

Good Teaching is Like Life—It's All about Relationships

Kim M. O'Donnell

Naugatuck Valley Community College

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kim O'Donnell, Department of Psychology, Naugatuck Valley Community College, 750 Chase Parkway, Waterbury, CT 06708.

Email: kodonnell@nvcc.commnet.edu

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After earning my doctorate in Clinical Psychology at Temple University, I completed a two year fellowship at Yale University and then accepted a staff psychologist position in a day hospital program. I worked in clinical positions for several years and then I took a position as a part-time member of the faculty at Naugatuck Valley Community College in 1997. This was my first teaching appointment after completing my doctorate and I quickly realized how much I wanted to return to the classroom. I accepted a full-time position at NVCC in January 1998 and I am currently a Professor of Psychology at Naugatuck Valley Community College in Waterbury, Connecticut.

Since I began a full time teaching career, my work and accomplishments have been largely split between teaching and more administrative tasks and leadership roles. This combination has mostly worked well for me, but finding the correct balance between them has been a theme in my professional life and an ongoing challenge. One of my most defining roles has been my work as Chair of the college's Center for Teaching over the last 10 years and my involvement in Connecticut's Great Teacher Seminar. These roles allow me to shape institution wide initiatives, while I keeping teaching related concerns at the center of my professional life. The fact that I have been nationally recognized for both my teaching and my work in faculty development served as significant validation of the choices that I have made in my professional life.

My Early Development as a Teacher

My first experience in a teaching role occurred when I was an undergraduate in my senior year at New York University. NYU awarded academic credit to selected students to serve as teaching assistants for the General Psychology course. In this role, I was one of ten or so TA's in

a weekly recitation section. It was our role to review the chapter material each week with our 8 assigned students and to answer questions as well as we could. I loved being in this role, and it was perhaps the beginning of imagining myself as a professor. My memory of the training for this position is fairly vague—I know there was some support from graduate students overseeing the group of us, but I do not remember any formal training on teaching techniques or approaches.

The assumption that I could figure out how to teach on my own continued after I began graduate school at Temple University. All graduate students in the Clinical Psychology program worked either as research assistants, as I was in my first year, or as teaching assistants, as I was in my second year of studies. Although I was excited at the prospect of teaching, I was a bit unnerved when I realized that my first assigned course would be Theories of Personality as the sole instructor. There was no professor to provide direct supervision of my teaching and I received no training. I did not even receive an instructor's manual to accompany the textbook.

Although I had many conversations with fellow graduate students who were also teaching, there were a fairly small number of us in my program. Mostly, I felt very much on my own to figure out how to effectively engage and educate the undergraduate students who enrolled in my courses. I cringe to think about the poor quality of education they must have received as I experimented and felt my way through this fairly overwhelming task. In doing so, I reflected a great deal on teachers I had that I thought were particularly effective (as well as those who were not) and tried to emulate what I thought were the most effective approaches they had used. I knew that I needed to be entertaining, that the information I presented needed to be interesting as well as accurate, and that I needed to be fair to my students.

Outside of these fairly vague ideas about teaching, I, mostly unwittingly, used my ongoing training as a therapist to inform my classroom behavior. I began focusing a great deal on my relationships with my students and the importance of gaining their trust and respect if I wanted their engagement. I needed to see them as individuals and to think about what those individuals wanted from their interaction with me, as well as what I might think they needed from that interaction. I was not doing therapy with them, but I was entering into a similar facilitative relationship through which I hoped they would experience personal growth.

While my earliest thoughts about becoming a teacher stemmed from the enjoyment of my experience at NYU, my graduate teaching experience changed that goal to a large degree. I realized that, more than any other activity, I loved the engagement with others that I experienced both in the therapy room and in the classroom. However, I actually put aside the plan to seek an academic job because I assumed that any teaching position would be subordinate to a role as a researcher and writer. I did not have any models for faculty who prioritized their teaching rather than other forms of scholarship. Given this assumption, I decided to pursue clinical work upon completion of my degree.

Several years later, after working exclusively in clinical positions, I was still thinking about teaching. I loved being a therapist, but realized that teaching was not something I could put aside. I am not sure why exactly. I suspect that teaching was an activity in which I could use the interpersonal and reflective skills that make me an effective therapist, but with the excitement, optimism and relative immediacy of change that one can experience in the classroom.

Once I began my full-time position at NVCC, I had opportunities to talk to other faculty about teaching, and worked with a senior colleague who visited my classroom several times and also invited me to visit his. Those exchanges were helpful, but the mentoring relationship ended

(by design) after the first semester and, at the time, the culture of my college was not one in which conversations about teaching often happened. I continued to focus on my relationships with my students, and they gave honest and helpful feedback about what worked and what did not work. The most significant event in learning to really teach came at the end of my first full year at NVCC when I attended Connecticut's Great Teacher Seminar.

Like all such seminars, the Barnes Seminar is organized around minimally structured conversations among teachers. The main idea is that teachers learn best by talking to other teachers and that those conversations are not discipline specific—good teaching is good teaching, regardless of the topic. That experience in May 1999 was a true catalyst in my growth as a teacher. I had conversations with individuals at many different stages of their careers and came away with concrete ideas and feedback about my own teaching. Most importantly, I came away with the conviction that I needed a community of teachers with whom to continue these conversations, and I began to seek that out on my campus. I also formed a mentoring relationship with a senior faculty member at another campus whom I had met at Barnes. Over the last decade, this relationship, and a broader commitment to forming these kinds of relationships with others, has been a driving force in my growth as a teacher.

Within a year of the Barnes Seminar experience, I joined our campus Center for Teaching committee and also became a staff member of Connecticut's Great Teacher's Seminar. Within three years, I became chair of our Center for Teaching and joined the statewide CFT Steering Committee. Since then, I have also become one of two Teaching and Learning Consultants on my campus and have been trained as an Instructional Skills Workshop facilitator, offering ISW's at least once per year. Focusing so much of my energy and work life on activities that force me

to think about my teaching and the teaching of others has, by far, been the greatest influence on my teaching.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

There are two main obstacles that I have struggled with as a teacher. Both stem largely from personal traits, and both continue to be issues that I think about each semester. I am a fairly driven individual with clear and vocalized goals. I get excited about new projects and interesting ideas. While I often like this about myself, and it is often helpful to my success, it can interfere both with my time for teaching and with effective classroom behavior when these other projects become distracting or become drains on my time. I believe that I have successfully engaged with these issues, but it has been a struggle.

I have often marveled to others that I have a job in which I get to spend my days thinking and talking about ideas that I find fascinating. This fact is certainly true, but for me it presents a potential trap in which I talk excitedly and at length to my students while they become increasingly glazed-over and uninterested. At the start of my career I certainly relied heavily on lecture as a teaching approach and only gradually incorporated increasing amounts of group work and other active learning approaches. These non-lecture approaches are now much more at the heart of my teaching, but my own preference for talking is still evident. I need to remind myself often to incorporate activities that rely less on written or spoken media, and to incorporate opportunities for more visual or hands-on activities. Because these are not what I find most comfortable, I easily forget about them or treat them as unimportant to learning. To keep this tendency in check, I often use anonymous feedback forms in class through which students can tell me how class is going for them. Without exception, this feedback includes comments that I need to do more "hands on" work and more "fun" activities. This request from students is, I

believe, really a request for more emotionally engaging activities, while my own tendency is to focus on intellectual engagement. It is an important, if frustrating, reminder of how much who I am colors my teaching, for better or worse.

Similarly, my excitement about new projects and ideas can sometimes interfere very directly with my teaching. Over my years at NVCC, I have happily taken on leadership roles in many areas of the college, including institutional research, curriculum affairs, and strategic planning. Having a leading role in making something new and important happen is very appealing to me. Too many times in the past, my non-teaching commitments have directly interfered with the quality of my teaching by limiting the amount of time I have for class preparation, thoughtful responses to student work, and other important teaching tasks. Several years ago, I became very aware of a growing sense that my teaching and my students' demands were "interfering" with my ability to complete other projects. This was an important realization for me, and one that led to significant changes in the choices that I make.

While I still happily serve on committees when asked, I try to make choices to work on projects that are more directly related to teaching in some way. A current example of this change is my choice this year to lead my college's effort to implement learning communities and a first year experience course. While this project has taken up a great deal of time, all of it involves conversations with other teachers about creating a successful experience for our freshmen. Working on this project leads to closer examination of my own teaching and of my relationships with students and feels like an opportunity for growth as a teacher, instead of a drain on my teaching time. On a larger scale, my primary professional commitment outside of the classroom is my work through the Center for Teaching. Again, this work as a faculty developer directly enriches my teaching.

On the other hand, I relinquished my nine-year tenure as department chair because of its impact on my teaching. Most directly, it released me from half my course load each semester. Indirectly, it was simply a distraction from teaching, both in terms of time and emotional commitment. As chair, I felt that I was increasingly embroiled in administrative problem solving, including managing conflicts among faculty and between faculty and students. These activities created a mindset about the college that took me away from the idealism that I think is at the heart of most good teaching—the belief that we are doing something good or altruistic. As I felt my cynicism and annoyance growing, I decided to move away from administrative tasks and to focus more on teaching and my own relationships with students.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

My ideas about teaching and the support of teaching excellence continue to be related to my earliest ideas and experiences of teaching. I continue to believe that relationships with students are central to teaching success. If any teacher can instill loyalty, trust, and respect in his or her students, then learning will happen. Of course, teachers are not likely to earn loyalty, trust, or respect without knowledge and competence, but knowledge and competence alone are not enough. All of us have seen many highly respected scholars fail at teaching—with students who don't attend class, who don't put full effort into assignments or activities, or who simply do not invest what they need for full engagement in the learning process.

Consistent with this philosophy, my own teaching has changed over my career in ways that I believe make it more likely that I will gain my students' loyalty, trust, and respect. At the start of my career, I was almost exclusively focused on course content—on the information that I needed to give to the students. I had ideas about what information was important and believed I knew the best ways of teaching and learning it. I spent little time or effort thinking about my

students' goals, or their preferred learning approaches. I think I was often entertaining, especially to bright students and those already interested in the subject. As I matured as a teacher, I became increasingly concerned with those students who were struggling or who were uninterested. I began to think more about how to reach these students. While "learner centeredness" has become a somewhat overused buzz phrase, I believe that there has been an important shift in my own teaching to focus more on the individual learners and less on my pre-existing ideas about what is true for "most" students.

Along with this change towards learner centeredness, there has been a parallel increase in my willingness to fully engage with individual students. I am more likely to know details of my students' lives. This level of engagement often seems messy and not directly related to teaching. It also involves issues and problems I often feel powerless to address. But my willingness to develop that side of my student relationships seems very important to earning that loyalty and trust. As a younger teacher, and one who was trained as a therapist, I think I tried to adhere to stricter boundaries in my interactions with students, making clear distinctions between their academic and personal issues. I have learned, however, that those "personal" issues often directly interfere with their academics. In addition, many of our students, especially at an open enrollment college, need to see me as a person who is invested in them before they will fully invest in me and my course.

This shift toward a teaching role that is more personally engaged and emotionally relevant is evident in my own practice of assessment and reflection. Although I do use classroom assessment techniques (Angelo & Cross, 1993) as well as the college's formal assessment instrument to gauge my teaching success, much of my practice in this area is more reflective and involves regularly scheduled opportunities to engage with colleagues about

teaching. As with my changing engagement with students, these reflective sessions often include discussion of the subjective experience of teaching, focus on personal doubts and frustrations, and pride in specific accomplishments. For several years, this reflective practice included participation in a small group of faculty who regularly journaled about our teaching experiences and met to share those journal entries. More recently this practice has involved a group that has met for several semesters—reading and discussing books that touch on teaching in a variety of ways. Through these activities, I have developed a trusted group of colleagues. These are individuals with whom I can share my darkest teaching doubts and fears and whom I can trust to give me honest feedback, even when they think I am failing in some way as a teacher.

Advice for New Teachers

My best, but perhaps least simple, piece of advice for new teachers is to think very carefully about where you choose to teach. Before accepting a teaching position, try to assess the overall culture of the institution, especially as it is reflected in peer relationships among teachers. I believe that it is very difficult to become an excellent teacher in a vacuum and that conversations and reflection with peers are central to any teaching career. Once you accept a position, actively seek out the most respected teachers on campus. Find a mentor in someone you respect as a teacher and who you can trust as a person. Commit yourself to reflecting on your own teaching practice for the rest of your career—your development as a teacher will actually accelerate the longer you teach. Teaching is about relationships. Failure at teaching, I think, often happens when teachers forget about this truth and see themselves as somehow apart from their students and their colleagues.

References

Angelo, T. and Cross, K. P. (1993) *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A handbook for college teachers*. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass.