

33 Years and Still Getting Psyched!

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Teaching high school psychology has always been a job I look forward to 180 days out of the year. Many of those days involve working with 100 or more enthusiastic high school students, introducing them to a world of new ideas and old theories, always hoping that they will love learning as much as I love teaching.

I started teaching psychology in 1977 at West Deptford High School in New Jersey and have been there my whole career. I graduated from Glassboro State College (Rowan University) with a BA in psychology and later earned an MA in Supervision and Curriculum from Rowan in 1990. After attending the final NSF institute at Beaver College (Arcadia University), I began teaching Advanced Placement Psychology and my life really changed as a result of that experience. I became an affiliate member of the American Psychological Association and attended many workshops that helped me learn more about teaching psychology and since have become very involved in this organization. I chaired the executive board of Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools (TOPSS), worked with the Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education, served on a Task Force for Increasing the Number of Quantitative Psychologists, and currently serve on APA's Membership Board. I am also a member of APA's Working Group to Revise the High School Psychology Standards, and the Working Group on the Certification and Training of High School Psychology Teachers. Meeting and working with other high school and college instructors as a reader for the Advanced Placement Psychology Examination was also a great experience for me.

Over the last 15 years, I have had the pleasure of presenting at the American Psychological Association, Eastern Psychological Association, and National Council for Social Studies conventions, as well as working with my friend Rob McEntarffer to organize and implement the first APA-APF/Clark University Workshop for High School Teachers. Among my teaching awards are the APA Society for the Teaching of Psychology (Division 2) Mary Margaret Moffett Memorial Teaching Excellence Award in 2007, the TOPSS Excellence in Teaching Award in 2006, Rutgers University Public School Educator of the Year Award in 2004, and finalist for the New Jersey State Teacher of the Year in 1999-2000 when I was chosen as the New Jersey Gloucester County Teacher of the Year. None of this could have been possible without the support of my husband, Chris, who never complains about me traveling and leaving him alone to care for our pets, Scully and Vader. “Just call me when you get there” is a line I hear often!

My Early Development as a Teacher

When I was in college, most of my friends were studying to become teachers. I was sure I wanted to be a teacher but not sure exactly what I wanted to teach. After two years of courses in social studies, and a few electives in psychology, I became really interested in the prospect of teaching high school psychology. Most of the professors in my education program were unsure of the job market in this field but I was intent on pursuing it. I student-taught psychology with an amazing teacher and I was sure this was my calling. When I graduated in 1976, the state of New Jersey required a separate certification to teach psychology, and I was one of the few who obtained that certification upon graduation. I did not even know how many high schools offered psychology, but in

the summer of 1977 when I was unable to go on a cross-county trip with my best friends due to a car accident, I was called by West Deptford High School for an interview. They needed a certified high school teacher of psychology and I was hired—despite the fact that I had to go to the interview with the Superintendent Mr. “Chic” McNally missing five of my front teeth. It was not a pretty sight, but to this day “Chic” still comments on how memorable my interview was for him. Talk about being in the right place at the right time! That fall, I started teaching psychology, sociology and United States history. Within a few years, the number of psychology classes increased, and after starting the school’s first AP Psychology course, I continued to teach psychology and sociology, eventually becoming the department chair. In 1998, I also started teaching at Rutgers University, Camden NJ, in the Teacher Preparation Program, and just recently was asked to be the Advisor of the newly formed Student New Jersey Education Association on campus. Teaching is not just a job to me—I guess you could say it is my life.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Over the past 33 years, I have learned a lot from my students. I have learned that they need my undivided attention at times when I do not think I can give it. There are times when I have been frustrated with myself—not able to make them understand a concept, tired of repeating my expectations, lost for a new way to present an old idea. Then there have been times when I am so in tune to their every need, so in the “flow” that I forget that I only have 43 minutes to teach this period. My students have helped to define me as a teacher. I have become the teacher that I have always wanted to be.

When I started teaching, I was very limited in my knowledge base—even though I thought I knew everything! Even though I majored in psychology, I did not know 10% of

what I know today. I relied on the textbook and the few resources that I could find. Like most psychology teachers even today, I had no one to talk to—I was all by myself. The best thing that ever happened to me is the vast network of colleagues and friends I have found. I have to credit a very important person for this change: Dr. Sam Cameron. When I met him at Beaver College and spent four weeks at the “final NSF institute” for psychology teachers, I started a new phase in my life that has led me to where I am today. He encouraged me to get involved, and I took his advice. Most psychology teachers that know Sam regard him as the “Father of AP Psychology.” Those who have never had the pleasure of getting to know him are missing someone very special.

Reading, attending workshops and learning as much as I can about what I teach my students has helped me to become proud of what I know and how I teach. Sometimes I have been called a “workshop junkie.” But today I spend just as much time teaching others as I do attending and learning to improve myself. Often teachers contact me to advise them on developing a new course. One teacher just happened to be the mother of two of my AP Psychology students. She said that they told her, “If you want to do it right, go see Park.” What better compliment could any teacher want? When I go to visit other school districts or mentor teachers on the phone or via email, I give them anything and everything they need to become the best teacher they could be.

Over the years, many of my students have majored in psychology, achieved their Master’s degrees, and a couple of them have achieved what I have not yet accomplished—a PhD in psychology. Many of them have come back to my high school to talk with my students. Often I get emails, letters, and phone calls from students still in college, telling me how well they are doing in their psychology courses. And yes—

sometimes they call or text me asking for help with a project or exam question. Unless it is past 10:00 p.m., I welcome their calls and enjoy staying in touch with them.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

The bell rings at 7:31 a.m., and I can usually be found in the hallway upstairs pushing the freshman into their homerooms—mind you I do not teach freshman and this is not my favorite activity of the day. After drinking my third cup of coffee—or more—I begin the day gathering all the materials I need for my first two classes. But teaching has changed over the years, and even though I teach the same courses, my life as a teacher has been in a constant state of evolution.

Over the years, high school teachers have been introduced to many educational initiatives—state standards, increased high school graduation requirements, subject area exit exams, No Child Left Behind legislation, and Understanding by Design curriculum revision to name a few of the most recent. There are national and state policies to which we must attend, and as a psychology teacher I have always been aware of the fact that if the school district needs to make changes in its curriculum, the “required” classes would take a priority over electives. Many of my friends have lost their psychology courses due to budget reductions, decreased enrollment, and board of education decisions. I have been very lucky that my enrollment figures have been high and my administration supports me in all that I have done to make my courses popular and effective. The best thing any teacher of psychology can hope for is that she will be seen as an effective teacher—one that brings to her students knowledge that will benefit them the rest of their lives. Helping parents, teachers, and students realize that psychology is everywhere and that learning about it will reach far beyond the classroom walls is a goal I have worked on every day I

have been a teacher. Developing performance assessments that allow the students to share what they have learned, participate in service learning activities, and conduct research that benefits the school and community has helped me to achieve this goal..

My textbooks are on-line now and I teach with a Smart Board in a classroom with students that are far more technologically advanced than I am. Soon all of our students will be bringing a laptop to class—no more textbooks—and we will not be running off hundreds of papers to give out (save the trees!) or using scantrons to grade tests. Every day, I use the computer to download United Streaming videos or use PsychSim and other interactive programs to help my students actively participate in their learning. Quizzes, hand-held response systems, and other means of formative assessment allow me to monitor how my students are learning. Our *GETPSYCHED!* Wiki allows my students to continue discussing the topics outside of the classroom and I have to say this has been a really great addition to my educational repertoire. The only real negative I have found in using all the new technology available to me is that I have to sleep with a brace on my wrists because I am developing carpal tunnel—a small price to pay for the advancement of my young students' minds.

Advice for New Teachers

My three suggestions to new teachers are: be yourself, keep a sense of humor, and be as flexible as you possibly can. In my college course, many of the pre-service teachers have asked me what I think the most important quality of a good teacher should be. There is not just one. Consistency is important to classroom management. You have to be a good listener and always be aware of the mood of the day—both yours and your

students'. Be patient. What works with one group may not work well with the next so always have alternative plans handy!

Never hesitate to ask for help—whether it is content related or behavior related. I truly believe I do not know everything and I am thankful for my friends in the English, science, and social studies departments who are there to talk to me about anything and everything. Moreover, when I need to talk psychology, I am truly blessed to be able to email or phone more than 300 other psychology teachers for their advice or feedback. You do not have to reinvent the wheel—someone, somewhere will have an idea from which you can benefit and will be willing to share it with you. Having this network of colleagues is surpassed by no other content area I know.

Join APA TOPSS—become an active member. You will benefit from the resources and the people you meet in ways you cannot imagine. Go to the APA Convention if you can, or your state and college sponsored psychology workshops. Always be ready and willing to learn more about your craft and your content. When you think you don't have enough room in your filing cabinets or you have too many files on your computer, remember there are teachers out there that need your resources and new teachers that will benefit from your mentoring. Plan a workshop—call up a few people and get together for coffee or pizza! Cooperative learning is not just for your students!

I hope that you will take on the challenges of the 21st century with a happy heart and a healthy mind. As Abraham Maslow might say, “Be all you can be” (the army stole this from him, I am sure) and go forth to teach psychology.

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