out of necessity, I cut back rather dramatically on course preparation.

And, alas, the Earth kept spinning. I didn't feel sufficiently prepared heading into my classes, but the students didn't boo me. In fact, they seemed more engaged than before, perhaps because space now existed for them to ask questions and for me to offer my answers.

There were now many more opportunities for me to proclaim, "I don't know." I started saying things like, "That's a good question. Where might we look for good information on that issue?," "Let's do a preliminary lit search to see if there is research on that question," and, the most difficult of all, "I have absolutely no idea. Is there a volunteer who would like to look into this issue before our next class?"

I continue to put a lot of effort into my course preparation, but I now take a more incremental approach. When I repeat a course, I might modify the instruction set or the rubric for an assignment, or revamp the content for a subset of the class sessions. I'm much less likely than before to recreate the whole course. When teaching new courses, I try to import effective assignment types from other courses.

I've stumbled into a relationship with my teaching that I find both rewarding and sustainable. Likewise, I've come to see the relationship between my teaching and my scholarship as synergistic. Reminiscent of those early days as a graduate student collaborating with undergraduates in the lab, some of my most rewarding teaching moments occur in the context of my scholarship. Conversely, producing and consuming the research literature adds depth and currency to my teaching. And, my classes provide a venue for staying in touch with the research literature; as a function of the design of my assignments, students regularly introduce me to research I would otherwise not know about. Likewise, some of the research ideas I'm most motivated to pursue arise from in-class discussions with students.

I'm also fortunate to be at an institution that explicitly recognizes the creation of teaching materials or techniques as scholarship. As such, the presentations I give at teaching conferences, ancillaries I author to accompany textbooks, and a conference I co-hosted (and subsequent volume I co-edited) to examine social psychology's relevance to teaching and learning all count as valuable products in my tenure portfolio.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

I remember the first day of my first class as a tenure-track member of the HMC faculty. Intending to set a tone of curiosity for the semester ahead, I opened my Introductory Psychology class with a discussion of the mind as a black box, a puzzle to be solved. The discussion took more time than I had allotted; we barely made it through the syllabus before class ended. A successful first class, I surmised. Ah, but wait! After class a senior engineering major approached me, politely introduced himself, then said: "I wanted to let you know that I don't believe in psychology." Too stunned to ask any clarifying questions (thus setting myself up to remain uncertain to this day what the heck it means to say one doesn't believe in an entire discipline), I offered a shaky smile and said, "Thank you for letting me know. I look forward to learning from you this semester."

HMC students, the vast majority of whom major in science, engineering and mathematics, typically enter my classroom unfamiliar with psychological ways of knowing. During my first year at HMC, I quickly realized—thanks to a number of interactions that looked similar to the one I had with The Disbeliever—that, unlike my experience teaching upper-level courses for psychology majors at large state universities, I could assume neither prior exposure to, nor current interest in, the subject matter. What I could assume, however, was that all of my

students were both intellectually curious and intelligent, both skeptical and willing to change their minds in the presence of convincing evidence.

My teaching philosophy emerged and continues to develop within this teaching context. In a nutshell, I seek to create autonomy-supportive courses with the intent of (a) creating or amplifying student interest in the discipline, (b) leveraging this interest to expand and deepen student understanding of psychological science, and (c) fostering a spirit of intellectual curiosity that will ideally manifest itself across the curriculum and well beyond the college experience. My course design process begins with an articulation of aims and objectives. From there, I develop the course architecture to support these goals. Finally, working within this structure, students exercise a tremendous amount of choice in terms of what they learn and how they learn it. That is, I've learned to step aside, to allow flexibility within structure.

My commitment to flexibility within structure is relatively new. It certainly wasn't present when I taught my first Social Psychology course as a graduate student a decade ago. That first course was 90% lecture and 10% "other," mostly short demonstrations and brief discussions. Since arriving to HMC five years ago, I've become much more able and willing to share power with my students. I think the HMC context really demanded this change of me as I sought to meet the students on their own turf *vis-à-vis* interests and background, skepticism and intelligence. Now, my courses are about 25% lecture and 75% "other."

Now, the 75% "other" takes many forms. For example, students in my Introductory Psychology course participate in Book Clubs where they communally interrogate a topic of personal interest, drawing material from self-selected non-fiction books about psychology written by experts for non-expert audiences. Students in my Social Psychology course synthesize primary research literature and popular media to answer self-generated questions

about social psychology (e.g., How can we apply principles of persuasion to convince students to donate during the campus blood drive?). And, students in my Close Relationships course dive into the empirical research to evaluate the accuracy of popular relationship advice of their own choosing.

My greatest frustration thus far is perhaps specific to the HMC context. I've found myself time and again defending psychology as a science to a minority of students with interests exclusively grounded in the "hard sciences." Now in every survey class I teach, students assigned to particular positions draw from a standard set of readings to debate the question "Is Psychology a Science?"

When forced to define their understanding of science, and to then pit that understanding against their understanding of psychology, good things happen. First, I'm given the opportunity to address misconceptions about psychology (e.g., Freud's ideas are at the heart of our discipline). Second, I'm able to use this debate to frame the rest of the semester. I ask students to tell me what they would like to know about psychology before settling on answers to the debate questions. Inevitably, the students say they need to know more about the methods used; I promise we'll talk about research methods. They say they want to know whether psychologists can do anything beyond describing behavior; I assure them we'll spend lots of time during the semester reading primary research focused on the experimental manipulation of human behavior. They say they want to know whether psychology studies anything that's actually important in the world; I ask them to tell me about some important current affairs, then wax poetically about how psychologists from various perspectives might think about the current event.

Making space for debate about the form and value of psychology has given way to some powerfully rewarding experiences. I love watching students toy with the "science/not

science” issue over the course of a semester as they read primary research, scoff at the lack of external validity of some studies, marvel at the effect sizes of others, and search out findings relevant to their own interests. By resisting the urge to proclaim, “Of course psychology is a science! No question about it. Moving on...,” I’ve given my students the space to come to their own informed understanding and, along the way, I have tackled a personal frustration.

If all goes according to plan, I will continue staging such debates for at least the next three decades, a time horizon that offers much space for continued growth. Prior to landing a tenure-track job, I thought of teaching evaluations as little gold stars I could use to decorate job applications. It wasn’t until I arrived at HMC and really started thinking about my long term teaching career that I came to view evaluations as an opportunity to assess and reflect on what I could do to improve my teaching. Now, my favorite evaluation comments are those that point out trouble spots in my course design, approaches in the classroom, the nature of the feedback I give on assignments, etc. These comments are real gems in that they give me ideas for ways to tweak my teaching.

Likewise, I’ve come to rely quite heavily on the feedback of my teaching peers. A group of colleagues and I regularly conduct small-group midterm evaluations in each others’ classes. We then go out for lunch on the college’s dime to debrief, focusing our feedback on those concerns shared by the majority of the students. Before the semester begins, we sometimes get together for coffee to go over syllabi and to brainstorm assignment ideas to meet particular course objectives. We co-teach and we sit in on each others’ classes. Without a doubt, I’ve been blessed with amazing colleagues who invest willingly in my personal development as a teacher.

Advice for New Teachers

Although I'm not convinced I have any advice anyone would care to listen to, I'll offer the following just in case. Get your students involved in the design and implementation of your teaching. Perhaps an analogy would be useful here. Imagine a community organizer who sweeps into a neighborhood and lobbies the municipal government for specific changes without ever asking the residents of the community what it is they want and need. Most of us would perceive that organizer as well-intentioned, though wildly paternalistic. My sense is the same holds true in the classroom. Like the community organizer, teachers offer interventions—daily, we intervene in terms of our students' experiences, knowledge, and worldview. The least we can do is provide opportunities for our students to have a say in the process.

Final Thoughts

As one who embraces change and challenge, I don't imagine I will ever consider my courses fully developed, my teaching philosophy fully formed, or my development as a teacher complete; I will continue to tinker. That said, I find a lot of comfort—and freedom—in knowing I am zeroing in on an approach to teaching that my students find enriching and that I find sustainable and rewarding.