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From Teaching Tennis to Teaching Psychology

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My parents instilled in me a love of learning, and I've been greatly influenced by my mother's enthusiasm for art, literature, creativity, and humor, as well as my father's passion for science and medicine. They raised their children in the small college town of Oberlin, Ohio, where opportunities for intellectual enrichment were ever present. However, after high school, when it came time for college, I set my sights on new lands and attended Pomona College in Claremont, California. There I majored in psychology and conducted my senior thesis on hemispheric lateralization and spatial ability.

After graduating from college in 1983, I returned to Ohio and became an assistant coach for a high school girls' tennis team as well as for the Oberlin College women's tennis team. After one year of hitting and picking up thousands of tennis balls, I craved intellectual stimulation and desperately needed to attend graduate school. Psychology was clearly the area of study for me, but my interests were broad. I knew I didn't want to be a clinician, but that was essentially all I knew. Based on my undergraduate thesis topic, I should have applied to cognitive, experimental, or biopsychology programs. However, I was also interested in individuals' self-perceptions and the socialization of people's attitudes and biases. Finally, I applied to developmental psychology graduate programs and eventually decided on the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Eight years later I received my doctorate.

In 1992 I became an adjunct assistant professor at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, where I taught a research methodology course. This position was the first time I taught my own psychology class and all went well. In retrospect, it's clear that this experience is what subsequently opened doors for me.

From 1993 to 1995 I held a tenure-track position at Ferrum College in Virginia. I had

wonderful colleagues there, but the sociopolitical climate in Virginia left me needing a new venue. I heard about a 1-year, visiting assistant professor opportunity at University of Michigan-Dearborn, so I jumped at the chance and applied for the job. It turns out that it was my excellent previous performance as an adjunct that got me an interview because my publication record was quite weak compared to other candidates'. Fortunately, I attained the temporary position and later became one of four candidates when a national search was conducted for the tenure-track job. It was my substantially stronger teaching demonstration that earned me the full-time position over the other applicants, who all had more impressive research records. I'm currently a fifth-year, associate professor of developmental psychology at UM-Dearborn, where I teach three classes each semester.

In 2004 I won the *Distinguished Teaching Award* at UM-Dearborn and in 2008 I received the *Robert S. Daniel Teaching Excellence Award* from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP). I've published six articles in *Teaching of Psychology (ToP)* and am a consulting editor for the journal. Besides my *ToP* articles, I have 13 peer-reviewed publications. I've also written test banks and student study guides for several textbooks.

My Early Development as a Teacher

Although I obtained my doctorate in developmental psychology from the University of Michigan (the home of both Bill McKeachie and the nation's first Center for Research on Learning and Teaching [CRLT]), I surprisingly didn't receive any training or preparation for teaching when I was in graduate school. I do vaguely remember Bill's *Teaching Tips* book (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006) being mentioned by a few people, but I didn't even know about CRLT. Instead, I was merely told that I was in charge of a discussion section of 30 students and that I needed to develop discussion topics, activities, and graded assignments. I had a few ideas,

but was also fortunate to have two, more experienced, second-year students as fellow teaching assistants for the course who gave me some helpful suggestions. However, I was still basically on my own to develop a discussion section for this course and to learn how to grade the assignments appropriately and fairly. Nevertheless, I continued to be a TA for a variety of courses and found that I greatly enjoyed helping students to understand difficult material, make connections between concepts, and see the relevance of psychology in their own lives. It became apparent early on that I was able to connect with students and make the field of psychology accessible and exciting for them. Teaching allowed me to be creative as well, which is something I find highly motivating. My passion for teaching psychology started early in graduate school and has continued to grow and take new forms throughout my career.

As I look back at my academic life, I realize that I've actually had no teaching mentors. However, I've definitely had many instructors from whom I've learned important lessons about teaching. I've learned from observation and experience many desirable instructional practices to incorporate into my own repertoire, as well as many undesirable practices to exclude from my own teaching. All of these experiences have been valuable and have greatly informed the development of my craft.

Contemplating my teaching career and abilities has made me realize that my extensive time as an instructor at a summer tennis camp is where I learned and polished many of the effective instructional strategies I use in my psychology courses. The director of the camp and two other senior instructors were superb role models for many of these teaching practices. I developed other skills on my own as I sought the best ways to reach students and help them learn. Although my initial use of these philosophies and behaviors involved tennis balls and racquets, the actions and ideas transfer wonderfully to the academic domain. In that tennis-

teaching environment I was able to observe, experience, and develop the following important, effective, pedagogical practices:

- connecting with students via enthusiasm, humor, patience, and empathy;
- preparing lessons of appropriate difficulty and pace, but being willing and able to change the structure of the class if need be;
- breaking information into its component parts for ease of comprehension;
- continually checking student comprehension during instruction;
- developing students' fundamental skills and then building upon them;
- treating each student as an individual and monitoring his or her progress and achievements;
- using student errors as windows into their understanding;
- giving individual feedback that includes not only corrections and constructive criticism, but also positive comments concerning the things that each student is doing well;
- developing analogies and examples in order to facilitate student understanding;
- pushing and encouraging students to perform at higher levels than they think they can;
- helping students learn self-regulation skills in order to perform well;
- making sure that assessment is fair and equitable;
- creating a safe, comfortable learning environment;
- and, remembering my own initial difficulty in learning the material and using those past experiences to tailor instruction to students.

Certainly, teaching a physical activity differs in many substantive ways from teaching an academic subject. For example, I can't say that there's much abstract or critical thinking involved in tennis. Plus, there's no research, written work, in-depth analytical insights, or

opportunities to apply material to real-world examples (outside of tennis). However, as can be seen in the above list, my experiences teaching tennis helped me to develop many excellent pedagogical practices that do indeed carry over to teaching psychology.

In addition, teaching tennis forced me to develop keen observational skills regarding individuals' body movements and how those actions communicate attention and underlying comprehension (or lack thereof). The importance in my early teaching experiences of dynamic, in-person relationships with students is probably one of the reasons that I find distance-learning classes so unsatisfying and generally at odds with my teaching style and philosophy. Face-to-face, real-time interactions allow me to connect with students in ways that are impossible via long-distance technology. Additionally, an in-class presence allows me the flexibility to change the pace or focus of the class at a moment's notice in order to better serve the needs of my students.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Despite the multitude of positive experiences I've had, I've also dealt with some obstacles in my teaching. In graduate school I encountered widespread undervaluing of teaching, especially undergraduate teaching. When I worked as an adjunct instructor, inadequate pay was an obstacle. As a college/university professor, there have been a few different roadblocks that have impeded my teaching career, but I've generally been able to circumnavigate them. In general, the obstacles have involved administrative decisions and actions. For example, there have been devaluations of peer-reviewed pedagogical publications, mandates to use specific instructional tools, and the use of course reductions as supposed rewards. (Instead of a *course* reduction, I'd much prefer a *committee* reduction.) These institutional obstacles can create a climate in which teaching is not valued by faculty. However, I've been quite fortunate in my

academic positions to work with many psychology faculty members who deeply value teaching and who create and maintain a student-centered environment. Without such colleagues, the travels along my teaching path would have been much rockier.

Ultimately, students are my main focus and the most important aspect of my job. Teaching, not research, is the reason I became an academic. Therefore, sometimes my research and writing have had to take a backseat to my grading, class preparation, and meetings with students. However, this priority is at odds with the publication record necessary for promotion and tenure, which did indeed cause some problems for me. I was advised to let my teaching “slide” for a while as I worked on my research; however, I just couldn’t allow myself to do that. Instead, my weekends and summer months were filled with data collection, analyses, and writing. Did my research suffer? Yes, I believe that it did. But, that was my choice based on my values and sense of responsibility, and to this day I still feel that I made the right decisions regarding the balance of teaching and scholarship.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

I tend to engage in a lot of self-reflection about my teaching so that I can continue to expand my repertoire and improve my abilities. Student feedback is just one source of information I use for self-assessment and for improving my instructional practices. I also use discussions with colleagues and family members, internet sources, articles from *Teaching of Psychology* and other pedagogical publications, and ideas from instructors’ manuals. Much of my time is spent developing writing assignments for my classes that have an analytical, applied focus and that also reduce the likelihood of plagiarism. In addition, I scour the Web sites and catalogues of independent filmmakers in order to find up-to-date documentaries that demonstrate course constructs. I also read newspapers and science-related magazines to keep up with the

latest scientific discoveries and controversies. All of these activities continue to help me develop courses that increase student engagement and learning.

It's difficult to condense my teaching philosophy into a few paragraphs or a few main ideas. However, when I reflect on my instructional values and practices, there seem to be four general themes that emerge.

1. *Students must be encouraged to be skeptical and to question the belief systems of themselves and others.* I believe that students should be encouraged to critique psychological theory, to understand and evaluate psychological research, and to recognize the biases that are inherent in the field of psychology and in their own ideas and opinions. We all have biases. A role of teaching is to help students recognize and admit them, explore them, and then alter them if necessary.
2. *Teachers need to set high (but reasonable) standards.* I want to encourage, push, and nudge students to perform at a higher level than they think they are able to. In this way, students are challenged both academically and psychologically.
3. *Material from the course needs to be applied to real life.* An essential component of my teaching is to have students apply course material to the real world. Material is applied to real-life examples during lectures, on exams, in class activities, and in written work. I believe that if students are able to apply class material successfully, then they truly understand what they've learned.
4. *A teacher should be available to and respectful of students.* Students must feel comfortable to express their ideas and opinions both in the classroom and one-on-one with the instructor. They also need an instructor who is willing and available to help

them learn and reach their goals. Thus, I believe that advising and mentoring are integral components of teaching.

The rewards of teaching far outweigh the frustrations. It's a great pleasure to help students become excited about learning, in general, and about psychology, more specifically. It's gratifying to play a role in their sudden, or slowly acquired, understanding of course material. And, what a wonderful experience to see students achieve at a higher level than they ever thought possible. As I search with frustration for ways to keep students' thumbs from texting during class and to keep their laptop computers focused on note taking rather than surfing the Internet, I continually remind myself of the rewards I experience as a teacher each and every week. There are the students who doubted their own abilities, but who now realize that they do have the skills necessary to excel. There are those who have reset their priorities so that their education is first and foremost. There are those who have taken their academic knowledge and applied it positively to their life. There are those who are not only the first in their families to graduate college, but who are also soon to start a doctoral program. And, there are those whose minds have been opened to new ideas that they find exciting or even transforming.

Advice for New Teachers

I feel that the 14 pedagogical practices I listed earlier are exceptionally important, and perhaps even essential, for becoming an excellent teacher. I also believe that my previously discussed teaching philosophy includes four other general practices that will lead to teaching excellence. In addition, as numerous other teachers (e.g., Brewer, 2002; Lowman, 1995) have pointed out, becoming an outstanding teacher of psychology also involves passion—a passion for teaching, for learning, and for psychology. A few additional pieces of advice I would give to those individuals who want to be good or outstanding teachers are the following:

- Engage in continual, honest self-reflection and self-assessment about your own teaching, and always strive to improve.
- Don't feel that you have to use all the latest technological advances in your teaching. Excellent teaching can and does occur in classrooms without such electronic equipment.
- Help students explore psychology through designing and conducting their own research. Doing so enhances their sense of ownership and their excitement about learning and discovery.
- Join STP and other teaching-related organizations in order to find instructional resources and to interact with a great group of people who truly value teaching.

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