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### **Cultivating Scholars**

The title of this chapter comes from a colleague of mine, Dr. Salena Brody, who established an event at Collin College called *Cultivating Scholars*. This yearly gathering highlights our psychology students who are encouraged to present their original research in a conference-style forum. By actively planting the seeds of knowledge in my students, I strive to cultivate scholars while facilitating growth through a dynamic reciprocal learning process.

Born in Abilene, Texas, I received my B.A. in Psychology and Speech/Communications from Texas Christian University in 1991, and graduated from Emporia State University in 1994 with a M.S. in General Experimental Psychology. I joined the full time faculty at Collin College in 2002, after teaching there as an associate instructor of psychology. I was honored to be the recipient of the Wayne Weiten Teaching Excellence Award (2009), and to be named the Texas Professor of the Year by The Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2006). A six-time recipient of the Collin Faculty Recognition Scholarship for Exemplary Teaching and Service, I was also acknowledged by my colleagues as Outstanding Professor at Collin in 2004 and 2006. I act as primary advisor for the Collin chapter of Psi Beta National Honor Society, the national honor society in psychology for community and junior colleges, and serve as an Associate Editor for the *Journal of Psychological Inquiry*.

Currently, I teach Honors Introductory Psychology, Life Span Psychology, Human Sexuality and a course called, “Deep Impact: Exploring Media Influences on Human Development,” which combines Life Span Psychology and Child Growth and Development. In addition to my course load, I promote scholarship through undergraduate research and have

enjoyed accompanying students to national and regional conferences since 1999. I have had the privilege of supervising award winning undergraduate research presentations, with several resulting in student publications (e.g., Tanuvasa et al., 2006; Bridgman et al., 2004).

My research with students has centered on their interests, such as civic engagement, lucid dreaming, road rage, sexuality, youth sports, service-learning, and criminal behavior. Facilitating undergraduate research ultimately led to a highlight in my teaching career which was the co-founding of the National Psychology Synergy Conference in 2006. The conference was developed to afford psychology enthusiasts from high schools, community colleges, and colleges/universities the opportunity to build bridges through scholarship. The Psychology Synergy conference is now in its fourth year as a collaborative venture between Psi Beta and Psi Chi national honor societies.

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

Multiple scholarly experiences as a graduate student influenced my career direction. Under the supervision of my primary mentor, Dr. Stephen F. Davis, I helped maintain an animal vivarium while assisting with research on caffeine exposure and how it affected bar pressing behavior in rats, cadmium exposure influences on aggression, and basic discrimination learning in bearcats (*arctictis binturong*). Dr. Davis pushed me beyond what I thought possible, supported me, guided me, and ultimately tested me. I also had other secondary advisors, such as Dr. Kenneth Weaver, who helped shape my experiences and guide my successes.

My second year in graduate school, I was thrilled to receive a teaching assistantship and independently taught a general psychology lab course. I did not know it at the time, but this experience in the classroom would ignite my love for teaching and propel me towards the path of choosing to be an educator.

*Training for Teaching*

I did not receive formal training in teaching, although responsibilities as a graduate teaching assistant (GTA) included periodic mandatory meetings with Dr. Davis to discuss, as a GTA group, any problems or concerns in the classroom and to elaborate on successful teaching practices from which we could all benefit. These meetings were valuable and helped create and foster an atmosphere of camaraderie and collegiality. GTA desks were housed in one office space affectionately called the “bull pen,” where we could converse and collaborate in a spontaneous nature. Often we would commiserate the joys and anxieties of teaching.

Dr. Davis also actively encouraged scholarship by having his students conduct and present original research at local, regional and national psychology conferences. As a result of his leadership, I presented and co-presented papers at many conferences on various different topics. Conferences also provided an opportunity to learn of new and exciting research in the field of psychology and afforded occasions to expand social networks with other students and professionals in the field. We were able to attend research sessions that incorporated components we were studying in our courses. In addition, meeting with faculty and graduate students from other campuses provided a view of their institutions as potential graduate schools for further study. These scholarly opportunities outside the classroom demonstrated to me how teaching and research were intimately related.

**Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

As a professor at a community college, I face unique challenges. I concur with research that suggests, “At the core level of the classroom, many of the pedagogical demands arise from the sheer diversity of community college students—in terms of their preparation, expectations, and aspirations” (Cox, 2003, p.1). Other hurdles include the transitional nature of the two-year

community college and the large percentage of students with heavy commitments to their off-campus work, families, and regular course work.

Teaching a weighty course load, it can be complex to create the extra time needed outside of class to nurture connections with students. Nonetheless, I recognize that my students need research experience that will enable them to compete for jobs and coveted spots in university. To that end, I design research projects and establish research groups to equip my students for the outside world. By taking this hands-on approach, I try to synthesize my experiences as professor and researcher to offer my students a glimpse of the real world of psychology. Therefore, my work with students often takes me beyond the classroom, where I endeavor to cultivate the skills of students, who even at this early point in their academic journeys, have the capacity to conduct research proficiently and the desire to embark on this path as soon as possible.

In addition to providing research opportunities for my students, I also try and model the benefits of civic engagement through pursuit of partnerships with community groups. As a former liaison for Collin's Service-Learning program, I have partnered with Boys and Girls Club, Angel League Athletics, the teen homeless shelter for our county, and many other non-profit agencies. These partnerships, along with growing concern for declining social capital among young adults, led to my development of the course, "Psychology Service-Learning Philanthropy." Incorporating student civic responsibility into the core classroom structure was the objective and the course was constructed and based on a successful model, the Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project housed in the Scripps Howard Center at Northern Kentucky University. The primary goal of the class is to help students grasp psychology concepts as they learn grant-writing skills, develop a sense of civic awareness, and invest in the community's future. Students learn that scholarship can be an active endeavor that also has practical

community applications. The course received national attention as the article “Creating a Successful Psychology Service-Learning Philanthropy Course” was published in the spring 2006 *Journal for Civic Commitment* (Smith & O’Loughlin-Brooks, 2006).

I use course development as a way to meet the individual needs of my students. Therefore, in order to provide intellectually gifted and highly motivated students challenging material and research opportunities, I also created the first Honors General Psychology Course taught at Collin. Teaching through the Honors Institute, I enjoy crafting specialized and enhanced learning experiences such as student-originated psychological research, incorporating guest speakers into the classroom experience, providing networking opportunities for students, fieldtrips, and facilitating collaborative learning.

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

Critical thinking and challenging students to think beyond the classroom is central to my teaching philosophy. I believe the role of a teacher is more than one who provides instruction or disseminates information. Therefore, my primary goal is to guide my students to a deeper appreciation of themselves and the world around them by creating and fostering a learning atmosphere that prepares them to face life’s challenges.

My approach to teaching has changed over the years as I have invested more energy in facilitative instruction instead of lecture. I feel the role of a teacher really should be to guide the learning process. Passive lecturing is the mode of teaching I encountered most in college and this style entails a non-active role by students as they learn. I have tried to learn from my past experiences and reflect, through my teaching, a more active experience for my students.

*The Rewards of Teaching*

Each student whose life is touched or positively changed by my methods is the greatest reward. For example, a former standout student, who is currently a history graduate student, expressed to me he had yet to find another undergraduate student with the research experience that he has. He managed to convince a professor at his current institution to sponsor undergraduate historical research based on the work he completed under my guidance. He ended up winning second place at a history conference presenting original research using the principles that I had taught him. Stories like these from former students continue to fuel my desire for teaching.

### *Evaluating and Improving Teaching*

Over the course of my career, how I evaluate my teaching has evolved. There are numerous ways to evaluate teaching, and I try to critically analyze all outlets and weigh each one respectively. In higher education, one of the most debated areas of research is student evaluations of faculty (Rhem, 2009). “Ratemyprofessor” and “Pickaprof” are online sites students can access and provide instructor feedback. How valid these sites are is still in question, but I do consider the comments, along with in-class evaluations, when assessing my teaching.

In order to improve my own teaching, I regularly engage my colleagues for ideas and often collaborate with them on new teaching methodologies. Attending teaching conferences and scouring teaching journals, magazines, and articles keeps me abreast of new techniques. Conferences are especially beneficial where the free discussion of philosophies, research, technology, and instructional materials allows me to stay on the cutting edge. I critically analyze student and administrative evaluations at the end of each semester in order to glean any areas in need of immediate improvement. There is always room for improvement, and motivation to make necessary changes is crucial for continued excellence in teaching.

### **Advice for New Teachers**

*Prioritize-* No matter how long one has been in the classroom, it is important to constantly reevaluate and prioritize your life. Value and nurture your relationships with family and friends, keep physically fit, and find time to develop an outside hobby. Managing these priority areas will transfer positivity to the classroom and help you to keep a healthy and balanced perspective on the bigger picture.

*Be Engaged-* Learn your students' names within the first two weeks of classes and fully engage yourself in a collaborative learning process. Keep in mind that facilitating the classroom experience does not mean a one way street of knowledge dissemination. Many new teachers are surprised by the profound reciprocal learning process that takes place as students learn from you, and in turn you learn from your students.

*Rise to the Occasion-* "No one rises to low expectations" (Tinto, 2008, p. 2). "Routinely project attitudes, beliefs, expectations, and attributions...that imply that your students share your own enthusiasm for learning. To the extent that 'you treat your students as if they already are eager learners,' they will be more likely to become eager learners" (Brophy, 1986). I encourage constantly challenging your students to raise their own expectations through rigorous academic experiences. One of the ways I achieve this goal is through cooperative learning groups. Group work is facilitated in my classes regularly, with the assumption that students will learn together and rise to the occasion of a finished project or mastered concept.

*Step Outside the Classroom-* Some of my most meaningful pedagogical moments have come from the extra time spent outside the classroom fostering further student connections. For example, oversee research projects if possible, and attend local, regional, and national conferences with students. Students enjoy and appreciate the opportunity to present their

research and network with peers from other institutions, along with meeting esteemed researchers in the field. These interactions enhance their education and show them how connections can make a difference in attaining their educational goals.

### **Final Thoughts**

In your classes, students are not only learning a new subject while connecting with their peers, many of them are also exploring life options perhaps never dreamed of before! Imagine what it would be like to be a *tabula rasa* with regard to psychology as you meet your new students. Endeavor to shape information into the types of learning exercises that will effectively reach students. Strive to be an engaged teacher, set high standards, keep abreast of the current studies in the field of psychology, and dare to step outside of the classroom. Teaching is a profession where the more you give to the process, the greater the reward for both you and your students.

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